Disrupting Harm Research Methods

Disrupting Harm is a collaborative project implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL and United Nations Children's Fund Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (UNICEF Innocenti) aimed at generating new and unique evidence about the scope and nature of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The first round of studies was successfully completed in 2022 and focused on 13 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and in Southeast Asia.[1] The second round of studies was completed in 12 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic and Mexico); Eastern Europe (Armenia, Montenegro and North Macedonia); Middle East and North Africa (Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia); and South Asia (Pakistan). Each implementing partner (ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF) leveraged their networks and expertise in child protection, to collect data on 1) the scope and nature of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, and 2) how national child protection systems are responding to these forms of violence.

The research aims to provide national policymakers and other key stakeholders with high-quality data about tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The findings of Disrupting Harm provide crucial insights about forms of sexual exploitation and abuse that are not always recognized or fully understood. Using these insights, evidence-driven recommendations were developed with key national stakeholders in each country. They are relevant to duty-bearers across sectors from policymakers to parliamentarians, law enforcement, social services, caregivers, teachers and industry.

The Disrupting Harm research outputs can be found here.

Research questions

The project is designed to provide insights into the following research questions:

- RQ1. What characterizes different forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
- RQ2. What factors are associated with victimization or offending?
- RQ3. How do different children experience and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
- RQ4. How do families, friends and social networks prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
- RQ5. How do organizations (e.g., law enforcement, justice sector, service providers, government, educators, healthcare and industry) prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
- RQ6. How do existing policy and legislation prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

[1] Eastern and Southern Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam.

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The research questions were used to develop the analytical framework for the mixed-methods analysis which informed the Disrupting Harm national reports. The research questions were developed based on the socioecological model.[2]

Research activities

ECPAT International conducted an extensive analysis of the national policy and legal landscapes. This provided an important backdrop to understand how well tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is covered in national legislation and how child friendly national policies are.

INTERPOL worked with national law enforcement units in each country to understand the capacity and gaps in addressing this crime area. INTERPOL's activity included interviews with serving officers and observational studies.

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (UNICEF Innocenti), with support from UNICEF country offices and local research partners, conducted four research activities. Where possible all four activities were implemented in each country participating in the study. In some countries, some research activities were not conducted due to approvals processes and/or safeguarding considerations. The four research activities are as follows:

1. Nationally representative household survey with 12–17-year-old children and their caregivers.
2. Trauma-informed interviews with children and young people aged 16–24 who had experiences of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood.
3. Semi-structured interviews with frontline service providers working directly with cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
4. Semi-structured interviews with justice professionals working directly with cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

1. Legal and policy analysis

RATIONALE

The Disrupting Harm project is a multi-country initiative focused on understanding and addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. A key component of this project is the development of analyses to assess whether the target countries' legal and policy responses align with international standards. These analyses form part of broader country reports, providing a basis for recommendations to improve said responses. This section outlines the process used to conduct such analyses.

[2] UNICEF, 'Brief on the social ecological model', <www.unicef.org/media/135011/file/Global%20multisectoral%20operational%20framework.pdf>, accessed 07 October 2025.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Guiding checklist

The legal and policy analyses are built upon a structured methodology that ensures consistency across countries. At the heart of this approach is a guiding checklist of 110 points and over 30 subpoints. To develop it, ECPAT International analysed key international and regional instruments to assess how they define child sexual exploitation, including the various forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, the obligations they impose on states and the rights they grant to survivors. Relevant guidance from United Nations mechanisms, recent literature on the topic and best practices from other countries were also used to account for practical implementation. This ensured a comprehensive tool for analysing the compliance of national responses with international standards.

The checklist addresses key areas such as the ratification and integration of major international conventions into national legislation, with a particular focus on ensuring that the various forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are duly defined and criminalized. It also:

- examines whether provisions for extraterritorial jurisdiction and extradition are robust enough to handle the cross-border nature of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- maps the specific obligations placed on the private sector, such as implementing appropriate safeguards, monitoring systems and reporting mechanisms.
- reviews whether domestic legislation provides appropriate legal remedies, child-centric procedures within the justice process and support services for survivors.
- assesses whether national child protection policies adequately address tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, and whether they include comprehensive prevention and response measures.

Document collection

ECPAT collected all relevant laws, policies and regulations for each of the countries included in the study. This included criminal codes, cybercrime legislation, telecommunications regulations and policies specifically addressing child protection, online safety and victim support. Where available, case law and relevant reports from trustworthy sources (United Nations and government agencies, prominent human rights organizations and media outlets, etc.) were also gathered to provide insights into how the legal framework is enforced.

Legal and policy documents were accessed through government websites or national legal databases. In cases where critical materials were not easily accessible, local ECPAT network members or partners assisted in securing up-to-date texts so that all key materials were accounted for. This ensured that the documents reflected the latest legislative changes and policy adjustments.

Analysis

The documents that were collected were then analysed against the questions in the checklist to identify gaps, strengths and areas for improvement. Beyond evaluating the written provisions, the analysis also examined, when possible, whether they were effectively implemented by reviewing relevant case law, research studies and media reports to gain insights into any obstacles that might hamper enforcement efforts.

For national policies, the analysis focused on whether they specifically address tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, contain measurable targets and timelines, clearly define responsibilities and allocate sufficient resources for implementation. The existence of mechanisms for periodic review and evaluation was also assessed to determine whether the policies are adaptable and responsive to changing needs.

The findings were then structured logically, following the framework of the guiding checklist, with evidence-based conclusions clearly outlined.

National expert reviews

The first drafts of the legal and policy analyses underwent a systematic internal peer review process to ensure accuracy, reliability and thorough examination before finalization. After this internal review, the drafts were shared with legal experts in each country, in most cases associated with ECPAT network members, who provided critical feedback on both the interpretation and practical implementation of local laws. Their insights were instrumental in refining the analysis, particularly in understanding how the laws functioned in practice.

Additionally, local ECPAT network members contributed valuable knowledge, especially in identifying areas where legal and policy provisions – particularly those related to victim protection – were not being enforced as intended, or where additional resources were needed to bridge the gap between policy and practice. This dual focus on examining both the existing frameworks and their real-world application ensured that the analysis was not only comprehensive in terms of legislation and policy, but also practical and realistic in assessing enforcement and its impact on children.

The draft analyses were also further shared with UNICEF country offices for an additional round of review focusing particularly on existing policies and the addition of any relevant case law.

Finalization

Once feedback from national experts was incorporated, ECPAT finalized the legal and policy analyses. The analyses are intermediated documents to be used to support qualitative research activities conducted by other partners. Selected content from the analyses will be incorporated in the comprehensive country reports, forming the foundation for developing targeted recommendations aimed at strengthening national responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

2. INTERPOL research with law enforcement

Under the Disrupting Harm study, INTERPOL drafted a confidential report and coordinated with the countries involved to determine which findings will be shared and included in the public national reports.

RATIONALE

A confidential report is necessary for several important reasons. First, it enables INTERPOL to include sensitive or classified information that may not be suitable or safe for public disclosure. Such information could involve details related to national security, ongoing investigations, specific methods of operation, or intelligence that, if exposed, could jeopardize law enforcement operations. Keeping this information confidential ensures that it remains protected from unauthorized access, safeguarding both the integrity of investigations and the security of the nations involved.

Additionally, a confidential report fosters more open communication and cooperation among member countries. This approach builds trust between INTERPOL and its member countries, ensuring that critical information can be exchanged without fear of unintended consequences or breaches of confidentiality.

Finally, a confidential report allows for tailored information sharing. INTERPOL can consult with the countries involved to determine which findings are appropriate for public release, balancing transparency with the need to protect sensitive data. This method respects each country's preferences and confidentiality requirements, ensuring that shared information is both meaningful and secure.

This research activitiy focused on collecting qualitative and quantitative data on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse from national law enforcement. Data was collected from law enforcement agencies, and relevant specialized units working in this crime area.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

INTERPOL distributed a quantitative questionnaire to the National Central Bureaus (NCBs) of the countries participating in the Disrupting Harm project. The questionnaire requested the NCBs to provide national data for the years 2020, 2021, and 2022 on the total number of identified victims of in-person child sexual exploitation and abuse, the number and sources of referrals, and details on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse offences, including the region, type of offences, and information about the victims (age, gender, location) as well as perpetrators (age, gender).

Through the NCBs, the Crimes against Children (CAC) unit conducted interviews with law enforcement officers responsible for investigating tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse within the specialized unit working this crime area, such as Child Protection, Cybercrime, Internet Crimes against Children, Anti-Human Trafficking, Juvenile Protection, as well as relevant ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Justice, or Ministry of Interior). This enabled the

identification of investigations suitable to serve as illustrative case studies of offending in each country.

In addition, in-depth open-ended interviews were conducted by the CAC unit with select data sources pre-identified in consultation with the point of contact from the relevant NCB. Partners' stakeholders contact lists were reviewed, and any significant cross-source was further consulted with the NCB point of contact to establish contact and subsequently conduct interviews.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore several key areas, including:

- Motivation: Understanding the factors that motivate officers in their roles, such as personal commitment, professional development opportunities, and recognition.
- Work Processes and Procedures: Examining the day-to-day operational procedures, including case management, decision-making processes, and communication within and across units.
- Unit and Officer Workload: Assessing the distribution of workload among officers and units, and the impact of workload on performance, stress levels, and overall efficiency.
- Forensic Processes: Evaluating the forensic methods and technologies used in investigations, including digital forensics, evidence collection, and analysis.
- Language: Investigating the languages used during communication, reporting, and interviews to understand any challenges or barriers in multilingual environments.
- Training Capacities: Assessing the availability, quality, and effectiveness of training programs for officers, including specialized training on child exploitation and abuse cases.
- Welfare of Officers: Analysing the support systems in place for the well-being of officers, including mental health resources, stress management, and work-life balance.
- Victim Cantered approach: Reviewing the processes for interviewing victims, reporting incidents, understanding safeguarding policies in place, and managing referral pathways to ensure victims receive appropriate care and support.
- Collaboration with Governmental and Non-Governmental Agencies: Investigating the extent and effectiveness of partnerships with various stakeholders, including law enforcement agencies, social services, NGOs, and community organizations.
- Interviewing Offenders: Exploring the techniques and protocols for interviewing suspected offenders, including best practices for ensuring accurate and ethical information gathering.
- Prosecution of Cases: Understanding the processes involved in prosecuting cases of child exploitation and abuse, including coordination with legal authorities, evidence presentation, and case management strategies.
- Sex Offender Management: Examining the strategies in place for managing convicted sex offenders, including monitoring, rehabilitation, and community safety measures.

In addition to the information collected from national law enforcement agencies and specialized units, the CAC team also requested data and qualitative insights from INTERPOL and several partner organizations, including the following:

- Foreign law enforcement agencies not directly involved in the Disrupting Harm project but with intelligence or outreach activities in the countries included in the study.

- The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).
- Statistics from the INTERPOL International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database.

The research methodology also incorporated publicly available data. In particular, research was conducted using Google Trends (trends.google.com) with a view to identifying national levels of interest in searching for child sexual abuse material on the open web.

ANALYSIS

Quantitative and raw case data was collated in MS Excel. Basic pivot tables and formulae were used to extract trend data. For qualitative data, linking and visualizing data based on keywords or themes occurred and trend information was extracted, even where quantitative data was lacking for a particular country. Case studies were used to demonstrate the nature of offending in a particular country. Visualization tools were used to illustrate trends and map investigative and referral process flows.

3. Household survey with children and parents

The purpose of the survey was to understand directly from children and their caregivers about their online experiences, both positive and negative. The target population for the survey was 12–17-year-old internet users who live in a private household. In addition, one of their parents/guardians was also interviewed regardless of whether they used the internet or not. Internet users were defined as those who have used the internet in the three months prior to participating in the survey.

In all 12 countries, the sample size per country was around 1,000 children and 1,000 of their parents or guardians. For the sample – and the data – to be nationally representative of this target population, the survey used random probability sampling with national coverage, or as close to full national coverage as possible, in all study countries. This is explained in further detail below.

UNICEF worked with the Ipsos Social Research Institute and their local offices to collect the survey data in each country.

Table 1: List of Ipsos network partners

Country	Ipsos network partner
Armenia	IPM and MPG
Brazil	Ipsos Brazil
Colombia	Ipsos Colombia
Dominican Republic	Ipsos Dominican Republic
Jordan	Ipsos Jordan
Montenegro	Ipsos Montenegro
Morocco	Ipsos Morocco
Mexico	Ipsos Mexico
North Macedonia	Ipsos North Macedonia
Pakistan	Ipsos Pakistan
Serbia	Ipsos Serbia
Tunisia	Ipsos Tunisia

RATIONALE

Children's perspectives and lived experiences around tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly at the national level, remain scarce. The main aim and rationale of this research activity was to hear directly from children about their experiences of the digital environment and tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in a way that could be generalized to internet-using children aged 12–17 living in private households in each country. In addition to generating data about the scope of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, a key part of this research activity was to explore protective factors that can mitigate the risk of harm and the factors in children's lives and wider contexts that perpetrators take advantage of to harm children. This requires measuring a variety of indicators ranging from children's own understanding of exploitation and abuse, norms and values around sex and relationships, migration status, and so on.

FIELDWORK COVERAGE & SAMPLE DESIGN

The Disrupting Harm survey aimed to reach 100 per cent fieldwork coverage or as close to this as possible. In some countries, conflict-affected areas or very remote and isolated areas could not be accessed by the field teams. Fieldwork coverage (*see Table 2*) is defined as the percentage of the total population that had a chance of being included in the survey sample, i.e., the fieldwork would cover the area where they live if sampled.

Table 2: Fieldwork coverage and sampling frame/fieldwork exclusions by country

Country	Coverage	Sampling frame and fieldwork exclusions
Armenia	100%	No sampling frame exclusions.
Brazil	95%	No sampling frame exclusions. Sample reviewed after selection and high-crime or inaccessible areas replaced prior to fieldwork, suggesting approximately 5% coverage loss.
Colombia	99%	No sampling frame exclusions. Areas (secondary sampling units, or SSUs) where access is difficult in Amazonia, Vaupes, Vichada, San Andres and Providencia were excluded from fieldwork – accounting for 0.5% of the population.
Dominican Republic	97%	No sampling frame exclusions. High-crime areas could not be covered in fieldwork due to safety reasons.
Jordan	100%	No sampling frame or fieldwork exclusions.
Morocco	95%	No sampling frame exclusions. The extreme south (Sahara part) cannot be covered due to political reasons – accounting for 5% of the population.
Montenegro	99%	No sampling frame exclusions.

		Poorly accessible, remote parts of the country were excluded from fieldwork – accounting for 1.4% of the population.
North Macedonia	99%	No sampling frame exclusions. Poorly accessible, remote parts of the country were excluded from fieldwork – accounting for 0.8% of the population.
Mexico	94%	The sampling frame (the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, INEGI) hides the information for primary sampling units (PSUs) with two or less dwellings. Small PSUs (with less than 60 dwellings) are also excluded from fieldwork. Several municipalities in the states of Sinaloa, Sonora, Tamaulipas and others with security issues will also be excluded. These all account for around 6% of the population.
Pakistan	91%	The sampling frame does not include Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir – accounting for 6% of the population. These areas are not covered in surveys in Pakistan due to security reasons. In addition, Cantonment areas are not covered in fieldwork – accounting for 3% of the population.
Serbia	99%	No sampling frame exclusions. Remote parts of the country that were not easy for field teams to access were excluded from fieldwork – accounting for 0.6% of the population.
Tunisia	93%	No sampling frame exclusions. Some areas – accounting for 6.7% of the population – were not included in the sample due to safety considerations.

OVERVIEW OF SAMPLE DESIGN

The sampling generally followed a three-stage random probability clustered sample design with some variation by country with the following stages:

1) At the first stage, 100 PSUs were selected in each country. In some countries, an additional selection stage was included prior to PSU selection, with higher-level units (e.g., provinces) sampled at the first stage, before random selection of PSUs within the selected provinces.

2) At the second stage, interviewers randomly selected addresses in the field using random walk procedures and attempted contact at the selected addresses to screen for members of the survey population using a screening question developed for this purpose.

3) At the third stage, individual respondents (children and parents/guardians) were selected within each eligible household using random methods. In this survey, a list of all eligible

children was input into a software called iField which randomly selected an eligible child in the household to participate in the survey.

Interviewers contacted sufficient addresses in each PSU to achieve 10 interviewed households per PSU, therefore achieving interviews with 1,000 children and 1,000 parents/guardians.

FIRST STAGE SELECTION – PSUS AND STRATIFICATION

The approach to PSU selection involved a single stage of selection with probability proportional to size (PPS) and proportional stratification by region and urbanity.[3] The sampling involved the following steps:

1) Population statistics were obtained at the regional level (i.e., the largest administrative unit in the country). Ideally, the statistics would have been for the child population aged 12–17, or as close to this as possible. However, in cases where child statistics were not readily available, the total population was used instead with the assumption that distributions at region level were similar to the child population distributions.

2) The 100 PSUs were distributed across the regions in proportion to the population statistics. For example, 20 PSUs were selected in a region which accounted for 20 per cent of the country population.

3) The required number of PSUs was randomly sampled from each region with PPS and proportional stratification by variables available on the PSU sampling frames, which were expected to correlate with survey measures (urbanity and lower-level region variables). This part of the sampling involved the following steps:

i) The full list of administrative units was prepared for the country, consisting of a single row of data for each unit at the chosen PSU level (*see Table 3*, which describes the PSU units for each country). These PSU lists also included: the top-level region used in step 2, lower-level region information and urbanity measures for the stratification at this stage and the size of the PSU (total population or households).

ii) The PSUs were selected systematically via PPS. First, the list was sorted by urbanity and second-level region (e.g., district): the implicit stratifiers. The PSUs were selected with a random start point and fixed interval, with the interval set as the number of PSUs required in each region divided by the sum of PSU sizes in that region. The purpose of sorting the PSU list by urbanity and second-tier region before selection was to achieve proportional stratification by the sort variables. Although the process of stratification increases the accuracy of survey estimates, one of the difficulties for multi-country projects is that it is preferable that the data for the stratifiers be universally available in all countries included in the study. For this reason, and due to the limited availability of official statistics, the implicit stratifiers were confined to these two measures.

[3] Proportional stratification (also called implicit stratification) is undertaken to ensure that the selected sample profile matches the population profile on the stratification variables. For example, if in a given region 80 per cent of the population lives in rural PSUs the resulting sample of PSUs will be 80 per cent rural by population. Without stratification, due to sampling error, the sample would be close to, but usually not exactly, 80 per cent rural.

SECOND STAGE SELECTION – HOUSEHOLDS

Random walk methods were used for random sampling of households. The enumerators were given a random starting point (usually a landmark such as a church, mosque or school) and clear instructions on which directions to take and which households to contact. This was the preferred method for random sampling as it was not always possible to access sampling frames with full lists of addresses. At each contacted address, interviewers checked for the presence of a resident aged 12–17 and recorded the contact outcome using the iField electronic contact sheet. The pattern of following the random walk rules and adding addresses – using the map to stay within the boundaries of the PSU[4] – was continued until 10 interviews were completed in each PSU.

THIRD STAGE SELECTION – INDIVIDUALS

In each household, one eligible child was interviewed. In households with more than one eligible respondent, one was selected by listing all the 12–17-year-old internet users and randomly selecting one via the electronic contact sheet. A minimum of three additional visits were made to eligible households to ensure that the selected respondent had a good chance of being interviewed in case they were not at home during the initial visit. In some countries, such as Pakistan, for cultural reasons, it was necessary to gender match between the respondent and the interviewer; in these instances, interviewer teams were made up of both men and women, and a different interviewer made the call-backs where necessary. One parent/guardian of each child was also selected from the household to be interviewed. If both parents were available at the time, the parent who was most informed about the selected child's internet use took part in the survey. Only households where an interview with both a child and caregiver was completed counted towards the overall sample.

SAMPLING FRAMES

Table 3: PSU list sources by country

Country	Name of PSU list	List provider	PSUs	Average PSU size
Armenia	Early Elections to the National Assembly, 2021	RA Central Electoral Commission	Polling station territories (PST)	1,290
Brazil	Census list	IBGE - Instituto Brasileiro de Geografía e Estatística	Census tract/census sector	300

[4] Most countries used pre-existing maps of the PSU boundaries; however, where these were not available interviewers were given detailed instructions on how to sketch a boundary map when in the field.

Colombia	PSU: Serie municipal de población por área, para el periodo 2020–2035	National Administrative Department of Statistics National Geostatistical Framework – Population Census 2018	Municipalities, with further division into SSUs	33,378 (municipalities)
Dominican Republic	Segment reconnaissance tour	Oficina Nacional de Estadística	Segments	92
Jordan	Estimates of the population in neighbourhoods	Department of Statistics	Subdistricts, with further division into blocks (SSUs)	7,137 (subdistricts)
Morocco	Province (or *Préfecture*) x Urbanity (the city or rural village which include *arrondissements*/districts)	Local urban/rural commune	Province x Urbanity, with further division into SSUs	241,230 (provinces)
Montenegro	n/a	Statistical Office of Montenegro – Cadastre and State Property Administration	Statistical circles territories	390
North Macedonia	Polling station territories	State Election Commission of Macedonia	Polling station territories	589
Mexico	National public databases and cartographic information from the INEGI 2020 census (results by Areas GeoEstadísticas Básicas - Basic Geostatistical Areas [AGEBs] and *Localidades*)	INEGI	In urban PSUs: AGEBs. In rural PSUs: *Localidades*	Urban: 2,248, Rural: 703
Pakistan	Blocks list	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS)	Block Wise Province Data	201
Serbia	SK	The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia –	Statistical circles territories	580

		Republic Geodetic Authority		
Tunisia	Tunisian Republic sampling frame by commune census_2014	Institute of Statistics	Commune x Urbanity	5,270

DATA COLLECTION TOOL

UNICEF Innocenti used the same survey tool developed for the first round of Disrupting Harm studies conducted between 2019 and 2022. The Disrupting Harm survey developed for the first round of studies builds on a survey developed by UNICEF Innocenti and London School of Economics under the Global Kids Online project, with its origin in the EU Kids Online survey from 2012. Variations of this survey have been implemented in over 60 countries across the world. The Global Kids Online survey focuses primarily on topics like internet access, digital skills, online activities and online risks. For the Disrupting Harm project, the survey was extended and updated through consultations with national stakeholders and governments to include a greater focus on sexual violence both online and in person. The development of the Disrupting Harm survey tool was also informed by child-centred workshops conducted in 2019 to understand children's perceptions of the online environment including its benefits and risks.

In 2022, UNICEF Innocenti revised the original Disrupting Harm survey tool based on lessons learned in the first round of implementation. This included feedback on the survey tool received from national partners and key stakeholders and additional statistical analysis of the data – including its psychometric properties – to ensure that the indicators worked as intended. However, for reasons related to comparability with previous rounds of data collection, the survey tool remained largely the same.

The Disrupting Harm survey tool used a mixture of computer-assisted personal interviewing and computer-assisted self-interviewing. To ensure that enumerators were able to build rapport with the respondents, the questions related to children's life context and broader internet use were administered using face-to-face interviewing. Sections of the survey containing sensitive questions about sex and sexual violence were filled in by respondents themselves in the self-complete mode on a tablet or phone. This was primarily to protect children's privacy – particularly if other people were in the household during the interview – and to allow children to feel more comfortable answering these questions. Enumerators were available to answer questions, address concerns and respond to any adverse reactions to the survey, including by activating the safeguarding and referral protocol where needed. Regardless of the mode of data collection, children always had the option to skip questions or entire sections of the survey or stop the interview all together.

INTERNET USE RATES

Given that enumerators visit randomly selected houses into order to identify which households are eligible to take part in the study, they were also asked to collect data on whether all the 12–17-year-olds in each household had used the internet in the past three months. The electronic contact sheet, which is used to manage the random walk procedures, screen households for eligibility and administer the random respondent selection, was also used to collect data about each 12–17-year-old's internet use. This was used to estimate internet use rates for 12–17-year-olds in all study countries for 2024.

COGNITIVE AND PILOT TESTING

UNICEF Innocenti also conducted cognitive and pilot tests in each country to ensure that the survey questions were well understood and that they were appropriate for the local context.

From September to October 2023, cognitive testing of the questionnaire took place with 10 children from the target population in each country. Participants provided feedback on question wording or scales that they found difficult to understand and were altered in the survey tool. In some cases, children also suggested adding response items that would capture experiences relevant to their lives online and offline. In addition, the questionnaire was later tested through pilot surveys with 20 households (20 children and 20 parents/guardians) in each country. The pilot allowed enumerators to implement what they learned in the training sessions. It also acted as a test-run of administering the survey instrument, trialling the collection of data on internet use rates through the electronic contact sheet, and going through the consent and safeguarding processes with respondents. Following the pilots, a small pause was implemented to adjust research tools, fieldwork materials and/or procedures as needed.

All survey tools and respondent-facing materials were translated into the main local language(s). This involved independent translations by two translators, followed by an independent adjudication of both translations to agree on the best translations to be used.

LIMITATIONS

The survey methodology has several limitations that should be noted, particularly when interpreting the results of the survey data.

Exclusions:

While the survey is intended to be nationally representative of 12–17-year-old internet users, it is also important to note that it was designed and implemented as a household survey. This means that only private residences were contacted to take part in the survey. The questionnaire was therefore not implemented with children who may be living in various contexts – this includes children living in institutional care, children engaged in migration or children living in street situations, among others.

In addition, as mentioned above, part of the survey was administered in a computer-assisted self-interview format to ensure that respondents had the maximum amount of privacy when answering sensitive questions. There was therefore a certain level of comprehension, reading

and writing skills required to complete the survey. This poses a barrier to participation for very young children, individuals with certain disabilities or individuals with low levels of literacy. Children and parents living in these contexts have unique sets of experiences and capacities that could not be captured through this survey. It is important to further engage with these communities to understand their perspectives and unique challenges, but it is also fundamental to do this safely and ethically.

Upon reflection, the research team decided that this was not possible within the current scope of the project. However, an important future piece of work should include designing modified versions of the questionnaire, protocols and safeguarding approaches to cater to different communities, and to modify the way that the questionnaire is administered to facilitate participation for a wider range of children and their families.

Low levels of disclosure:

In studies that focus on topics like violence, it is common for disclosure rates to be low. Given that the survey explores the sensitive topic of sexual violence against children, high levels of refusals to participate in the study at all were expected, as were high non-response rates from those who did participate.

Measures were put in place to mitigate this risk, including strong data protection and data privacy measures, training enumerators on child-friendly interviewing techniques, conducing the interview out of earshot of other household members, using the self-complete modality for any sensitive questions, and locking the self-complete sections of the survey so that enumerators could not go back and view the answers. Despite this, there was still a reluctance to speak openly about these issues in some countries. While the survey data presented is intended to provide estimates that are as reliable as possible, the general low levels of disclosure mean it is likely that the true figures are higher.

Measuring complex processes:

The survey does not intend to measure all the possible ways that digital technologies are used to exploit or abuse children. It measures nine behaviours that children may be subjected to that are characteristic of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Some forms of abuse and exploitation like grooming are particularly difficult to measure as they can involve complex and continuous interactions between children and perpetrators. Livestreaming of child sexual abuse can also be difficult to measure as children may not be aware that their abuse was filmed, let alone livestreamed.

Cross-sectional survey:

The survey is cross-sectional, not longitudinal, meaning that the data capture a single moment in time in the lives of the 1,000 children surveyed. While the Disrupting Harm data highlight relationships between sexual abuse and other factors in children's lives, it is not possible to determine cause and effect based on this survey data alone.

4. Interviews with children and young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood

This Disrupting Harm research activity involved loosely structured, trauma-informed interviews with children and young people aged 16–24 years who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during their childhood. The research teams aimed to interview up to 30 eligible children and young people per country.

This research activity aimed to understand the experiences of young people who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood. In addition, it aimed to identify how systems can better prevent and respond to this issue.

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RATIONALE

Digital technologies can be a powerful tool for children to connect, explore, learn and engage in creative and empowering ways. It can also facilitate a wide range of harms against children, including sexual harms. The constantly shifting nature of technology means that these forms of sexual violence change and new undocumented means of exploitation and abuse emerge. There is a lack of understanding of what characterizes these different forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, how they happen, and how they impact children. This lack of evidence limits the ability of society to prevent and respond to this issue. Listening to children who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is essential for truly understanding it.

Children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse may or may not seek support from their friends, family and support networks to navigate the violence they are or have been subjected to and its impact on them. Previous evidence from Disrupting Harm shows that in 41 per cent of cases, children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse told a friend about what happened, while in 34 per cent of cases they told nobody at all.[5] Some children may engage with a wide range of actors within the child protection system (e.g., frontline workers, justice professionals and law enforcement) for support, recovery and/or to seek legal remedies and resolution. Previous Disrupting Harm research indicates that these systems are not always well suited to support children. They may be discriminatory and, in some contexts, interacting with child protection and justice systems could be unsafe for children and young people.[6] Research has also shown that only a small percentage of children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse seek support from formal support organizations (e.g., social workers, police and helplines). Children and young people's perspectives are therefore crucial to understanding how systems can be strengthened to better respond to these forms of exploitation and abuse in child-centric and effective ways.

A central dilemma when involving young people in research projects is balancing their right to express their views with their right to be protected.[7] Engaging people that have been subjected to child sexual abuse or exploitation in research requires substantial care to account for a range of ethical considerations.[8] The research must place significant importance on participants having the right to participate in discourse safely, actively and meaningfully on issues that impact them. They must also be fully aware of their rights to opt out, the limits of confidentiality and their agency in shaping what is and is not part of the interview.[9] This research activity was built on the methodology used in the first round of Disrupting Harm studies and was designed to balance ethical considerations with strategies to include the

[5] ECPAT International & UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, *Disrupting Harm Data Insight 2: Children's disclosures of online sexual exploitation and abuse*, UNICEF, New York, 2022.
[6] ECPAT International & UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, *Disrupting Harm Data Insight 4: Legislation addressing online child sexual exploitation and abuse*, UNICEF, New York, 2022.
[7] Thomas, Nigel P., 'Child-Led Research, Children's Rights and Childhood Studies: A defence', *Childhood*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2021, pp. 186–199.
[8] Bredal, Anja, Stefansen, Kari, and Bjørnholt, Margunn., 'Why Do People Participate in Research Interviews? Participant orientations and ethical contracts in interviews with victims of interpersonal violence', *Qualitative Research*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2024, pp. 287–304.
[9] Perôt, C., Chevous, J. and Survivors Voices Research Group, *Turning Pain into Power: A charter for organisations engaging abuse survivors in projects, research & service development*, Survivors Voices, 2018.

perspectives of young people in a safe and trauma-informed way.[10,11,12] The research design was based on these considerations and guided by ethical research principles, along with input from experts such as researchers, clinicians and survivor groups. This process helped define the target population, establish the study procedures and determine how data would be collected, analysed and presented.

Findings from this activity were triangulated with other data collected under the project to respond to its research questions.

POPULATION OF INTEREST

The population of interest in this research activity was young people aged 16–24 years who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children. The lower age limit of 16 years was informed by evidence from various fields (e.g., developmental and social sciences and bioethics) as a conservative age when young people can provide informed consent.[13] In some countries, local research teams decided to only interview individuals 18 or over due to insufficient availability of support services for children. In all countries, local research partners considered a range of factors when deciding on inclusion criteria such as laws that criminalize same-sex relationships and/or sex outside of marriage, which could potentially put participants at risk. Decisions on inclusion and exclusion were made in consultation with UNICEF country offices to ensure that due consideration was given to national contexts and circumstances. In two countries (i.e., Jordan and Pakistan) this activity was pilot tested but not continued due to safeguarding considerations. Due to implementation challenges this activity was not conducted in Morocco.

Two different participant groups were identified as important to the research, with different ethical practices set up to accommodate both. These are presented below.

[10] ECPAT International, *Disrupting Harm – Conversations with young survivors about online child sexual exploitation and abuse*, Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, 2022.
[11] Anderson, Katherine M. et al., 'Engagement of Sexual Violence Survivors in Research: Trauma-informed research in the THRIVE study', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 29, no. 11, September 2023, pp. 2239–2265.
[12] Perôt, C., Chevous, J. and Survivors Voices Research Group, *Turning Pain into Power: A Charter for Organisations Engaging Abuse Survivors in Projects, Research & Service Development*, Survivors Voices, 2018.
[13] Mathews, Ben, 'Adolescent Capacity to Consent to Participate in Research: A review and analysis informed by law, human rights, ethics, and developmental science', *Laws*, vol. 12, no. 1, 23 December 2022, pp. 2.

Group 1: 16–24 years, recruited via service providers	Group 2: 18–24 years, recruited via the community or social media
Young people aged 16–24 who had been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This group of young people had or were receiving professional support from social workers, therapists, legal organizations or other service providers and were provided with information about the study by those services. 16–17-year-olds were only included if they were already engaged with service providers for support to mitigate first-time disclosure by children of sexual abuse to researchers.	Young people aged 18–24 who had been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse who learned about the study through a community advertisement or network. As this group of participants were recruited through the community, this included cases that were not previously reported and/or young people who had not received any formal psychosocial support. As this group of young people are adults, disclosure of abuse during childhood does not require mandatory reporting, which in some contexts and cases could potentially be harmful to children. For example, when children subjected to abusive experiences could be criminalized or where service provision systems are still developing.

A detailed sampling strategy was developed for each country, in consultation with the clinical researchers in each national research team and with UNICEF country offices. Where applicable, technical working groups and technical advisors were also consulted. The consultations aimed to ensure that each country context was considered in the design and implementation of the research protocols and to manage and mitigate ethical implications of participation and inclusion.

RECRUITMENT

This research activity adopted a combination of convenience and purposive sampling to guide recruitment in each country.

1) Recruitment via service providers

Recruitment strategies were adapted to reflect each country context. Agencies working on child protection, collaborative networks, child protection working groups and professional associations were identified and consulted in the development of a recruitment strategy for each country. The research team also drew on pre-existing professional networks to

communicate the study to service providers who may be able to assist with participant recruitment. These networks also assisted in identifying relevant service providers supporting cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Organizational and/or cross-sectoral briefings were conducted to communicate the purpose of the study and the proposed study design to relevant stakeholders and potential participants. Information sheets and invitations for young people to participate were shared through networks of relevant organizations and working groups. Service providers explained the study to young people who met the inclusion criteria and provided them with further information. Young people who expressed interest in the study were put in touch with the national researcher teams for further information and for preparatory calls before being enrolled in the study.

2) Community recruitment

In some countries, young adults (18–24 years) were invited to take part in the study via posters and social media posts providing information about the study. Social media recruitment was considered because very few children or young people ever report their abuse or receive formal support through service providers. People who were eligible were given options for communication with a researcher, either providing their contact information or choosing to contact the research team themselves. In countries where social media platforms were used, the national research teams, UNICEF country offices and communication specialists co-developed the social media strategies and content to be used. Once launched, the social media campaigns were monitored and revised as needed.

A range of ethical and safeguarding concerns were taken into consideration when developing the communication material and strategies for how it would be shared. This included paying special attention to the language used to describe tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, the provision of information and access to support services, and the disabling of comments on social media posts.

ENROLMENT & CONSENT

In all countries, the national research team held preparatory calls with young people who expressed an interest in participating in the study. This call was to provide further information about the study, confirm eligibility and enable the researcher to talk to the young person and assess whether their participation in an interview would be likely to have any negative impacts on their well-being. If the young person did not meet the inclusion criteria, or if there was evidence that participation in the study would not be in their best interest, the young person was referred to relevant support services and they were not included in the study. Otherwise, with their consent, the young person was enrolled into the study, and an interview time and place were agreed.

Potential participants and caregivers (where required) received the participant information and consent forms along with information about how to contact the research team to sign up or for further information and to confirm that they met the inclusion criteria. In cases where

caregiver consent was required and appropriate, service providers first asked the child (16–17 years) if they were interested in participating in the study.[14] At that point, either the service providers or researchers requested the caregiver's written consent. Researchers were then given access to the contact information of the child or young person to conduct the preparatory call and schedule interviews. During the preparatory call, participants could speak to the interviewer, ask questions and re-consider their participation. Informed consent was audio recorded and registered in a de-identified and secure participant database. The number of eligible participants varied by country as represented in Table 4.

Table 4. Participants by country and gender – Female (F), male (M), gender non-binary (NB)

Country	Participants
Armenia	1 (1F)
Brazil	9 (8F, 1M)
Colombia	30 (28F, 2M)
Dominican Republic	13 (10F, 3M)
Montenegro	4 (3F, 1M)
North Macedonia	Ongoing
Mexico	20 (20F)
Serbia	9 (7F, 2M)
Tunisia	9 (6F, 2M, 1NB)

INTERVIEW METHOD

The design of the research activity was developed following trauma-informed principles, including that participants should have control over the interview process. During the interview, participants could decide what they wanted to discuss, be it the abuse itself, the different components of the protection system they encountered and/or what worked well for them and what did not. A simple interview guide was shared with clinical researchers and trauma-informed qualitative researchers who were trained by UNICEF Innocenti researchers to adapt the tools to the specific context and facilitate the interviews.[15,5] The resources were developed to assist researchers in providing space and options for young people to express themselves and control the direction and pace of the conversation. Interviews lasted 1.5–2 hours.

NATIONAL RESEARCH TEAM COMPOSITION

In most countries, interviews were conducted by a clinical researcher specialized in interviewing children and young people. In two countries (Mexico and Brazil) qualitative researchers with experience in trauma-informed interviewing conducted the interviews with

[14] This is not the formal assent process; it seeks to ascertain the interest of the young person in order to proceed with the initial call and caregiver consent.
[15] Ly, Stephanie, Runacres, Fiona and Poon, Peter, 'Journey Mapping as a Novel Approach to Healthcare: A qualitative mixed methods study in palliative care', *BMC Health Services Research*, vol. 21, 2021, pp. 1–9.

supervision from a clinical psychologist. All researchers working on the project were trained in trauma-informed and child-friendly research practices and followed the project's research and safeguarding protocols.

ANALYSIS

National research teams analysed data using deductive and inductive qualitative thematic analysis techniques. The interviews were analysed together with interviews from frontline workers (see here) and justice professionals (see here) where applicable. NVivo 14 (or another compatible software) was used to code the data and support with qualitative thematic analysis.

The research teams at ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti then conducted a mixed-methods analysis of the qualitative data with data from the other research activities implemented under the project.

DATA MANAGEMENT

National research teams kept a password-protected database of participants meeting the inclusion criteria. The database was organized by participant number and without identifiers (i.e., names and contact information) and stored on the UNICEF secure server. Written artifacts were used in some interviews and documented for data analysis. Transcripts were allocated participant identification numbers and final transcripts were translated into English. Interviews were voice recorded with the consent of research participants. Interview recordings were deleted after analysis was completed and reports were finalized.

LIMITATIONS

As with many qualitative studies, the findings are shaped by several limitations. First, despite continued efforts to include the voices of boys and young men in the study, only a few approached research teams to participate. This limited representation may reflect broader social stigma, gender norms and barriers to disclosure that can silence boys and young men subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. In connection to this, participants opted into the study independently, meaning that those who participated may have felt more comfortable or ready to share their experiences. Although this aligns with trauma-informed approaches, it means that some experiences remain less visible in the study.

5. Interviews with frontline service providers

This Disrupting Harm research activity involved semi-structured interviews with frontline service providers who have direct experience providing case management or support to children and young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood. The research teams aimed to interview up to 15 frontline service providers per country.

The research activity aimed to understand current frontline support practices for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in each country. It also explored how service providers currently respond to children affected by tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and identified ways to strengthen prevention and improve responses to these forms of sexual violence against children.

RATIONALE

Frontline service providers such as social workers, psychotherapists, helpline workers, peer support workers and health professionals provide invaluable services, care and support. These can come in the form of psychological and medical care, social support, and short- or long-term rehabilitation services for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and their families. The work of these professionals is a key component of a national response to violence against children. Due to their proximity to the issues associated with tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse via day-to-day service provision, frontline workers are uniquely positioned to share nuanced insights into this problem and the current capacity of the national system to respond. They bring diverse experiences of the trajectories of care for children who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and as such are able to critically explore the limitations and challenges of service provision and propose possible solutions.

The interviews explored the different steps frontline workers undertake when they provide support to children and young people. The research also allowed for the identification of some gaps and opportunities in national service provision systems.

POPULATION OF INTEREST

The population of interest in this research activity was professionals providing support or essential services directly to individuals who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse while under the age of 18. Frontline workers were included in the study if their case/patient load over the last 12 months included at least one child or young person subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. In Armenia, this timeline was extended to five years due to low numbers of eligible frontline workers. Frontline service providers were invited to participate if they were able to talk about a de-identified case. Cases where judicial proceedings were ongoing were excluded to ensure the integrity of the case.

Although their responsibilities may vary across countries, a short description of the likely role of each group of professionals as it relates to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is presented below.

- → **Social workers:** Social workers identify cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse and report them to agencies mandated to intervene (e.g., police) and assess children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. They may also provide information about available resources, refer children to other service providers and support children in the form of case management.
- → **Psychotherapists:** Therapists may support children by providing a confidential space for talking about their feelings, disclosing abuse, where required reporting tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to law enforcement, and referring children to other services. This category may include school psychologists, counsellors, psychiatrists and other mental health and psychosocial support professionals working with children and young people. For individuals experiencing mental health problems related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, evidence-based trauma-focused interventions are imperative.[16]
- → **Helpline workers:** Helplines may be staffed by a wide range of trained practitioners or volunteers providing free information, advice, guidance and support to people concerned about (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse. Children and adolescents may not be the primary users of helplines focusing on child sexual exploitation and abuse as helplines may also be used by adults concerned about themselves, other adults or children.
- → **Other frontline providers:** This includes other frontline providers who offer care and support to individuals subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This was adapted by country and included for example teachers and health professionals.

A detailed sampling strategy was developed for each country, in consultation with UNICEF country offices, as well as technical working groups and technical advisors where applicable. Due to implementation challenges this activity was not conducted in the Dominican Republic or Morocco.

RECRUITMENT

Convenience, purposive and snowballing sampling were used to recruit a cross-section of frontline service providers with relevant experiences. Agencies working in the field of child protection, collaborative networks, child protection working groups, professional associations and research partners' networks were identified and consulted in the development of a recruitment strategy for each country. The groups assisted in identifying relevant advocacy groups and other groups of professionals working on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Organizational and/or cross-sectoral briefings were conducted to communicate the study's purpose and proposed study design. Information sheets and invitations to participate were shared through the networks of relevant organizations and working groups.

[16] Hanson, Rochelle F. and Wallis, Elizabeth, 'Treating Victims of Child Sexual Abuse', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 175, no. 11, 2018, pp. 1064–1070.

ENROLMENT & CONSENT

After initial contact between frontline service providers and study researchers or after frontline service providers contacted study researchers directly expressing interest in the study, participant information and consent forms were sent by email with an invitation for a phone call with the researchers to discuss participation in the study. A brief screening conversation was administered over the phone to assess eligibility based on the criteria mentioned above. Eligible participants were asked to consent before being scheduled for participation. The number of eligible participants varied by country as represented in Table 5.

Table 5. Participants by country

Country	Participants
Armenia	19
Brazil	23
Colombia	15
Jordan	14
Montenegro	12
North Macedonia	13
Mexico	15
Pakistan	20
Serbia	15
Tunisia	24

INTERVIEW METHOD

Researchers were provided with a semi-structured interview guide and training to adapt questions to the specific context, service provision systems and participants' needs. During a 1.5–2-hour interview, frontline service providers were invited to reflect on a de-identified case of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that they supported. Participants discussed the response to the case, talked through the steps they took in providing services and shared their experience of providing support to a child or young person. Frontline service providers were asked to reflect on opportunities and challenges from their own professional perspective and in relation to improvements that could be made at a systems level.

ANALYSIS

National research teams analysed data in the local language using deductive and inductive qualitative thematic analysis techniques. Interviews with frontline workers were analysed together with interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (see here) and justice professionals (see here). NVivo 14 (or another compatible software) was used to code the data and support with qualitative thematic analysis.

The research teams at ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti then conducted a mixed-methods analysis of this qualitative data with data from the other research activities conducted under this project to produce the Disrupting Harm national reports.

DATA MANAGEMENT

National research teams kept a password-protected database of participants meeting the inclusion criteria. The database was organized by participant number and without identifiers (i.e., names and contact information) and stored on the UNICEF secure server. Interviews were voice recorded with the consent of research participants. In cases where the participant did not agree to have their interview recorded, detailed notes were taken instead. Written artifacts were used in some interviews and documented for data analysis. Transcripts were allocated participant identification numbers and final transcripts were translated into English. Any physical documents or artefacts produced from the interview were documented by scanning then shredded. Interview recordings were deleted after analysis was completed and reports were finalized.

LIMITATIONS

As with many qualitative studies, the findings are shaped by several limitations. The use of snowball and convenience sampling may have introduced bias, as participants are likely to share similar characteristics or experiences, limiting the diversity of perspectives captured in the study. In each country, specific locations were selected for the study in consultation with UNICEF country offices and national research teams. While qualitative research prioritizes depth of experience over representativeness, focusing on specific regions for logistical reasons may limit the contextual diversity of experiences captured and affect the transferability of the findings to other settings.

6. Interviews with justice professionals

This Disrupting Harm research activity involved semi-structured interviews with professionals from the formal or informal justice system with recent experience working a case of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse or providing support to individuals subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The research teams aimed to interview up to 15 justice professionals per country.

This research activity aimed to understand the experiences of justice professionals handling cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in each country. It also explored how national justice systems currently respond to children affected by such crimes and identified ways to strengthen prevention and improve responses to these forms of sexual violence against children.

RATIONALE

Children who are subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse must be able to engage effectively with the criminal justice system to secure remedies for the violation of

their rights, including compensation and services that may help them to recover. Seeking redress through formal or customary and informal justice systems can be the only feasible way for children to secure damage compensation in contexts where alternative avenues such as separate civil lawsuits or state aid from compensation funds tend to be costly, impractical or non-existent.[17] While policy and legislation may exist allowing compensation to be sought and awarded to children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse (although to different extents and with different limitations), in practice this may not always be accessible to children. For example, not one instance of children receiving compensation through the formal justice system was identified through interviews across the 13 countries in which the Disrupting Harm study was conducted between 2019 and 2022.[18]

In general, justice mechanisms may not always cater to children and young people's needs. They may also not cater to children or specific groups of children or even be unsafe for them, leading to stigmatization and revictimization.[19] This is especially relevant for victims who experience barriers such as reluctance to report, lack of family support, threats to their safety and risk of re-traumatization, among others.[20] Research has found that when sexual exploitation and abuse is facilitated by technology, children can be even more reluctant to report due to fear that images or recordings of their abuse will be circulated.[21] Research also shows that few children who were sexually exploited enter criminal justice systems and fewer still participate in proceedings until their conclusion or are given the option to seek and obtain compensation or monetary relief.[22,23] It is unclear to what extent policies and procedures are implemented across countries and if children are benefiting from child-centric procedures.

This research activity explored the perspectives and experiences of justice professionals working on cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Their perspectives were used to help identify gaps and opportunities in the criminal justice system to respond in ways that promote the rights of children. Notably, due to their proximity to the issues associated with the provision of justice for victims of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, justice professionals are uniquely positioned to share nuanced insights into these issues and the current capacity of the national justice systems to respond. They bring diverse experiences of the trajectories of the justice process for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.[24] As such, they can critically explore the limitations and challenges of the system and propose possible solutions. By discussing the justice provision journey, the study explored justice professionals' perspectives, legislative and practice-based enabling and challenging factors, common examples of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse encountered in the caseloads of justice professionals, and the varying

[17] ECPAT International, *Through the Eyes of a Child: Barriers to access to justice and remedies for child victims of sexual exploitation*, ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2017, pp. 17.

[18] ECPAT International & UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, ***Access to Justice and Legal Remedies for Children Subjected to Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse***, UNICEF, New York, 2022, pp. 6.

[19] Liefaard, Ton, 'Access to Justice for Children: Towards a specific research and implementation agenda', *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2019, pp. 204.

[20] For a complete analysis on the different barriers to access to justice for children see: ECPAT International, *Through the Eyes of a Child: Barriers to access to justice and remedies for child victims of sexual exploitation*, ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2017.

[21] ECPAT International, *Through the Eyes of a Child: Barriers to access to justice and remedies for child victims of sexual exploitation*, ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2017, pp. 21.

[22] ECPAT International, *Through the Eyes of a Child: Barriers to access to justice and remedies for child victims of sexual exploitation*, ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2017, pp. 17.

[23] ECPAT International, *Barriers to Compensation for Child Victims of Sexual Exploitation: A discussion paper based on a comparative legal study of selected countries*, ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2017, pp. 6.

[24] The Crown Prosecution Service, 'Safeguarding Children as Victims and Witnesses', < www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/safeguarding-children-victims-and-witnesses>, accessed 7 October 2025.

impacts of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse on children and young people. This facilitated the identification of gaps and opportunities within national justice systems and services.

POPULATION OF INTEREST

The population of interest in this research activity was professionals from the formal or informal justice systems with direct experience working on cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the five years prior to being interviewed. Justice professionals were invited to participate if they were able to talk about a de-identified case. Cases where judicial proceedings were ongoing were excluded to ensure the integrity of the case. Justice professionals who had retired or moved into different roles were included if they met the other inclusion criteria.

Although their responsibilities may vary across countries, a short description of the likely role of each group of professionals as it relates to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is presented below. National research partners and technical advisers adapted these to align with each country context.

- → Prosecutors: public officers employed by the state to prosecute persons accused of crimes related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- → Judges: public officers appointed to decide on cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in a court of law.
- → Lawyers: any person who practices the law and is involved in a case of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- → Justice advocates and leaders: includes child justice advocates/case managers from legal support NGOs or any other justice professional involved in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This category also included where possible community leaders that in their capacity have mediated informal justice procedures.
- → Law enforcement: in some countries (Brazil, Colombia, Jordan and Tunisia), law enforcement personnel working directly with cases and in connection to the justice system were also included.
- → Customary and informal justice actors: people who function as part of justice and conflict resolution mechanisms that operate outside of formal state-based laws and courts, or alongside them. This category was defined in close consultation with local stakeholders for each country.

A detailed sampling strategy was developed for each country, in consultation with UNICEF country offices, as well as technical working groups and technical advisors where applicable. Due to implementation challenges this activity was not conducted in the Dominican Republic and Morocco.

RECRUITMENT

Convenience, purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit a cross-section of justice professionals. Agencies working in the field of child protection, collaborative networks, child

protection working groups, professional associations and research partners' networks were identified and consulted to develop a recruitment strategy for each country. The groups assisted in identifying relevant advocacy groups and other groups of professionals working on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Organizational and/or cross-sectoral briefings were conducted to communicate the study's purpose and proposed study design. Information sheets and invitations to participate were shared through the networks of relevant organizations and working groups. National research teams offered further information and follow-up sessions as needed.

ENROLMENT & CONSENT

After initial contact between justice professionals and study researchers or after justice professionals contacted study researchers directly expressing interest in the study, participant information and consent forms were sent via email with an invitation for a phone call with the researchers to discuss participation in the study. A brief screening conversation was administered over the phone to assess eligibility based on the criteria mentioned above. Eligible participants were asked to consent before being scheduled for participation. The number of eligible participants varied by country as represented in Table 6.

Table 6. Participants by country

Country	Participants
Armenia	11
Brazil	20
Colombia	11
Jordan	8
Montenegro	14
North Macedonia	Ongoing
Mexico	15
Pakistan	16
Serbia	14
Tunisia	0

INTERVIEW METHOD

Researchers were provided with a semi-structured interview guide and training to adapt questions to the specific context, justice systems and participants' needs. During a 1.5–2-hour interview, justice professionals were invited to reflect on a de-identified case of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that they were involved in. Participants discussed the response to the case and talked through their experience as a professional in this sector. Justice professionals were asked to reflect on opportunities and challenges from their own professional perspective and in relation to improvements that could be made at a systems level.

ANALYSIS

National research teams analysed data using deductive and inductive qualitative thematic analysis techniques. Interviews with justice professionals were analysed together with

interviews from young people subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (see here) and frontline workers (see here). NVivo 14 (or another compatible software) was used to code the data and support with qualitative thematic analysis.

The research teams at ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti then conducted a mixed-methods analysis of this qualitative data with data from the other research activities conducted under this project to produce the Disrupting Harm national reports.

DATA MANAGEMENT

National research teams kept a password-protected database of participants meeting the inclusion criteria. The database was organized by participant number and without identifiers (i.e., names and contact information) and stored on the UNICEF secure server. Interviews were voice recorded with the consent of research participants. In cases where the participant did not agree to have their interview recorded, detailed notes were taken instead. Written artifacts were used in some interviews and documented for data analysis. Transcripts were allocated participant identification numbers and final transcripts were translated into English. Interview recordings were deleted after analysis was completed and reports were finalized.

LIMITATIONS

As with many qualitative studies, the findings are shaped by several limitations. The use of snowball and convenience sampling may have introduced bias, as participants are likely to share similar characteristics or experiences, limiting the diversity of perspectives captured in the study. In each country, specific locations were selected for the study in consultation with UNICEF country offices and national research teams. While qualitative research prioritizes depth of experience over representativeness, focusing on specific regions for logistical reasons may limit the contextual diversity of experiences captured and this may affect the transferability of the findings to other settings. Participants were asked not to discuss ongoing cases in the justice system to protect the integrity of those proceedings. While this approach is necessary and ethical, this restriction also limits the study, as it prevented discussion of more recent cases that may have been highly relevant to the topic.

7. Ethical clearance processes

UNICEF Innocenti obtained ethical approval for the Disrupting Harm project from the Health Media Lab, a global institutional review board. Ipsos also obtained internal ethical clearance for the project from the Ipsos Ethics Committee.

In some countries there were requirements to obtain survey permits or research visas before commencing primary data collection.

In several countries, there were no national ethics review boards available to review the study and/or no requirement for national ethical clearance. In those countries, UNICEF Innocenti sought reviews either from a panel of subject-matter experts or from technical working groups made up of national stakeholders across various sectors. Table 7 outlines the review process followed in each country.

Table 7: Ethical approval/ Study review process by country

Country	Organization
Armenia	Group of subject-matter experts
Brazil	n/a
Colombia	Group of subject-matter experts
Dominican Republic	Etikos Foundation
Jordan	Technical working group; Department of Statistics
Morocco	Key national stakeholders
Montenegro	Group of subject-matter experts
North Macedonia	n/a[25]
Mexico	Informal review by Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía
Pakistan	National Institute of Health – National Bioethics Committee for Research; Technical working group, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics
Serbia	Group of subject-matter experts
Tunisia	Technical working group and Conseil National de la Statistique

8. Safeguarding protocols

Overview of respondent safeguarding and safety approach

In addition to the ethical review processes detailed above, referral mechanisms and procedures were put in place to ensure that children were not harmed by the research conducted and that there were reliable and available support services available to them if needed. The objective was to ensure that all personnel engaged in data collection was aware of the kinds of safeguarding cases that could arise, and that a clear protocol was agreed on how to handle, refer and report these cases. This was a crucial part of the research process given the sensitive topics about children's personal experiences of violence, exploitation, and abuse.

The research team used the safeguarding protocols developed for the first round of studies and refined these further based on lessons learned. The child safeguarding and referral protocol was developed for all UNICEF-led activities under this project in line with international guidance and principles, including UNICEF standards on ethical research with children. The safeguarding protocol outlined the principles and actions to be taken throughout the research process to safeguard the rights of fieldwork teams, the local communities and research participants.

UNICEF Innocenti also collected feedback from the local research teams and UNICEF country offices to localize the protocols to each country.

[25] In North Macedonia, there was no national ethics review board that could review the study tools and protocols. After attempts to identify subject-matter experts to undertake the review, it was not possible to find individuals to undertake this task.

Rapid assessment of services

In order to uphold the duty to minimize harm for respondents who partake in the study, the research teams aimed to not only provide a list of support services to participants, but to also ensure those services met a minimum standard to respond in an adequate and timely manner. As such, each support service provider was assessed to ensure their capabilities and competency in responding to cases that were referred to them. The assessment included:

- type of organization (government, NGO or private organization)
- type of services provided
- whether the services are free or if there is a charge
- operating hours
- location
- contact methods
- type of staff e.g., professional qualified/trained staff or volunteers
- whether the service provides specialist services for vulnerable groups
- whether anyone is excluded from service provision
- how the service responds to referrals (if applicable) and average length of time for response to be provided
- who can contact the service e.g., members of the public, or only health and social care professionals
- anonymity of reporting
- confidentiality of services

Focal points

Following the rapid assessment of services, the most appropriate organization (in terms of capacity, network and service provision) to serve as a focal point for referrals was identified for each country. The focal point was either a government social service office or an NGO. Depending on the country context, between one and three organizations were identified as focal point organizations. The focal point organizations were able to respond to concerns about children and adults.

Where possible, the designated focal points were fully briefed on the context of the study and the timing of the fieldwork. The focal point was responsible for providing a response when a case was reported to them by an interviewer, and where necessary, referring the case to other appropriate service provider(s) (e.g., counselling, removal of the child from a dangerous situation and legal support). In some cases, the focal point was also able to refer the case to specific services within their own organization, where appropriate and available.

Pilot and mainstage fieldwork did not start until the fieldwork teams had established a relationship and clear process with the focal point.

Available services lists

Due to the sensitive nature of some of the topics in the survey, a list of support services was developed after a rapid assessment of each service provider. This list was provided to all research participants regardless of whether a concern was raised or suspected during the interview. In addition, this list also provided children and families with useful information on where to go for help in case they experience any problems in the future or have concerns for the well-being of another child. This list was provided at the start of the interview in case the interview was interrupted abruptly.

The list of support organizations aimed to cover a variety of youth-related services rather than child protection services only (for example hospitals and healthcare services, counselling and mental health services, emergency helplines, children or women's services, family support, and other social welfare services). This was done to ensure the safety of participants in case they faced retaliation for having a list of support services specifically for victims of sexual abuse.

In addition to only including services that passed the rapid assessment, efforts were made to include organizations that offered services free of charge and that had toll-free contact numbers. When organizations charged for their services or where contact numbers were not toll-free, this was signposted to respondents.

Mandatory reporting laws

In countries where mandatory reporting applied, the enumerators' duty to report any case of abuse or child endangerment was clearly explained to respondents – for children this was done in child-friendly terms – during the consent/assent process. Mandatory reporting applied in almost all countries included in this round of studies, without provisions exempting researchers. The process for obtaining waivers for research teams in each of the 12 countries was complicated and unclear at times, and as such the research team ensured that research participants were fully informed about these requirements prior to agreeing to take part in the research.

Researchers were provided with a decision tree to help them distinguish between acute and non-acute cases. Non-acute cases often did not require a direct referral, although enumerators were trained to offer a referral in case the respondents wanted it. Acute cases on the other hand – for example if a child disclosed abuse and requested a referral – did require a referral. The research team discussed the criteria for acute cases extensively with child protection and ethics specialists, and with local researchers.