European Parliament

VOTE FOR CHILDREN

WeProtect GLOBAL ALLIANCE

End Violence Against Children

Safe Digital Futures for Children

Technical Workshop - 16 November 2022, Brussels

BRIEFING NOTE

Context

The internet's increasing global reach is providing valuable opportunities for children to learn, connect and play, but it can also increase the risk of unsafe or traumatic experiences including online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA). The full extent of online CSEA remains unknown. The most current data depicts how online CSEA is a significant and growing threat within the sphere of violence against children globally, with COVID-19 intensifying the challenges for child safety.

The European Commission released a new legislative proposal that would, among other things, make it mandatory for Internet companies to detect, report and remove child sexual abuse material (CSAM). This legislation has the potential to make an impact beyond the EU and help advance the global fight against online CSEA.[1] Moreover, the European Parliament and Member States reached a political agreement on the Digital Services Act which sets a new standard for the accountability of online platforms regarding illegal and harmful content, including new safeguards for the protection of minors. These recent developments, including the new EU strategy for a better internet for kids and the EU strategy for a more effective fight against CSEA, reinforce the urgent need for high-quality, comprehensive, national evidence-generation efforts to determine the extent to which children are exposed to online CSEA in any given country, and how prevention and response capabilities can be improved. This is not only limited to the EU, with the lack of a robust evidence base on online CSEA widespread globally jeopardizing investments to tackle the issue.[2]

To address this data gap, partners have invested in various initiatives such as the WeProtect Global Alliance's Global Threat Assessment, the INHOPE Universal Classification Schema that is developing a methodology to translate between existing categorisations and ontologies for CSAM, the Out of the Shadows Index, ECPAT's public opinion poll in selected EU countries on the intersection of privacy and safety online, and similar. The Safe Online Initiative has invested over US$ 15 million to enhance the understanding of online harms including the risk and protective factors that are specific to online CSEA and applicable to other forms of violence in different contexts.[3] Examples include but are not limited to the flagship large-scale research project Disrupting Harm and the collaboration with the Tech Coalition to generate research informing the design of industry products and policies to make digital platforms safe for children (e.g. data collection on offender profiles and help-seeking behaviour conducted by the University of Kent). The data and evidence generated informs Safe Online's investments and initiatives - e.g. the latest investment for $US 10 million to strengthen holistic systems across multiple countries in Africa and Southeast Asia was informed by on Disrupting Harm findings.

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[1] Other examples include but are not limited to the UK Online Safety Bill, the California's Age-Appropriate Design Code, and the Australia Online Safety Act.

[2] Although many countries have some form of nationally representative data on violence against children, the nature and scale of online CSEA in each country is mostly untapped. Globally, there is limited systematic and institutionalized data collection on online CSEA to inform policy and practice. There appear to be few efforts for systematic, regular and comprehensive data collection through routine national administrative data systems. (UNICEF, Ending online CSEA: Lessons learned and promising practices in low and middle-income countries, 2021).

[3] Since 2016, through its Safe Online Initiative the End Violence Partnership has invested US$68 million in 80 projects to tackle online CSEA in the context of existing child protection and violence prevention efforts at country, regional and global levels. The Safe Online network of grantees has evolved over time into a community collectively building global momentum to make the internet safe for children.

Rationale

There is an urgent need to build a more comprehensive understanding of the threats of online CSEA at national, regional and global levels. The lack of reliable, comparable and comprehensive data to quantify and contextualize technology-facilitated risks and the extent to which children experience online CSEA, both at global and country level, makes it difficult to prevent and disrupt this abuse. This extensive data gap is partly due to ethical and methodological challenges to measure abuse, cost and time to conduct national prevalence surveys, socio-cultural taboos related to sexuality, lack of reporting due to limited adequate support services, low investments from governments, lack of transparency of industry data, no clarity of how different data sources talk to each other, and an inconsistent and unclear understanding of how child sexual abuse manifests in the digital environment.[4]

The lack of systematic and harmonised data collection and infrastructure for robust analysis of online risks and harms for children in the context of other forms of violence and across levels remains a critical barrier to securing a safe internet for children. These gaps impact the accurate identification of problems and needs, and the effective measurement of progress. They also undermine investments and advocacy resulting in limited political attention and financial resources allocated to the issue.

To respond to this urgent need, the European Parliament, End Violence's Safe Online Initiative and WeProtect Global Alliance joined forces and convened the Safe digital futures for children: Data for change event at the European Parliament on 17 November 2023 and Technical Workshop on 16 November 2022 in Brussels (Belgium). The workshop was attended by around 40 experts from multiple sectors, and it was possible thanks to the generous contribution of the OAK Foundation. It aimed to achieve the following key objectives:

- Start building a shared understanding of the online CSEA data ecosystem in the context of data about other forms of violence and identify an initial list of areas for improvement and opportunities.
- Create the basis to inform the creation of a compelling shared narrative on the nature and scale of online CSEA and the importance of child online safety to raise the profile of the issue across stakeholders, sectors and policy debates with a particular focus on the EU context.
- Explore strategic partnerships and joint efforts, including through private-public partnership, around online CSEA data architecture within the wider data ecosystem and instruments.

The workshop provided an opportunity to explore concrete ways to better use data to inform advocacy and programming and promote the importance of data as a driver of change in the EU context and beyond. Participants discussed the strengths and limitations of existing data sources, including how online CSEA data is currently collected, analysed, interpreted and communicated or aligned across data sources. This formed the basis for a discussion on how the online CSEA data landscape can be improved, how we can better use the existing data and what needs to be done to fill in the data gaps to support effective advocacy, practice and solutions at global, regional and national levels.

This briefing note outlines the initial findings and opportunities to drive efforts aimed at improving the online CSEA data ecosystem that emerged from the workshop.

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[4] Reported CSAM is often used to estimate the scale of the problem. While this is a useful data point, it presents a limited picture of the extent to which children experience online CSEA. Reported CSAM only captures materials that were identified, includes older and recirculated materials and only quantifies abuse that resulted in the production of CSAM shared or stored online (Disrupting Harm Data Insight 1, 2022).

Workshop format

Participants considered in turn:

- The current state of the online CSEA data landscape. In the first workshop session, one participant from each organisation explained what online CSEA data they use most often, how they access it, what they use it for, and how/if they communicate it externally. The objective of this session was to share with the other participants information supplied in response to the pre-event questionnaire (see Annex B). A second session of group discussions focused on closer examination of key data sources, flows and applications, common challenges and opportunities relating to data held by a) government authorities, b) industry, and c) NGOs and academia. Results were shared with all participants in a gallery of completed worksheets.
- The ideal state of the online CSEA data landscape. In the same groups, participants described a scenario of optimal data collection and analysis, flows and integration, application and communication, with particular focus on 6WH: the *who, what, when, where, why and how* of the proposed provision. A nominated person from each group reported findings back to all participants in a panel discussion.
- How to bridge the gap. While the plenary heard from a panel of participants on the subject of good practice in data application, communication and advocacy, a smaller 'think tank' comprising group facilitators and additional sector representatives identified what would be required to progress from the current state to the ideal state. Participants again considered the 6WH practicalities of moving from one to the other. Findings from the discussion were shared with all the participants in the closing session of the workshop.
- How to translate data into action across policy, programming and advocacy. Selected organizations and projects (Disrupting Harm, Internet Watch Foundation, Protect Children Finland and Terre des Hommes) presented their experiences and best practices to inform a discussion and reflect on how current data on online CSEA can be better used to influence stakeholders' practice including policy change, programmatic frameworks and compelling narratives to put the issue high on the agenda of multiple stakeholders.

Limitations

The outcomes of the technical workshop are entirely based on responses and inputs from participants which had online CSEA as their main focus of work and was limited in size due to logistical constraints, thereby resulting in partial representation of the field. While it appears that some data collected and used by stakeholders were not disclosed in the questionnaires completed by participants, in the interest of methodological integrity their responses were not altered, even where the existence of additional data inputs and outputs were known. Moreover, not everyone who holds or uses relevant online CSEA datasets was able to participate in the workshop or complete a questionnaire as noted about due to limitations in the size of the convening. Recommendations for filling these gaps are included in the takeaways.

Key findings and takeaways

The current fragmented state of online CSEA data was highlighted along with the difficulty of obtaining a comprehensive overview of the state of the field. Currently, the full opportunity for data sharing and use is not always maximised due to barriers in the ecosystem. Participants identified a need for all stakeholders to better qualify what online CSEA datasets do - and do not – represent. For instance, NCMEC data should be qualified as providing a partial view of global online CSEA, focused largely on known CSAM, solicitation, etc., reported by electronic service providers who are either obliged by U.S.

law or who report voluntarily; and, that report numbers reflect the detection efforts of providers as much as they do their status as locations of online CSEA. Misunderstandings around existing data can be improved through clearer messaging and improved awareness and responsible use of data by stakeholders, including policymakers and media. For example, high reporting numbers from providers have been interpreted in some cases as reflecting platforms with the highest incidence of abuse, when in fact they may also be reflective of more proactive and extensive detection measures.

Funding and capacity constraints, legal barriers and lack of political were identified as challenges to optimal data collection, analysis and application. As regards outputs and outcomes, panellists noted the liability of datasets to different interpretations when data may be deliberately skewed in order to advance stakeholder mandates. Accordingly, responsible/appropriate use of data emerged as a key theme including the consideration of the need for different narrative tones and language for communication with different audiences: while criminal justice professionals may be more accustomed to candid language and imagery concerning offending, for example, data should be used to empower children and civil society to navigate the complexities of the online world.

Participants identified several potential opportunities in the short and mid-term to improve capacity, transparency, digital literacy and appropriate data use. The need was reiterated throughout discussion to intentionally expand this community of practice to include additional stakeholders, with a view to providing more representative and comprehensive landscape analysis of the online CSEA data ecosystem.

Overall, good quality data on online CSEA is essential to inform and ensure the quality and impact of the very large number of activities across levels. We need better and reliable data and collection methods to build a more comprehensive understanding of the threats, and we also need collaboration, capacity and sustained political support to ensure data is used effectively. More specifically, there is an immediate need to improve capacity, transparency, digital literacy, appropriate data use and investments on data, and possible concrete focus areas around which efforts can begin to be coordinated for how this could happen emerged and are outlined below.

1. EVIDENCE: A comprehensive overview of the threat and opportunities to tackle is currently limited by the fragmented state of online CSEA data and the difficulty of formulating a harmonised picture.[5] There are misalignments in different datasets in the space that point to different trends and insights. The contextualisation, comparability and more robust collection and cross-analysis of datasets would help to clarify the full picture and reality of children's experiences for more effective action. Key challenges identified are related to the comparability of data in light of differing definitions at national and international levels, the lack of public access to criminal justice and social services data, and issues with user-friendliness where such data is available.

Additional analysis is needed to further articulate the current state and key gaps, barriers, needs, areas for improvement, opportunities, costing as well as specific features that make datasets more applicable and effective across the ecosystem; integration and de-duplication models that could be applied to online CSEA data; and, opportunities to improve proprietary data-sharing and a more extensive use of

[5] The analysis of the pre-survey questionnaires and the discussions at the workshop allowed for an *initial mapping* and assessment of the online CSEA data ecosystem - an initial visualisation and a shared understanding of the current online CSEA data ecosystem based on participants' contributions was shared during the workshop.

data to demonstrate transparency and accountability, responsible data use, and ensure activities to counter online CSEA are targeted and effective.

2. LANGUAGE: A common terminology including key definitions and a glossary of terms relevant to online CSEA is needed, as well as its transposition into national legal instruments and mandates. Recognizing that documents such as the Luxembourg Guidelines and definitions in international conventions already exist, and efforts are underway such as the INHOPE Universal Classification Schema, a key gap was identified specifically in relation to ensuring that these are regularly updated, used and assimilated into national legislation and structures.

3. SYSTEMS: Optimal data collection, analysis, integration and application are currently challenged by limited funding, capacity constraints, legal barriers and lack of political will. Greater data collection and integration, also between and among sectors at the national level, are needed to provide a more complete global online CSEA ecosystem.[6] The large-scale research project Disrupting Harm is addressing the need for holistic data generation and analysis at national level thanks to an innovative methodology designed by global experts and already tested in 13 countries across two regions.[7] A first of its kind, it provides unique insights on how online CSEA is manifesting across the globe (data insights), along with tailored roadmaps for each country outlining what is needed to better protect children online. The approach is being replicated in 12 more countries across four new regions to continue building a solid global evidence base on what puts children at risk as well as what protects them from online sexual abuse.

A more transparent data ecosystem across sectors, including governments and industry, would help to ensure adequate coverage of all target groups, including victims/survivors, offenders, and children displaying risky or harmful sexual behaviours. It would also support mindset shifts where needed: from exceptional to evidence-based policymaking, from focus on political aims to making substantive progress against online CSEA, and from a culture in which stakeholders shame each other to one in which trust fosters truly collaborative responses.

4. ADVOCACY: The translation of data into action across policy, programming and advocacy remains crucial to ensuring impact and sustainable change. The translation of data to knowledge is a critical distinction; knowledge is useful for communicating and spurring change while the work to make data insights accessible and digestible for different audiences is what enables effective data use. Language is significant as it can be used in a way that is shaming or blaming which has a huge impact on how people understand and respond to the issue. It's also important to note that it is never possible to completely eradicate bias; however, acknowledging more clearly and explicitly the particular bias of a dataset (e.g., factors such as ethnicity and race, disability, etc., are not currently well-represented in datasets and statistics) and the limitations so that it is contextualised and used appropriately and ethically is crucial.

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[6] Data arrangements of the Barnahus (Children's House / Children's Centre) multi-agency 'one stop shop' for child victims of violence could be a model worth examining more closely, along with those of the Italian Observatory for the Fight against Paedophilia and Child Pornography or others.

[7] Disrupting Harm is funded by the End Violence Partnership through its Safe Online Initiative for US$14 million in 25 countries and is implemented by 3 leading expert organizations: ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti.

Evidence-based, coherent, child-centred, and compelling narratives need to be developed to facilitate the translation of data to explainable insights and knowledge for action for various stakeholders and avenues. The translation of data to knowledge and action as well as visibility efforts within the online CSEA space can support the effective use of existing data and evidence of best practices, as well as support better identification of priority gaps. This work would also aim to enable an institutional culture shift across stakeholders to ensure high-level engagement and commitments across sectors.

5. NETWORK: Joint efforts and coordination across key actors and levels remain critical to ensure alignment, avoid duplication, design shared initiatives and promptly respond to needs as they emerge (including on ethics, privacy and data in this field), and to review and provide continued technical advice on new developments.

Next steps

The Safe Online Initiative at the End Violence Partnership will continue coordinating this community of committed partners and will expand participation in line with the key takeaways from the workshop. Safe Online will also commission a more in-depth landscape analysis of the online CSEA data ecosystem to further elaborate on this initial consultation and outline a clear roadmap for joined action.

If you would like to hear more about the Data for Change Initiative or you would like to be involved in this community of experts and partners, please contact Safe Online at fund@end-violence.org.

Every child must be #SafeOnline!

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