

DISRUPTING HARM IN ARMENIA

Evidence on technology-facilitated
child sexual exploitation and abuse



Funded
by



Implemented
by



unicef 
for every child

Content warning:

This report discusses the sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Armenia. It includes accounts of child sexual exploitation and abuse cases as described by professionals in Armenia. Readers are encouraged to monitor their responses to the content and only engage with this report in ways that feel comfortable to them.

Suggested citation:

ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2025). Disrupting Harm in Armenia: Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Safe Online.

Copyright © ECPAT, INTERPOL, Safe Online, UNICEF, 2025.

Use of this publication is permitted provided the source is acknowledged and that the publication is not used for commercial purposes. Funding from Safe Online does not constitute endorsement.

CONTENTS

Executive summary	2	5. Service utilization	54
Methods	5	<hr/>	
Introduction	10	5.1 Factors that influence children seeking or receiving formal support	55
Internet use in Armenia	11	5.2 Factors influencing service provision and effectiveness	58
1. Technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Armenia	17	6. Access to justice and legal remedies	62
<hr/>		<hr/>	
1.1 What instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are children in Armenia subjected to?	19	6.1 Identifying cases and initial collection of evidence	64
1.2 Where does the sexual exploitation and abuse happen?	20	6.2 Investigative actions	67
1.3 Who perpetrates tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?	25	6.3 Criminal court proceedings	72
1.4 How is sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated?	28	6.4 Compensation	76
2. The impact on children	33	7. A child's right to privacy and anonymity: Media coverage in Armenia	78
<hr/>		<hr/>	
2.1 Social impacts	35	8. Conclusion	81
2.2 Mental health impacts	39	<hr/>	
2.3 Physical impacts	41	9. Recommendations	83
3. Disclosure	42	<hr/>	
<hr/>		10. Acknowledgements	89
3.1 How does child sexual exploitation and abuse come to light?	43	<hr/>	
3.2 Barriers to disclosure	45	11. Annex: Definition of key terms	90
4. Reporting	47	<hr/>	
<hr/>		<hr/>	
4.1 Do children report?	48		
4.2 Barriers to reporting to police: Individual and community factors	49		
4.3 Barriers to reporting to police: Organizational and systemic factors	51		

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Funded by Safe Online, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (UNICEF Innocenti) worked in partnership to design and implement the Disrupting Harm research project and methodology. The original project idea and conceptualization were developed by Safe Online, providing the foundation for this collaborative effort.

This unique partnership uses a multidisciplinary approach to enhance our collective understanding of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and the national response to these forms of violence against children. The Disrupting Harm research was conducted in 13 countries across Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia from 2019 to 2022. From 2023 onwards, it has been conducted in another 12 countries, including Armenia.

Between 2023 and 2024, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti conducted research in Armenia to understand tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse from multiple viewpoints. The data in Armenia were collected through a national household survey with 12–17-year-olds, interviews with justice professionals, front-line workers, survivors of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, law enforcement, and an analysis of national legislation and policy.

What is technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

The Disrupting Harm project uses the term technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to refer to situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point during the continuum of sexual exploitation or abuse of a child. This type of violence is sometimes referred to as ‘online’ child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the term ‘technology-facilitated’ is now preferred¹ to convey that this violence against children does not only occur in online spaces; it can occur fully online, or

through a mix of online and in-person interactions between perpetrators and children.

More information concerning key definitions used in this report can be found [in the annex](#).

Key findings

Tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Armenia

- According to Disrupting Harm survey data, 5 per cent of internet-using children in Armenia aged 12–17 were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in only a one-year period.² Scaled up to the overall population of 12–17-year-old internet-using children, this represents around 9,000 children who were subjected to any of these harms in the span of a single year.
- According to the survey, the most common form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that children were subjected to was unwanted exposure to sexual images.
- The most common cases discussed by professionals involved grooming of children and sexual extortion. Yet, gaps exist in comprehensively criminalizing both crime types.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse on social media, online games, and other online platforms

- In Armenia, 71 per cent of cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse happened exclusively via online channels (e.g. social media or online gaming platforms).
- When discussing their caseloads, professionals consistently identified Facebook and Instagram as platforms where perpetrators made initial contact with children. According to survey data from 12–17-year-olds, the most common social media platforms where children were sexually exploited or abused were Instagram (45 per cent of instances) and Snapchat (45 per cent). A minority of the instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that happened on social media occurred via Facebook (7 per cent).

1. Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse: Second Edition*, ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2025.

2. Children were asked if they were subjected to at least one instance of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse in the year prior to being surveyed. The survey data collection was conducted in 2024.

- Despite this, Armenian legislation does not impose a mandatory duty on internet service providers and online platforms to detect, block or report illegal content such as child sexual abuse material.
- In addition, the absence of a comprehensive legal framework on intermediary liability for third-party content means that internet service providers and online platforms cannot be held accountable for illegal material uploaded by users, leaving them with little legal incentive to proactively detect, remove or prevent the spread of child sexual abuse material.

Perpetrator profiles and common tactics

- In over half of cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse (57 per cent) analysed in the survey, the perpetrator was someone already in the child's life. Perpetrators in the child's environment tended to be adults over 18 as opposed to peers.
- According to front-line workers, common tactics used by perpetrators included building trust, making a child feel loved, exposing children to sexual contact, and obtaining child sexual abuse material, often using it for sexual extortion.
- Importantly, fear of exposure – likely due to the stigma and victim-blaming that children face – was also weaponized by perpetrators to keep the child trapped in a cycle of violence.

Disclosure and reporting of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- According to survey data, over half of children (53 per cent) subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse did not tell anyone about what happened to them. If children told anyone about the abuse, it was most often to a friend.
- The most common barrier to disclosure was that children felt too embarrassed. This was mirrored in the cases that professionals discussed, where shame, community stigma, and notions of honour and family reputation made it difficult for children to seek help.
- Children are not reporting the exploitation or abuse they were subjected to, or seeking help from support services; based on the survey data, only one out of the 43 children who were exploited and abused in the last year spoke to a social worker. No one sought support by calling a helpline or reporting to the police.

- From the viewpoint of professionals, some barriers to reporting to police include concerns over confidentiality, fears over the family's reputation if the abuse becomes known, and concerns over navigating the justice process.
- Front-line workers and justice professionals mentioned several systemic and organizational factors that make reporting difficult. These include a lack of standardized protocols for identification, intervention and reporting of cases. The interviews also highlighted inconsistent understanding and application of mandatory reporting among professionals.
- In some cases, professionals discussed a reluctance of schools to report abuse due to fears over damage to the school's reputation. However, it should be noted that in 24 per cent (10 out of 42) of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, children first met the perpetrator at school.
- Likely linked to the stigma and fear associated with sex, sexuality, and sexual violence, professionals also described a reluctance by children and families to make formal complaints and participate in forensic examinations and legal proceedings, making it difficult to move cases through the justice system.

Children's experiences with law enforcement, the justice process and social services

- Community stigma, fear and feelings of shame were all identified by professionals as barriers to effective service utilization by children and their families.
- Stigma and misconceptions around mental health were mentioned as a reason families were hesitant to seek mental health support for their children following the exploitation or abuse they were subjected to.
- There is also a discrepancy in service provision depending on location, especially in rural or remote areas of the country. This was partly due to the lack of psychologists and social workers working in these areas.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Some positive steps have been taken in Armenia to enhance the justice process for child victims of crime, including tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. These included the establishment of Safe Corners (following the Barnahus model), mandatory participation of trained psychologists in all investigative actions conducted by the Investigative Committee, and positive collaboration between forensic psychologists and investigators.
- Some barriers were also highlighted including a lack of child-friendly practices during initial encounters with the police, underutilization of Safe Corners, delays in investigations, and psychological assessments being limited to evaluating a child's ability to testify, rather than evaluating the impact of the exploitation and abuse on the child.
- While mechanisms for compensation do exist, they are not widely utilized due to various barriers, such as procedural complexities and a lack of awareness among relevant parties.

Social and mental health impacts of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- According to the survey, children in Armenia who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were 12 times more likely to report suicidal thoughts and behaviours,³ and 21 times more likely to self-harm, compared to children not subjected to this kind of violence.⁴
- There are severe social impacts for children who were subjected to abuse in Armenia. In cases discussed by professionals, children and even their families were commonly excluded and faced social stigma from the community, sometimes resulting in children having to relocate to a different area or school.

This report ends with a set of data-driven recommendations. They include action to be taken by key actors across government, law enforcement, justice and social services sectors, by communities, teachers and caregivers, and by digital platforms and service providers. These are too detailed to be recounted in the executive summary, but can be found on [page 83](#) of this report.

3. For this analysis, the relative risks for suicidal ideation and behaviours are reported for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year, and those not subjected to abuse during this period. Estimates are based on smaller subgroups, and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals (5.383, 27.068).

4. For this analysis, the relative risks for self-harm are reported for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year, and those not subjected to abuse during this period. Estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals (6.683, 65.691).

METHODS

The Disrupting Harm methodology combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a better understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia. The quantitative data provide an understanding of the scope of this issue among children in Armenia. The analysis of national legislation and policies, together with interviews with survivors, justice professionals, front-line workers and law enforcement, provide insights into the formal systems and processes intended to support victims, while also offering important context through which to understand the abuse that children face and how families and communities react to abuse.

The same research methods were implemented in all 12 countries and adapted with local researchers to best suit the country context. The research was designed and implemented following strict safeguarding and ethics protocols. In total, six separate but complementary research activities were designed with the aim of answering the following questions:

- 1. What characterizes tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?**
- 2. What factors are associated with victimization and perpetration?**
- 3. How do children protect, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse?**
- 4. How do families, friends and social networks prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?**
- 5. How do organizations (e.g. law enforcement, justice sector, service providers, government, educators) prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?**
- 6. How does existing policy and legislation prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?**

Legal and policy analysis

The analysis of national legal and policy frameworks was aimed at identifying legal gaps, assessing compliance with international obligations, and highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in national responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The legal and policy analysis

was developed using a detailed checklist consisting of over 140 items, ensuring consistency across countries analysed. This tool, based on international legal standards and best practices, evaluates areas such as legal definitions, criminalization, jurisdiction, child-centric justice, private sector responsibilities and child protection policies.

To conduct the analysis, ECPAT International collected national laws and policy documents in collaboration with local partners, ensuring they reflected current legal frameworks. These were analysed using the checklist to identify legal gaps and enforcement challenges, supported by case law and reports on prosecution where available.

Draft analyses underwent internal and external expert reviews, including review from local ECPAT members organizations and UNICEF country offices, to ensure accuracy and real-world relevance.

More information on this research method can be found [here](#).

Household survey of 12–17-year-olds and their caregivers

The purpose of the survey was to hear directly from children and their caregivers about their online experiences, both positive and negative. The questionnaire was divided into modules, most of which were administered by an enumerator. For personal questions, including around sexual violence, respondents input their answers directly in the tablet to ensure that their comfort and confidentiality were protected. The target population for the survey was 12–17-year-old internet users who live in a private (or individual) household. In addition, one of their parents/guardians was also interviewed regardless of whether they used the internet. Internet users were defined as those who have used the internet in the three months prior to the survey.

To achieve a nationally representative random sample of 12–17-year-old internet users, the survey used random probability sampling with national coverage. In Armenia, the fieldwork coverage was 100 per cent. 'Coverage' is defined as the proportion of the total population that had a chance of being included in the survey sample – meaning that the fieldwork would cover the area where they live if sampled. Data collection took place from May to September 2024.

METHODS

The sampling followed a three-stage random probability clustered sample design. The response rate was 48 per cent, and the sample achieved included 1,002 children and 1,002 of their parents/guardians.

The age and gender breakdowns of the sample are presented below:

Age and gender distribution of child sample:

12–14 years	52%
15–17 years	48%
Girls	56%
Boys	44%

Age and gender distribution of parent sample:

Under 40 years	51%
Over 40 years	49%
Women	93%
Men	7%
Other	0.1%

More information on this research method, including safeguarding protocols and limitations, can be found [here](#).

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

This research activity aimed to include the voices of children and young people (16–24 years) who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood.⁵ Children and young people who were currently engaged in ongoing justice proceedings were not included in the study. Trauma-informed research was designed and adapted in consultation with

research and implementation partners in Armenia. Two engagement strategies were developed to connect children and young people with a clinical researcher to share their experiences during an interview:

1. Professional Networks: Service providers distributed information sheets and consent forms to young people (16–24 years) within their networks. There were very few young people within this age range who were still directly connected with service providers and eligible to participate. Four young people expressed interest in participating. However, only one young person consented to participate.

2. Digital networks: Information about the study was shared with young people aged 18–24 in Armenia through digital platforms, including through UNICEF Armenia’s Facebook and Instagram accounts. Youth organizations, student councils, and universities also shared information about the study through their networks and on campuses. The study posters directed those interested to a web page that detailed the study, participants’ rights, and the consent process. Interested individuals were invited to fill in an eligibility questionnaire.

Despite efforts that spanned over several months and reached more than 470,000 views on social media among the general population of young people in Armenia, only one eligible young person chose to participate. It is possible that trauma and stigma related to sexual violence, and a lack of trust in confidentiality, deterred participation. These recruitment efforts have underscored the cultural and systemic challenges of engaging young survivors of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in research. Their voices and experiences are central to fully understanding how this issue affects people in Armenia and therefore remains a critical gap in national-level research.

Throughout the report, attributions to data from this research activity with children and young people will be indicated with (YP) at the end of quotes.

5. This study uses the terms children and young people to refer to participants in this research activity. Children are defined as anyone under the age of 18 years. While there is no universally agreed age group to describe young people, the study follows the United Nations’ practice of referring to young people as those aged 15–24 years.

More information on this research method, including safeguarding protocols and limitations, can be found [here](#).

Interviews with front-line workers

This research activity aimed to understand how front-line workers in Armenia support children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and to identify how systems can better prevent and respond to these forms of violence. It also aimed to explore the experiences of front-line workers handling cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as their perceptions of good practices and challenges.

The population of interest for the study was front-line workers in Armenia – such as social workers, psychotherapists and helpline workers – who provide support or essential services directly to individuals who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Front-line workers were included in the study if their case/patient load over the last 12 months included at least one child or young person who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood. This timeline was extended to five years in Armenia due to low numbers of eligible front-line workers with this experience. Front-line workers were only invited to participate if they were able to talk to the researchers about a de-identified case.

A trained researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 front-line workers. The sample included:

- Social workers employed in state systems under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (e.g. crisis centres and family support centres), regional government offices (community social workers), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supporting children, families and adults.
- Professionals supporting vulnerable populations intersecting with children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, including organizations assisting children without parental care; lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual + (LGBTQIA+) groups; trafficking victims; and harm reduction programmes.

Interviews were conducted between May and October 2024. Among the front-line workers interviewed, 17 were women and two were men. Seven participants were based in the capital Yerevan, while the rest worked in regions including Ararat, Shirak, Lori, Vayots Dzor, Kotayk and Tavush.

Throughout the report, attributions to data from this research activity with front-line workers will be indicated with (FW) at the end of quotes.

More information on this research method, including safeguarding protocols and limitations, can be found [here](#).

Interviews with justice professionals

This research activity aimed to understand how Armenian justice mechanisms respond to children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to identify how systems can better prevent and respond. The research also aimed to explore the experiences of justice professionals handling cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as their perceptions of good practices and challenges.

The population of interest for this study was justice professionals in Armenia, such as lawyers, judges and investigative committee members. Justice professionals were included in the study if they had a direct role working on a case of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the last five years. Justice professionals were only invited to participate if they were able to talk to the researchers about a de-identified case. Ongoing cases were excluded to ensure the integrity of the case in the justice system.

A trained researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 justice professionals across government, law enforcement, NGOs and independent legal practices. Their responsibilities included investigation, prosecution and legal defence in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Interviews were conducted between May and October 2024. Among justice professionals interviewed, seven were women and four were men.

METHODS

Throughout the report, attributions to data from this research activity with justice professionals will be indicated with (JP) at the end of quotes.

More information on this research method, including safeguarding protocols and limitations, can be found [here](#).

Interviews with national law enforcement

Quantitative data analysis

Data were requested on cases related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse from law enforcement authorities via the INTERPOL National Central Bureau in Armenia. Data were also obtained from the mandated reports of United States of America-based technology companies, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), and from several partner organizations, including relevant NGOs, government bodies working on child protection, independent specialists contracted in the field and private sector actors in the telecommunications space, with a view to deepening the understanding of relevant offences committed in the country, perpetrator and victim behaviour, facilitators of criminal activity, and vulnerabilities. These data were analysed for the five-year period between 2020 and 2024.

Qualitative data analysis

In addition to seeking data on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases, INTERPOL requested data on the capacity and capability of national law enforcement authorities to respond to the type of crime and interviewed serving officers. Emphasis was placed on human resources, access to specialist equipment and training, investigative procedures, international collaboration and cooperation, and key achievements and challenges.

More information on this research method can be found [here](#).

Limitations and understanding the data

To fully understand the findings of this report, it is important to consider the limitations of the research activities and their implementation in Armenia.

The **household survey** is conducted in private households with 12–17-year-old internet users. The survey was designed to be nationally representative of this group of children only, as opposed to all children in Armenia. The survey is cross-sectional, not longitudinal, meaning that the data capture a single moment in time in the lives of the 1,002 children surveyed. While the Disrupting Harm data highlight relationships between sexual exploitation and abuse and other factors in children's lives, it is not possible to determine cause and effect based on the survey data alone.

The survey does not intend to measure all the possible ways that digital technologies are used to exploit or abuse children. Some forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, 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.

As with other studies on sexual violence, a high level of underreporting is expected due to several factors including potential discomfort speaking about a very personal and painful experience, fears around confidentiality and anonymity, and social norms and taboos around discussing sexual violence, among others. This means that the data presented are likely an underestimate. Low sample sizes also limit the kind of statistical analysis that can be conducted on the data.

The **interviews with front-line workers and justice professionals** do not aim to provide a measure of the types or amount of violence in Armenia due to the nature of this research method. In many cases, the data presented represent the perceptions of participants. However, these data can help provide context and meaning for understanding these types of abuse and how they occur. It is also important to note that the cases that reach the formal support or justice system only represent a minority of abuse cases, and may reflect cases more widely understood as abuse.

Interviewing children and young people

who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during their childhood was also a challenge. Despite extensive and sensitive efforts to engage with this population in the research, only one agreed to be interviewed.

Ethical approval

UNICEF Innocenti obtained ethical approval for the Disrupting Harm project from the Health Media Lab, a global institutional review board. There was no appropriate national ethics review board in Armenia that could review the study. However, to ensure that the protocols were suitable for the national context, UNICEF Innocenti sought a review by several subject matter experts in Armenia

National consultation

In a national consultation in May 2025, representatives across sectors including government, law enforcement authorities and civil society in Armenia were asked to provide input on the Disrupting Harm findings and recommendations to enhance their relevance for the Armenian context.

Each child subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse has a unique story. For some, it may be a single incident; for others, it is part of a broader pattern of violence in their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Disrupting Harm uses the term technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to refer to *any* form of sexual exploitation and abuse of a child that involves the use of technology. This broad definition allows for recognition of the diverse and evolving ways that digital tools, platforms and content can be used in the sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

Technology in this context includes, but is not limited to, the internet, social media, messaging apps, online gaming platforms and devices used to create or distribute images, videos or other content. The definition does not depend on who the perpetrator is, how they commit the abuse, or the child’s awareness that what is happening is abusive. It also does not depend on the child’s actions before, during or after the sexual exploitation and abuse has taken place.

Each child subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse has a unique story. For some, it may be a single incident; for others, it is part of a broader pattern of violence in their lives. Incidents documented throughout this report could be connected to existing abusive relationships, human trafficking, violence in school, home or the community, or other forms of violence that extend beyond what is captured through this research.

Perpetrators may use digital platforms to manipulate or threaten children they already know, or to seek out new victims. Technology facilitates sexual exploitation and abuse in different ways: in some cases, it remains confined to the digital realm; in others, it extends abuse that is already taking place in person. And in other instances, abuse begins online and later progresses into physical contact.

Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is shaped by a variety of factors and dynamics that are difficult to capture. These include but are not limited to power imbalances, social identities, and social, gender, cultural and religious norms and values. These dynamics are not always directly visible in the data, but are critical to understanding how sexual exploitation and abuse occur and how children are impacted.

Being aware of these nuances is important when reading this report. Without considering the context in which violence occurs, there is a risk of oversimplifying the issue. Looking at individual cases or statistics alone can overlook the societal forces that enable sexual exploitation and abuse, or allow it to continue undisclosed and unreported. What children share in surveys and interviews represents what they felt comfortable with disclosing at that point in time. This means that the full extent of the problem is likely to be greater than captured in this report.

Nonetheless, the findings presented in this report go a long way towards unpacking tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia. It adds much-needed nuance and understanding to this issue, grounded in the experiences of children and young people, and the professionals working to support them.

“Perpetrators use the threat of family shame to pressure children into continuing their communications and sending more sexual images”

INTERNET USE IN ARMENIA

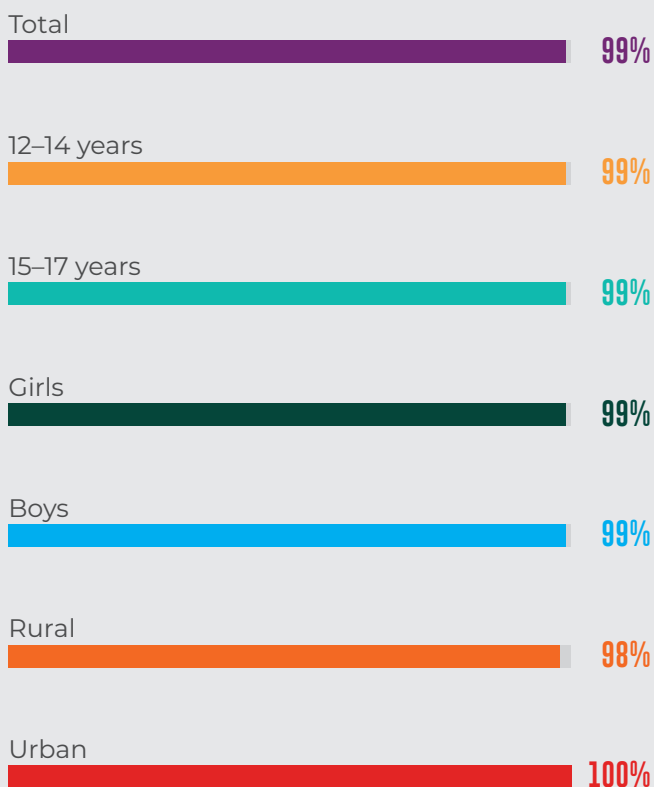
National-level data on children's internet access and use are often scarce. The Disrupting Harm project collected key indicators on children's internet use via the household survey to address this gap.

Understanding how children access the internet, if they are able to go online regularly or not, what they do online, and how parents engage with their internet use, may provide insights into how to create a digital environment that is safer and more enjoyable for children. However, prevention of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse is not primarily about what children are doing online. Disrupting Harm data consistently show that perpetrators act opportunistically, using

coercion and manipulation while taking advantage of existing social and gender inequalities, misogyny, the lack of adequate support networks, and gaps in protection systems to commit abuse against children online and/or in person.

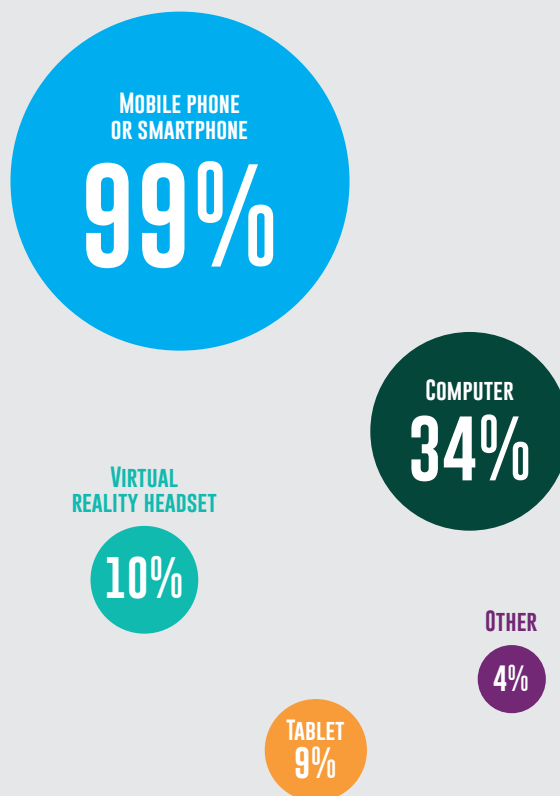
Any effort at prevention must therefore look beyond what children are (or ought to be) doing online; not doing so often results in victim-blaming or treating children as complicit in their own exploitation and abuse, as evidenced in this report. Instead, prevention requires a multi-pronged approach that focuses on creating barriers to offending, while addressing norms, values and inequalities that enable perpetrators to sexually exploit and abuse children.

INTERNET USE RATES AMONG 12-17-YEAR-OLDS IN ARMENIA



n = 1,280 households

MOST POPULAR DEVICES TO GO ONLINE, AMONG INTERNET-USING CHILDREN AGED 12-17*

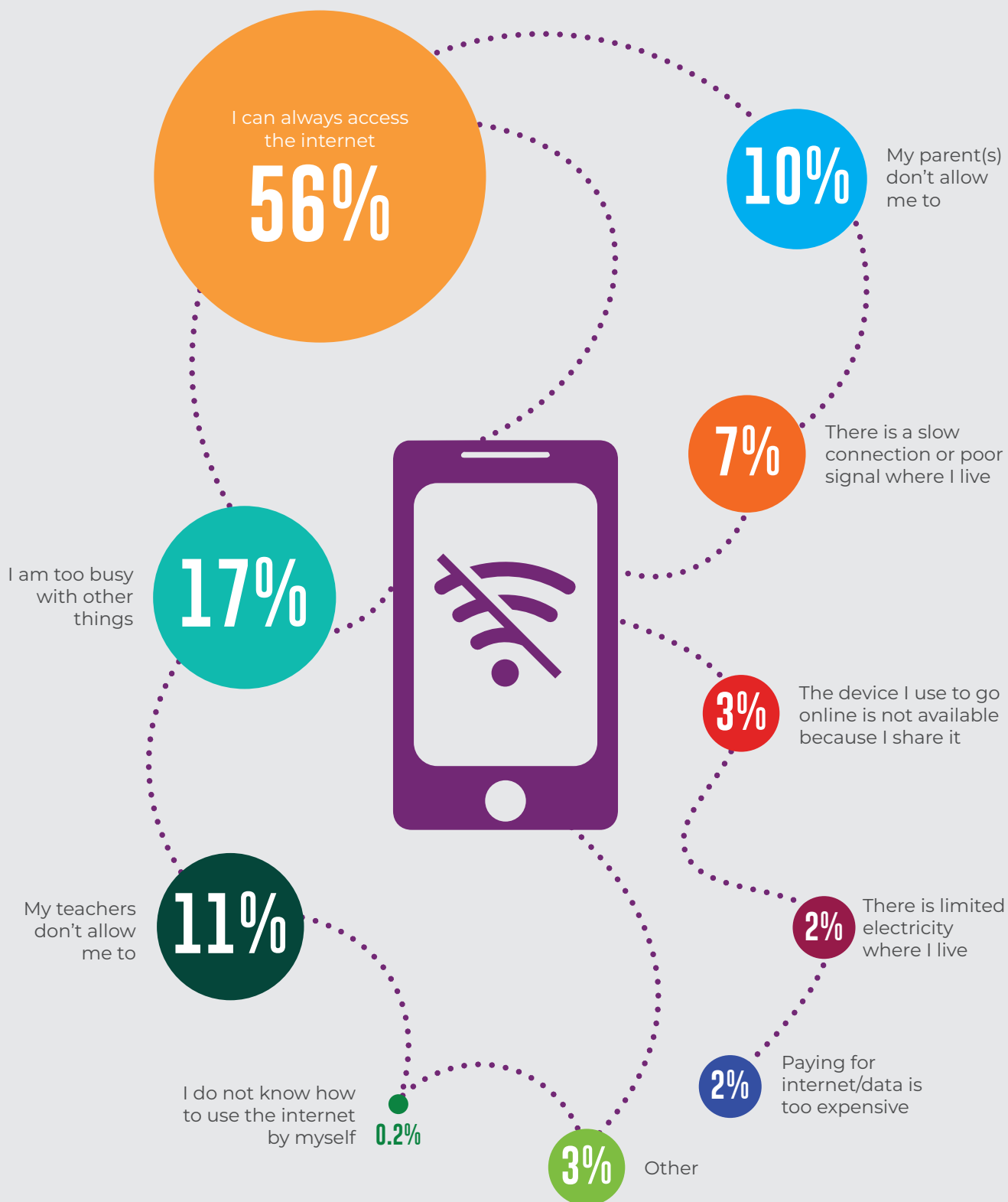


n = 1,002 internet-using children

*Multiple choice question

INTERNET USE IN ARMENIA

BARRIERS TO INTERNET ACCESS AMONG INTERNET-USING CHILDREN AGED 12–17*

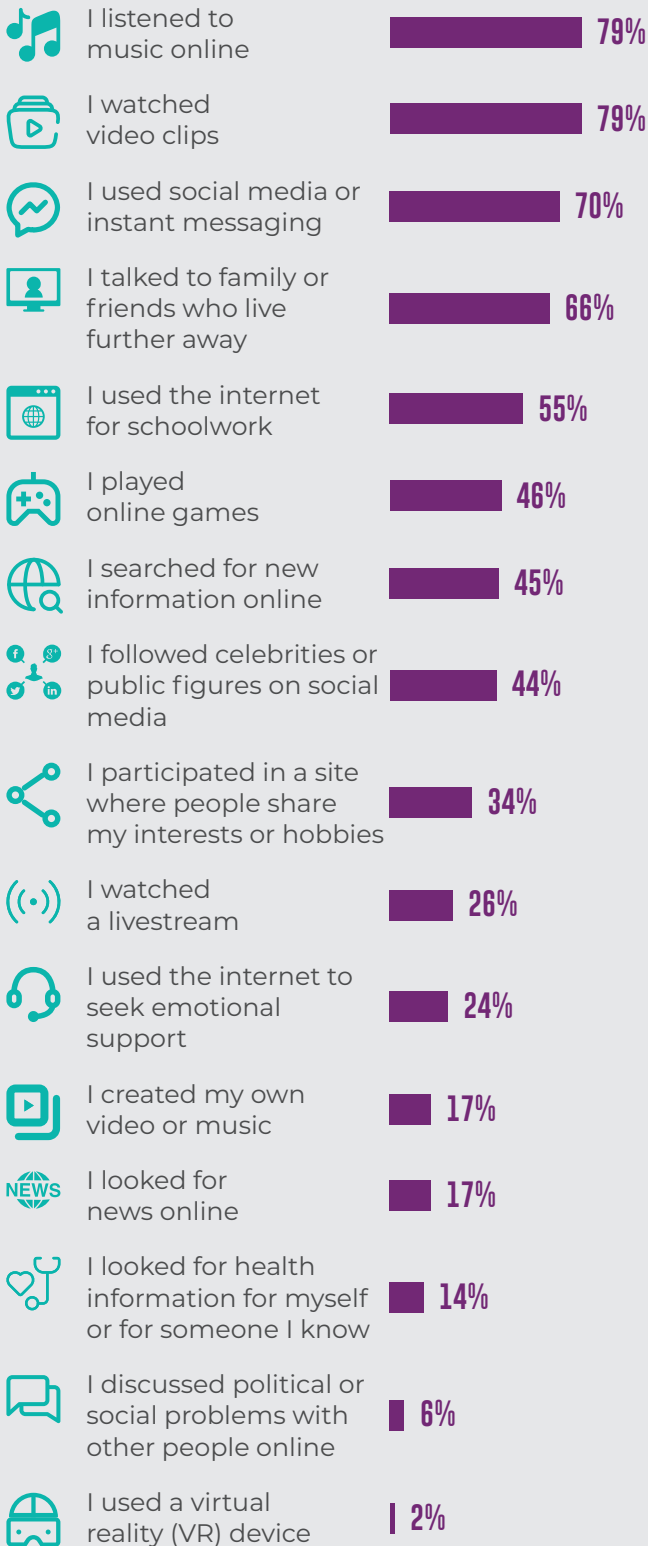


n = 1,002 internet-using children

*Children could select multiple barriers, so figures above may add up to more than 100%

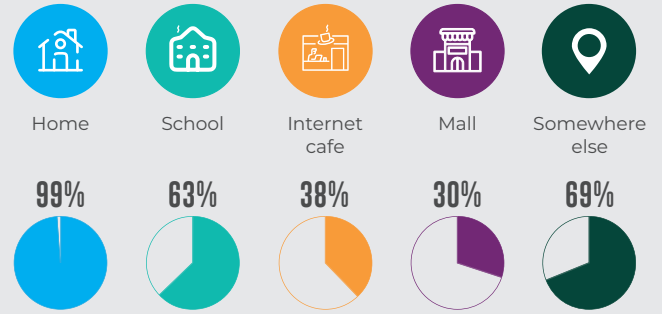
INTERNET USE IN ARMENIA

ACTIVITIES CHILDREN ENGAGE IN ONLINE AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK



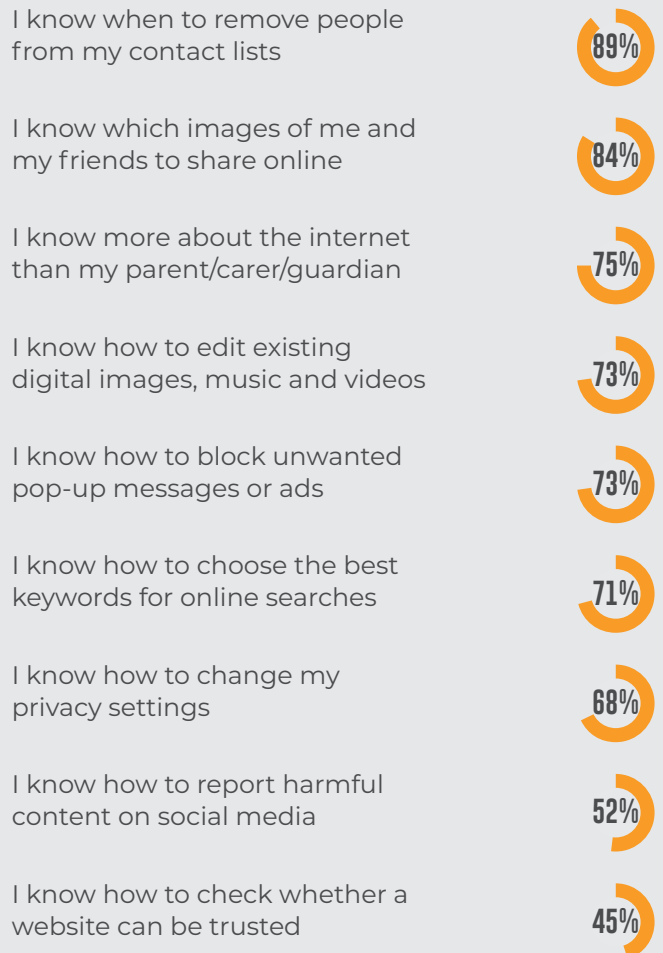
n = 1,002 internet-using children

MOST POPULAR PLACES TO GO ONLINE AMONG INTERNET-USING CHILDREN AGED 12-17



n = 1,002 internet-using children

DIGITAL SKILLS AMONG INTERNET-USING CHILDREN AGED 12-17*

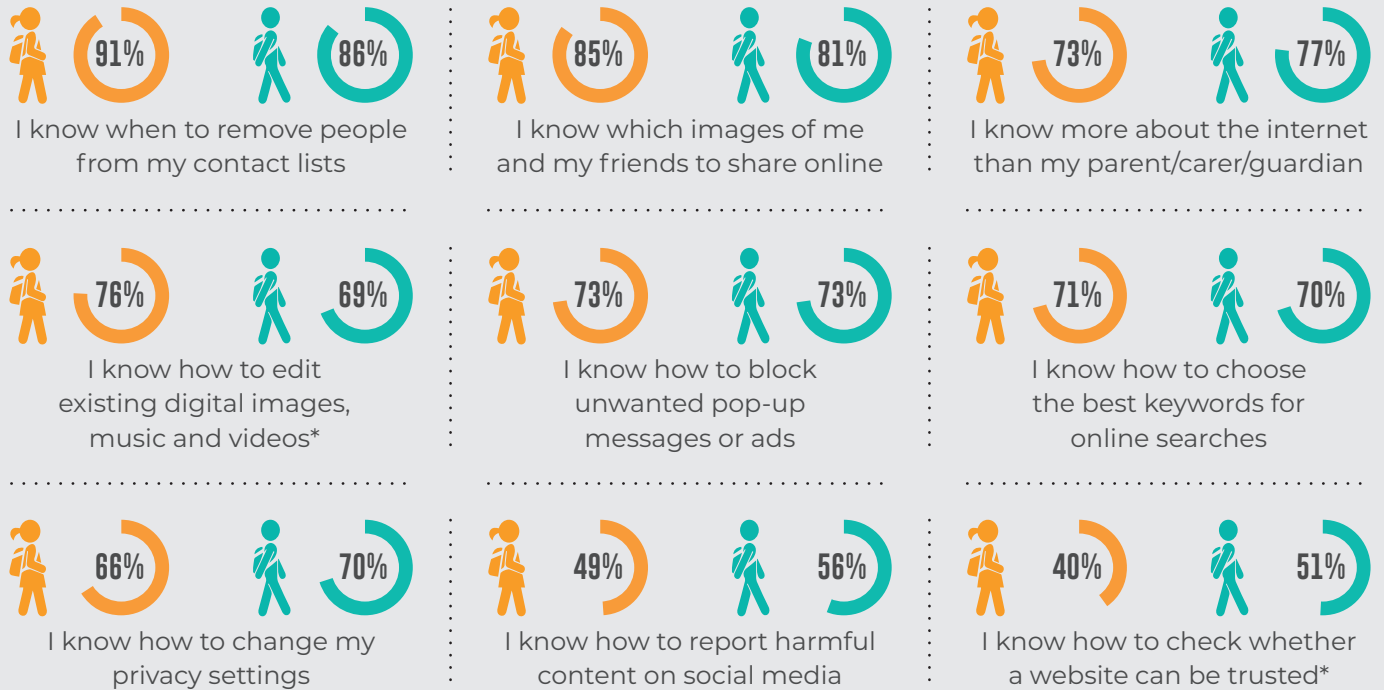


n = 1,002 internet-using children

*Percentage of children who say it is 'mostly' or 'very' true that they can do this.

INTERNET USE IN ARMENIA

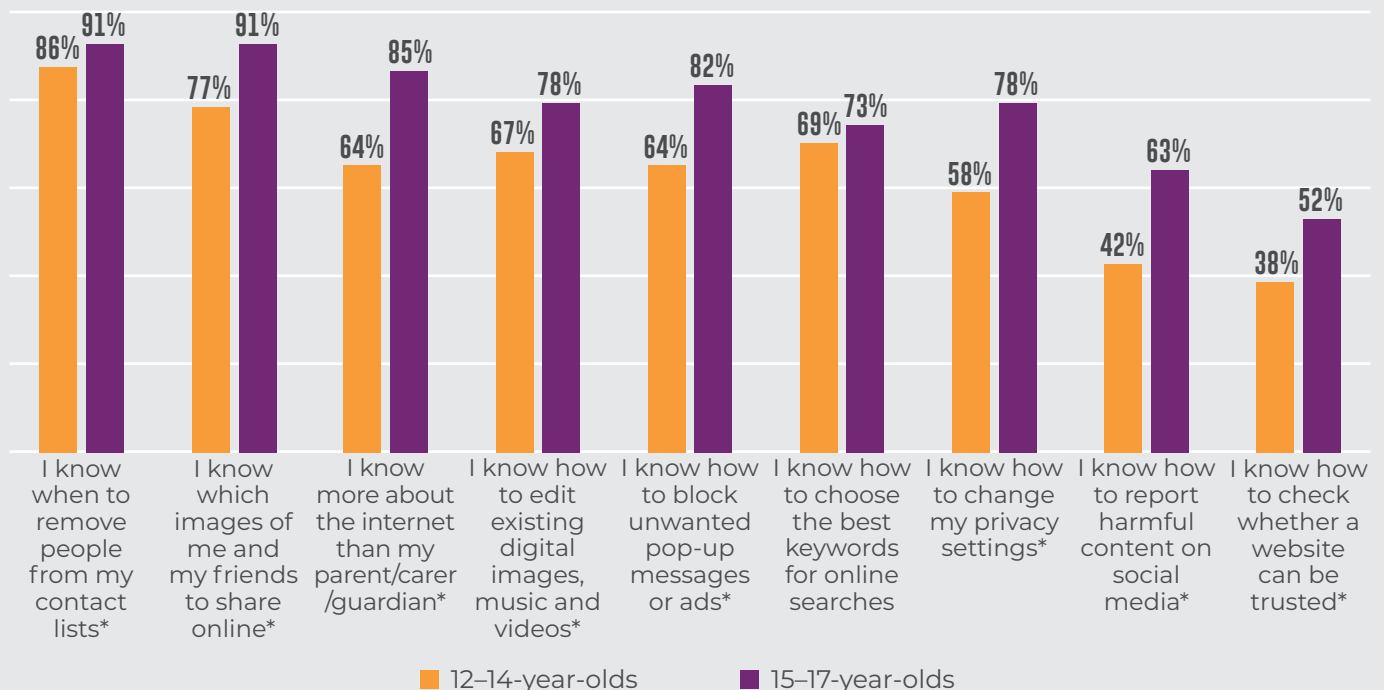
DIGITAL SKILLS AMONG INTERNET-USING CHILDREN AGED 12-17, BY GENDER



n = 1,002 internet-using children

* Statistically significant gender difference (p<0.05)

DIGITAL SKILLS AMONG INTERNET-USING CHILDREN AGED 12-17, BY AGE GROUP

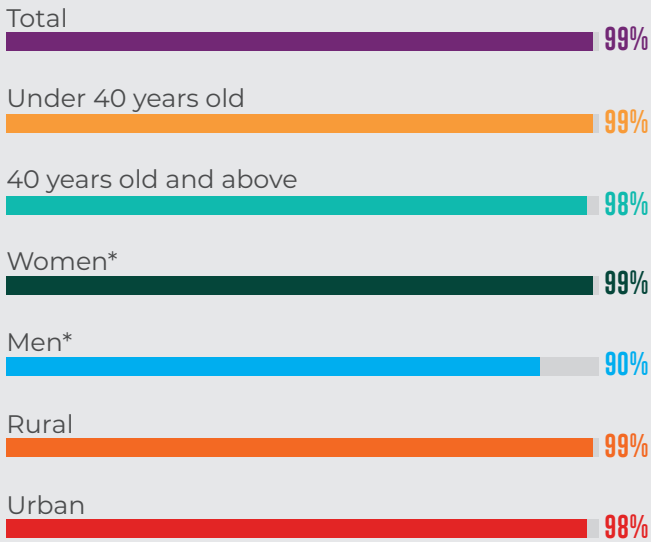


n = 1,002 internet-using children

* Statistically significant age difference (p<0.05)

INTERNET USE IN ARMENIA

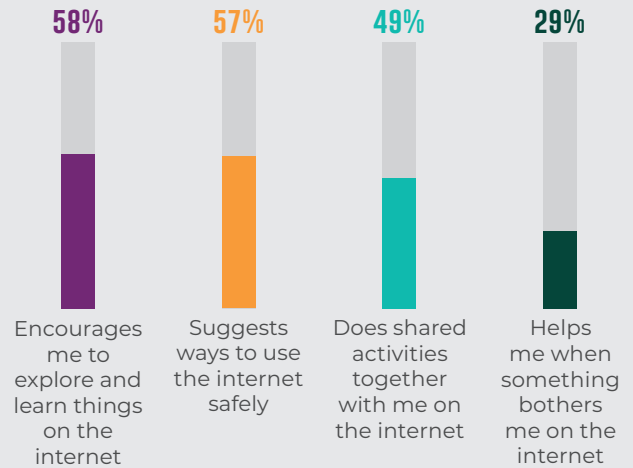
INTERNET USE RATES AMONG THE CAREGIVERS OF 12-17-YEAR-OLD INTERNET USERS



n = 1,002 caregivers of internet-using 12-17-year-old children
 * The caregiver sample has a low proportion of men (7%). These results should be interpreted with caution.

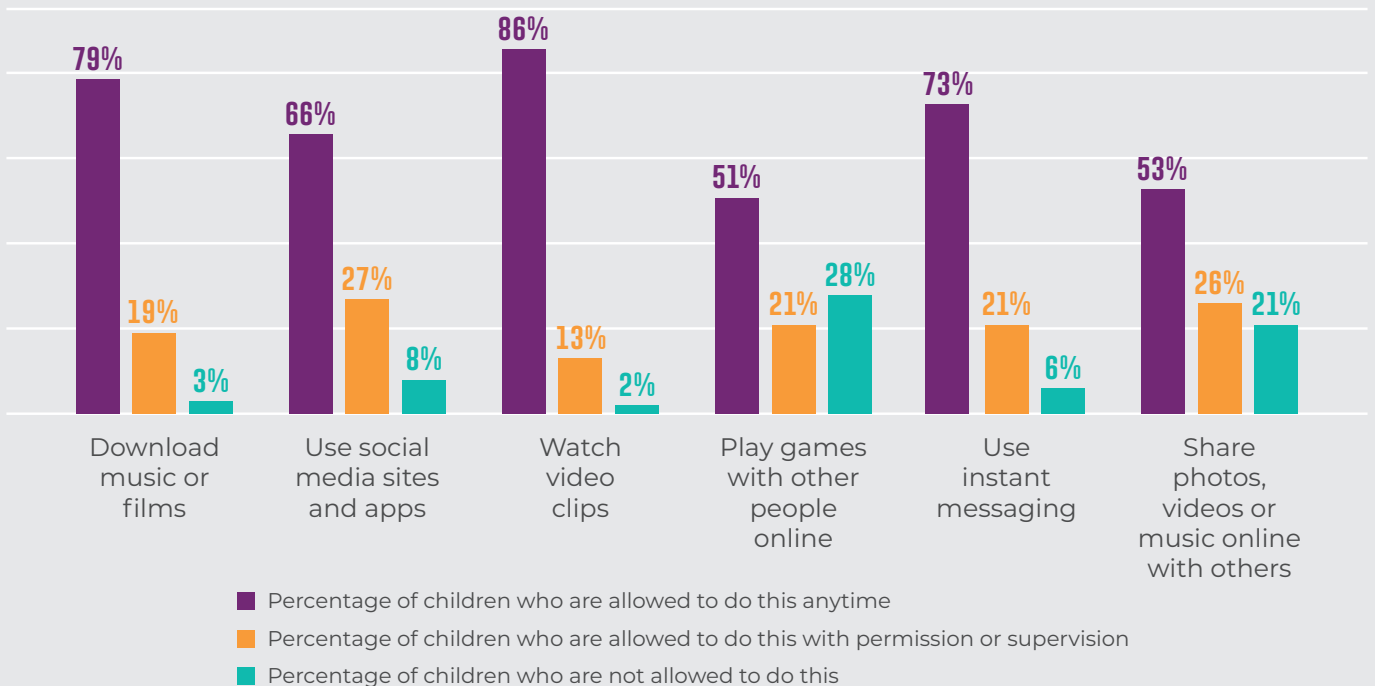
HOW PARENTS IN ARMENIA SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S INTERNET USE*

Percentage of children who said this is the case 'sometimes' 'often' or 'very often'



n = 1,002 internet-using children
 * According to 12-17-year-old children surveyed

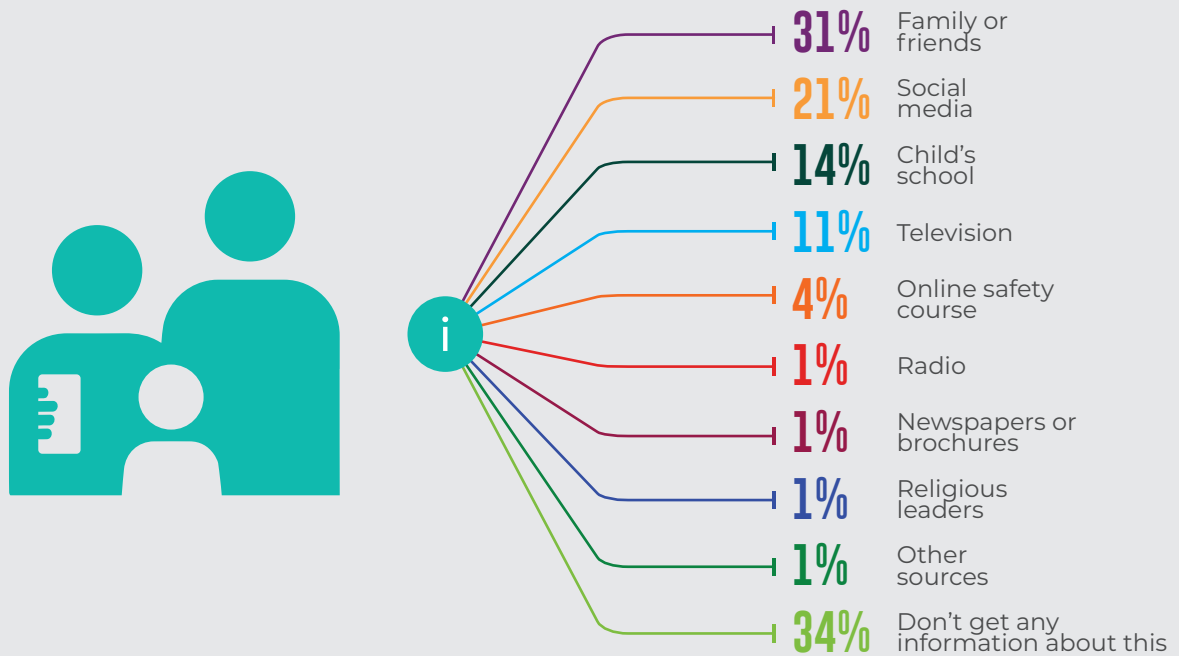
HOW DO PARENTS RESTRICT THEIR CHILD'S INTERNET USE?*



n = 1,002 internet-using children * According to 12-17-year-old children surveyed

INTERNET USE IN ARMENIA

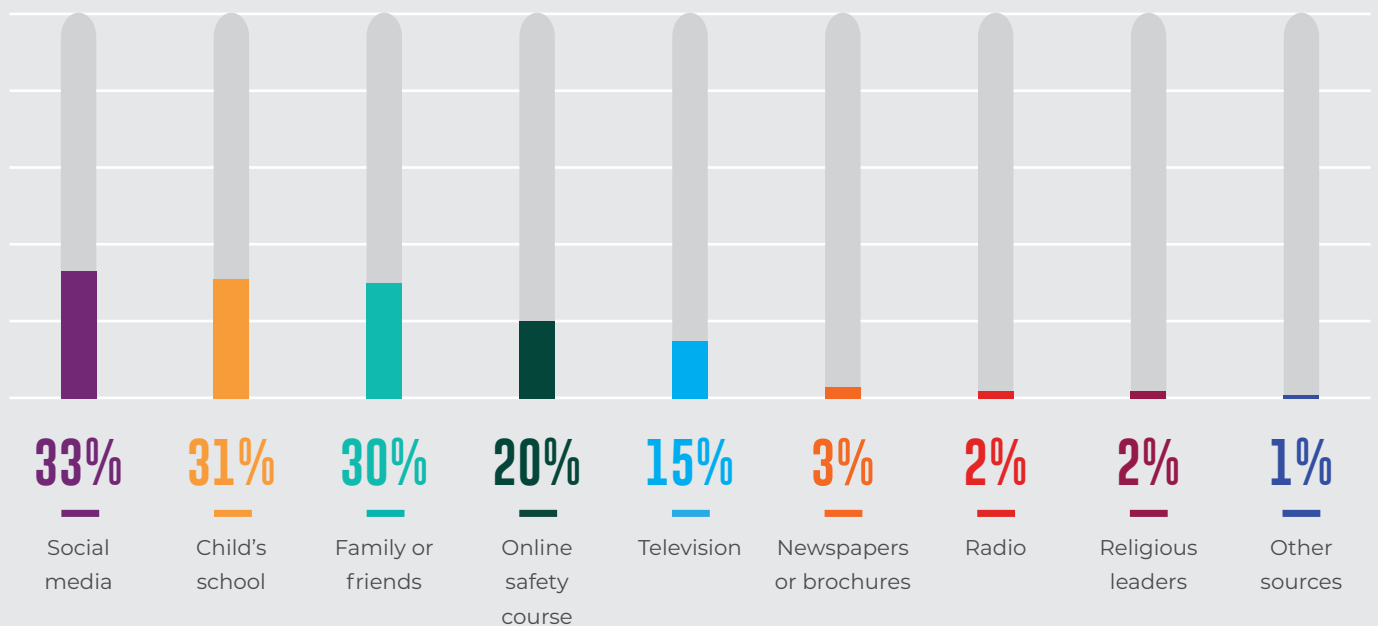
WHERE DO PARENTS GET INFORMATION AND ADVICE ON HOW TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILD'S INTERNET USE AND KEEP THEM SAFE ONLINE?*



n = 1,002 caregivers of internet-using 12–17-year-old children

*Multiple-choice question

WHERE PARENTS *WOULD LIKE* TO GET INFORMATION AND ADVICE ON HOW TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILD'S INTERNET USE AND HOW TO KEEP THEM SAFE ONLINE*



n = 1,002 caregivers of internet-using 12–17-year-old children

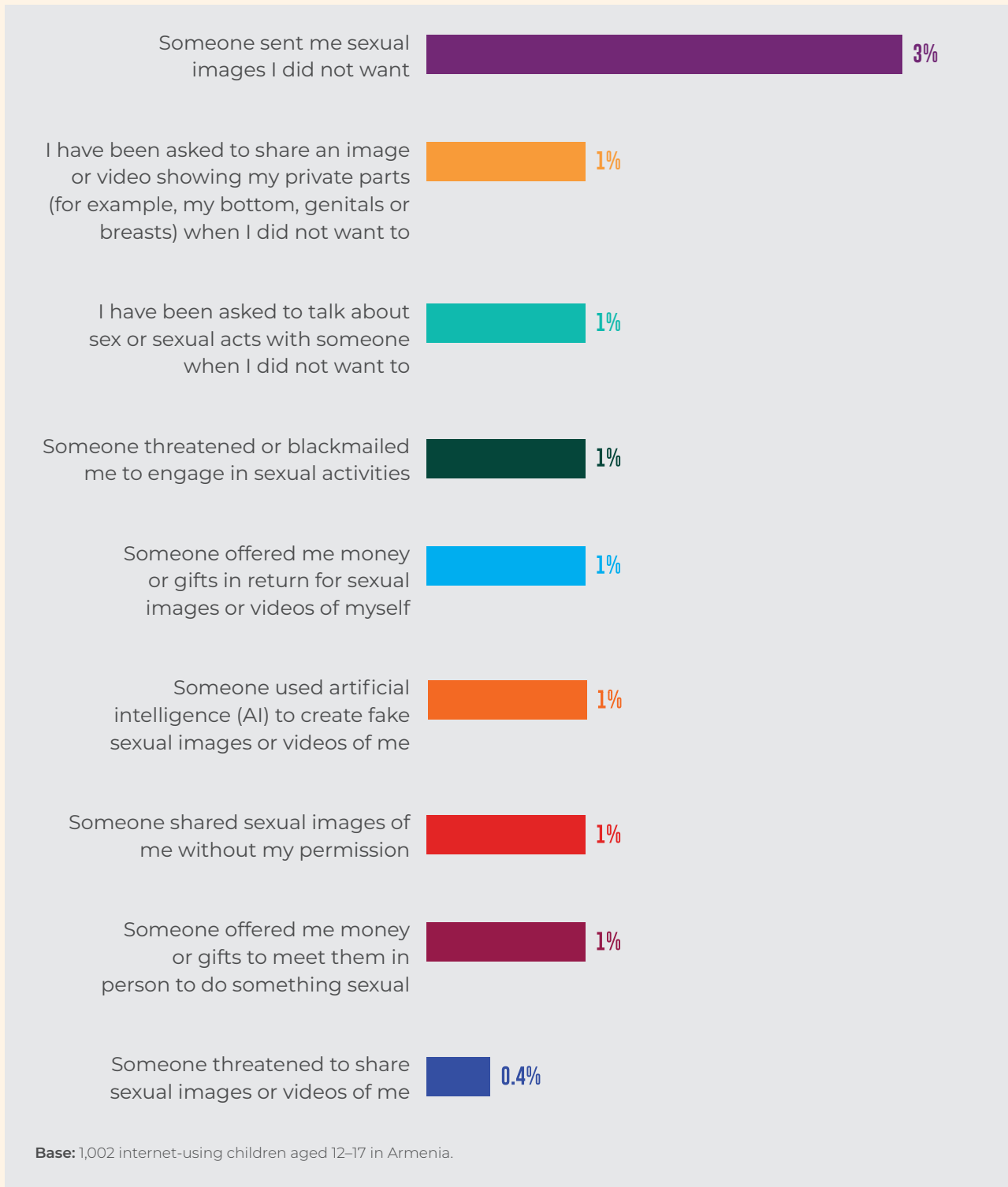
*Multiple-choice question

1. TECHNOLOGY- FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN ARMENIA



1. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN ARMENIA

Five per cent of children surveyed in Armenia were subjected to one of these instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in a one-year period. Scaled up to the overall population of 12–17-year-old internet-using children, this represents around 9,000 children in Armenia who have been subjected to any of these harms in the span of a single year.



1.1 WHAT INSTANCES OF TECH-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ARE CHILDREN IN ARMENIA SUBJECTED TO?

In Armenia, 5 per cent of children surveyed said that they were subjected to at least one of the abusive behaviours shown on page 18, in the year prior to being surveyed.

Among those 5 per cent (or 43 children – 24 girls and 19 boys), 13 children said they were subjected to more than one of the abusive behaviours listed above, while the remaining 30 children were subjected to one instance of abuse. According to the survey data, rates of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse among children surveyed in Armenia were the same regardless of age, gender, area of residence (urban versus rural area), or whether the child is in or out of school. The small number of children included in this analysis means that this analysis should be interpreted with caution. However, this could challenge existing perceptions that boys are not vulnerable to abuse. It also serves as a reminder that while a child's gender, age or gender identity may impact how the abuse is experienced, or how perpetrators victimize children, prevention and response mechanisms should not exclude or overlook children because of their age, gender or area of residence.

The most common abusive behaviour that children were subjected to was unwanted exposure to sexual images (3 per cent), as shown in the infographic on page 18. While front-line workers and justice professionals spoke of various abusive behaviours that children in Armenia face, grooming and sexual extortion were the most common examples of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that they handled. Common features of sexual extortion and grooming cases discussed by professionals in Armenia, including the modus operandi used by perpetrators, will therefore feature prominently in the qualitative data presented in this chapter.

Understanding the data

Five per cent (43 children) of respondents to the survey in Armenia said they were subjected to **at least one** instance of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year. In some cases, one child was subjected to multiple instances of abuse. Taken together, those 43 children were subjected to **83 instances** of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured in the survey. These 83 instances of abuse serve as the basis for much of the survey analysis in this report.

While reading these findings, it is important to consider that the true magnitude of this issue in Armenia may be much higher, in part due to low rates of disclosure and reporting. Throughout this report, service providers and justice professionals consistently described victim-blaming attitudes and social stigma that can impact children's experience of abuse and the events that follow, including disclosure and help-seeking. Within this context, children surveyed may not have felt comfortable enough to speak out about their experiences. This could also explain the low number of young people who were willing to participate in interviews. This presents a challenge in fully understanding the experiences of children and young people who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia.

1.2 WHERE DOES THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE HAPPEN?

Sexual exploitation and abuse in virtual and physical spaces

The role of digital technologies in facilitating contact sexual exploitation and abuse of children is becoming increasingly apparent. Professionals and the young person interviewed described several cases where online interactions were followed by in-person meetings where the child was sexually abused. For example, a service provider recalled a perpetrator who used their online interactions and meetings to convince a young person that they were in love. The 16-year-old girl agreed to meet the adult perpetrator – who she thought was a young man her own age. During the in-person meeting, the child was sexually abused.

However, in other cases this sequence is reversed. For example, in one case, a young boy entered his classmate's home. He secretly filmed her naked and then shared the video with friends online. In another case, a mother abused her children and created child sexual abuse material, which she then distributed further. These examples demonstrate how tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse may occur in both online and physical spaces, and transition between the two over the course of the abuse.

Spotlight: Child sexual abuse material in Armenian law

From a legal perspective, two of the cases presented above clearly involve the production of child sexual abuse material, which is defined by Armenian legislation as any material depicting a child “performing a real or simulated action of a sexual nature” or portraying a child’s genitals for sexual purposes.⁶ Therefore, the cases described constitute offences under the Criminal Code, which criminalizes, among others, the creation, dissemination, possession, access through information or communication technologies, and viewing of such material, as well as its storage in computer systems or networks. Perpetrators are liable to three years’ imprisonment, or five years in aggravating circumstances.⁷ In the second example, the mother, as a caregiver, could face up to eight years’ imprisonment for exploiting her children to produce child sexual abuse material.⁸

While the legal framework provides for the prosecution of the above-mentioned offences, the terminology used in the legislation warrants critical attention as the Criminal Code still uses the outdated term ‘child pornography’. This expression, although still used in many legal systems, is inappropriate and misleading because it suggests that recordings or images of child sexual abuse are merely a form of pornography. This may contribute to diminishing the gravity of, trivializing, or even legitimizing acts that constitute sexual abuse and/or sexual exploitation of children. The term child sexual abuse material should therefore be used instead.⁹

6. Armenia, *Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia*, 2022, art. 300-5.

7. Ibid., arts. 300-2, 300-3, 300-4.

8. Ibid., arts. 239-1, 239-2.

9. Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse: Second Edition*, ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2025.

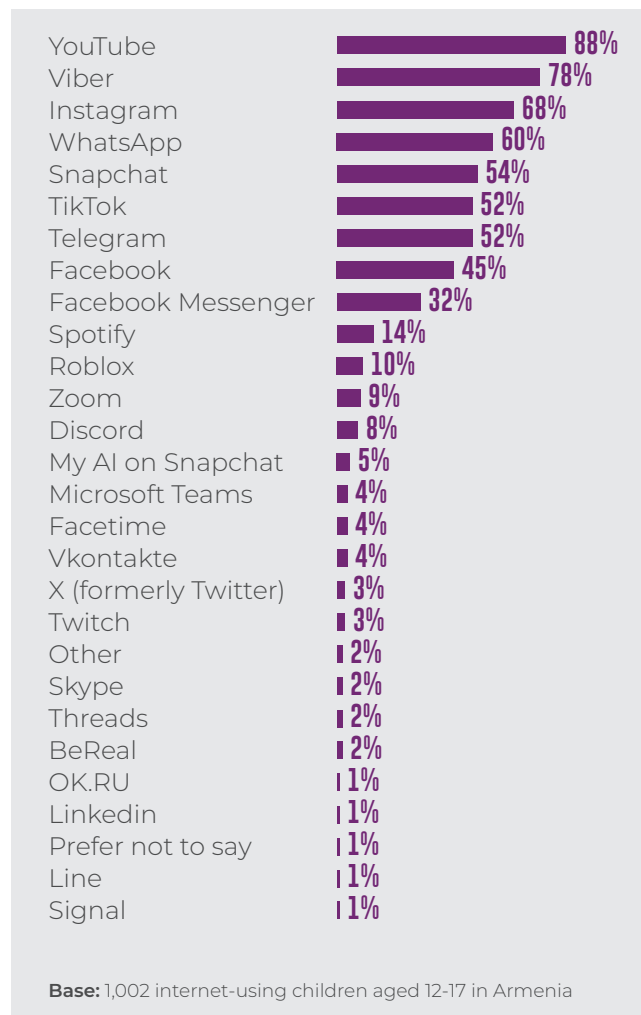
Sexual exploitation and abuse on social media and online gaming platforms

Social media and online gaming platforms continue to play a role in sexual exploitation and abuse of children.¹⁰ In Armenia, 69 per cent of cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse happened on social media and 9 per cent on an online gaming platform. In more than half of cases, the first contact with the perpetrator happened online. In particular, the use of such online platforms *to establish initial contact with children* featured strongly in the survey data; in 55 per cent of instances of exploitation and abuse (23 out of 42), the perpetrator made first contact with the child online.

Service providers and justice professionals suggest that perpetrators are opportunistic and use whichever platform is ‘active and fashionable’ to target children. For example, one justice professional observed that the methods of committing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse tend to evolve alongside the popularity of social media platforms: “Now it is Instagram, it is Telegram and some other channels, that is, even Viber and Signal, everything can be used. This is just a method; that is, it doesn’t matter what kind of programme [platform] it is” (JP).

The most popular social media and instant messaging apps among 12–17-year-old internet users in Armenia are YouTube and Viber, with Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook and Telegram also being used by a majority of children (see chart 1).¹¹ According to the survey data, **the most common social media platforms where children are sexually exploited or abused are Instagram and Snapchat (26 instances each)**, two of the most popular platforms. This was followed by TikTok (13), YouTube (9) and Telegram (7). Despite their relative popularity, Facebook and WhatsApp were less frequently mentioned as apps where children in Armenia were sexually exploited and abused.

Chart 1: Social media and gaming apps used by children in Armenia



When reflecting on their caseloads, professionals consistently identified Facebook and Instagram as platforms where perpetrators made initial contact with children. TikTok was noted in at least one case discussed by professionals, but was not widely referenced. Platforms like Odnoklassniki (OK.ru) and Skype¹² – popular five or more years ago – were less prevalent in the accounts of professionals. Participants also recalled the use of video conferencing applications to livestream child sexual abuse, but could not determine which platforms were used.

10. UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, *Disrupting Harm Data Insight 7: The role of social media in facilitating online child sexual exploitation and abuse*, Safe Online, New York, 2023.

11. As of September 2024, when the survey was conducted.

12. Interviews were conducted before Skype went out of service in May 2025.

1.2 WHERE DOES THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE HAPPEN?

Spotlight: Livestreaming of child sexual abuse in Armenian law

Regardless of the platform used, it should be noted that Armenian legislation does not contain dedicated provisions on the livestreaming of child sexual abuse. Although the legal provisions that prohibit making available and accessing of child sexual abuse material are broad enough to apply to such conduct,¹³ legislative reforms would help eliminate interpretative ambiguity. Indeed, the current definition of child sexual abuse material is centred on the concept of ‘material,’¹⁴ which can potentially create uncertainty for practitioners as to whether current legislation apply to livestreamed abuse, transmitted in real-time and potentially not recorded or existing as a file.

Similarly, it is unclear whether the provision punishing the act of inducing or engaging a child in conduct ‘related to pornography’ by use of information or communication technologies, which carries a prison penalty of up to eight years,¹⁵ extends to cases of livestreamed abuse. This uncertainty is partly due to the broad terminology used in the corresponding provision, which would benefit from greater precision to ensure these cases are clearly encompassed. Given the growing use of livestreaming technologies to facilitate and commit acts of child sexual exploitation and abuse, specific legislation should be adopted to clearly distinguish such conduct within existing offences, enabling clearer classification and the collection of more accurate data on its prevalence.

Interviews with professionals revealed cases where the *perpetration began on one platform and then moved to another*. For example, professionals described Facebook Messenger and Instagram Direct being used for private conversations where perpetrators build trust or manipulate children. As interactions progress, perpetrators transition to more discreet platforms such as Telegram, Snapchat and WhatsApp for continued private communication. Survey data reveal that 37 per cent (21 out of 57) of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse occurring via social media involved the use of multiple social media platforms, providing further evidence that this is a common way for perpetrators to operate.

Service providers and justice professionals suggest that perpetrators are opportunistic and use whichever platform is ‘active and fashionable’ to target children.

13. Armenia, [Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia](#), 2022, art. 300-2.

14. *Ibid.*, art. 300-5.

15. *Ibid.*, art. 239.



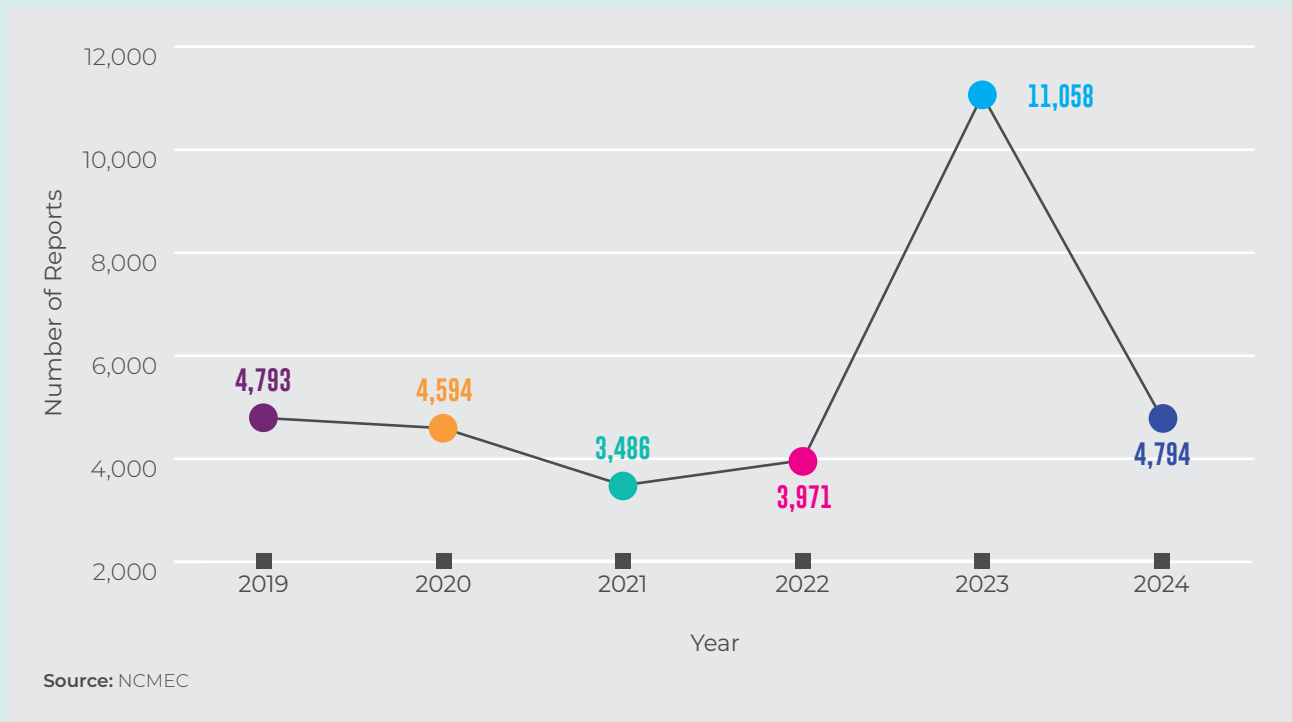
Spotlight: International detections and referrals of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

Reports developed and disseminated by NCMEC, based in the United States of America, known as CyberTips, are an important indicator that can shed some light on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse taking place in a country.

United States law requires electronic service providers (i.e. technology companies like social media platforms) based in the United States of America to report suspected cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to NCMEC. Most of these reports involve the upload of child sexual abuse material to a social media platform, by a user outside the United States of America. Geographic indicators related to the upload of the child sexual abuse material are used to refer the report to the appropriate country and law enforcement agency.

The below figure is related to the number of CyberTips associated with Armenia. As shown, the reports stay relatively stable between 2019 and 2022. However, in 2023, 11,058 CyberTip reports detailing suspected instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse were generated for Armenia.

Chart 2: Number of CyberTips concerning suspected child sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia



It is important to recognize that these reports only show a partial picture of the overall landscape of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in any country, mostly due to the fact that only United States of America-based electronic service providers are legally required to report these instances to NCMEC. In countries like Armenia, where the primary language is not English, and a variety of non-United States of America-based electronic service providers may be used by the public, these reports do not capture the full scope of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

1.2 WHERE DOES THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE HAPPEN?

A rise in NCMEC reports does not necessarily mean more cases; it can reflect various external and systemic factors. The 2023 spike in CyberTip reports may be due to:

- **Better detection:** Platforms like Meta and Google have improved AI-based child sexual abuse material detection. Armenian institutions and NGOs may also be collaborating more effectively and raising public awareness.
- **Policy changes:** Armenia has enacted stronger laws related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, improving case identification and reporting.
- **Greater awareness:** Public education may have helped parents, teachers and children recognize and report tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- **Underreporting:** It is also possible that the significant increase in 2023 reports partially reflects underreporting in previous years.
- **Greater connectivity:** Increased access to the internet and devices like smartphones means that a greater proportion of the population is online. This could contribute to higher risks and instances of exploitation.

As awareness, detection and reporting mechanisms improve, it is possible that underreported cases are now being captured, contributing to the sharp rise in numbers.

While the sharp rise in 2023 may indicate improvements in detection and awareness, the return to pre-2023 levels in 2024 indicates a shift in the underlying factors driving report volumes.

The drop in CyberTip reports from 11,058 in 2023 to 4,794 in 2025 may be influenced by several factors:

- **Platform-level changes:** Tech companies like Meta and Google may have adjusted their child sexual abuse material detection systems or reporting thresholds, leading to fewer automated reports submitted to NCMEC.
- **Reduced offender activity:** Public awareness campaigns, increased law enforcement action or platform moderation improvements may have discouraged offenders or prevented uploads before they occur.
- **Data quality improvements:** The 2023 spike may have included duplicates or low-quality reports. As filtering systems and triaging protocols improve, the total number of reports may drop, even as the quality and relevance of tips increase.
- **Adaptive offender behaviour:** Perpetrators are often quick to modify how they use platforms, taking advantage of changes in encryption and available features to actively avoid detection.

A decrease in reports does not necessarily mean the problem has been solved, just as an increase does not always mean it is growing worse.

Distribution on peer-to-peer networks

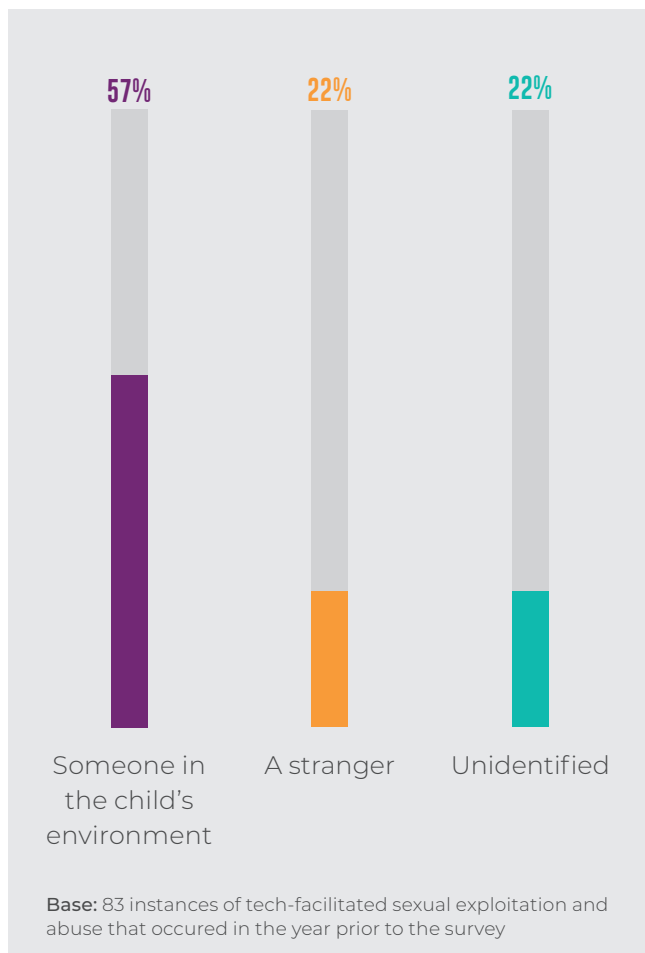
Child Rescue Coalition provides trained law enforcement with access to the Child Protection System. This allows law enforcement to identify IP addresses known to be used to possess child sexual abuse material on peer-to-peer file-sharing networks.

Data supplied for the past 365 days reveals that 163 Armenian IP addresses were identified in possession of child sexual abuse material. Notably, 95 per cent of this reported activity originated from the capital city, Yerevan. As the system does not monitor all file-sharing networks, this information should be understood as providing only a partial view, and may not capture the full extent of child sexual abuse material offending across such platforms.

1.3 WHO PERPETRATES TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

There is a common perception that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is perpetrated primarily by strangers online. While abuse by strangers does indeed occur, the survey data in Armenia suggest that most instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (57 per cent) were perpetrated by someone the child already knew, as shown in chart 3. In 22 per cent of instances, the perpetrator could not be identified (i.e. the child could not, or did not want to, identify the perpetrator).

Chart 3: Instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that were perpetrated by...



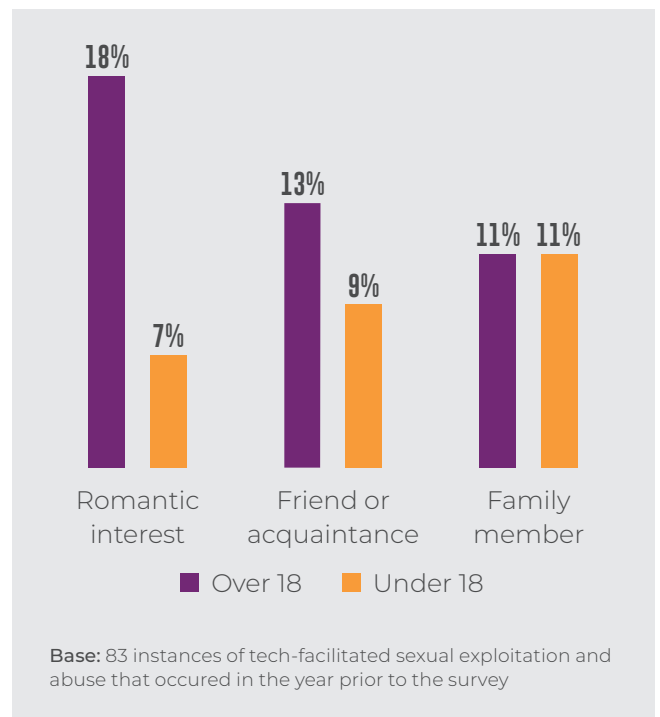
In the cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse analysed in Armenia, the majority (84 per cent) were committed by just one perpetrator, while 16 per cent of instances were committed by multiple perpetrators.

Sexual exploitation and abuse within existing relationships or networks

Within the child's existing relationships, the survey data revealed instances of exploitation and abuse that were committed by family members, friends and acquaintances, or people the child had a romantic connection with (e.g. a crush or a boyfriend/girlfriend). This aligns with the caseloads of professionals, which frequently involved perpetrators who already knew the child.

On average, perpetrators in the child's environment tended to be adults over 18 as opposed to peers under 18, as shown in chart 4. This was particularly common among romantic partners.

Chart 4: Groups of perpetrators known to the child, by age



Professionals also spoke of cases perpetrated by adults known to children, including by adult family members. Many professionals referenced a high-profile case where both parents sexually abused and exploited their children. This included contact sexual abuse, livestreaming of child sexual abuse, and receiving instructions from other perpetrators about what abusive acts to carry out against their children.

1.3 WHO PERPETRATES TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

When a child is exploited or abused by someone they already know, for example a family member, this could add an additional layer of complexity in the detection or disclosure of this kind of abuse, especially if the child or another guardian is economically and/or emotionally dependent on the perpetrator(s). For example, one mother refused to report her husband for using photos of their child to advertise sexual services, explaining that her motivation was to preserve the family structure. As a front-line worker recounted: “She had a hope to save the family. And the father should be considered as the pillar of the family [...] the fact that her child is a girl, so that the child is not criticized [in the community], later she will get married, she should not be pointed at” (FW).

Understanding the data

Abuse committed by family members is sometimes more difficult to capture, including in the context of household surveys. Considering the need for parental consent to conduct the survey with children, it is possible that interviewers did not get access to many homes where exploitation and abuse by family members was occurring. This is an important point to consider, as the proportion of abuse committed by family members may be higher than captured in the survey.

Sexual exploitation and abuse by unknown perpetrators

Around one in five (22 per cent) cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse identified in the survey were perpetrated by a stranger – someone the child did not know before the abuse took place. Both service providers and justice professionals reflected on several cases they worked on where a child or young person met a stranger online and was subsequently abused and exploited. This is illustrated in one case recalled by a justice professional: “A 12-year-old girl was sexually abused and then sexually exploited by a perpetrator, whom she met online, who sent her photos to various online platforms to sexually exploit her. A justice professional [working on this case] revealed that the number of perpetrators likely exceeded 30 individuals” (JP).

The survey data did not capture any cases where a child was exploited or abused by both strangers and people known to him/her. However, professionals reflected on some cases where a child is first abused or exploited by people they know, and is later abused by people both known and unknown to the child. In one such example discussed by a service provider, a 14-year-old girl was persuaded by male peers at her school to create sexual images of herself. These images were later used by the same peers to blackmail her. This abuse led the child to create an Instagram account containing “provocative” photos which soon garnered attention and messages from strangers online, who then also sexually abused the child. The abuse lasted for about a year. During this time, rumours spread about her in the village, and she was invited to the home of a family friend where she was sexually abused again. Not only does this case demonstrate how abuse can begin with people known to the child and transition to abuse and exploitation by strangers, but it also reiterates how interwoven in-person and ‘online’ abuse can be in children’s realities.



Spotlight: Children who displayed harmful sexual behaviours

While tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse was more often perpetrated by adults aged 18 and above, survey data revealed that 25 per cent of instances of exploitation and abuse involved another child who displayed harmful sexual behaviours. Cases described by professionals demonstrated how interactions and relationships can develop into sexual extortion, where intimate images, videos or messages are used to coerce children into further sexual exploitation, financial extortion or contact sexual abuse. This can happen in the context of already-abusive situations like grooming, but initially consensual interactions like sexting in a peer-relationship can also turn abusive.

In the case discussed above for example, different forms of violence like bullying escalated into sexual exploitation and abuse by peers. As narrated by the front-line worker, the case of sexual extortion started with bullying of a child by other students. When aiming to fit in socially, the girl who was being bullied was encouraged by a group of male students to take posed (explicit) pictures and send them: “When she took a photo and sent it to these boys [...] the blackmail began” (FW).

Another case highlighted by professionals involved a 12-year-old boy who was groomed online by his neighbour, a 16-year-old boy. The 16-year-old desensitized the younger boy to sexualized conduct through videos and imagery, and then invited the 12-year-old boy to meet in person. The 12-year-old boy took his younger brother and friend to meet the teenager. Both the brother and friend were unaware of the situation, and the meeting ended with the rape of all three boys. The 16-year-old boy then used threats to coerce the boys into complying with further sexual demands. The front-line worker supporting the boys who had been raped reported that the 16-year-old boy said: “If you don’t come next time when I call you, I will tell everybody about this [the rape], I will tell your father and mother that you came to me and did such a thing” (FW). This case illustrates many of the patterns discussed throughout this chapter, including how tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children may involve online elements like grooming taking place via digital platforms, which can lead to contact sexual abuse, and result in the production of child sexual abuse material and in sexual extortion. However, it also demonstrates a situation where a child, who was himself a victim of sustained and multiple sexual abuses, harmed another child.

In situations where a crime has indeed taken place, and a child has been convicted for it, it is important to note that Armenia prioritizes rehabilitation over punishment. Under the Criminal Code, any punishment imposed on a child convicted of a crime must support their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.¹⁶ Imprisonment is considered an exceptional measure; it may only be applied when no other sanction can achieve the same rehabilitative aim¹⁷ and is prohibited for minor offences (punishable by up to two years in prison), as well as medium-gravity offences (up to five years in prison) when committed for the first time or not involving violence.¹⁸ In practice, the judicial system often opts for alternative measures such as probation. This reflects a prevailing emphasis on a more restorative approach towards children who have committed crimes.¹⁹

16. Ibid., art. 94-4.

17. Ibid., art. 99-1.

18. Ibid., art. 99-2.

19. UNICEF Armenia, personal communication, November 2023.

1.4 HOW IS SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE PERPETRATED?

This section focuses on professionals' accounts and perceptions of the strategies that perpetrators use to sexually exploit and abuse children, particularly in relation to cases of online grooming and sexual extortion.

Grooming

Cases of grooming were some of the most discussed by professionals in Armenia. Some professionals described cases of grooming that never left the online or virtual space, for example where children were coerced to engage in sexual acts online, or to share sexual images without an in-person meeting ever being planned. While such conduct could be prosecuted under various provisions,²⁰ it does not currently qualify as grooming under the Criminal Code. For this particular offence to be legally constituted, the perpetrator must propose an in-person meeting to a child under 16 through information and communication technologies with the intention of engaging in acts of a sexual nature or creating child sexual abuse material, and then take preparatory steps towards that meeting. This offence is punishable by up to two years in prison.²¹

By focusing narrowly on the offer of an in-person meeting and related preparatory actions, even if it does not ultimately take place, the provision currently fails to criminalize the broader and more complex process of trust-building and emotional manipulation that is characteristic of grooming, as well as grooming with no intention of meeting and sexually abusing the child in-person, but only online (for example, by coercing the child to produce and share sexual content). In addition, children aged 16 and 17 are currently left outside the scope of online grooming provisions.

This approach stands in contrast with the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, adopted in December 2024, which defines grooming as “the act of intentionally communicating, soliciting, grooming, or making any arrangement through an information and communications technology system for the purpose of committing a sexual offence against a child.”²² This definition fully recognizes grooming as a crime of intent that can take place entirely

online and ensures equal protection for all children, regardless of age. As this broader understanding of grooming is emerging as the new international standard, it provides important guidance for aligning Armenia's legal framework with evolving international best practices.

Front-line workers and justice professionals highlighted some of the complexities of grooming as a ‘crime of intent’, and the subtle, coercive strategies used by perpetrators to manipulate children into engaging in sexual activities online. According to professionals, these steps did not always follow a linear sequence. However, a consistent pattern was observed that included an escalation of emotional manipulation, as follows:

- Establishing initial contact with the child.
- Building trust (e.g. by discussing shared interests).
- Making children feel special, loved or desired.
- Exposing children to sexual content.
- Obtaining child sexual abuse material, often using it for sexual extortion and blackmail.

Initial contact: As described by one front-line worker, some initial contact with children began with unsolicited communication online. This contact with younger children started with perpetrators sending friendly messages and “heart emojis [...] as if they are good friends” (FW). In some of the cases described by professionals, ‘relationship-building’ started as a friendship. In others, it initially resembled a romantic relationship, with the perpetrator pretending to be the same age as the child, or from a similar background, to appear non-threatening.

Building trust: Once initial contact is established and continues, professionals reflected that building trust with the child becomes an important strategy for the perpetrator. This includes engaging in conversations about shared interests to create a sense of connection and understanding. In these situations, they establish a relationship by being friendly, attentive and supportive, which helps them gain the child's trust. They also use flattery to make the child feel valued, loved or special.

20. See, for instance, Armenia, [Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia](#), 2022, arts. 198–201, 300.

21. *Ibid.*, art. 202.

22. United Nations, [United Nations Convention Against Cybercrime](#), General Assembly Resolution 79/243, 24 December 2025, art. 15.

Perpetrators sometimes take advantage of a child's life circumstances, including feelings of loneliness or isolation, low self-esteem, or a strong desire for attention and validation. One such example involved a girl who was being bullied for her weight. The perpetrator told her "You are the most beautiful, the smartest, we want the whole world to see what you are like" (FW).

Exposure to sexual content: Professionals also reflected on how conversations can become more intense over time – even if never leaving the online world – with the perpetrator sending sexual messages or images, and then eventually asking the child for sexual photos. For example, one perpetrator used the child's interest in drawing to build a connection, but also to escalate the interactions to more sexualized messages: "They [the child and perpetrator] just discuss different artists who draw, famous ones, and so on. And then he went on: 'Do you think it's art when you draw a naked body?'" (FW).

In one case narrated by professionals, law enforcement agencies were able to prevent a crime by identifying correspondence between a man and underage girls at an early stage of the grooming process. They drew attention to the gradual sexualization in the correspondence between the child and the perpetrator: "We read messages, like 'Do you wear shorts at home? Are they short or long?' There were similar questions, which would have naturally led to some kind of sexual act. The continuation would be messages like 'Open it a little bit, so that I can see. Take it off'" (JP).

Exposure to sexual content during the grooming process is sometimes used by perpetrators to desensitize the child to sexual activity, presenting it as a normal or natural part of their relationship. In Armenia, this conduct falls under provisions criminalizing the display of pornographic material or objects to children under 16, with penalties of up to five years' imprisonment when committed through information or communication technologies.²³ However, as with the offence of online grooming, this provision currently fails to extend protection to children aged 16 and 17, leaving a critical gap that can be exploited by perpetrators.

Another case narrated by a front-line worker illustrates several key features of online grooming mentioned above, including trust-building, manipulation, secrecy, introduction of sexual content and progressive escalation:

“

The person who threatened the child later had a certain plan. He said to the child that they would be friends, they would talk, he would tell her secrets so that she could communicate with her friends more easily [feel more confident]. And the child told [sic] that her father was strict. And she could not talk openly with anyone. After some time, the man offered to show his organs [genitalia] to the girl so that she could 'get to know him better' and 'become more confident,' he commented [...] That man just said 'If you don't continue to communicate with me now, don't even send me a picture of your organs [genitalia], I will send all this correspondence to your papa or mama, everyone will know.' (FW)

”

This case also highlights one of the common strategies involved in grooming – obtaining child sexual abuse material. While the Criminal Code in Armenia recognizes that grooming may serve purposes such as the production of child sexual abuse material, the provision is limited to cases where the creation of such material is the objective of an in-person meeting.²⁴ This leaves a gap in situations where the material is obtained remotely, without any proposal to meet. Aligning the Criminal Code's definition of grooming with the United Nations Convention Against Cybercrime²⁵ is therefore critical to ensure that legal definitions reflect the actual characteristics of the offence, including forms of abuse that take place exclusively online. This is particularly important because, as demonstrated in the data, once child sexual abuse material is obtained or created, it provides perpetrators with leverage to escalate the exploitation and abuse further, including by blackmailing or extorting children.

23. Armenia, *Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia*, 2022, art. 201.

24. *Ibid.*, art. 202-1.

25. United Nations, *United Nations Convention Against Cybercrime*, General Assembly Resolution 79/243, 24 December 2025, art. 15.

1.4 HOW IS SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE PERPETRATED?

Sexual extortion

In the context of cases involving grooming, sexual extortion was the most frequently discussed example of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in interviews with professionals.

Child sexual abuse material as a means for sexual extortion: Sometimes, perpetrators obtain sexual content from a child through online communication in the context of a romantic relationship or during a grooming process, as outlined in the previous section. However, there are also examples of perpetrators producing child sexual abuse material themselves. *“Even if they [perpetrators] don’t have such photos, they will modify it in such a way that it will be close to the natural one, and naturally these teenage children believed it”.* (FW).

The proliferation of sites and technologies – including generative AI – that can assist in creating images and videos has presented an opportunity for perpetrators to more easily produce deepfakes of children and to further facilitate sexual exploitation and abuse. Based on the survey data, in only a one-year period, 1 per cent of children in Armenia said that someone used AI to create fake sexual images or videos of them. In some cases, children may not know what programme or technology was used to create the images, or they may not wish to disclose that this happened to them. However, these data point to the dangerous use of AI and that its impacts are already reaching some children in Armenia.

These developments are particularly concerning, as Armenia’s criminal provisions on child sexual abuse material do not account for this growing threat. Indeed, while the current legal definition could arguably be interpreted to include non-visual or digitally generated material, this is not explicitly stated. The legislation should explicitly cover material that does not involve actual contact abuse of real children but is artificially created to appear as if real children were depicted. This includes material created using AI.

Using fear of exposure: In most cases shared by professionals, perpetrators used the fear of exposure – compounded by notions of family honour and gendered social norms that set expectations of ‘goodness’ or ‘purity’ – as leverage

to force their victims to comply with their demands. In some cases, they also threatened to post sexual images or videos of the child on platforms like YouTube. As explained by a front-line worker, the perpetrator collected information “about the girl’s family, her brother, her older brother, who was serving in the army” (FW), and threatened to share sexually explicit content of the child with their family, friends and school. In another case, a front-line worker explains “[the perpetrator] told the girl *‘If you don’t come out [to meet and engage in sexual contact], I’m sending your photos to your parents, older sister... uncles, aunts’*” (JP). Perpetrators use the threat of family shame to pressure children into continuing their communications and sending more sexual images:

“

Her photos were already available, and they could give them to her dad, they could give them to her brother and they could share them in the village, but they didn’t demand money or anything from her. The goal was to make this correspondence ongoing. Well, because our culture is such that if something, a girl’s name comes out, she will no longer be the ‘good girl’, and since it was a traditional family, her father could also kick her out of the house because of all that. (FW)

”

Acting opportunistically: Some perpetrators do not follow any of the patterns described so far in this chapter. Rather, they act opportunistically, taking advantage of unique or context-specific vulnerabilities as they arise to abuse children. For example, during military hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, perpetrators would fabricate information about missing relatives to coerce victims: “In the war situation, they [the family of soldiers] did not get information about their relatives, and the criminal took advantage of that circumstance [...] *‘Where are they located, I can arrange a meeting with them, so that you talk to them...’* But all that was a lie. And in return, he demanded naked or half-naked pictures of those persons, pictures of genitals” (JP).

Despite its apparent prevalence, Armenian legislation does not currently contain dedicated provisions on tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children. The Criminal Code, however, does criminalize compelling a person, including a child, to engage in acts of a sexual nature, or to surrender property or property rights through blackmail.²⁶ While these provisions do theoretically enable prosecution, establishing tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children as a distinct criminal offence would be beneficial to fully capture the specific harm and methods involved. Without such a dedicated framework, this form of child sexual exploitation and abuse risks being absorbed into broader offence categories, hindering clear classification and the collection of accurate data on its prevalence, which are essential for the development of effective responses and prevention strategies.

Opportunities for prevention: Shifting the focus from children to perpetrators

Protecting children against sexual exploitation and abuse requires a strong understanding of the broader societal and systemic factors that enable violence against children. It requires an understanding of perpetrators' motivations, how they perpetrate, and the ways in which they exploit opportunities to harm children. The Disrupting Harm research does not include insights from perpetrators and offenders. However, this area remains an important element in understanding how best to prevent tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The data reveal several patterns in how perpetrators operate. Even though perpetrators' tactics may change over time, these findings remain an important starting point to identify areas for prevention.

Unwanted contact online: The data point to children in Armenia receiving unwanted sexual contact online in the form of sexual images or videos, or unwanted messages requesting sexual talk or sexual acts. This could be a one-off abusive interaction or part of the perpetrators' ongoing efforts to desensitize the child to sexual content, or it can be evidence of ongoing sexual exploitation and abuse. This points to safety gaps on social media, instant messaging and online gaming platforms where perpetrators can easily contact children via their online accounts. While prevention efforts often focus on teaching children to block the perpetrator or report them to the platform, these steps come after abuse has already occurred, and do not stop perpetrators from creating new accounts. It also raises the question of why the responsibility is placed on the child, rather than on creating obstacles to prevent perpetrators from contacting children in the first place.

26. Armenia, [Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia](#), 2022, arts. 199, 258.

1.4 HOW IS SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE PERPETRATED?

Creating fake profiles: Perpetrators consistently take advantage of the anonymity provided by the internet to reach out to children, gain their trust, and build a relationship with them. While children should be made aware of this risk, the progression of digital technologies, including generative AI, will only make it more challenging for children (and adults) to verify people's identities online. While perpetrators may create sophisticated fake profiles to send these initial communications with children, in one case narrated by a service provider, the perpetrator made little effort to make his profile and fake identity convincing: "It was a very handsome man's body, fit and well-dressed. But when I told the kid it wasn't him, she didn't believe it at first, but then we took that picture and Googled it. And it brought several options of the given man. He was a football player" (FW).

In cases like these, teaching children critical media literacy and strategies to verify people's identities online may be helpful. However, any interventions that focus on awareness-raising, education and digital literacy should be part of a more comprehensive package of interventions targeted at the systems, policy, community and individual levels. While

awareness-raising campaigns may be used to enable adults to understand strategies used by perpetrators, interventions should focus on making online spaces safe for all children. The onus should not be on children or their families to prevent these crimes, but on reducing perpetration and holding platforms accountable for making online spaces safe.

Non-consensual sharing of child sexual abuse material: Threats to share a child's sexual images or videos are also a common tactic used by perpetrators. The emergence of easily accessibly generative AI tools has made it easier than ever for perpetrators to create fake (and increasingly realistic) sexual images and videos of children. While discussions about non-consensual sharing of children's sexual images have often centred on self-generated content, this argument has become somewhat outdated, as anyone can now create realistic but fake sexual imagery of children. These developments call for platforms to directly prevent the creation and dissemination of this content, and enforce stricter detection and take-down policies and mechanisms, while the justice system needs to adequately and urgently criminalize the creation and dissemination of child sexual abuse material.

2. THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN



2. THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Sexual violence has long-lasting and far-reaching impacts on children, ranging from emotional and psychological, to physical, financial and social. There is a large body of research that investigates how childhood sexual abuse can impact people's lives and well-being.²⁷ Less is known about the impacts of abuse that occurs on digital platforms or that otherwise involves the use of digital and communication technologies.

Findings from Disrupting Harm research in Armenia suggest that the impacts of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse may be consistent with other types of child sexual exploitation and abuse including mental, social, emotional and physical consequences. Existing evidence of the impacts and support necessary for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse should therefore be considered when responding to tech-facilitated abuse.

This chapter also offers insights into some impacts that are specific to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to be considered in prevention and response mechanisms. For example, the ongoing fear that a child's sexual abuse material is found online and recirculated appears to have substantial impacts on survivors' well-being well after the abuse ends. Further, harmful outcomes such as self-blame, prevailing victim-blaming attitudes and social stigma may arise due to misconceptions that children and young people have played a role in the abuse and/or exploitation they have been subjected to, especially when production and dissemination of sexual content is involved.

“

They moved [...] because their entire community already knew about this, she was not allowed to go to school, even with some attempts to go there for some classes, she was beaten, beaten on the way, they closed the doors and didn't let her in, so this person was forced to move to another area, to another city. (JP)

”

27. Kristen W. Springer, et al., “[The long-term health outcomes of childhood abuse: An overview and a call to action](#)”, *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 18(10), 2003, pp. 864–870; Helen P. Haines, et al., “[Long-term outcomes of childhood sexual abuse: An umbrella review](#)”, *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 6(10), 2019, pp. 830–839; Lane Strathearn, et al., “[Long-term cognitive, psychological, and health outcomes associated with child abuse and neglect](#)”, *Pediatrics*, 146(4), 2020, e20200438; Manukrishnan and Krishnamani Bhagabati, “[Surviving childhood sexual abuse: A qualitative study of the long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse on adult women's mental health](#)”, *Journal of Psychosexual Health*, 5(4), 2024, pp. 253–262.

2.1 SOCIAL IMPACTS

Professionals observed serious consequences of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse on the social well-being of children. These included social exclusion and victim-blaming, family conflict, peer isolation and avoidance. These factors can compound the already highly traumatic experience of sexual exploitation and abuse, leading to further harm and even revictimization.

Community stigma and exclusion

Professionals commonly described community stigma and exclusion as an outcome for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. In one case, a 13-year-old child faced significant barriers to reintegration after being publicly identified as a victim of multiple instances of sexual exploitation. The abuse was reported to the police and the perpetrators were arrested. However, information about the case was leaked to the local community. As a result, relocation was seen as unavoidable due to active hostility and exclusion from the local community towards the child: “They moved [...] because their entire community already knew about this, she was not allowed to go to school, even with some attempts to go there for some classes, she was beaten, beaten on the way, they closed the doors and didn’t let her in, so this person was forced to move to another area, to another city” (JP).

When the system fails to preserve confidentiality, it not only negatively impacts on children, young people and their families, but it can also serve as a warning for others and reduce community confidence in reporting that deters others from seeking support. These dynamics may lead families to avoid reporting exploitation and abuse through official channels and instead try to manage the situation informally.

According to a service provider, another family felt compelled to leave their home due to the mother’s feeling of embarrassment and sense of being judged by her neighbours. As recounted by the service provider: “The mother would keep saying ‘I can’t live here, because it seems to me that whenever I open the door and go out to work or to the store, everyone looks at me or laughs’” (FW).

In one rural area, stigma and exclusion reached across generations, with the community judging and shaming the children who were abused, as well as their mother. This may reflect cultural or gendered norms that disproportionately judge women and their children for perceived moral failings rather than as victims or survivors of abuse: “From a young age, people in their environment would say that their mother was known for her ‘blameworthy’ behaviour, and in addition, they also emphasized that the children have now taken the same behaviour from their mother, and they mentioned that they could have relations with other people – yes, they were targeted, and they were discussed and criticized” (FW).

Reflections from service providers and justice professionals also highlight how the risk of rejection by the local community can be particularly high when a child is subjected to exploitation and abuse repeatedly.

Neighbours and communities sometimes attribute the repeated abuse to certain actions or characteristics of the child. As described by a justice professional:

“*After learning that the child had already been sexually abused [again], persecution of the child began in small communities (sic). They said ‘You are already like this anyway, you have such and such experience (of abuse), which means you can do this (be abused again), do that,’ and so on. Therefore, in some cases, unfortunately, the only attempt at prevention was moving the child to another region. (JP)*

2.1 SOCIAL IMPACTS

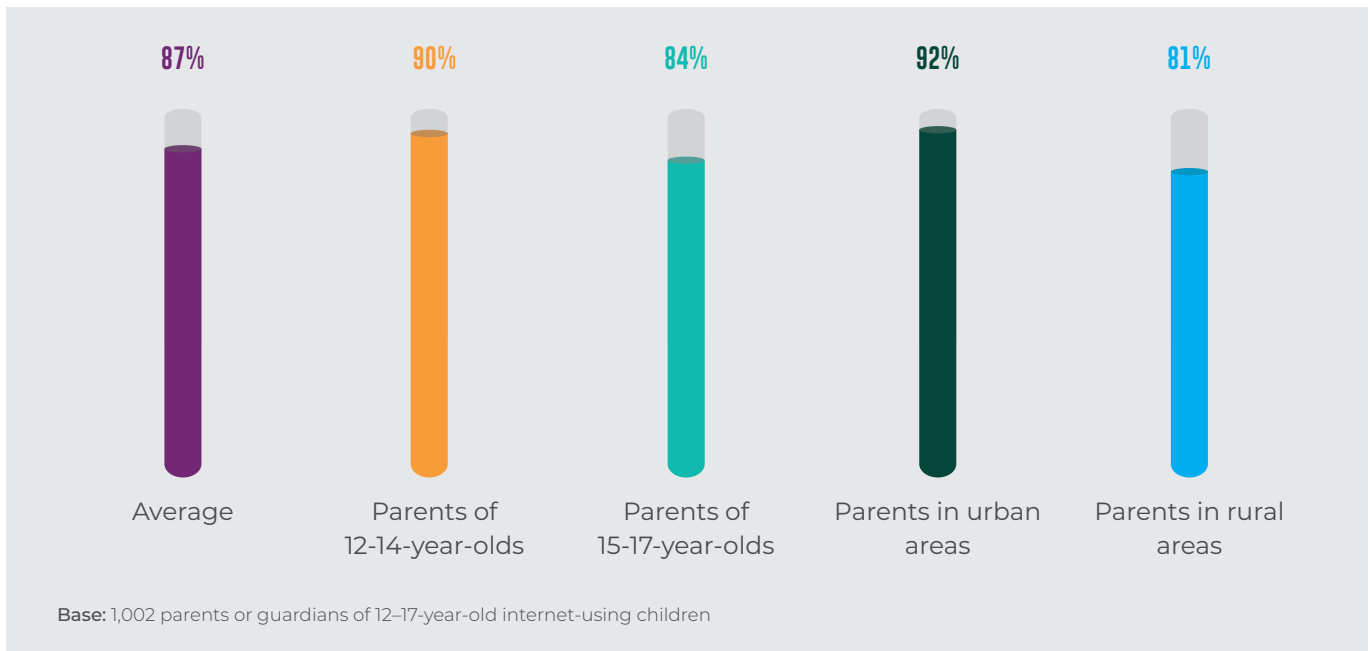
These examples highlight the intersection between victim-blaming, revictimization and social exclusion.

Family conflict

On average, parents in Armenia seem confident that they can support their children if they ‘experienced something online that bothered or upset them.’ Among the 1,002 parents that were surveyed for this study, 87 per cent were

confident they could support their child after a negative online experience. It was more common for parents of 12–14-year-olds to say this compared to parents of 15–17-year-olds. Likewise, parents of children living in urban areas were more likely to say they could support their child compared to parents living in rural areas. Gender differences were not statistically significant, so are not presented below.

Chart 5: Percentage of parents who say they can help their child to cope with things online that bother or upset him/her



At the same time, 27 per cent of parents said that they would restrict their child’s internet use if they experienced something online that bothered or upset him/her. Seven per cent said that they would punish their child. According to service providers’ observations, victim-blaming and punishment can contribute to a breakdown in relationships between children and caregivers. In one instance, a front-line worker recalled a girl who expressed frustration after her mother restricted her phone access when she found out about the abuse. As recalled by the front-line worker, the girl said, “I can’t live with her; she doesn’t value me; she slapped me” (FW). Another mother discovered explicit photos and online conversations on her

daughter’s social media account. According to the front-line worker, the mother felt anger towards the daughter and broke the phone, blamed the girl, and said that she should be ashamed and didn’t deserve to be her child, leading to an intense argument and the girl running away from home. Strong opposition from parents towards producing and sharing sexual images was also evident in the survey data. For instance, 94 per cent of parents surveyed said they believe it is “wrong for a person to take naked images or videos of themselves.” It was equally common for parents to say this regardless of their child’s age, gender, or whether they lived in urban or rural areas of Armenia.

Most parents (95 per cent) said it should be illegal to share naked images or videos of someone else with other people. As above, there were no statistically significant differences by child's age, gender or where they live. Despite the belief that this should be illegal, 90 per cent of parents said that if someone takes naked images or videos of themselves, it is their own fault if the content is shared with others. It was more common for parents of girls (93 per cent) to hold this view compared to parents of boys (88 per cent), perhaps reflecting different expectations around sexuality for boys and girls, and an increased likelihood for girls to be blamed for the abuse or exploitation they suffer if self-generated sexual content was involved at any point.

These attitudes may provide important context for the reactions of families, especially in cases where child sexual abuse material was involved in the abuse or exploitation of a child. Fear of negative reactions and social pressures from the family and wider community can create a sense of entrapment for children that perpetrators use to keep children in a cycle of violence. However, a lack of support for children, regardless of their actions leading up to or during the abuse, can be extremely damaging for children at a time when they require support. Blaming children subjected to image-based sexual exploitation and abuse risks causing further harm, and is quickly becoming untenable given the use of generative AI to create fake child sexual abuse material depicting real children. This leaves children even more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse using fabricated images and videos, and in greater need of understanding and support from adults around them.

Beyond parental attitudes, it should be noted that the legal framework itself may expose children to additional harm. Indeed, Armenian law sets the age of criminal responsibility at 16,²⁸ meaning that children aged 16 and 17 who produce or share intimate material could be criminalized, as such content may qualify as child sexual abuse material.²⁹ However, it is welcome that the Criminal

Code provides a general exemption from criminal liability in cases of physical or psychological coercion,³⁰ and separately excludes liability for children who are compelled to perform illegal acts under trafficking provisions.³¹ While these provisions cover situations involving abusive or exploitative pressure, legislation currently lacks similar exemptions for children who consensually create or disseminate self-generated sexual content. Addressing this gap is essential to ensure that children are treated primarily as individuals in need of protection, rather than as perpetrators, when material they have willingly created or shared is subsequently distributed without their permission. This is especially critical in a context where prevailing attitudes already assign blame to them for the sharing of sexual content.

Peer isolation

Isolation by peers was reported by professionals as one impact of abuse, observed while supporting children and young people. According to professionals, survivors may withdraw or be excluded from their social circles due to stigma or fear. In one case recounted, a 16-year-old girl and boy formed an online connection and, according to the front-line worker, may have been in love for some time. The girl sent the boy intimate photos, which he used to blackmail her and demand money. The girl gave him large amounts of money and jewellery she had taken from home. When the blackmail escalated, the matter was eventually discovered by the girl's relatives and reported to the police. In the aftermath of it being discovered, the girl was accused of having a relationship and giving money to the boy. Despite being the victim of exploitation and abuse, the backlash the child faced led her to distance herself from her friends. This was exacerbated by her mother's response to the situation, as she began to closely monitor and control her daughter's movements, due to what the front-line worker perceived as a lack of trust in the girl:

28. Armenia, *Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia*, 2022, art. 19-1.

29. *Ibid.*, art. 300-5.

30. *Ibid.*, art. 35.

31. *Ibid.*, arts.188-4, 188-5, 189.

2.1 SOCIAL IMPACTS

“

After those incidents, she changed her school, did not communicate with any of her friends, did not keep in touch with them, changed her phone number, her mother accompanies her everywhere, she does not trust her daughter. Coming here, going to school, going to the store, going for a walk, mom has to follow her all the time. Now we also have the problem that she [the girl] decided not to go to university... (FW)

”

Related to peer isolation, the impact of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse on young people's ability to participate in educational settings can be profound. Fear, emotional distress and stigma can disrupt their academic engagement and future aspirations. Specific examples recalled by front-line workers include a survivor pursuing distance learning because of fears that others may recognize her and know her story, children changing schools because of the fear of stigma, and survivors not attending school because of the impact of the abuse on their motivation and hopes for the future. In one case described by a service provider, a 16-year-old girl was secretly filmed by a friend in her own home. The friend began sharing the images, which were eventually circulated throughout the entire school community, including to students, teachers and parents. Despite this, the school's administration did not take any action to protect the girl:

“

The teachers at the school did not take any clear steps to solve this problem, they did nothing to reprimand the boys. They did not take any steps, and we can say that the girl's reputation was sort of... her psychological, emotional... throughout that period of time, and the only solution that the family thought of was changing her school... So she changed her school, and they thought that was the only solution. (FW)

”

Family and relationship breakdown, peer exclusion, and educational withdrawal highlight the potential for significant disruptions to the relationships of children who have been sexually exploited and abused. This leaves children isolated from support when they need it most. Importantly, these experiences also highlight the potential influence of community stigma and shame on the response by families, peers and schools, highlighting the need to address the shame and taboo associated with sexual violence at the individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels. These findings also point to an opportunity for adults and support organizations to take a stronger role in supporting children – both children who have been abused and other children who may be supporting them – by creating safe environments for them to seek help from adults without fear of shame, stigma or punishment.

2.2 MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

The results of the survey with children in Armenia reveal a strong association between tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and various mental health indicators ranging from anxiety to self-harm. The same results were seen among boys and girls, indicating that the mental health impacts of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse on children are the same regardless of gender. Service providers interviewed also observed impacts on children and young people’s mental health including difficulties with emotional regulation, anxiety and depression, which can contribute to reduced participation and a loss of goals.

Symptoms of anxiety

According to survey data, children in Armenia who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse had substantially elevated anxiety scores; on average, the anxiety scores of those subjected to abuse were 26 percentage points higher than those not subjected to abuse.³² This relationship between abuse and anxiety was also evident in the caseloads of service providers who supported young victims of violence. For instance, a shelter staff member described a girl’s emotional state when she was first placed in the institution: “She cried several times, she was emotionally unstable, then she smiled, laughed” (FW). In another case, a 12-year boy was abused in person and exploited via digital technologies. This boy was reported to have generalized anxiety and fear, and was prescribed medical treatment, as described by a service provider: “He was afraid of the dark, he was afraid of being alone, even during the day” (FW).

The production and dissemination of child sexual abuse material is a unique element of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that takes a toll on children’s mental well-being. According to service providers, fear that the child sexual abuse material will be released, found or recirculated leads to a general sense of insecurity, fear in relationships and increased anxiety. Two cases described by professionals illustrate the impact of these fears on children’s wider life context. In

one case, a young girl completely changed her appearance, left her school to take up distance learning and withdrew from relationships because she was worried that “someone would know her, know her story, remind her of it, or hurt her” (FW). Another child expressed similar concerns about future relationships, afraid that “if she started other relationships with other boys, that boy would see those pictures again... There was also general fear of starting a relationship and trust” (FW). This exemplifies the long-lasting impact that image-based abuse can have on a child, their future relationships and potentially throughout their life.

Despite the long-term harm caused by the continued dissemination of child sexual abuse material, Armenian legislation does not impose a mandatory duty on internet service providers and online platforms to detect, block, or report such content. In addition, the absence of comprehensive legal framework on intermediary liability for third-party content means that internet service providers and online platforms cannot be held accountable for illegal material uploaded by users, leaving them with little legal incentive to proactively detect, remove or prevent the spread of child sexual abuse material. Targeted legislative reforms are therefore needed to address these gaps, specifically by introducing mandatory reporting obligations and establishing liability standards that compel internet service providers and online platforms to take meaningful action against the dissemination of child sexual abuse material.

Family and relationship breakdown, peer exclusion, and educational withdrawal highlight the potential for significant disruptions to the relationships of children who have been sexually exploited and abused.

32. In this analysis, the anxiety scores analysed range from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating more frequent or intense symptoms. Differences in average scores are presented above; however, estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals (0.154–0.368).

2.2 MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

Suicide and self-harm

According to the survey, children in Armenia who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were 12 times more likely to report suicidal thoughts and behaviours,³³ and 21 times more likely to report self-harm³⁴ compared to children not subjected to this kind of violence. Professionals reflected on three cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that resulted in suicide, suicide attempts and self-harm. One was death by suicide of a boy and in another case of sexual extortion and blackmail, a young person's fear of their sexual photos being released (alongside ongoing contact sexual abuse) led them to attempt suicide. According to a front-line worker who supported her after the attempted suicide, "It became known that there was sexual violence, and she was ashamed to tell her parents about it, and therefore found a way out, so to speak" (FW).

“

The mother would keep saying: 'I can't live here, because it seems to me that whenever I open the door and go out to work or to the store, everyone looks at me or laughs'. (FW)

”

33. For this analysis, the relative risks for suicidal ideation and behaviours are reported for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year, and those not subjected to abuse during this period. Estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals (5.383, 27.068).

34. For this analysis, the relative risks for self-harm are reported for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year, and those not subjected to abuse during this period. Estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals (6.683, 65.691).

2.3 PHYSICAL IMPACTS

Children who are subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse also experience physical impacts. This may seem counter-intuitive, but once again highlights the need to view tech-facilitated violence within the broader context of sexual violence against children in all its forms. For perpetrators, digital technologies can provide a means to an end, making it easier to facilitate face-to-face meetings and contact sexual abuse, which causes serious physical injuries and negative health impacts for children.

In at least four cases discussed by professionals, physical impacts on a child were reported because of the abuse. These included sexually transmitted infections, gynaecological injury and pregnancy. Cases described included “losing consciousness and bleeding” after group sexual assault (JP), sexually transmitted infections contracted because of sexual abuse by adult men who had groomed and arranged in-person meetings via online platforms, pregnancy in a 13-year-old girl, and urinary incontinence in a 13-year-old girl because of contact sexual abuse.

One case involving a 13-year-old girl who was sexually abused and exploited illustrates how intertwined digital technologies can be with contact sexual abuse and the severe physical consequences that can follow:


“

This child was invited out of town by a group of three young people... The child lost consciousness during this act [the sexual abuse]. They [the perpetrators] were very frightened by this, because there was bleeding, and they did not know what to do with the child. They took the child in this condition to the hospital. They, of course, simply left her in the hospital and left without disclosing any information, but since there were cameras and so on, it was possible to reveal everything. And after this case had already been reported, they [law enforcement] began counting [images they found online]... and realized that during this year all the photographs of this child, information about this child, it passed from hand to hand [between perpetrators]. (FW)

”

3. DISCLOSURE

Disclosure of abuse can be a difficult process for victims, often wrought with uncertainty, fear and feelings of shame. This chapter highlights several factors that contribute to a safe and enabling environment for children to disclose, as well as the barriers that keep children in Armenia from speaking to someone about the exploitation and abuse they endured.



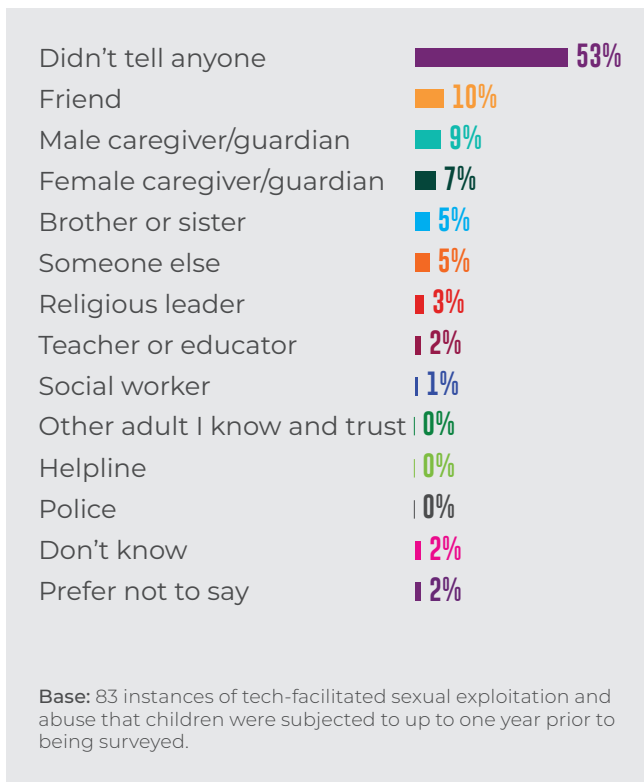
3.1 HOW DOES CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE COME TO LIGHT?

Disclosure of sexual exploitation and abuse can sometimes come from children themselves, whether intentionally or accidentally, fully or partially. However, disclosure of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia does not seem very common.

Survey data show that in more than half (53 per cent) of cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, children did not tell anyone what happened.

Professionals reflected on the difficulties children can face after disclosing: “She [the child/young person] was much more upset because of the disclosure... And mainly for that reason, many cases remain undiscovered, many people do not want to speak up, we keep our shame to ourselves” (FW).

Chart 6: Disclosures among children who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year



This quote and the data presented in chart 6 further suggest that children in Armenia are not finding safe spaces to disclose the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to, or to seek help.

Children who did disclose, most often turned to friends and caregivers. Professionals also discussed a few cases of disclosure to peers which highlighted the role of friends in disclosures and support to victims. Disclosure to peers may occur informally, driven by a child’s need for support or connection, or accidentally. The role of friends in supporting victims of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse was only explored through the account of one survivor. Her account highlights both the potential but also the limitations of peer support in such cases. In the case of this young girl, her friends played a significant role in providing emotional and practical assistance, especially when family support was inaccessible. The young person’s two close friends were particularly supportive during a critical time, helping her regain confidence:

“*My friends helped me a lot because at that moment, during that period, I had two close friends who knew about everything and who were updated on what was happening. And at some point, they would bring me to my senses, make me understand that I was strong enough to protect myself. They said ‘You can blackmail him, too.’ Yes, they helped me in that regard, and besides, they were by my side.* (YP)

While their support was well-intentioned, such advice could lead to negative outcomes if peers lack the skills and knowledge to respond effectively and safely to such situations. It is critical to have trusted adults that children can turn to for advice and guidance. In this case, the young person’s friends also encouraged her to seek professional support: “They constantly felt that I was in a very bad state, they constantly tried to convince me to see a psychologist, or at some point even one of my friends said that it was better to see a psychiatrist, and s/he sent me some contact information” (YP).

3.1 HOW DOES CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE COME TO LIGHT?

As shown in chart 6, disclosure to professionals was not common. Based on the experiences of front-line workers, it was rare for children to disclose the exploitation and abuse to professionals unprompted. In the few cases where this did happen, front-line workers explained that this was in the context of their established service-provision relationship with the child. In one example, a front-line worker was supporting a young person through a range of social and emotional challenges. During the provision of support, the young person eventually disclosed the abuse she had been subjected to: “That girl turned to me with her problems, yes, personal problems... she was in an emotionally unstable state of mind when she turned to me. And we started working, and she told me what the source of her problems was” (FW).

The various impacts of sexual exploitation and abuse may lead victims to disclose while seeking help or receiving support for other challenges they are going through. Sometimes this happens years after the exploitation and abuse took place. One young person interviewed explained that she sought psychological support two years after the abuse took place. The young person was encouraged to disclose by friends, who “constantly felt that I was in a very bad state, they constantly tried to convince me to see a psychologist, or at some point even one of my friends said that it was better to see a psychiatrist and s/he sent me some contact information” (YP). One psychologist explained how understanding the nuances of tech-facilitated sexual violence helped her to better understand the possible warning signs:

“

They [the parents] turn to me mainly when they notice a behavioural deviation, eating disorder, sleep disorder, aggressiveness, any other psychological or social problem. If 15 years ago I was approached with such a claim, I might not have understood what the problem was, and I don't blame my colleagues for that now, because I didn't understand then what it could be. (FW)

”

3.2 BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

Speaking to children in the survey revealed various considerations that may discourage disclosures. In line with professionals' insights about shame and fear of stigma, the most common barrier according to survey data was the child's feelings of embarrassment (35 per cent). This was followed by children not knowing where to go or who to tell (22 per cent).

Chart 7: Barriers to disclosure among children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year



Professionals spoke about judgment-free conversations as an essential element to enable disclosure. This is particularly relevant considering the survey data show that embarrassment, fear or not being believed, and fear of getting in trouble can be obstacles for children seeking help and support. Yet interviews with professionals revealed that disclosures are not always received without judgment. Negative reactions by parents and community stigma present significant barriers to disclosure, as described by the professionals and young person interviewed.

Fear of parents' reactions: Children who have already faced the trauma of sexual exploitation and abuse may be reluctant to turn to their parents for support, fearing that they will have a negative reaction. In some cases, these fears are realized, as illustrated in the 'Family conflict' section in [Chapter 2](#). The one young person interviewed in Armenia recalled that her hesitation to disclose the exploitation and abuse was more to do with how her parents might feel than with her own needs. This sheds light on an additional burden that some victims of sexual exploitation and abuse live with: "I was more concerned about their feelings and reaction, not about the consequences for me, because it seemed to me that they would have taken it much closer to their hearts than I did" (YP).

Discussions with front-line workers highlighted the perception that male caregivers will have more severe reactions than female caregivers. For example, one professional explained, "If he knows this, there may be a serious fight [...] No matter whether the girl has done that willingly or not, for the parents, it is unacceptable" (FW). Another front-line worker expected a violent reaction from a father who learned that his child was sexually abused by a male he met online – despite the father cutting the boy's hair "extremely short", perhaps as an attempt to reinstate masculine stereotypes ascribed to the boy, the front-line worker was surprised that the father's reaction had not been more severe, and that he did not turn to other types of physical punishment.

Cultural norms and family hierarchies can make it difficult for children to disclose abuse to their parents. One professional explained "We are Armenians, and that is our national disadvantage. We should be very strict; our children should be...

3.2 BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

they should walk along the path that we want, and we think is right for them” (FW). As illustrated above, these expectations create an environment where children may prioritize their parents’ feelings over their own need for support.

Lack of awareness by parents: These kinds of adverse reactions may be rooted in a general lack of knowledge among parents around (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, its various manifestations, and its signs and impacts on children. One psychologist explained that there is a lack of understanding of the non-physical impacts of sexual exploitation and abuse, and that psychological impacts can be minimized or otherwise remain under the radar. She explained:

“*If there is violence, we should definitely see some physical evidence for this. And so that we believe that this person was sick, felt bad physically, for example. And the psychological side is not very important here. She [a girl who has been abused] can be withdrawn, for example, and the mother will think ‘Well, okay, this happens to all children.’ That is, we are not yet very educated to understand that this withdrawal or this fear comes from somewhere, and not just because this is the teenage period. (FW)*

Understanding the potential ‘warning signs’ of sexual exploitation and abuse – whether they are physical, emotional, psychological and/or behavioural – can help to initiate sensitive conversations with children, which can be a first step to disclosure. Conversely, missing these warning signs or subtle changes in behaviour presents a missed opportunity to provide a child with care and support.

Community barriers: As discussed in Chapter 2, norms surrounding honour and modesty can play a significant role in shaping reactions to sexual exploitation and abuse, and could create barriers to disclosure. When incidents become known, they are not treated as isolated events, but are instead seen as reflections of the entire family, leading to the stigmatization of multiple family members.

Front-line workers discussed community norms particularly in relation to rural and smaller regions. “In villages, it is unacceptable that someone may think or say their daughter sent photos to someone. No one should talk about it” (FW).

Professionals also explained that in Armenia’s tightly knit rural communities, the lack of anonymity can heighten the social consequences of exploitation and abuse. Several professionals highlighted that once the abuse is discovered, confidentiality becomes a major challenge for victims and their families:

“*Considering the way of thinking, habits and traditions of the region, we can say that if the neighbours know about some details of a person’s personal life, they will speak about it for years, and that actually has a great effect on individuals. (FW)*

“*The whole village, instead of protecting this child, they begin to stigmatize him/her and say, ‘Like mother, like child,’ ‘What did you expect from this child?’ [...] We have even had cases of suicide (JP)*

As a result of the lack of confidentiality, lack of community support and fear of stigmatization, victims and their families may choose to never disclose or access support services. Families may isolate themselves to protect their reputation, fearing societal rejection. One front-line worker explained “I think our society is not ready to accept, we are still far from being able to accept such children [subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse]” (FW). In this environment, efforts by front-line workers may be diverted from supporting children’s recovery to helping families defend against pressure and judgment from neighbours and relatives and protecting their confidentiality.

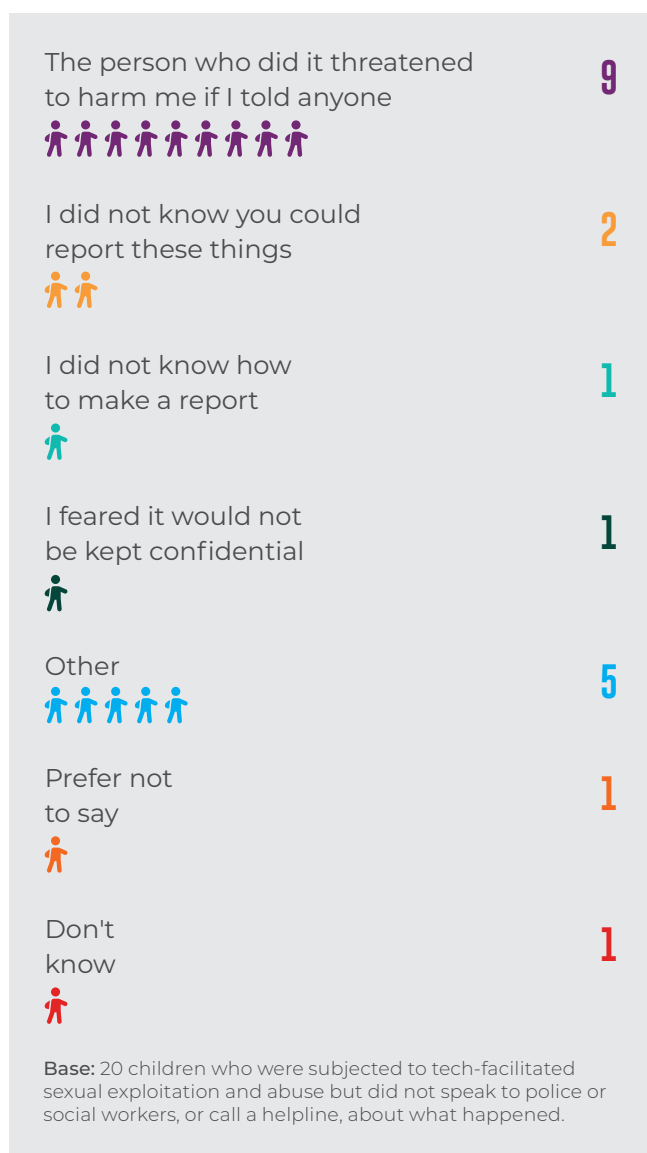
4. REPORTING



4.1 DO CHILDREN REPORT?

According to survey data, children in Armenia are not likely to approach services or to make formal reports related to the exploitation or abuse they were subjected to. None of the 43 children abused in the past year reported to the police. Notably, out of all the cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse discussed with professionals during interviews, there was only one where a child made a report directly to law enforcement. Further, only one child surveyed spoke to a social worker, and none sought support by calling a helpline. Children who did not report to helplines, social workers, or police said that the following factors stopped them:

Chart 8: Barriers to reporting or seeking help from formal services (number of children)



The most common barrier, selected by nine respondents, was that the perpetrator threatened to harm them if they told anyone. Among the five children who faced barriers not captured above, responses included not feeling a need to report and simply not wanting to make a report.

Making a complaint via a social media app: Social media service providers are key players in ensuring that children are safe while online, particularly as 69 per cent of the total cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse analysed happened on a social media app. In 43 per cent of cases, children who were subjected to sexual exploitation on social media also made a report or complaint on the social media app itself. Snapchat and Instagram were the most common apps where children in Armenia were subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, and these apps were also where most reports and complaints were made.

Regarding notice and take-down mechanisms, it should be noted that Armenian law does not expressly require online platforms to establish clear, accessible and user-friendly systems for reporting illegal content or behaviour. As a result, whether such features exist – and how effective or child-appropriate they are – is left entirely to the policies of individual platforms.

Would parents report? The 1,002 parents who participated in the survey were given a hypothetical question: What actions would they take if their child was sexually harassed, exploited or abused. Just 2 per cent of parents (19 participants) said that they would keep it to themselves.

On the other hand, most parents said that they would take some kind of action. Over half of parents (59 per cent) said that they would tell their partner or spouse, and 41 per cent said they would report it to the police. However, parents seem less likely to reach out to helplines and social welfare organizations; only 5 per cent of parents said that they would tell a social welfare officer if their child was subjected to sexual harassment, abuse or exploitation, and 8 per cent said they would call a helpline.

Although almost half of parents said that they would go to the police, the experiences of professionals interviewed reveal a culture of fear and silence among families when it comes to making formal reports to law enforcement and pursuing formal justice. These factors are explored further in the next section.

4.2 BARRIERS TO REPORTING TO POLICE: INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY FACTORS

In many cases recounted by professionals, parents were reticent to report the exploitation and abuse of their child to law enforcement. For example, one front-line worker explained “The family had already decided that they would not apply [report], naturally they did not let me do it” (FW). Another shared “The mother [of the child] contacted me, telling me in advance that no one should know about this, and she didn’t even ask for any counselling” (FW).

Professionals provided some insights into why parents may be reluctant to report, based on the cases they supported. Thematic analysis of these cases revealed two main, interconnected themes underlying this reluctance: fear of judgment by community due to intense stigma, and concerns about navigating the legal process.

Concerns over confidentiality and family reputation

Concerns that the community would discover the abuse was identified as a barrier to reporting cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia. These concerns coincide with intense community stigma around sexuality, abuse and notions of family honour. According to professionals interviewed, fears over confidentiality are heightened in smaller communities. As one professional noted, “In small communities where most people know each other... very often this information leak happens” (JP). Another participant shared how parents worry about breaches in confidentiality: “It is very difficult to go to the police when your daughter is involved in this sort of case... Because we live in a small town, everyone knows one another, and there is no confidence that confidentiality will not be leaked” (FW).

Professionals in Armenia described how they had encountered cases where notions of family honour – the social reputation and prestige associated with a family – can contribute to a culture of silence, as honour is ultimately prioritized above the needs of the individual. A front-line worker described this dynamic and how concerns over the family’s reputation, combined with moral judgments

around a victim’s actions, may result in the child’s well-being not being fully considered: “They are traditional families, it is quite unacceptable that someone may think and say that their daughter took some picture, sent photos to someone. No one should talk about it; they associate it with immorality. Now their family is more focused on her getting married” (FW).

The silence that surrounds child sexual exploitation and abuse can be so pervasive that families choose not to report even if the abuse persists. As one front-line worker shared, “One of those guys got in touch with her again and the same blackmail re-started [...] They refused to go to the police again, and their relative spoke to that guy again” (FW). Even when professionals identified broader patterns of sexual exploitation and abuse that could protect other victims, families often resisted:

“

There was a chain [of abuse] going around with different girls. And my approach and alarm were precisely that we could break a big chain with it, and we could help others, too. But since the family had already decided that they would not report, naturally they did not let me do it... If I don’t have their permission, of course I can’t do it. (FW)

”

Concerns about navigating the legal process

The legal process itself can be a deterrent for parents. The length and complexity of investigations can discourage families from pursuing formal justice. Some parents seek to protect their children from repeated interviews and legal confrontations, fearing that it will retraumatize them: “They don’t want to traumatize their child a second time, even to come to this building [court]” (JP).

4.2 BARRIERS TO REPORTING TO POLICE: INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY FACTORS

The possibility of multiple interactions with the justice system was also discouraging for victims, according to professionals: “She wanted to understand that if she was the only one to apply [report], would that be the end of everything, or they would have to go continuously, testify, and then go to court” (JP). Once the justice professional explained the whole process to the family, they decided not to proceed: “The mother did not want to harm the child, because she did not want publicity... we also explained that they should go through the whole process, those interrogations, etc. related to the child, that’s why she didn’t want to get into that” (JP). It is clear from these reflections that concerns over navigating the legal process of reporting are also intertwined with concerns about the community and public finding out about the abuse, as well as their genuine concern about the effects of justice system procedures on the well-being of their child.

Professionals in Armenia described how they had encountered cases where notions of family honour – the social reputation and prestige associated with a family – can contribute to a culture of silence, as honour is ultimately prioritized above the needs of the individual.

4.3 BARRIERS TO REPORTING TO POLICE: ORGANIZATIONAL AND SYSTEMIC FACTORS

Absence of a formal report

Silence by victims and families and the absence of formal complaints creates practical challenges for professionals. It means that criminal proceedings often cannot be initiated, even if law enforcement become aware of the exploitation and abuse. In one case, no formal complaint was filed by the victim, and law enforcement were limited to issuing warnings rather than pursuing formal charges.

“

The only failure is that the abuser was not punished, only emergency steps were undertaken by the police, and that's it. I would very much like to make it clear to the mother... and take her complaint to the end. I can say that I failed here, that I, as a social worker, was not able to give the right motivation. (FW)

”

As illustrated in the quote above, service providers sometimes act as intermediaries, trying to convince children and their families to participate in justice processes, while retaining their trust. Interviews with service providers revealed a sense of frustration and disappointment at not being able to help families, but reiterated the importance of having the child's permission to proceed. In fact, many front-line workers cited family resistance and absence of formal statements as the reason behind them not reporting violence against children.

One front-line worker explained that “No matter how unfair it is on our part not to contact the police, we are not the ones to [do it]... If there is no permission from the mother, I will not allow myself to do it. And if the girl's consent is not there, I will not move ahead until the mother agrees. We work with moms to agree to approach the police, but we don't succeed in convincing them” (FW).

In Armenia, professionals described a procedural reliance on victim involvement that includes participation in forensic examinations and legal proceedings. Without victim cooperation, crucial steps like forensic examinations or testimony cannot take place, leading to insufficient evidence for prosecution. One participant noted that “If a person won't go to the forensic examination, s/he won't participate in the proceedings, they can't take him/her by force and say ‘Let's do something’” (JP). The case may then fail to progress, as essential evidence or testimony cannot be gathered.

Several participants described feeling constrained in their ability to escalate cases without the cooperation of victims. However, it is unlikely that victims of sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia will come forward and pursue formal justice unless the barriers to reporting mentioned above and the fears around engaging with the justice system (covered in Chapter 6) are first addressed so that victims and their families feel assured that their rights and confidentiality will be protected.

Lack of standardized protocols for identifying and intervening in cases

Professionals explained that they do not have guidelines and criteria to guide the identification, intervention, and reporting of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse. Justice professionals from law enforcement explained that at times, this left them to rely on their own personal and professional judgment rather than standardized procedures. One participant explained “We have neither criteria nor any mandatory identification procedures... If we are identifying, then what are the criteria, how [is it done], and what methodology is being used?” (JP).

These challenges underscore the urgent need for clear guidelines, mandatory periodic training for professionals and awareness-raising among those with a duty of care. Establishing consistent policies on confidentiality, reporting protocols, and case identification is essential to equipping professionals with the tools and knowledge required to effectively address all cases of sexual violence against children, including those with a digital technology component.

4.3 BARRIERS TO REPORTING TO POLICE: ORGANIZATIONAL AND SYSTEMIC FACTORS

Inconsistent application of mandatory reporting

The Criminal Code in Armenia provides for criminal liability for those who fail to report certain criminal acts in the stage of preparation or attempt, when it is still possible to prevent their commission or consequences. However, this obligation does not extend to most offences that would typically be considered tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Notably, it excludes certain forms of sexual extortion, such as compelling a child to engage in sexual acts through blackmail. The following offences also fall outside its scope: showing pornographic material to or engaging in 'sexual conversation' with children under the age of 16 using information or communication technologies; performing actions of a sexual nature on children under the age of 16; online grooming; and offences related to child sexual abuse material, facilitating prostitution, or pimping.³⁵

A broader provision on mandatory reporting has been included in the draft Law on Child Rights and Child Protection System³⁶, which had yet to be adopted as of July 2025. According to the draft law, anyone who suspects a case or risk of child abuse must report it either to the police or to social services (community social worker).³⁷ Upon request, the identity of the reporting person can be kept confidential. However, this proposed provision remains broad and unspecific, and it appears to lack safeguards to prevent potential re-traumatization resulting from reports.

These developments are even more important given that mandatory reporting of violence against children seems to be inconsistently applied by professionals in Armenia. There appeared to be some confusion around mandatory reporting and its application among the service providers who were interviewed. Some noted that “If we

identify violence committed by parents or others, yes, we must... We must appeal [report], we simply must” (FW). Similarly, a front-line worker from an NGO stated “In cases of any small concern about ensuring safety with a child, as a specialist, I apply and respond very quickly. I apply to the law enforcement agencies” (FW).

However, other participants expressed a lack of clarity around implementing these procedures in practice: “To tell you the truth, I don't know who is supposed to do it [report], the hospital should inform them or what... or whether we should have informed [the authorities] about it” (FW). When asked if front-line workers should report to the police if they suspect that a child has been subjected to sexual violence, another justice professional responded in relation to teachers specifically that “There is no obligation as such, but I personally believe that first of all, the teacher should tell the parent about all this. It should be up to the parent to decide whether to tell the police or not” (JP).

Others reflected on the difficult balance between abiding by mandatory reporting and respecting the child's confidence: “The child trusts the psychologist. This question is a little more complicated, it is a controversial question for specialists: in which cases should it [...] be reported, and in which cases can it not be reported, because it is considered that it should be confidential” (JP).

Schools are another potential venue where adults might observe cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. However, according to professionals, school officials may be hesitant to report cases of sexual exploitation and abuse due to fears of an audit or negative impacts to the school's reputation.

35. Armenia, *Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia*, 2022, art. 473-1.

36. At the time of editing this report, the draft law was approved by the Parliament on October 22, 2025 and entered into legal force on November 29, 2025.

37. Armenia, *Draft Law on the Rights of the Child and Child Protection System*, 2022, art. 48. In the text of the approved law, this provision is included in article 29.2.

“

School directors [...] always try to hide it. And even if a teacher or a student him/herself turns to him and says “We had such a situation, or such an issue,” the director says “There is no such thing in our school, we don’t want to be disgraced to the whole Republic, we should not talk about this [...] If a child has been abused outside of school, it is not the school’s concern, let social services or parents deal with it. (JP)

”

While some schools may shirk the responsibility to report cases of abuse, it should be noted that in 24 per cent (10 out of 42) of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, children first met the perpetrator at school. This highlights an opportunity for interventions to improve the compliance of schools and education institutes in supporting children and – if in the child’s best interest – reporting cases of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Interviews with service providers revealed a sense of frustration and disappointment at not being able to help families, but reiterated the importance of having the child’s permission to proceed.

While mandatory reporting requirements aim to protect children from exploitation and abuse and encourage early detection and intervention, it does so with the assumption that making a formal complaint is always in the best interests of the child. As demonstrated throughout this report, there are significant barriers to children and their families feeling confident or comfortable in reporting abuse and accessing formal justice. In this context, obligating support workers to make a formal report, even if it is not in the child’s best interest, may erode families’ trust and willingness to engage with support organizations at all. It is crucial to address these normative barriers to disclosure and reporting, including negative or stigmatizing reactions by the community, and ensure that service providers are well resourced and trained to care for victims, including how to handle situations where a child’s case has been reported without their permission.

5. SERVICE UTILIZATION

Justice professionals and front-line workers reflected on factors that may influence the utilization of services for victims of sexual violence. Professionals also shared their perspectives on the provision and effectiveness of these services in Armenia. Importantly, these findings are informed by the perceptions of professionals. These can provide an important part of the picture, however they have not been contrasted or validated with the perspectives of children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse who, as described in the methods section of this report, were hesitant to participate in the qualitative research.

5.1 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CHILDREN SEEKING OR RECEIVING FORMAL SUPPORT

Community stigma, fear and shame

While community and social connection are important to health and well-being, professionals frequently reported examples where the community acted as a barrier for victims to receive the support that they need. Small, close-knit communities can amplify stigma and confidentiality concerns, discouraging children and/or families from accessing support. A professional explained that community gossip could exacerbate a victim's trauma: "If the neighbours know about some details of a person's personal life, they will speak about it for years" (FW). These attitudes have significant implications for children as they navigate seeking and utilizing support services as explained by one front-line worker: "In the community... usually it is bad... They point the finger at them... as the 'bad kids' of that community. In most cases, this is the reason why the parents do not seek any support in the community" (FW).

In this context, professionals reflected on many instances where families hindered help-seeking due to prevailing social norms about gender, sex and sexuality, and mental health. At times, this impacts the kind of support that parents seek for their children and their willingness to follow through on getting the support required. In one case described by a front-line worker, "The most important thing for them [the parents] was that the girl was a virgin. In other words, it was not so important that their daughter's psychological condition and mental health were damaged" (FW). The girl's caregivers later refused mental health consultations, fearing stigma associated with psychiatric services. As the front-line worker explained:

“

One of the symptoms that developed and worried me was suicidal ideation... We separately talked to her parents and suggested for her to visit a psychiatrist. But they did not agree, and the examination did not take place... No matter how much we explained that going to a psychiatrist does not necessarily mean that she would start taking pills and medication, it was just to understand the general situation, they did not accept it, did not take her for this consultation. (FW)

”

This service provider also explained that parents refuse initial psychiatric referrals because "If they hear the word 'psychiatrist', it means [parents think] that she will be taken away, will be kept, will be taken to a psychiatric hospital" (FW). In another case, parents refused hospitalization to a psychiatric hospital because "being in a psychiatric hospital is also shameful" (FW). In these examples, social stigma associated with mental ill-health may stop children from receiving the professional care they require.

Service providers reported that children may also adopt this lack of understanding or fear of psychological support. One front-line worker described how a child confused psychologists with psychiatrists, leading to delays in seeking help: "We had to get the child to the point where she understood that a psychologist is not a psychiatrist, and a psychologist is a specialist, right? We are not using the word 'psychologist,' just a specialist who will talk to you, understand your problem, help you" (FW).

5.1 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CHILDREN SEEKING OR RECEIVING FORMAL SUPPORT

Professionals also highlighted the difficulty that parents can have in grappling with the abuse of their child, while simultaneously trying to support them. In some cases, parents are so upset that they would prefer not to acknowledge the exploitation and abuse, or they might deal with the case within the family. This was described by several service providers, who said:

“

Sometimes parents do not want to talk about these cases. For them, this is a closed topic, a sore subject. They don't want people to know about their children, but sometimes there are hopeless situations for parents, and they come to us with the end result [sic] in the hope that we will help them. Sometimes there are cases when the police bring the child, but the parents are against it. They say “Why did you bring our child here? We could have dealt with our problem ourselves. (FW)

”

“

They [the parents] simply decided not to come again because the risk, in their opinion, was over [...] We've had a few cases [of child sexual exploitation and abuse] where they just took their kids and left [...] A lot of parents don't understand. (FW)

”

According to professionals, parental involvement is significant in a child's service provision pathway, yet parents and family are also left alone to process their experiences and needs. Some professionals identified a critical need for family-based therapies that can also address attitudes that blame children for their own exploitation and abuse. Some cases required joint therapy sessions to rebuild trust and communication between children and their family members. For instance, mothers often blamed themselves for their child's victimization, necessitating support to address these feelings and to rebuild fractured relationships in the family.

Conversely, according to professionals, some parents resisted long-term therapy as they believed it was unhelpful. According to one front-line worker, a mother stated “I want to stop all this, because she [the child] is already starting to live without thinking about it every day. And when she comes to you [psychologist], it always reminds her [of the exploitation and abuse]” (FW). This highlights the intensive support that parents may require to be able to address the needs of their children.

Among professionals interviewed, there were no known cases of children accessing services independently. The reliance on family cooperation and involvement poses a challenge, considering families may avoid seeking services due to intense fear and shame, or because they do not recognize the impact of exploitation and abuse on their children.

Unequal access to services for children living in rural areas

Interviews with professionals revealed a discrepancy in service provision depending on location, especially in rural or remote areas of the country. In these more isolated areas, participants described logistical challenges and lack of available professional support as barriers to effective service provision. Professionals described losing contact with families living in isolated communities due to logistical barriers. One worker shared “I tried to bring them to my [work]place, they didn't come anymore. And because I only had contact with the nurse of their village, she told me that they were from some remote area, the mother divorced her husband, took her two children and went to live in that area, and I lost them” (FW).

The front-line worker also reflected on the lack of continuity in the provision of support for a child: “He [the child] should have received further support; I didn't think it was over” (FW).

The lack of psychologists in rural areas further limits children's access to support. One service provider observed “The child lived in a remote rural community. There was no psychologist there, there was none in the school. The position was there but it was just vacant” (FW). As explained by

one service provider, highly trained professionals have little incentive to work in rural areas, further compounding the situation: “Good specialists do not go to the provinces, the wages are low, extremely low, and good professionals such as psychologists are scarce in the region” (FW).

A front-line worker explained that while they try to find and refer child victims of sexual violence to a local psychologist, this is often impossible. What this means for victims living in rural areas is that they often must travel to urban centres or the capital city for specialized services. Even when NGOs provide transportation, having to travel across the country is an added burden on children, and may prevent them from receiving support. For example, one front-line worker explained how one girl “spends four hours in a taxi every week, two hours to arrive in Yerevan, two hours to return to her home, just to meet with a psychologist” (FW).

Importantly, when social workers use transportation provided by local municipalities, this can unintentionally draw attention to the child and their family, especially in smaller communities. As one service provider described:

“

If the case is in a village, social workers will need the help of the head of the community [to arrange the transport]. They are obliged to provide us with transportation, and they do it with pleasure. But if, for example, in one village, this person helps us with the transportation once, twice, three times, four times, he will naturally have questions – why did the social worker go to this family, why does s/he keep visiting this family? (FW)

”

As discussed throughout this report, community stigma and fears of being identified as a victim are pervasive, and may add additional barriers for children and young people accessing services. These concerns around confidentiality in relation to service provision are discussed further below. However, research with children and young people who have been subjected to sexual violence are crucial to better understand their perceptions, motivations and the barriers they face around service provision.

5.2 FACTORS INFLUENCING SERVICE PROVISION AND EFFECTIVENESS

Interviews with professionals in Armenia highlight some areas related to the provision and effectiveness of services offered to children and young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. It should be noted however, that according to interviewees, there are no specialized protocols or methodologies specifically designed for children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Need for evidence-based therapeutic models to support child victims of exploitation and abuse

Service providers reflected on psychological interventions that they have used to address emotional and behavioural needs. A few reflected on the use of activities, such as embroidery, dancing or swimming, as tools to support psychosocial recovery. However, these activities were described as a way to keep children “busy most of the day, and other things, not to focus on problematic issues,” (FW) rather than as therapeutic activities that can help children explore and process their feelings at their own pace. These activities also do not appear to be a part of broader therapeutic protocols and strategies that aim to address trauma and build well-being: “Our work is to try and keep them away from revictimization, secondary victimization. And we are a supporting person in those actions, that is, we cannot do any therapeutic work in such situations” (FW).

None of the service providers reflected on the use of international psychological treatment guidelines³⁸ to address trauma among children and young people, such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy. Instead of following a standardized therapeutic model, practitioners rely on past experiences and internal discussions to determine their approach. This is described by a service provider, who said “Sometimes it seems to us that since we have already worked with such people, it will be easier in the future. But this is where the mistake comes in, of course, because they are not alike. So, we get together, discuss what we should do next, [in a] group specialized meeting” (FW).

The lack of specialized services for sexual violence survivors may imply that trauma-focused therapy is not readily available. This was sometimes explicitly stated by service providers, and other times understood in relation to the way they narrated their experiences: “There is no such structure in our region that deals with them [survivors of sexual violence]. There are structures dealing with domestic violence, but they do not deal with sexual violence or children who have committed crimes” (FW).

Further, there is no evidence from interviewees that specialists have received support to adapt culturally appropriate therapeutic protocols to address trauma associated with tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. This could indicate a lack of familiarity with effective therapeutic methods and a lack of specialized services for victims of these crimes. This means that when children and young people do receive psychological support, they may not always receive high quality, evidence-based therapeutic care.

Further, psychosocial support is often only provided to those who are assessed as having diagnosable mental illness, rather than as a critical tool to provide emotional support to all children who have been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. For example, in one case, a young man who had been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was not offered any psychological support because, as the service provider explained, “There was nothing mentioned [by the young man] about any mental trauma that he had suffered or was suffering at the moment” (FW). This approach reflects a challenge where mental health issues are overlooked until they manifest as obvious and diagnosable conditions. There may be a reliance on formal assessments and documented evidence of psychological harm before offering mental health services, which can prevent timely interventions.

38. Jonathan F.B. Thielemann, et al., “A systematic review and meta-analysis of trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy for children and adolescents”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 134, 2022, 105899.

Cross-sectoral coordination and cooperation

Interviewees consistently commented on cooperation across the sector including with NGOs and state service providers, local schools, police departments, and guardianship and trusteeship bodies. While reflections on this coordination and cooperation were described during interviews about professionals' work, the study did not specifically evaluate this coordination and cooperation. An evaluation would present a more nuanced picture. What the research can show is that service providers perceive their cooperation in a positive light and any further work to strengthen it would have a good foundation.

“

When violence against children happens [...] there are several ways to identify them [...] One is when I personally identify it, say, during home visits... The other is the police... More often, the relevant department of the police deals with it [a case of child abuse] and they call and invite me as a social worker. There have been cases when the Unified Social Service informed us about that, or the respective unit of the municipality. Regarding the mentioned, specific incident, I received a call from the police. (FW)

”

“

The police would definitely redirect information to the appropriate social centres, because all those NGOs that have relevant programmes with the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, they provide services not only to victims of trafficking or domestic violence, but also to the victims of sexual violence.” (JP)

”

Confidentiality

Confidentiality and trust were reported by front-line workers as critical for successful intervention and to protect children and families from stigma and social repercussions: “The secrecy was kept so correctly by both the centre and the rest of the employees [...] the community social service and the police. The latter also kept confidentiality. Because if the case was revealed [...] it would be the topic of conversation of the whole community, and the child would be targeted” (FW).

Similarly, another participant described how confidentiality reassured the child: “When she already realized that she was not in danger, that it was not a shame, etc., that it was confidential, the most important thing, then everything went well” (FW).

However, professionals described challenges with implementing this consistently across organizations and service providers, and recounted breaches in confidentiality with potential negative consequences for victims and their families. One front-line worker recounted a breach that had severe consequences: “I can say that there were cases when the family had to change their place of residence [...] A wrong intervention can lead to the destruction of the future of the whole family” (FW).

Professionals discussed how maintaining confidentiality in rural settings presented unique challenges, especially in smaller communities, where going to the police or being visited by a social worker may raise suspicion among other community members. One front-line worker shared their approach to addressing these issues: “Home visits not only create a comfort zone for the beneficiaries, but also give an opportunity to avoid unnecessary discussions and rumours – why did that person go to the police, why did s/he go to the municipality, etc.?” However, even repeated visits at the beneficiary's home raised suspicions within the community: “The neighbours, friends, and others were very interested: what is the reason that I visit them as a specialist, or she comes to me, what these meetings are about? That's why we started meeting in neutral places, in parks, in the square, that is, in a place where no questions would be asked” (FW).

5.2 FACTORS INFLUENCING SERVICE PROVISION AND EFFECTIVENESS

Continuity of care

Service providers often reflected on the efforts and coordination required to ensure follow-up with children, young people and their families. One service provider reflected that “It is not a work of one specialist only, a professional team, a good team should work” (FW). They explained the need for ongoing monitoring and follow-up, from visiting the child’s home to understand their immediate environment, to drawing up intervention plans, and following up with visits either to the child’s home or to the community:

“

The final section of the plan is on monitoring. Consistently, several times during the monitoring phase, I may visit the families or collect information from other places. (FW)

”

“

We have informed them that we would visit them without any preliminary information, to see how they are doing, what they are doing, we keep the situation under control, so that they don’t think they can relax again and think we won’t go. (FW)

”

The steps outlined by professionals above require resources and commitment to ensure that children continue to receive the support required to stay safe, especially when it is in the child’s best interests to remain in their usual environment.

Despite these efforts, there may be cases that are not followed up. In cases described by other professionals, abuse continued even after the provision of support services. In some examples, children were returned to family environments where sexual exploitation and abuse was ongoing

and social workers were unable (for reasons unknown) to follow up with the child to assess their safety. Justice professionals attributed this to system failures, including a lack of ongoing follow-up, provision of care, social support services and guardianship to ensure the long-term protection of children.

Perceptions of front-line workers and justice professionals

Reflections from both service providers and justice professionals suggest that there may be gaps in their knowledge and capacity to respond to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children. In particular, service providers themselves may overlook or diminish the impacts of abuse on boys, LGBTQI+ young people, or based on the child’s age. In addition, some participants believed that psychological support was not necessary for children who did not openly articulate trauma symptoms or presented as ‘ashamed’.

Some cases discussed indicated a perception among some professionals that younger children are less impacted by tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, because its impacts are less immediately observable to service providers. This was described by a psychologist, who explained the process for supporting younger children: “When the child is small and does not understand everything that has happened to her or to him, then in these cases there are no strong and deep consequences. In such cases, of course, we do not meet with them very often” (FW).

However, the perception that a child did not require psychological support was even more common in relation to older teenagers (15–17 years old), where sexual contact was framed as voluntary or consensual. One example included a service provider referring a young woman to a sexologist after concluding that what she was subjected to did not amount to child sexual abuse because, in the view of the professional, the child did not show any shame for her own behaviour. The 16-year-old girl was groomed and then had her sexual abuse livestreamed. However, she was advised that she did not need psychological support:

“

She was mature, clever, she had a bit of a behavioural disorder, her behaviour with her mother and also in terms of talking to me here [...] She was absolutely not ashamed of what she had done [...] This girl's case is just a product of today's life, don't you agree? It is a problem of today's internet. It is a problem of too much freedom, it is a problem of the morals of the whole world. (FW)

”

Stigma relating to gender and the sexual identity of victims could contribute to service providers overlooking the potential impact of the exploitation and abuse. Occasionally, professionals attributed revictimization to children's own behaviours and the irreversible psychological changes resulting from their past experiences of exploitation and abuse. At times, this included the perception by some professionals that abuse resulted in children becoming hypersexual. For example, one specialist described a case involving a girl whose behaviour was perceived as driven by a physical need for sexual contact, leading her to re-engage with an adult perpetrator who was her neighbour: “The doctors explained to us that if it has gone to this extent, this [sexual contact] is a need... If you don't keep the girl [in a shelter], this is of course a problem, but you can't do anything about it” (FW). In another instance, one specialist remarked “If that's his [the child's sexual] orientation, no one will be able to keep him away [from men who will abuse him]” (FW).

In other cases, children creating ‘provocative’ profiles or sharing sexual images were occasionally viewed as making an active choice rather than expressing a sign of vulnerability or adolescent development. For example, one professional indicated that the creation of child sexual abuse material stemmed from the girl's initiative to discuss sexual topics, noting “The girl had started conversations on sexual issues on her own initiative. The girl was mature, but the boy [who displayed harmful sexual behaviours] was not so much” (FW).

These perspectives can inadvertently lead to victim-blaming and stigmatization, which negatively impact on children's experiences with service provision, protection systems and rehabilitation processes, and could lead to harm. When children's online interactions are seen as active risk-seeking choices rather than expressions of vulnerability or adolescent sexual development, it reduces the responsibility of perpetrators and leads to harmful narratives that blame children, suggesting that they are somehow responsible for the exploitation and abuse they are subjected to.

This points to a cross-sectoral need to ensure that professionals in contact with children who have been sexually exploited or abused are aware of these attitudes and beliefs which place blame on children. It also highlights the need for comprehensive training on the short-, medium- and long-term impacts of all sexual violence for all children across age groups, gender identities and socioeconomic groups, among other factors, and are trained on required approaches to sensitively support victims in their rehabilitation.

6. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES



6. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

Children have a fundamental right to live free from abuse and exploitation under article 34 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.³⁹ If a child's right is infringed, States are obliged to uphold the right to access to justice and legal remedy. Access to justice encompasses the child's ability to obtain a just and timely legal remedy for violations of their rights. This includes fair and timely legal proceedings and access to support services aimed at aiding their recovery and reintegration.⁴⁰ Child-centric justice practices aim to make accessing justice and legal remedies less daunting for children and to minimize risk of further harm within the justice system itself, through processes that are age-appropriate, speedy, focus on the child's needs and respect their right to privacy.⁴¹

However, children who have been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse and are in contact with the justice system – be it voluntarily or not – may feel that they are thrust into a world that is completely foreign to them. Questioning by adults, complex legal processes, uncertain outcomes and lengthy waiting times may exacerbate feelings of fear and anxiety. This chapter highlights key elements of the formal justice system in Armenia discussed by professionals, from case identification to investigative actions and court proceedings, and examines them from the lens of child-centric justice.

Reflections from law enforcement suggest that there may be misalignments in how they perceive child-centric processes and the reality for children.

“
Children and parents perceive us as a law enforcement body, a punishing unit [...] We try to explain that we are there not only to punish but also to support, to help. (JP)
”

39. United Nations, [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), General Assembly Resolution 44/56, 20 November 1989.

40. ECPAT International, [Voices of Survivors of Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse on Justice and Effective Remedies](#), ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2024.

41. Council of Europe, [Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on Child-friendly Justice](#), Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2011.

6.1 IDENTIFYING CASES AND INITIAL COLLECTION OF EVIDENCE

Spotlight: Roles, responsibilities and structure of law enforcement in Armenia

The **Armenian National Criminal Police** combats cybercrime through its Division for Combating High-Tech Crime, a centralized unit within the General Department of Criminal Police. This division is responsible for handling cybercrimes nationwide, including offences against computer systems such as hacking, attacks on critical infrastructure, illegal interception and data interference. It also addresses technology-related crimes like computer fraud, internet crimes, intellectual property offences, and tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Once the Criminal Police has acted upon alerts or reports, or has itself come across a criminal incident and confirmed it, the case is immediately transferred to the Investigative Committee.

The **Investigative Committee** of the Republic of Armenia also plays a crucial role in combating tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, through its Department for Investigation of Cybercrime and High Technology Crime. This department is responsible for investigating cyber-related offences and works closely with other law enforcement agencies to address the growing threat of cybercrime, including tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the country.

The police in Armenia play a critical role in the initial identification of child sexual exploitation and abuse cases, often serving as the first point of contact for victims and their families. Police will receive information related to a crime and forward it to the Prosecutor's Office and/or investigative committee to initiate criminal cases.

Following updates in legislation, victims or their representatives can now report sexual crimes directly to the Investigative Committee, bypassing the need to report to the police: "After 2022, from July 1, they can directly contact the Investigative Committee too [...] Before this, it was possible only through the police. Now these two ways exist." (JP) Despite this option, none of the cases discussed by professionals were reported directly to the Investigative Committee by children or their representatives. Moreover, none of the interviewed professionals were aware of how to utilize this reporting mechanism. This suggests that the option to report directly to the Investigative Committee was largely unknown among professionals in the field at the time of data collection.

Police therefore remain central to receiving initial information, initiating cases, and facilitating referrals. However, during their interviews, professionals expressed mixed perceptions about how police handle cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Despite recent legislative emphasis on child-friendly approaches during investigations in Armenia, these provisions do not consistently extend to police procedures. Participants highlighted discrepancies of when police take forward a case of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, conditions for children in police departments, and the involvement of trained psychologists.

Challenges in initiating a case

The Criminal Code does not require a formal complaint from the child or their representatives to prosecute offences related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.⁴² Further, it requires investigators to initiate criminal proceedings upon receiving reports of an apparent crime from individuals, legal entities or state bodies,⁴³ provided that a preliminary legal and factual assessment points to the commission of a criminal offence.⁴⁴ This was reflected by some justice professionals who explained "The parent comes and files a report to the police. If they refuse, but since this

42. Armenia, *Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia*, 2022, art. 15.

43. Armenia, *Criminal Procedure Code*, 2021, art. 173-1.

44. *Ibid.*, art. 173-2.

criminal case is revealed, we ourselves can file it, without the parents” (JP). In addition, some cases are discovered through police operative work, with victims being approached afterwards: “They [victims] don’t go to the police voluntarily, it is mostly disclosed through operative work, and then we go and invite them” (JP).

However, some professionals highlighted the challenge of initiating a case without a formal statement from victims or witnesses. When asked “How is it possible that the police know about a crime, but do not initiate a criminal case?”, one participant replied, “Because there is no statement” (JP). In cases where evidence of violence is not immediately apparent, the police may refrain from pursuing a case due to insufficient proof: “If s/he does not go to report the violence and it may not be obvious on him/her even physically, the level of proof is quite low, they [the police] do not go after it” (JP). This highlights the very practical barriers to prosecuting cases in a context where children and families may be criticized, blamed and isolated after the exploitation and abuse becomes known.

While structural and procedural challenges exist in Armenia as highlighted throughout this report, the issue of shame and stigma continues to be an underlying factor that may reduce the willingness of victims to come forward. This makes tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse difficult to effectively address.

Conditions and procedures in police departments

The interviews revealed varying levels of awareness of child-centric procedures and how these may impact on victims who encounter the criminal justice system.

According to state social workers who participated in the study, the conditions in police departments are favourable for children: “In our police, very, very good conditions [for children] have been created in every way; they [police] approach it in a very competent way” (FW). On the other hand, one police officer acknowledged that visiting the police can be daunting: “Children and parents perceive us as a law enforcement body, a punishing unit [...] We try to explain that we are there not only to punish but also to support, to help” (JP). Others reflected on how they try to make their encounters with children less intimidating: “We all wore civilian clothes that day so that the children would not be stressed by the uniform” (JP).

However, reflections from law enforcement suggest that there may be misalignments in how they perceive child-centric processes and the reality for children. For example, one police officer reflected on a case where children and parents were gathered in a police department for suspect recognition: “There were children who were crying, the parents were so angry [...] We had them all in a room like this, and we watched them so that they did not leave that room” (JP). This case demonstrates practices that would (re) traumatize children and their families. The instance described above was not reflected on critically by the interviewee or discussed from the lens of revictimization or child-centric justice, but rather as part of the challenges of working with child victims and their families.

Overall, participants did reflect on repetitive questioning that can happen during initial interactions with the police, which can deter victims and families from continuing with the justice process. One respondent described a case where a child’s repeated questioning led her to withdraw: “She was a girl and was embarrassed to speak openly like that [...] She becomes more, so to speak, withdrawn and does not want to communicate” (FW).

6.1 IDENTIFYING CASES AND INITIAL COLLECTION OF EVIDENCE

In other cases, stigmatizing attitudes from police contributed to a reluctance among children and their families to pursue formal charges. According to front-line workers, police sometimes mirrored social stigma attached to victims by their communities. For example, in one community rumours were being spread about two girls becoming pregnant. When these girls were later subjected to sexual extortion, the front-line worker handling the case observed these harmful attitudes being replicated by police during the interview: “The police had started asking questions and being sceptical [of the victims], they were sure about what the rumours said [about the girls] in the village.” (FW) As a result of these experiences with police, some children or their families refuse to continue with the case as described by a justice professional: “After some cases of communication with the police, families and children refused to contact the Investigative Committee and go further [...] They decided to keep silent about their cases” (JP).

These findings suggest that professionals’ perceptions of the quality of care provided by state-based services and law enforcement does not always align with child-centric practices, and may even conflict with the reality of children’s experiences. Police interactions can exacerbate trauma due to repetitive questioning, stigmatizing attitudes, and a lack of sensitivity towards victims and their families. As mentioned throughout this report, the voices of children and their families are missing from these accounts and are critical to better understanding how children and young people experience the different stages of the formal justice system. However, this remains difficult given the trauma and stigma that many children and young people face when they speak up and seek help.

Involvement of psychologists in initial police interactions with children victims of crimes

Given the psychological toll that the justice process can have on children, having trained advocates and psychologists in the room is one way to ensure their well-being and best interests are protected. While the involvement of forensic psychologists during investigations conducted by the Investigative Committee is now mandated in the Criminal Code, one investigator explained that the involvement of psychologists during *initial police interactions* with victims is not mandatory. Due to this lack of regulation to govern disclosure at the community police level, pedagogues or other professionals can be brought in with the intention of helping the child disclose the exploitation and abuse before the case is transmitted to the Investigative Committee.⁴⁵ Although well-intentioned, this practice carries risks of revictimization if community police and the professionals involved are not properly trained in trauma-informed practices and child-centric justice. The introduction of clearer provisions governing disclosure at the community police stage could help mitigate this risk and ensure greater consistency with child-sensitive procedures.

In summary, the reluctance to provide formal statements, repetitive questioning and stigmatizing attitudes were all identified by participants as gaps to be addressed. Fostering a safer environment for children and families when they first encounter the justice system is integral to ensuring that they feel comfortable and are willing to progress their case further.

45. UNICEF Armenia, personal communication, 2025.

6.2 INVESTIGATIVE ACTIONS

Child-friendly investigative spaces

Participants spoke of recent efforts in Armenia that aim to create investigative spaces that are child-friendly. However, participants also highlighted several challenges in properly utilizing these spaces.

Safe Corners: In 2023, the Armenian Government, in collaboration with UNICEF Armenia established Safe Corners in Yerevan and Kapan, based on the Barnahus or 'child's house' model. The Barnahus acts as a one-stop centre where child victims of any form of violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation are prepared for investigative procedures and where child-centred interviewing can take place with the involvement of multidisciplinary teams including investigators, the child's lawyer, psychologists and social workers. The aim of this model is to minimize children's repeated direct contact with the justice system and to protect them from secondary victimization.

While these Safe Corners introduced more child-centred investigative environments in Armenia, uptake remains an issue. According to some professionals, "In many cases, this model [Safe Corners] is not applied" (JP), while another added, "No one accesses or uses this model or this room" (FW). According to another front-line worker, "There are still rare cases when the police agree to talk to the child here [Safe Corners]. In most cases [...] their interviews take place at the police stations" (FW).

Explaining the limited use of these facilities, one law enforcement representative cited the scarcity of such centres and the difficulty in accessing them. With only two centres located in Yerevan and Kapan, access is particularly challenging for children from remote regions: "There are difficulties with getting to these places. Mostly, the operations are carried out in the investigative departments" (JP). As a relatively new concept, it appears that further support for implementation may enhance effective utilization of existing Safe Corners. For example, responses from law enforcement suggest that they may not see total alignment between the resources available and their law enforcement needs: "It is not regularly used in Yerevan [...] because not all cases are

transferred to be conducted following the Barnahus model investigation. And sometimes there is also a need to conduct several interviews, conduct investigative activities with children, etc." (JP).

While a promising initiative, based on the perceptions of professionals interviewed, an absence of mandatory referral and a lack of training on using the model may introduce barriers to the proper utilization of Safe Corners. For example, one participant pointed out the selective use of these facilities: "There are cases when there is no need for that centre. When we really need it, then we organize the meeting there" (JP). Importantly, interviewees did not reflect on the specific training or resources that would be required to utilize Safe Corners specifically for sexual exploitation and abuse cases with a technology component. Additionally, none of the cases discussed during the research involved interviews conducted in Safe Corners. Instead, interviews were typically carried out in police departments, investigative committee offices, or even at crime scenes.

Investigate Committee Divisions: Efforts to create child-friendly environments in the Investigative Committees were self-reported by law enforcement and professionals working in State services. According to participants, many Investigative Committee divisions were renovated and now also have specific rooms for interviewing children in their buildings.

While progress has been made in creating child-friendly spaces within the Investigative Committee, challenges remain in ensuring consistent access and use, particularly in regions outside Yerevan. As one respondent summarized, "not all investigative bodies are equipped with rooms for operations with children" (JP).

In summary, this underutilization of child-friendly spaces highlights a need to focus on training for investigators and clear policies mandating the use of child-friendly spaces for interviews with children. In addition, periodic evaluations of these spaces and procedures are necessary to ensure they are achieving their required objectives.

6.2 INVESTIGATIVE ACTIONS

Approaches used during interviews with children

The Criminal Procedure Code in Armenia establishes strict rules for the questioning of child victims and witnesses. For example, sessions cannot exceed two consecutive hours, and the total duration per day is limited to six hours.⁴⁶ As for any other investigative action, psychologists must be involved to help safeguard the child's best interests and prevent insensitive questioning.⁴⁷ In addition to these provisions, mandatory video recording provisions do exist and are discussed later in this section.

Conduct of investigators: Some psychologists spoke positively about the professionalism of investigators when handling cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. One respondent stated “There has never been a case for the investigator to go out of his scope and position. They work according to the law, keeping the best interests of the child” (FW). In another case, special accommodations were made to create a more supportive environment for children. For example, “even the investigator was changed, they assigned a woman, and more favourable conditions were created for girls, so that trust was established better” (FW).

In contrast, some respondents noted that in some cases the attitude of law enforcement officials differed depending on the child's age, particularly if they are older adolescents. One front-line worker explained “If a child, for example, is more than 15 years old, and in all cases with adults [...] we know that the process will go wrong. That is, there will definitely be accusations in the way she is addressed [her story will be doubted], she will definitely feel bad. In cases where the child is younger, they [law enforcement officials] are very helpful, understanding, and so on” (FW).

Other participants expressed their perception that biases from some investigators may impact their approach to a case: “It depends on the inner conviction of the person investigating the case. If he thinks the child is cheating, he starts doing everything to support the other party. If

he is convinced of guilt, he will do everything to prove it” (JP). Another respondent shared their perception that the Investigative Committee's supportive attitude is present only in cases where “the Investigative Committee is on the child's side” (FW).

Children who take the brave step to report or talk about their case with professionals should have their story heard and taken seriously, regardless of their age. Having trust that they will be treated with sensitivity is an important step to ensure that children and families are willing to cooperate during investigations, allowing more effective investigation and prosecution to cases and access to justice for victims.

It is critical to consider children's well-being, emotional state and willingness to participate during investigations. Participants shared that a child's emotional state during investigative processes often reflects the psychological toll of the exploitation and abuse and that in this context, it is rare for children to clearly articulate their experiences without support. One participant recalled a child who refused to speak about a perpetrator, stating “If you don't want me to commit suicide, I won't go there” (FW). Feelings of shame and fear of criticism were also present. A participant noted, “She was ashamed of what had happened, she felt uncomfortable, and she wanted the person who had committed a violent act against her to be punished, but she was sort of lost” (JP). Another explained that children “were very afraid of being criticized, of not being understood... They didn't do it on purpose, and they wanted us to understand that” (FW).

This only reiterates the importance of creating physically and psychologically safe spaces for children at every step of the justice process. The findings above point to steps that can be taken to create safer more child-friendly practices for children: not excluding adolescents or treating them like adults; taking what children say seriously regardless of their age and gender; and addressing any lack of consistency in due process based on the perceptions of investigators or prosecutors.

46. Armenia, *Criminal Procedure Code*, 2021, art. 217-3.

47. *Ibid.*, art. 212.

Spotlight: Harmful confrontations

Confrontations are a practice used in Armenian procedural law that arise during interviews when the testimonies of the parties involved conflict.⁴⁸ As an investigative action, confrontations involving children should be carried out with the participation of a qualified psychologist, and appropriate safeguards should be in place to protect the child's best interests, including the possibility of restricting direct communication with the accused.⁴⁹ In addition, both interviews and cross-examinations may be conducted using technical means like video conferencing to protect child victims.⁵⁰

The process of confrontations and questions about its potential impact on victims were raised by participants in Armenia. Some children's reactions during confrontations with perpetrators can be particularly intense that they become frozen. One professional described a girl who "did not show or express any emotion, she did not cry, she kept everything in herself" (FW). Similarly, some children display physical symptoms of distress during confrontations, with one respondent noting, "He got hysterical, he was pushing his mother, shouting 'Let's get out of here.'" (FW)

Even with the safeguards in place of having a psychologist present and the possibility of video conferencing, re-traumatization during confrontation is still a concern held by some front-line workers: "If the child has already reached this stage with their feelings under control, one such hearing can reignite intense emotions when they return" (FW). One of the forensic psychologists explains the approach she used to protect the child during a confrontation: "Apart from the two confronting persons, a number of persons also participate in the interrogation [interview] process and act as a wall between them. For instance, the girl sits with all participants between her and the accused, creating a physical and psychological barrier" (FW).

The approach described, while well-intentioned, remains concerning. The child and the accused are still in the same room which can be profoundly distressing for the child regardless of how many individuals are placed between them and the perpetrator. This underscores the need to promote the use of legally permissible tools such as video conferencing for such procedures (when appropriate), with all questions systematically filtered through a trained psychologist to ensure the child's emotional safety. Amending legislation to incorporate protective approaches such as the use of intermediaries could also help to create a safer environment for children during confrontations. In essence, the absence of explicit legal provisions prohibiting physical confrontation between child victims and alleged perpetrators creates gaps in protection. Establishing such safeguards would help ensure that justice processes are genuinely child-centred and trauma-informed.

Mandatory video recordings: Another element of investigations raised during interviews is the use of video recordings. In 2022 it became mandatory for investigative actions, including interrogations or interviews of children, to be video and audio recorded.⁵¹ Withdrawing from mandatory

recording does not seem to be an option, as the only exceptions outlined in the Criminal Procedure Code are objective impossibility or unforeseeable technical malfunction. If recording is interrupted, the investigative action must be suspended until it is restored.⁵²

48. Armenia, *Criminal Procedure Code*, 2021, art. 224.

49. *Ibid.*, art. 212.

50. *Ibid.*, art. 214-6.

51. *Ibid.*, art. 214.

52. *Ibid.*, art. 214-4.

6.2 INVESTIGATIVE ACTIONS

The introduction of mandatory video recordings for investigative actions has been praised by justice professionals for ensuring disclosures and securing convictions: “It was the use of video recording that helped, because no one would have believed that the child [victim] themselves had said this” (JP). The process is also seen supporting child-centric justice and limiting repeated questioning: “The interrogations [interviews] are already conducted with cameras, which helps us not to carry out the same interrogation [interview] a second time. This is safer and better” (FW).

This practice has not yet been tested from a trauma-informed perspective for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse that involved the use of digital technologies including but not limited to cameras. Children subjected to these types of abuses may have heightened sensitivity to being recorded or the use of cameras by an adult. For some victims, the presence of a camera may trigger feelings of vulnerability, embarrassment or fear of further exposure. However, this may not be the case for any or all children and young people. More research is needed to ensure that mandatory video recording aligns with trauma-informed principles, balancing the need for reliable evidence with the psychological needs of victims and survivors of these types of abuse on a case-by-case basis.

Involvement of psychologists: Mandatory participation of psychologists in interviews and other investigative actions conducted by the Investigative Committee is a recent development in Armenia’s criminal investigation system, aiming to support child witnesses and victims. These psychologists undergo specific training and licensing by the Ministry of Justice. Their involvement aims to create a more supportive environment, facilitating the child’s ability to provide accurate and comprehensive testimony. This approach aligns with international best practices, recognizing the importance of safeguarding the mental health of minors during legal processes. Professionals highlighted the important role that trained psychologists can play throughout the justice process, including before and during investigative actions.

Preparatory work and initial assessment:

According to psychologists interviewed, their work on a case begins even before the interview itself. They work with the child to assess their readiness and emotional state. This can be an important element of child-centric justice – namely in assessing the best interests of the child, ensuring their rights are respected and that they are informed of all procedures in simple language. One psychologist explained:

“

Before starting the questioning, I work with the minor, I try to understand whether they are ready for the participation in the interrogation [interview] [...] does the minor understand why they are there and whether they can give the information that is needed within the interrogation [interview] [...] I explain them their rights and responsibilities in a simple, understandable language. (FW)

”

Involvement in investigative actions: Under the Criminal Procedure Code, psychologists can collaborate with the investigator to formulate appropriate questions for the child who gives testimony,⁵³ and advise on the environment, duration and manner of questioning to prioritize the best interests of the child.⁵⁴ Psychologists may also recommend that they be consulted on any questions from the accused or their defence attorney to the child, and that these be asked in a manner that prevents direct communication between the parties.⁵⁵ Investigators retain discretion over whether to follow the psychologist’s recommendations, but are required to include them in the corresponding protocol.⁵⁶

Interviews revealed that this collaboration does take place in practice. In some cases, this involved taking a support role during police interviews, for example ensuring that breaks are taken when needed: “Our pauses [taking breaks] in this

53. Ibid., art. 212-4.

54. Ibid., art. 212-3.

55. Ibid., art. 212-5.

56. Ibid., art. 212-2.

process are very important... so the child does not feel themselves in a strange environment as much as possible and can tell the story more calmly and freely, without worrying about being misunderstood or judged” (FW).

With approval from investigators, psychologists are sometimes allowed to lead on questioning a child, for instance in complex cases such as those involving sexual assault or very young children. While the Criminal Procedure Code does not specifically mention this practice, several participants confirmed that it is taking place in Armenia. As one participant noted, “In the most complex cases, say sexual assault, they basically leave the interrogation [interview] to me. And in the case of small children, too, they leave the questioning to the psychologist” (FW). Justice professionals confirmed that beyond suggesting edits to interview questions, psychologists may lead on questioning when appropriate.

The importance of building a non-critical and trusting relationship before and during the investigative process was highlighted by participants. “We were to create an atmosphere of trust so they could trust us and tell the truth... It was very important to create that non-critical atmosphere, a psychologically safe space” (FW). In the experience of professionals, trust-building often transforms children’s willingness to cooperate. “When trust and contact are established, the minors themselves want to have contact with us, to speak. They open themselves and begin to help more in all this, so the case moves on faster” (FW).

Procedural timing and delays

The timing and pace of investigative actions vary widely in cases involving minors. In some instances, professionals spoke of investigations that proceeded quickly. For example, one participant noted that from the beginning of an investigation to the case being sent to court took only five days: “Already on the fifth day, those boys were charged, and the case was sent to court” (FW). Another respondent highlighted that “We investigated the case very quickly. It took months, of course the process of obtaining evidence was very interesting and complicated, but we had very good evidence, and the case was sent to court very quickly” (JP).

However, delays are also a frequent issue, often related to prolonged expert examinations and the repetitive nature of investigative procedures. “We have a lot of cases which are in process with pretrial authorities. At the stage of preliminary investigation, when there is a decision to make an expert examination, they drag on for months or even a year. Well, there are problems with expert examinations” (JP). According to justice professionals, the lack of time limits for investigations further contributes to these delays.

Children are often called to participate in repeated procedures, such as interviews, confrontations, and clarifications, which can lead to additional emotional strain. One participant explained that in Armenia, “A person, and a child, are invited to the same procedures many times again and again. That is, suddenly, if the abuser said something different during the interrogation [interview], they call her [the victim] again to clarify with her” (FW). According to one front-line worker, despite efforts to minimize the number of interviews, the need to revisit evidence or clarify statements can result in children undergoing up to five interviews or more.

The repeated involvement of victims in procedural actions can erode their willingness to participate.

“

Those people who filed an application, yes, to file a statement about a criminal case and want justice to finally be done, seem to be no longer able to fight. Their strength disappears, and their willingness disappears. We sometimes have situations when the victim regrets that they have filed a complaint (JP).

”

Delays and repeated procedures can complicate the justice process and intensify the emotional burden on child victims and their families. Expediting such cases, where possible, would reduce these burdens and support children in sustaining their engagement with the justice process.

6.3 CRIMINAL COURT PROCEEDINGS

From the outset, it should be noted that procedural safeguards during court hearings are weaker than those in the investigative phase, which could potentially cause discomfort and stress for the children involved. While the law does allow for the participation of a psychologist during the questioning of a child in court, this is not automatic and must first be requested by a party or initiated by the tribunal.⁵⁷ In Armenia, a child shall not be questioned if the psychologist recommends against it to protect their legitimate interests. However, this is only permissible if the defence has already had the opportunity to question the child during the pretrial proceedings.⁵⁸ Judicial reforms are therefore needed to make sure hearing conditions are more child-centric.

Nonetheless, professionals interviewed spoke of several child-friendly elements of court proceedings in Armenia aimed at reducing the stress and trauma experienced by child victims. Psychologists play a key role in advising the court on whether a child should testify in the courtroom or if alternative arrangements, such as private rooms, are more appropriate. As one respondent explained, “Before the questioning, the psychologist speaks with the minor and then advises the court on whether the minor should testify in the courtroom or if an alternative arrangement is more appropriate, along with a justification. The law now allows for this flexibility” (JP).

In cases where the child is unable to testify in person, the court can use pre-recorded testimonies. This decision often hinges on the psychologist’s expert opinion. For example, one respondent noted, “Our code allows you to use that recording in several cases. If the case concerns young witnesses, then this can be done [...] if, say, a psychologist comes and says that it is impossible to interrogate [interview the child]. In this case, I’ll watch the recording” (JP). If the psychologist deems it appropriate for the child to testify, the court follows that guidance.

Another procedure available is the deposition of the child’s testimony, designed to minimize their repeated participation in court proceedings. This involves recording the child’s testimony during the investigation phase, with all relevant parties, including the judge, lawyer and investigator, present to pose questions: “If this deposition is carried out, that is, the same lawyer, investigator, representatives, and so on go to court, the judge puts together all the questions that may be necessary for him to make the appropriate decision. This is all recorded, attached to the criminal case, and thus the person [child] may no longer participate in court proceedings” (JP).

In exceptional cases, the court has considered evidence from preliminary investigations when the child was hospitalized and unable to participate in the hearings (JP). These measures underscore the importance of tailoring judicial processes to the unique needs of child victims, ensuring their well-being while maintaining the integrity of the justice process.

In addition to these promising practices, participants also pointed to some areas for improvement in court proceedings, as discussed below.

Assignment of judges and specialized trainings

According to professionals, cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse are automatically distributed based on judges’ workload rather than being assigned to specialized judges. One participant highlighted the psychological discomfort experienced by participants during the court hearing, and the need for adjustment:

57. Ibid., art. 329-2.

58. Ibid., art. 329-3.

“

The judge himself felt uncomfortable. Even the lawyer of the accused did not ask any questions to avoid making her emotional again. In this specific case, I think the judge should have been a woman, at least. It is easier for a girl to talk to a woman. There is always that moment of shyness, nervousness. She was abused by a man, and then many men are gathered there, and that makes her feel psychologically depressed. (JP)

”

This testimony highlights the importance of building institutional capacity to treat child victims and witnesses of crimes with sensitivity. In this regard, the draft Law on the Rights of the Child and the Child Protection System⁵⁹ provides that all professionals involved in judicial proceedings with children – including judges, prosecutors, investigators, lawyers and other specialists – should undergo specialized training. The content of this training and corresponding procedures are to be determined by the Government.⁶⁰ Enacting this law and ensuring its effective implementation would be a critical step towards equipping justice professionals to engage with child victims and witnesses in a trauma-, gender- and child-sensitive manner.

Limited use of evidence of psychological harm

According to professionals, in cases involving children, psychological examinations are typically limited in scope and focus primarily on assessing whether the child can provide accurate and reliable testimony – often by confirming basic facts like their age, or ensuring they are not fabricating or imagining events – rather than evaluating the psychological impact of the abuse. According to one participant:

“

Psychological examinations are appointed in cases involving children and, basically, the questions are the ones that the child can testify correctly, like their age, for example, so that the child does not fantasize [make things up] and all that [...] They really don't touch on the topic of whether the child suffered psychological trauma after such an incident. That is, questions about trauma are not asked by the psychologists. (JP)

”

Another respondent noted the lack of trauma-focused assessments, explaining that “We do not have a psychological examination of trauma. That is, our only examination is to understand whether the child understood what happened to her or not; this is the only thing. The psychologist can't say, ‘Yes, he was sexually assaulted.’ But there are post-traumatic stress symptoms that can [indicate violence]” (FW).

This approach prioritizes the legal utility of the child's testimony over their psychological well-being. It points to a gap in trauma-informed practices, as the child's mental health and emotional needs are not being adequately assessed or addressed during these examinations. The limited scope of psychological assessments in child sexual exploitation and abuse cases may have negative impacts on the justice process, as it prevents the court from fully understanding the extent of harm caused to the child. Psychological trauma can be a critical indicator of abuse, especially when physical evidence is lacking or inconclusive. This may be particularly relevant in cases where sexual abuse and exploitation took place exclusively online. If trauma is not identified and documented, the system may fail to recommend or require appropriate therapeutic interventions for the child, leaving them without the necessary support for recovery and possibly leading to further harm. Additionally, when the psychological effects of abuse are ignored, the harm done by the perpetrator can be underestimated, potentially affecting judicial outcomes.

59. At the time of editing this report, the draft law was approved by the Parliament on October 22, 2025 and entered into legal force on November 29, 2025.

60. Armenia, *Draft Law on the Rights of the Child and Child Protection System*, 2022, art. 29. The mentioned provision was not included into the law, however in article 15 part 3 it defines the requirement for having trained specialists in all cases involving children.

6.3 CRIMINAL COURT PROCEEDINGS

Standards of evidence

The Criminal Procedure Code provides a general definition of physical evidence as any object that can serve as a means of establishing factual circumstances for the proceedings.⁶¹ This open-ended formulation seems to encompass digital evidence, such as child sexual abuse material, especially given that the Criminal Procedure Code does provide for a digital search procedure for data contained in electronic devices or media.⁶² Under this procedure, data must be copied to another medium in a manner that ensures their integrity, preserving its evidentiary value.⁶³ Digital searches require prior court authorization, ensuring judicial oversight of these investigative actions.⁶⁴

While this suggests that digital evidence is, in principle, receivable under Armenian law, the Criminal Procedure Code lacks clarity on whether child sexual abuse material would be sufficient during trial, and does not set out dedicated procedures for handling digital evidence. The lack of provisions on critical aspects such as chain of custody and standards for storage and access control creates risks to the integrity and admissibility of digital evidence. This is particularly concerning in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, where digital material may be central in establishing the offence. Without clear processes, errors such as improper handling or loss of evidentiary data may not only weaken prosecutions, but also increase the risk of re-traumatization for child victims, particularly if sensitive material is circulated beyond what is strictly necessary for judicial proceedings.

Beyond rules governing electronic evidence, data retention provisions play a crucial role in enabling law enforcement to conduct effective investigations. However, Armenian legislation lacks any legal obligation for service providers and online platforms to retain user data. In the absence of such a framework, critical digital

traces risk being deleted before law enforcement can access them, undermining efforts to bring perpetrators to justice. In November 2015, the Investigative Committee signed a memorandum of understanding with internet service providers including Team Telecom, Ucom and VivaCell-MTS to facilitate more effective information-sharing between prosecutors and service providers, and to establish a temporary data retention policy.⁶⁵ Despite this positive step, a comprehensive legal framework on data retention is needed.

Avoiding undue delay

According to research participants, cases involving child victims of sexual exploitation and abuse often face extended judicial timelines, leading to significant emotional and psychological strain on victims. One example provided by a front-line worker is of a 22-year-old who was 16 at the time of the abuse. As of June 2024, her case was still ongoing and she continues to attend court hearings. In some cases, the process takes so long that “the statute of limitations has expired” (FW).

Statutes of limitations refer to the period after which legal action can no longer be initiated for a criminal offence. In Armenia, the length of this period ranges from 5 to 20 years based on the gravity of the crime.⁶⁶ For crimes related to child sexual abuse material, this period starts the day after the offence takes place.⁶⁷ But for other offences – such as online grooming; showing pornographic material to, engaging in ‘sexual conversation’ with, and performing actions of a sexual nature on children under 16; and compelling a child to engage in sexual acts through blackmail – the statute of limitations only begins when the child turns 18.⁶⁸ This means that children who are subjected to these forms of exploitation and abuse are given more time to come forward and seek justice once they reach adulthood. However, given the barriers to disclosure and reporting identified in the report, the very existence of statutes of

61. Ibid., art. 94-1.

62. Ibid., art. 236-1.

63. Ibid., art. 236-2.

64. Ibid., art. 209-4.

65. Council of Europe, “[Armenia: Status regarding Budapest Convention](#)”, no date (retrieved 26 September 2025).

66. Armenia, [Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia](#), 2022, art. 83-1.

67. Ibid., art. 83-2.

68. Ibid., art. 83-11.

limitations for offences related to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse can potentially allow perpetrators to evade accountability.

In addition to feelings of frustrations and stress, these delays negatively impact the quality of evidence and can weaken a victim's case: "Our evidence base is already declining. Because the girl once testified in the court of first instance. Then the case went to the appeal court. Returned to the court of first instance. He [the perpetrator] was wanted. Years have passed. Now the girl is being invited to court again for this case" (JP).

This prolonged engagement with the justice system not only weakens the evidence – for example, if victims have to give additional testimonies years after the case first opening – but also undermines the principles of child-centric justice.

Confidentiality

Under the Code of Criminal Procedure, court proceedings are by default open to the public.⁶⁹ However, the court may, either on its own motion or at the request of a party, order a closed hearing to protect the privacy of those involved or safeguard the best interests of the child.⁷⁰ While this discretion could extend to cases of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse, the law does not explicitly require closed proceedings in such instances. The only scenario in which closed proceedings are unequivocally mandated is when the person accused of a crime is a child.⁷¹ Details of closed proceedings are not meant to be published in the public court hearing system DataLex.

Professionals reflected on how the implementation of confidentiality often depends on individual discretion. For instance, one judge mentioned trying to schedule court hearings outside school hours to prevent the child from being pulled out of class, and to ensure that the school community remains unaware of the proceedings. Such efforts are personal initiatives rather than standardized protocols. This gap in standardized practices can leave children vulnerable to stigma or further harm, undermining their sense of security and trust in the justice process.

Given the barriers to disclosure and reporting identified in the report, the very existence of statutes of limitations for offences related to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse can potentially allow perpetrators to evade accountability.

69. Armenia, [Criminal Procedure Code](#), 2021, art. 28-1.

70. Ibid., art. 28-3.

71. Ibid., art. 417-1.

6.4 COMPENSATION

In Armenia, victims of crime have the right to seek compensation from the perpetrator for the harm caused.⁷² To do so, they must file a property claim against the accused before the completion of preliminary hearings.⁷³ The claim must specify the amount sought, and include a request for the seizure of money or property to secure compensation.⁷⁴ It is adjudicated by the criminal court and may be fully or partially granted, rejected, settled through agreement, or left unresolved.⁷⁵ If the victim does not file a property claim during the criminal proceedings, they can pursue compensation through civil litigation.⁷⁶ Moreover, if a child who has been subjected to a crime is unable to defend their interests, whether due to dependence on the accused or for any other reason, the court is authorized to rule on compensation for damages on its own initiative.⁷⁷

It should be noted that this general compensation mechanism appears ill-suited to address the full extent of harm experienced by children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse. It focuses narrowly on direct property damage or “reasonable expenses incurred for restoring health”, such as food or care,⁷⁸ overlooking the broader psychological, emotional and long-term damage of such abuse.

None of the participants identified any successful cases of compensation for the victims of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that they supported.

The Criminal Code allows the Government to use funds collected from fines to implement social programmes aimed at compensating victims of crime.⁷⁹ In that regard, one justice professional highlighted the importance of Government Decision No. 1398, which operationalizes this provision by outlining the principles, priorities, procedure and compensation amounts for damage caused to victims of crime.⁸⁰ The Decision lists crimes against sexual freedom and inviolability – under which tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse seemingly falls – among the state compensation priorities, and ranks reasonable expenses incurred to restore health first among the types of damage eligible for compensation.⁸¹ However, victims are only eligible to apply for state compensation once a final court decision has been issued – and only if they can provide evidence that enforcement of the court-ordered compensation has failed.⁸²

By contrast, the Law on Identification and Support to Persons Subjected to Trafficking in Human Beings and Exploitation establishes an alternative route to compensation that is not contingent on court proceedings. Recognized victims are entitled to a lump-sum monetary payment, provided independently of a final ruling or failed enforcement, ensuring victims can access tangible support more swiftly. Beyond compensation, the same law also provides recovery and reintegration measures such as medical care, accommodation and in-kind assistance.⁸³ However, Armenian legislation contains no explicit provisions on recovery or reintegration measures specific to children who have been subjected to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse. Although not specifically designed for such cases, the compensation, recovery and reintegration measures under the trafficking law could potentially apply where such exploitation also meets the legal threshold of trafficking.

72. Ibid., art. 23-3.

73. Ibid., art. 160-2.

74. Ibid., art. 160-4.

75. Ibid., art. 162-1.

76. Ibid., art. 160-8.

77. Ibid., art. 163.

78. Ibid., art. 159.

79. Armenia, *Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia*, 2022, arts. 59-6, 128-5.

80. Armenia, [Decision No. 1398 of 8 September 2022](#).

81. Ibid., annex, point 2.

82. Ibid., annex, point 6.

83. Armenia, *Law on Identification and Support to Persons Subjected to Trafficking in Human Beings and Exploitation*, 2014, art. 22.

According to one justice professional, these compensation mechanisms are not widely utilized due to various barriers, such as procedural complexities, a lack of awareness among relevant parties and, as a result, an absence of claims. For example, no other participants recalled any legal document guaranteeing state compensation specifically for children who are victims of sexual violence. Further, none of the participants identified any successful cases of compensation for the victims of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that they supported. This underscores the urgent need for a dedicated state fund that can provide immediate support to children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, without requiring them to navigate lengthy court and enforcement processes.

Children who take the brave step to report or talk about their case with professionals should have their story heard and taken seriously, regardless of their age. Having trust that they will be treated with sensitivity is an important step to ensure that children and families are willing to cooperate during investigations.

7. A CHILD'S RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND ANONYMITY: MEDIA COVERAGE IN ARMENIA



7. A CHILD'S RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND ANONYMITY: MEDIA COVERAGE IN ARMENIA

Fears around the confidentiality of cases and leaking information about cases remain a serious concern for children and families in Armenia. This can be exacerbated by inaccurate and harmful media coverage of child sexual exploitation and abuse cases in Armenia, an issue highlighted by front-line workers and justice professionals. Professionals pointed to the immediate and long-term impacts that this can have on children, their families and the justice process.

Protecting the identity and anonymity of children involved in cases of abuse and maintaining the confidentiality of court proceedings are stipulated in several international instruments and guidelines.⁸⁴ However, according to professionals, the media and communications industry in Armenia lacks clear legal and ethical guidelines on reporting on sexual exploitation and abuse of children, which can breach the confidentiality of victims and compromise the best interests of children.

Media can play a role in raising awareness about tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, but according to professionals interviewed, its effectiveness is limited by sensationalism and victim-blaming. A front-line worker commented “When we have a sensational incident, everyone talks, journalists take pictures, share these things... but when it comes to doing the work, it is so difficult to find a professional person who will help you get the child out of this situation” (FW).

To further illustrate this point, a front-line worker described a case where they learned about the publication of a video depicting child sexual abuse on a popular Telegram channel: “Everything was there – the name of the child, and everything, all the information, that is, the whole conversation” (FW). The video was posted by a well-known public figure in Armenia as an illustration of the severity of the problem of violence in the country. The front-line worker filed a report with law enforcement authorities. However, the case did not progress any further: “They called me and

said that they are dealing with it, and so on. But no other actions took place” (FW). This illustrates the gravity of sharing details about a child and/or the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to online. Once the information is published, it is not always possible to achieve justice for the victim, or to ensure that the information compromising the child is deleted. The experience of having exploitation and abuse exposed by media can significantly re-victimize the child and infringe on their rights, especially if identifiable information is published.

After the suicide of a 16-year-old boy who was sexually exploited by men he met online, the case became a topic of conversation in public forums across Armenia. One of the perpetrators also died by suicide. According to professionals, media representation shifted public focus from the exploitation that the child endured to blaming him. The public discourse described by a justice professional below illustrates discrimination and stigma towards LGBTQI+ people and communities: “The case was very heatedly discussed, but it was discussed not from the point of view of protecting this child, why the child did it, but from the point of view that *‘It is good that now that these two [the child and the perpetrator] are gone [have died], we have less of these guys [gay men]’*” (JP).

A recurring concern is the lack of protection of victims' identities. According to research participants, children's personal information is protected under investigative secrecy. This requires justice professionals to refrain from disclosing the identities of child victims. However, information about children often leaks to the media through other channels, such as uninvolved professionals, family members, neighbours or journalistic investigations.

According to research participants, media outlets have disclosed information that may harm the child such as names or other identifying details, either unintentionally or as part of a sensationalized story. For instance, one justice professional noted that “The media publishes it.

84. United Nations, [Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice \(“The Beijing Rules”\)](#), General Assembly resolution 40/33, 29 November 1985; United Nations Economic and Social Council, [Guidelines for Action on Children in the Criminal Justice System](#), Resolution 1997/30, 21 July 1997; United Nations Economic and Social Council, [Guidelines on Justice in Matters Involving Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime](#), Resolution 2005/20, 22 July 2005; Council of Europe, [Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings](#), 2005.

7. A CHILD'S RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND ANONYMITY: MEDIA COVERAGE IN ARMENIA

They don't give the initials of the children, but [report] that a certain criminal case has been initiated involving a student at a specific school" (JP). Another participant highlighted how some media outlets share "all the personal data in these fields" (FW).

Professionals shared that there is no legal accountability for journalists who publish personal details of children subjected to sexual violence. This leaves children vulnerable to further harm and social stigma. Although the Law on Protection of Personal Data can be interpreted as prohibiting such conduct and the Agency for the Protection of Personal Data has the authority to impose administrative sanctions,⁸⁵ enforcement remains weak.⁸⁶ While some organizations have voluntary codes of conduct, adherence to them is not binding. In the absence of effective legal frameworks or stronger regulatory measures, media outlets may choose sensationalism over responsible reporting, violating the privacy and dignity of victims.

Allowing victims the right to tell their stories and testimonies in confidence is a cornerstone of child-centric justice. The disregard for children's anonymity could cause real harm to victims and their families. This is especially dangerous considering the context of shame, victim-blaming and reprisal that children sometimes find themselves in once the exploitation and abuse is discovered.

“

When we have a sensational incident, everyone talks, journalists take pictures, share these things... but when it comes to doing the work, it is so difficult to find a professional person who will help you get the child out of this situation. (FW)

”

85. Armenia, [Law of the Republic of Armenia on Protection of Personal Data](#), 2015.

86. UNICEF Armenia, personal communication, 2025.

8. CONCLUSION



8. CONCLUSION

To offer a nuanced understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia, this report presented multiple viewpoints including those of children and young people, parents, front-line workers, justice professionals and law enforcement. Taken together, the data collected reveal a story of severe stigma and shame surrounding sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia, creating a sense of entrapment for children. Those children, whose rights have already been violated when they were abused and exploited, face additional victimization through blaming attitudes and accusations that make disclosure and help-seeking difficult. As a result, much abuse remains in the shadows and children do not receive the support, access to justice, or tools for healing and recovery that they deserve.

This stigma and shame are pervasive and affect many aspects of a child's life. As illustrated in this report, community stigma and a child's subsequent fear that the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to will become known become weaponized by perpetrators who use this to victimize children and keep them trapped in a cycle of violence. Concerns over community judgment and the family's reputation may also impact reactions from parents and schools, and whether they seek professional support.

The severe effects of exploitation and abuse and victim-blaming on children were evident. Professionals spoke of cases where children and families experienced such severe stigma after the child's abuse became known that they had to move areas or schools. They also spoke of children being subjected to peer isolation or facing punishment for their perceived role in the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to. Professionals reflected on cases that resulted in suicide and self-harm, further highlighting the importance of addressing this issue in Armenia and the human cost of inaction.

While these issues remain, Armenia continues to make progress towards addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Several safeguarding exists in Armenian law that aim to protect children's best interests during criminal proceedings, for example, children's right to free legal assistance and interpretation to support their meaningful participation. To protect children's privacy, courts may order a closed hearing. Other efforts towards child-centric justice have also been enacted, including the creation of Safe Corners following the Barnahus model, and mandatory involvement of psychologists in investigations. Professionals reflected positively on recent updates to Criminal Procedure Codes as well as the draft Law on the Rights of the Child and the Child Protection System⁸⁷ which seeks to introduce further improvements like mandatory training for justice professionals working on proceedings involving children.

Taking these positive steps and challenges into account, this report ends with evidence-based recommendations that have been workshopped and validated with national experts and stakeholders in Yerevan in May 2025. However, to support the effectiveness of these recommendations, it is important to address the underlying stigma and shame which very often overlooks the fact that the children in question are victims of exploitation and abuse that have the right to support and understanding, rather than judgment.

Taken together, the data collected reveal a story of severe stigma and shame surrounding sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia, creating a sense of entrapment for children.

87. At the time of editing this report, the draft law was approved by the Parliament on October 22, 2025 and entered into legal force on November 29, 2025.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS



9. RECOMMENDATIONS

INSIGHT 1

Stigma, shame and blame affect every aspect of the exploitation and abuse of children in Armenia. Fear of exposure and judgment is weaponized by perpetrators to keep children trapped in a cycle of violence. The fear of being stigmatized is a barrier to children disclosing, reporting and seeking help. Once a child's story becomes known, there is evidence that they are isolated, judged and further harmed.

Relevant for: Government, media, educational institutions

- Addressing victim-blaming attitudes is an essential step to tackle tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Armenia. Evidence-informed social and behavioural change programmes, together with awareness-raising and education campaigns, should be designed and implemented with a long-term focus on addressing violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours. These efforts should highlight how community stigma can be weaponized by perpetrators to coerce and trap children in a cycle of violence. They should also encourage the creation of safe spaces for children to seek help. Any content or messaging should be developed through safe and ethical consultations with children, families, teachers and other relevant duty bearers.
- Educational initiatives for children, young people and families – whether new or existing - should comprehensively cover sexuality, how to build positive and healthy relationships, bodily autonomy and integrity, and consent. They should also transfer core concepts of bodily autonomy and consent to the digital world and online interactions. This will contribute to prevention efforts in Armenia by addressing the root causes of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse.

- Education focused on the digital environment is also useful as a complement, to teach children media literacy skills. These should focus on developing the ability to critically assess social interactions online, including strategies to verify people's identities, and recognizing and reporting exploitative and abusive online behaviours.

Relevant for: Legislators

- Given that children in Armenia can experience shame, stigma and blame after the abuse or exploitation they were subjected to becomes known, consider how draft mandatory reporting⁸⁸ provisions introduced into Armenian law may impact on children's best interests. This may include:
 - Avoiding provisions around mandatory reporting that are too broad or unspecific.
 - Adopting localized protocols or provisions that enable professional assessment of a child's best interest as part of mandatory reporting procedures, including non-reporting and alternative support options.

Relevant for: Government, NGOs, law enforcement

- Given the fears around a lack of confidentiality that stop children from reporting exploitation and abuse, consider developing a user-friendly, secure and confidential online platform and hotline for reporting. The platform should enable anonymous reporting to encourage victims and concerned individuals to report. Ensure accessibility through multiple channels (phone, website, mobile app, social media).
- It is recommended that such mechanisms be co-designed with children, caregivers and professionals.
- Without trust in the system, reporting mechanisms are likely to go unused. This recommendation should be paired with efforts by institutions to gain the trust of families and children so they feel safe, respected and supported while seeking justice and accessing support services.

88. At the time of editing this report, the draft law was approved by the Parliament on October 22, 2025 and entered into legal force on November 29, 2025.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

INSIGHT 2

Although most cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are perpetrated by adults, some children in Armenia are engaging in harmful sexual behaviours.

Relevant for: The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, its National Centre for Educational Development and Innovation, Republican Psychological-Pedagogical Centres, and academic institutions for higher education reforms. During a consultation with national stakeholders in May 2025, these institutions were identified as being central to implementing this recommendation.

- Building on the mandatory ‘Healthy Lifestyle’⁸⁹ courses at schools for children and young people, consider an updated approach which includes adapting and testing rights-based, comprehensive approaches to relationship and sexuality education.⁹⁰ These should be age-appropriate, informed by children’s insights and perspectives, and regularly updated to reflect new research and trends.
- Consider establishing relationship and sexuality education teacher certification criteria and pre-teaching evaluations, and monitoring the implementation of these courses.

INSIGHT 3

Children who are in contact with the justice system may face judgment from professionals working with them, be required to face the perpetrator during confrontations, or give multiple testimonies, all of which may result in their re-traumatization.

Relevant for: Legislators, law enforcement, justice professionals

- Introduce provisions in the Code of Criminal Procedure to protect children subjected to any form of sexual exploitation and abuse from having direct contact with the accused during investigative actions, including confrontations.
- Research and design a contextually appropriate, child-centric system of intermediation to support children’s participation in the investigative and justice procedures and reduce experiences of trauma (i.e. prohibiting physical confrontation between child victims and alleged perpetrators, all questions being filtered through the child’s lawyer/psychologist).

89. Courses introduced to the Armenian school curriculum for grades 8–11, and covering topics like gender and gender equity, conflict resolution, reproductive health and puberty, etc.

90. A rights-based approach is underpinned by the shared belief that sexuality, sexual health, sexual rights and gender are topics that must be raised jointly to facilitate pupils to be responsible and make informed choices in their sexual lives.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

INSIGHT 4

Access to specialized child psychologists remains a challenge, especially in rural areas. Their involvement is now mandatory during investigations by the Investigative Committee, making this an important gap to address.

Relevant for: Education institutions, Government, health care sector

- Develop a cohort of specialized trauma-informed child psychologists who have standardized professional training and practices. Their services should be accessible nationwide to ensure that any child subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation receives quality care, regardless of where they live. Some steps to achieving this may include:
 - a) Adapting tertiary curricula to include standardized trauma-informed practice and specialized training for child psychologists.
 - b) Incentivizing work placements and positions for specialized psychologists outside of Yerevan, or initiating travel rotations to increase availability of relevant professionals for all Armenian children.
 - c) Extending access to services to all children in Armenia, including those in rural areas of the country, by continuing to commission services from NGOs working in less accessible regions.
 - d) In the long-term, addressing health system structuring that creates wide inequities in public/private salary that may lead professionals to work in private clinics due to the comparatively low public salary.

INSIGHT 5

While the findings in this report highlight the importance of specialized psychologists in particular, other findings around the perceptions and practices of front-line workers, justice professionals and law enforcement highlight that all professionals working with children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse could also benefit from specialized training and capacity-building.

Relevant for: Front-line workers, justice professionals, law enforcement

- Require specialized, continuous training for all personnel handling cases involving children. In line with the draft Law on the Rights of the Child and Child Protection System⁹¹ – which mandates that all professionals working with or interacting with children in the justice process (including judges, prosecutors, investigators, advocates and enforcement officers) undergo special training – this training should be integrated into existing child protection and justice for children programmes and systems. They should go beyond general awareness and be skills-based, with a focus on child-friendly interview techniques, trauma-informed approaches, and sensitivity to the dynamics of exploitation and abuse. These programmes should be consistently evaluated and updated to reflect the most recent developments in digital technology and patterns of offending.

91. Armenia, [Draft Law on the Rights of the Child and Child Protection System](#), 2022, art. 29. At the time of editing this report, the draft law was approved by the Parliament on October 22, 2025 and entered into legal force on November 29, 2025. The mentioned provision was not included into the law, however in article 15 part 3 it defines the requirement for having trained specialists in all cases involving children.

- Establish ongoing workshops for all justice actors, including prosecutors, judges and law enforcement officers, to agree on ways for future collaboration and how to deliver child-friendly justice and specialist capability enhancement, including topics such as digital evidence, open-source intelligence (OSINT), victim identification, INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database and criminal intelligence support to investigations. Ensure that there are standardized procedures for handling tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases, ensuring a consistent and specialized response.
- Establish a connection to the ICSE database, to reduce duplication of efforts and enable a more effective response to child sexual abuse material.
- As a priority, training should be given to regional law enforcement officers, as they are often the first point of contact for victims in their communities. Unlike officers in larger cities, they may not have access to the same level of training, resources or specialized support services, like officers in Yerevan or Kapan who are able to utilize services like the Safe Corners. Ensuring they receive comprehensive training may improve their response to victims and promote justice more effectively in underserved areas.
- Equally important is building trust in the system given the high stigma associated with tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Law enforcement should therefore engage in prevention efforts and collaborate on community outreach initiatives. By tackling social stigma, challenging victim-blaming attitudes and shifting responsibility onto offenders, law enforcement can demonstrate a strong commitment to prevention. This proactive approach would not only strengthen community trust, but also foster a safer and more supportive environment for victims and their families.

INSIGHT 6

Although several provisions exist, the legal and policy analysis points to areas for improvements to ensure that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is comprehensively criminalized and in line with international standards.

Relevant for: Legislators

- Amend Armenian legislation to ensure that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be prosecuted effectively. This could also contribute to prevention by strengthening deterrence and signalling that all forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are serious crimes. A package of legislative reforms to align with international standards could include:
 - a) Amending existing provisions on online grooming for sexual purposes to ensure the protection of all children below 18, and revise the definition to encompass abuse that occurs entirely online, without requiring the offender to propose or arrange an in-person meeting.
 - b) Amending legislation to explicitly criminalize the livestreaming of child sexual abuse, either through a stand-alone provision or by directly indicating that existing provisions on child sexual abuse material and/or 'engaging children in conduct related to pornography' also apply when the abuse is livestreamed online, and materials are not downloaded or stored. Ensure that the offence covers both the use of children for such purposes, as well as access to livestreamed abuse.
 - c) Adopt legal provisions for the explicit criminalization of tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children, with a definition that reflects its unique dynamics, including the coercive use of self-generated sexual material to extort money or sexual acts from a child.
 - d) Amend the Criminal Code's definition of child sexual abuse material to explicitly include non-visual and digitally generated content, including material produced using AI. The revised definition should make clear that any material which appears to depict children – regardless of whether actual children were involved in its creation – qualifies as child sexual abuse material.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

INSIGHT 7

There is a lack of provisions for internet service providers and online platforms to take down illegal content and retain data that may support investigations of child sexual exploitation and abuse. This is particularly concerning considering that over half of cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse occurred (at least partly) on an online platform. Rapid take down of child sexual abuse material is critical to prevent re-victimization.

Relevant for: Legislators, social media, gaming platforms

- Adopt legal provisions requiring internet service providers and online platforms to establish clear, accessible, and user-friendly notice and take-down mechanisms for reporting illegal content, including child sexual abuse material. These provisions should be accompanied by a clear legal framework on intermediary liability for third-party content, to incentivize the proactive detection and blocking of such material.
- Establish a comprehensive legal framework on data retention, with necessary privacy safeguards in place, to ensure that service providers preserve user data essential for investigating child sexual exploitation and abuse offences.
- All social media, instant messaging and online gaming platforms should work towards strengthening their prevention measures, detection mechanisms and reporting of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This should include putting monitoring and evaluation frameworks in place to ensure that safety measures used to keep children safe from harm are working effectively and as intended. Metrics should aim to go beyond measuring engagement with certain campaigns, but should also focus on lasting behaviour change.

INSIGHT 8

The findings point to several cases where the confidentiality of children and families in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse were not maintained, especially in the media. This often has severe consequences for children, from having the child moved to another school or area, to suicide attempts.

Relevant for: Commission on Television and Radio, Media Ethics Observatory,⁹² legislators, justice professionals, law enforcement, front-line service providers

- Develop regulation or guidance on standards for ethical and informed media reporting and update the Code of Conduct of the Media Ethics Observatory to account for cases related to children and tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Media professionals should be trained in how to ethically and responsibly report on cases involving children, whether the child is a victim of a crime, accused of a crime or in conflict with the law. Trainings should include appropriate terminology to use, the impact of (tech-facilitated) exploitation and abuse on children in Armenia, and the impact that breaches of confidentiality can have on children in contact with the justice system.
- While breaches in confidentiality were highlighted in relation to media coverage of child abuse cases, confidentiality should be safeguarded through clear, legally grounded protocols that define requirements and obligations **across all sectors**. This requires developing legislative and professional guidelines, coupled with training and capacity-building for service providers and justice and media professionals. Without such safeguards, breaches of confidentiality may cause re-traumatization and further harm, and deter children from seeking help or engaging with services.

92. During a consultation with national stakeholders in May 2025, these key institutions were identified as being central to implementing this recommendation.

10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Disrupting Harm in Armenia report was written by Marium Saeed, Angela Davis, Tiago Afonso, Andrea Varrella and Laura Smith.

ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight have appreciated the unique opportunity to work together to gather evidence around tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This report is the result of a three-year collaborative effort to gather and generate this evidence.

This research would not have been successful without the engagement of many individuals and partners, especially those in Armenia. Our thanks and appreciation go to our colleagues in Armenia, including UNICEF Armenia, Hope & Help, and INTERPOL’s National Central Bureau Yerevan.

In particular, the findings and insights presented in this report would not have been possible without research participants taking the time to speak to the researchers. Our sincerest gratitude goes to all children, young people, parents, front-line workers, justice professionals, law enforcement and other professionals who participated in this study.

The authors would like to thank our research partners in Armenia for their expertise and collaboration in collecting the data:

- **Hope & Help and Astra Foundation for Health Protection and Prevention of Violence:** Review of national legislation and policies, interviews with justice professionals, front-line workers, and children and young people, and qualitative analysis.
- **Ipsos International Social Research, IPM and MPG:** Implementation of the household survey.

The authors are also grateful to the following experts for their review and feedback to the research protocols in Armenia: Harutyun Vermishyan and Lusine Saghumyan.

The authors also wish to acknowledge colleagues at UNICEF Innocenti who reviewed the report and contributed with their expertise: Bella Baghdasaryan, Camila Perera Aladro, Daniel Kardefelt Winther and Jorun Arndt.

The authors also wish to acknowledge colleagues who reviewed the report and contributed their expertise: Adrine Babloyan, Astghik Martirosyan, Guillaume Landry, Nora Mnatsakanyan, Sendrine Constant, Serena Tommasino, Veronika Odinkova and Viktorya Ohanyan.

11. ANNEX: DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS



11. ANNEX: DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Child sexual abuse: What defines an abusive act can be difficult to capture or to definitively categorize. The term ‘abuse’ often refers to treating another person in a cruel or violent way. The term often focuses on both the act (e.g. violent, non-consensual), as well as the effect of the act, e.g. causing bodily injury, pain (physical or emotional), distress, etc.

Child sexual abuse more specifically, refers to various sexual activities perpetrated on children (persons under 18), regardless of whether the children are aware that what is happening to them is neither normal nor acceptable. It can be committed by adults or peers, and usually involves an individual or group taking advantage of an imbalance of power. It can be committed without explicit force, with perpetrators frequently using authority, power, manipulation or deception.⁹³

Child sexual exploitation: Involves the same abusive actions mentioned above. However, an additional element of a threat or of exchange for something (e.g. money, shelter, material goods, or non-material components such as protection, a relationship, or even the mere promise of such) from a third party and/or the perpetrator must also be present.⁹⁴

Child sexual abuse material, including AI-generated child sexual abuse material: Photos, videos, audios or other recordings, or any other representation of real or digitally generated (including generated through/by AI) child sexual abuse or sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.⁹⁵

Livestreaming of child sexual abuse: Child sexual abuse that is perpetrated and viewed simultaneously in real-time via communication tools, video conferencing tools and/or chat applications. In most cases, the perpetrator requesting the abuse in exchange for payment or other material benefits, is physically in a different location from the child(ren) and the facilitators of the abuse.⁹⁶

Online grooming of children for sexual purposes/solicitation of children for sexual purposes: Building a relationship with a child via technology with the intent of sexually abusing or exploiting the child.⁹⁷

Sexual extortion of children: The blackmailing of a person with the help of self-generated images of that person in order to extort sexual favours, money or other benefits, under the threat of sharing the material beyond the consent of the depicted person (e.g. posting images on social media). Often, the influence and manipulation, typical of perpetrators of grooming over longer periods of time (sometimes several months), turns into a rapid escalation of threats, intimidation and coercion once the person has been persuaded to send the first sexual images of themselves.⁹⁸

Sexual harassment: “Any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment,” as defined by the Istanbul Convention (art. 40), the only international legal definition of the term.⁹⁹

Children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour: This term refers to sexual behaviour or developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people which is harmful or abusive.¹⁰⁰

For further guidance on terminology and key considerations, refer to the [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#).

93. Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse: Second Edition](#), ECPAT, Bangkok, 2025, pp. 31–34.

94. Ibid., pp. 39–44.

95. Ibid., p. 63.

96. Ibid., p. 86.

97. Ibid., p. 95.

98. Ibid., pp. 97–98.

99. Ibid., pp. 36–38.

100. Ibid., p. 160.

