

DISRUPTING HARM IN MONTENEGRO

Evidence on technology-facilitated
child sexual exploitation and abuse



Funded
by



Implemented
by



Content warning:

This report discusses the sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Montenegro. It includes accounts of child sexual exploitation and abuse cases as described by professionals in Montenegro. 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. (2026). Disrupting Harm in Montenegro: Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Safe Online.

Copyright © ECPAT, INTERPOL, Safe Online, UNICEF, 2026.

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

Foreword by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Family Care and Demography	2	6. Prevention efforts and opportunities	63
Executive summary	4	6.1 Policy and institutional initiatives and opportunities	64
Methods	8	6.2 The role of schools, families and communities in prevention	65
Introduction	13	6.3 Shifting the focus from children to perpetrators: Understanding perpetrators' strategies and tactics	66
Internet use in Montenegro	14	7. Cross-cutting barriers impacting service provision to children	68
1. Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Montenegro	18	7.1 Limited human resources and excessive caseloads	70
1.1 Receiving unwanted sexual images	20	7.2 Need for further and continuous training and capacity-building	71
1.2 Grooming of children for sexual purposes	22	7.3 Further strengthening of multisectoral collaboration	73
1.3 Non-consensual, abusive or exploitative acts involving children's sexual content	24	8. Psychosocial support	74
1.4 Perpetrators of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse	29	8.1 Barriers impacting the provision of psychosocial services	76
2. Intersectionality and abuse	33	8.2 Social stigma around mental health issues	78
2.1 How does gender influence tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?	35	9. Access to justice and legal remedies	79
2.2 Victim-blaming attitudes	37	9.1 Child-centred justice safeguards in criminal proceedings	81
2.3 Taboos around sexual abuse	39	9.2 Statements taken by the police	82
2.4 How does age influence tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?	40	9.3 Forensic interviews	84
3. Disclosure	41	9.4 The right to free legal aid	87
3.1 Whom do children disclose to?	43	9.5 Gender considerations in assigning professionals to cases related to children	89
3.2 When and why do children disclose?	44	9.6 Protracted judicial proceedings	90
3.3 Barriers to disclosure	46	9.7 Protection for children and their families	91
4. Reporting	49	9.8 Access to compensation	92
4.1 Barriers to reporting linked to parental involvement	51	10. Conclusion	94
4.2 Trust in institutions and institutional response	52	11. Recommendations	96
4.3 Existing reporting mechanisms	53	12. Acknowledgements	109
5. Impact	56	13. Annex: Definitions of key terms	110
5.1 Shock and confusion	58		
5.2 Fear, anxiety and social isolation	59		
5.3 Further mental health impacts and wider psychosocial impacts	62		

FOREWORD BY THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL WELFARE, FAMILY CARE AND DEMOGRAPHY

The internet has become an essential part of children's lives, offering remarkable opportunities for learning, creativity, communication, and participation. Yet these same technologies can also be misused in deeply harmful ways. Online grooming, the production and distribution of child sexual abuse material, and the livestreaming of abuse represent some of the most serious violations of children's rights, demanding an urgent and coordinated response across all sectors.

As digital technologies evolve rapidly, the risks children face are growing just as quickly. This creates significant challenges—not only for governments and public institutions responsible for prevention, detection, and child protection services, but also for parents and caregivers who are trying to navigate their children's online worlds. To keep children safe, our response must be proactive, well-coordinated, and grounded in a clear understanding of these emerging threats.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Family Care and Demography is pleased to note the completion of the *Disrupting Harm in Montenegro* report, which offers a comprehensive assessment of the current risks of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children and provides an objective overview of how our national systems are responding. This report arrives at a time of heightened commitment by the Government of Montenegro to address all forms of violence against children, including online harms.

In December 2024, the Government adopted the five year Strategy on Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence (2025–2029), a cross-sectoral framework aimed at strengthening our national system to better prevent, detect, and respond to violence against children, with a particular focus on combating online violence. Furthermore, in February 2025, Montenegro endorsed the Pledge on Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence, as a follow up to the Bogotá Global Conference on Violence Against Children—reinforcing our dedication to accelerating progress in this area.

This broader reform agenda also includes the Government's continued work on the Barnahus (Child Friendly House) model, which is a cornerstone for improving our multidisciplinary response to child victims and witnesses of violence. Alongside Barnahus, we are advancing the development and expansion of specialized social services, parenting support programmes, community based prevention initiatives, and strengthened mental health and psychosocial support services. Together, these efforts ensure that children receive coordinated, child-centered, and trauma-informed support.

In parallel with these reforms, Montenegro is also progressing with the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, a key policy framework aimed at tackling child poverty and ensuring that all children, especially those in vulnerable situations, have access to essential services such as education, healthcare, nutrition, and adequate housing.

The European Child Guarantee reinforces our commitment to strengthening social protection systems and expanding community-based services that support children and families.

Many of the measures foreseen under this framework, including the expansion of psychosocial support services, stronger coordination between institutions, and improved access to community-based prevention and protection programmes, directly contribute to addressing the risks identified in this report.

The evidence generated through the *Disrupting Harm in Montenegro* research will therefore play an important role in informing policy development and strengthening the national response to violence against children, including online and technology-facilitated abuse.

By aligning child protection reforms with broader social inclusion policies, Montenegro reaffirms its commitment to building a system that protects every child from violence, supports families, and ensures that children can safely benefit from the opportunities offered by the digital environment.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Family Care and Demography extends its sincere gratitude to all ministries, institutions, front-line professionals across justice, education, health and social welfare, social service providers, national non-governmental organizations, and all stakeholders who contributed their time and expertise to this research. Our appreciation also goes to the UNICEF Montenegro team for their continuous partnership and support.

Finally, the Ministry congratulates ECPAT International, INTERPOL, UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti, and Safe Online on the successful completion of this project.

We look forward to deepening our collaboration as we strengthen our national systems to tackle these crimes and ensure that every child in Montenegro is safe, protected, and able to thrive-both online and offline.

Damir Gutic

Minister of Social Welfare, Family Care and Demography
Government of Montenegro

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Funded by Safe Online, partners ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti) worked together 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. A combined investment of \$15 million allowed the Disrupting Harm research to be conducted in 13 countries across Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia from 2019 to 2022, and in another 12 countries, including Montenegro, from 2023 onwards.

Between 2023 and 2025, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti conducted research in Montenegro to understand tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse from multiple viewpoints. The data in Montenegro were collected through a nationally representative household survey with 12–17-year-olds and one of their parents or guardians, interviews with front-line workers, justice professionals, young people subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse before the age of 18, and 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 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

Technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Montenegro

- According to Disrupting Harm survey data, more than 1 in 10 internet-using children in Montenegro aged 12–17 years were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to the survey.
- Over 40 per cent of children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed were subjected to more than one form. In total, the survey captured 214 instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse among 106 children.
- The data shows that many children experience multiple and overlapping forms of abuse, underscoring that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is rarely an isolated incident, but part of broader patterns of coercion, manipulation and control.
- Data from the survey show that the most common forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that children were subjected to were unwanted exposure to sexual images, followed by abusive, exploitative or non-consensual acts involving children’s sexual content. Seven per cent of children reported receiving unwanted sexual content and five per cent of children were asked to share an image or video of their private parts when they did not want to in the year prior to being surveyed.
- The most common cases discussed by front-line workers and justice professionals involved grooming of children for sexual purposes and sexual extortion.
- Survey data found that 82 per cent of cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse involved social media. The most common social media platforms where children were sexually exploited or abused were Instagram (45 per cent), Viber (42 per cent), Snapchat (22 per cent) and Facebook (9 per cent).

¹ Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, 2nd Edition (ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2025). Available at: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Second-Edition-Terminology-Guidelines-final.pdf>.

Perpetrators of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- In over two thirds of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the survey, the perpetrator was someone already known to the child. In 25 per cent of instances, the perpetrator was someone unknown to the child.
- In over half of the instances (51 per cent), the perpetrator was a friend or acquaintance of the child (27 per cent were aged 18 and over, and 25 per cent below the age of 18). Justice professionals and front-line workers described cases where children engaged in sexual bullying of peers and where sexual extortion or blackmail were used.
- In 22 per cent of instances, the perpetrator was a previous or current romantic partner or crush of the child (13 per cent were aged 18 and over, and 10 per cent below the age of 18). In these cases, threats of sharing and the distribution of sexual content were common.

Intersectionality of abuse

- Thirteen per cent of girls and eight per cent of boys were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed.
- Qualitative data showed how girls who are exploited or abused often face stigma and harassment from peers and sometimes from family members due to prevailing gender norms and stereotypes.
- Abuse against boys instead is often minimized and dismissed. Boys are often perceived as the ones who should be 'in control', not as individuals who can be manipulated and exploited, which can contribute to silencing and a lack of disclosure.
- Victim-blaming attitudes frequently shift responsibility away from perpetrators and onto children.
- Interviews highlight how conversations about sex and sexuality, in particular involving children, remain difficult, are generally avoided or silenced altogether.

- Only 48 per cent of children in Montenegro reported receiving sexuality education.² While education alone cannot prevent tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, it can play a critical role in helping children understand consent, recognize abusive behaviours and feel empowered to set boundaries.

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

- According to the survey data, 59 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were not disclosed to anyone.
- The most common response to why children did not disclose was that they did not think what happened was serious enough to do so (21 per cent), suggesting that many children may not recognize certain behaviours as abusive.
- Feeling embarrassed (20 per cent) and not wanting anyone to know what had happened to them (16 per cent) were among the most common reasons provided by children for not disclosing.
- Interviews further showed how the normalization of violence, shame, stigma and self-blame discourage disclosure.
- Fear of exposure – likely linked to the stigma and victim-blaming attitudes around sexual abuse – was weaponized by perpetrators to prevent children from disclosing and reporting.
- Children who did disclose most commonly did so to a friend, followed by a sibling and then their mother or a female caregiver.
- Less than 1 per cent of disclosures by children were made through formal channels (a social worker, helpline or the police) according to the survey. Only one child reported to the police.
- Legislation requiring children to submit criminal complaints through their legal representative – typically a parent or caregiver – could be a significant barrier to children reporting. Young people described not wanting their parents to find out about the exploitation or abuse, fearing negative reactions and the impact on their family if the abuse became known.

² This term is used as it reflects the term used in the survey.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Delayed disclosure also has an impact on access to justice. Statutes of limitations for offences of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse in Montenegro range from 10 to 20 years and are counted from the point that the child turns 18 years old. This risks shielding perpetrators from accountability if survivors are unable or unwilling to come forward in time.

Access to services and justice for children subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- The child-centred justice framework in Montenegro includes specialized professionals, limited and recorded interviews, protection from contact with the accused, psychological support and privacy safeguards to prevent revictimization; however, key protections such as prohibitions on confrontation with the alleged perpetrator and the involvement of the Professional Support Service in forensic interviews are only mandatory for children under 14 years old, which can result in uneven levels of protection for older children.
- Professionals across the child protection, health and justice system discussed limited human resources and excessive caseloads as barriers to providing high-quality, specialized and child-centred services.
- While some professionals considered the opportunities for training and capacity-building sufficient, others highlighted the continuous need to strengthen knowledge and practical skills.
- While examples of well-functioning collaboration between institutions were described, the qualitative data point to the opportunity to further strengthen multisectoral collaboration through clear protocols and processes.
- Professionals reported a shortage of psychologists and therapeutic and psychosocial services, with particularly limited specialized care for children subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse. Limited human resources further mean that services may not be consistent and continuous.

Criminalization of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- The legal framework on child sexual exploitation and abuse in Montenegro provides a solid basis for protection and could be further strengthened to reflect evolving online risks.
- The Montenegrin Criminal Code criminalizes online grooming when aimed at arranging an in-person meeting with a child under 14 years old for the purpose of committing sexual offences. However, this does not apply to conduct targeting children aged 14–17 years and does not cover grooming aimed at online abuse.
- Montenegrin law criminalizes a range of criminal conduct related to child sexual abuse material, including possession without intent to distribute. However, mere access to child sexual abuse material is not criminalized, creating a loophole that allows individuals to deliberately seek out and view such content with impunity.
- As the age of criminal responsibility is set at 14 years and no exemptions exist, children aged 14–17 years could potentially face prosecution for voluntarily creating or sharing their own sexual content, despite such acts arising from sexual exploration.
- The law does not explicitly criminalize the livestreaming of child sexual abuse, nor does it clarify whether the offence of using a child in a “*pornographic performance*” extends to such conduct.
- Montenegrin law still uses the term “*child pornography*” to refer to child sexual abuse material. This outdated terminology can imply that such images or recordings are a form of pornography, thereby failing to reflect their abusive nature.
- Penalties for the production of child sexual abuse material and exposure to pornographic content are lower when the conduct targets children aged 14–17 years, resulting in uneven legal protection for older children.
- While existing legal provisions enable the prosecution of tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children, they only partially reflect the coercive use of self-generated sexual material to extort sexual acts, money or other benefits from a child.

This report ends with a set of data-driven recommendations based on its key findings. They include action to be taken by key actors across government, law enforcement, justice and social services sectors, by communities, schools and families, and by digital platforms and service providers. These are too detailed to be recounted in the executive summary, but can be found on [page 96](#) of this report.

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 Montenegro. The quantitative data provide an understanding of the scope of this issue among children in Montenegro. The analysis of national legislation and policies, together with the qualitative interviews conducted, provide insights into the formal systems and processes intended to support children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. They also offer important context to understand the sexual exploitation and abuse that children face and how families and communities react to it.

The same research methods were implemented in all 12 countries from the current research cycle 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 themselves against, 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, the justice sector, service providers, government and educators) protect against, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
6. How do existing policy and legislation protect against, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

A summary of methods used for each of the six research activities is presented below.

Legal and policy analysis

The analysis of national legal and policy frameworks aimed to identify legal gaps, assess compliance with international obligations, and highlight 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 the countries analysed. The tool, based on international legal standards and best practices, evaluates areas such as legal definitions, criminalization, jurisdiction, child-centred 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 that they reflected current legal frameworks. These were then analysed using the checklist to identify legal gaps and enforcement challenges, supported by case law and reports on prosecution, where available.

The draft analysis underwent internal and external expert reviews, including review from local civil society and the UNICEF country office, 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 parents or guardians

The purpose of the survey was to hear directly from children and their parents or guardians about their online experiences, both positive and negative. The questionnaire was divided into modules, most of which were administered by an enumerator. For sensitive questions, including those around sexual violence, respondents input their answers directly into 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 or guardians was also interviewed regardless of whether they used

the internet. 'Internet users' were defined as those who had used the internet in the three months prior to the survey, in line with the threshold set by the International Telecommunications Union.³

To achieve a nationally representative random sample of 12–17-year-old internet users, the survey used random probability sampling with national coverage. In Montenegro, the fieldwork coverage was 98.6 per cent. Poorly accessible, remote parts of the country were excluded from fieldwork, accounting for 1.4 per cent of the population. '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 April to July 2024.

The sampling followed a three-stage random probability clustered sample design. The response rate in Montenegro was 51 per cent, and the sample achieved included 1,039 children and 1,039 of their parents or guardians.

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

Age and gender distribution of child sample

12–14 years	61%
15–17 years	39%
Girls	48%
Boys	52%

Age and gender distribution of parent/guardian sample

Under 40 years	31%
Over 40 years	69%
Women	70%
Men	30%
Other	0%

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

Interviews with children and young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse while under the age of 18

This research activity aimed to include the voices of children and young people (16–24 years old) who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse while under the age of 18.⁴ Children and young people who were engaged in ongoing justice proceedings were not included in the study. Trauma-informed research protocols were designed and adapted in consultation with research and implementation partners in Montenegro.

Two main engagement strategies were developed to connect children and young people with a clinical researcher to participate in an interview:

- 1. Professional networks:** Service providers were contacted and asked to share information about the study and the opportunity to participate in interviews with young people (aged 16–24) within their networks. In Montenegro this included, in particular, Centres for Social Work, schools – through school psychologists and pedagogues, and civil society organizations providing services.
- 2. Digital networks:** Social media posts providing information about the study and the opportunity for young people (aged 18–24 years) to participate in an interview were shared via the UNICEF Montenegro Facebook and Instagram accounts. Information was also shared via U-report, a social messaging and data collection system developed by UNICEF, whereby young people within the eligible age range and signed up to the app received a message with information about the study. Youth organizations, student councils and universities also shared information about the study through

³ International Telecommunications Union (ITU), *Manual for Measuring ICT Access and Use by Households and Individuals, 2020 edition* (ITU, Geneva, 2020). Available at: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/manual/ITUMannualHouseholds2020_E.pdf

⁴ 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.

METHODS

their networks via social media, emails and on campuses via posters. Information materials provided links or contact details to where more information about the study, participation, the consent process and the steps to take in order to participate could be found.

Additionally, a presentation was held at a university faculty where UNICEF Montenegro and the clinical researcher provided information about the study and the opportunity to participate, and shared contact details for further information about participation and the consent process.

All information shared about the project included contact details for organizations providing support services, to anyone wishing to seek support.

Trauma-informed interviews were conducted with four young people. The interviews were conducted by a clinical researcher with training in trauma-informed interviewing between June 2024 and April 2025. The four participants were aged between 18 and 21 years; three were female and one male.

Despite the use of multiple means to inform young people of the opportunity to participate in an interview, spanning over several months, only four eligible young people came forward to participate in the study. It is possible that trauma and stigma related to sexual violence, and a lack of trust in confidentiality, deterred participation. The recruitment efforts have underscored the cultural and systemic challenges of engaging young people subjected to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse in 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.

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 Montenegro 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 Montenegro who provide support or essential services directly to individuals who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Front-line workers were included in the study if their case or 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 when they were under the age of 18. Front-line workers were only invited to participate if they were able to talk to the researchers about a de-identified case.

Trained researchers conducted semi-structured in-person and online interviews with 12 front-line workers. The sample included social workers and case managers employed in state systems under the Centres for Social Work, psychologists from the health care sector, pedagogues from the education system and professionals from the civil society sector working to support vulnerable populations intersecting with children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

Interviews were conducted between June and November 2024. The 12 front-line workers interviewed were women based in Bar, Berane, Bijelo Polje, Nikšić and Podgorica.

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 Montenegrin justice mechanisms respond to children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to identify how systems can better prevent and respond to these forms of violence. 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 Montenegro, such as judges, prosecutors and lawyers. 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.

Trained researchers conducted semi-structured in-person and online interviews with 14 professionals from the justice system and independent legal practices, including judges, prosecutors and lawyers.

Interviews were conducted between June and November 2024. Among the justice professionals interviewed, 13 were women and one was a man. Participants were based in Bijelo Polje, Herceg Novi, Nikšić and Podgorica.

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

INTERPOL's Crimes Against Children Unit conducts field-based assessments in collaboration with each member country's National Central Bureau. INTERPOL's team engaged directly with national law enforcement agencies as well as child protection units, and trusted civil society partners and non-governmental organizations.

The aim was to understand the operational realities of investigating and responding to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. These engagements focus on identifying practical challenges: gaps in resources, limitations in investigative capacity and barriers to international cooperation. The findings inform the targeted support INTERPOL provides, which could include access to specialized training, analytical tools and coordinated operational assistance. While this report includes INTERPOL's aggregated, non-sensitive findings, the full scope of its observations and conclusions (including detailed operational recommendations and tailored capacity-building measures) are shared exclusively with national authorities, ensuring the integrity of ongoing investigations.

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 Montenegro.

The **household survey** was 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 Montenegro. The survey is cross-sectional, not longitudinal, meaning that the data capture a single moment in time in the lives of the 1,039 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.

METHODS

As with other studies on sexual violence, a high level of underreporting is expected due to several factors including potential discomfort speaking about something very personal and painful, 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.

Interviews with front-line workers and justice professionals do not aim to provide a measure of the types or amount of violence in Montenegro due to the nature of this research methodology. 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.

Some of the statutory services contacted during the recruitment of professionals for interviews reported either an absence of cases or only limited experience with tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. As discussed above and further in this report, a range of factors may impact whether tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse reach service providers, law enforcement or the justice system. It is important to note that the cases that reach the formal support or justice system represent only a minority of incidents of exploitation and abuse and may reflect what is more widely understood as exploitation and abuse.

As described above, despite extensive efforts to engage with **young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse before the age of 18**, only four young people came forward to participate in an interview. This limits insight into the important perspectives of those subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Ethical approval

UNICEF Innocenti obtained ethical approval for the Disrupting Harm project from the Health Media Lab, a global institutional review board.

No appropriate national ethics review board that could review the study was identified in Montenegro. UNICEF Innocenti therefore sought a review by subject matter experts. Despite the identification of multiple experts, feedback was only received from one. A technical committee consisting of officials from the Government and non-governmental organizations was also established to oversee and provide guidance for the implementation of the research.

National consultation

A national consultation was held in December 2025 with representatives from relevant line ministries, the judiciary, the Office of the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms of Montenegro and Montenegrin civil society to receive input on the Disrupting Harm findings and recommendations, to enhance their relevance for the national context.

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 have taken place.

Tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse affect children in different ways. 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 contact children not previously known to them. 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 risk overlooking 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, meaning 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 Montenegro. They add much-needed nuance and understanding to this issue, grounded in the experiences of children and young people, and the professionals working to support them.

INTERNET USE IN MONTENEGRO

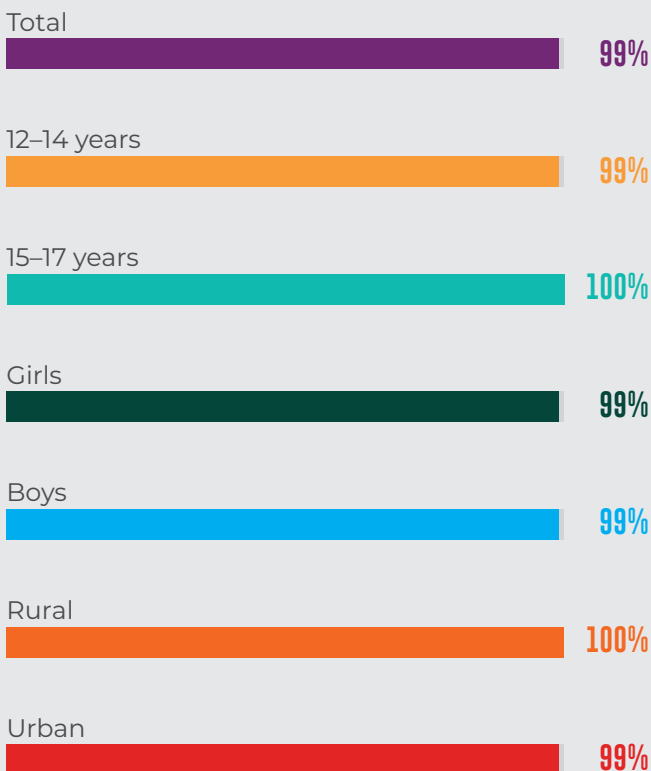
The Disrupting Harm project collected key indicators on children’s internet use via the household survey. This was intended to complement available studies and provide up-to-date data.

Understanding how children access the internet, whether they go online regularly or not, what they do online and how parents or guardians 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.

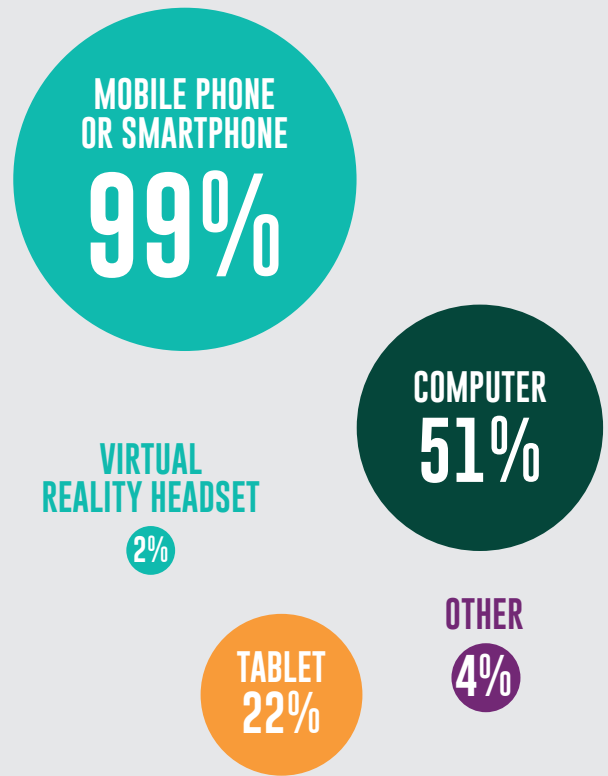
Any effort at prevention must therefore look beyond what children are doing online; not doing so often results in victim-blaming or treating children as complicit in the exploitation and abuse they have been subjected to, as evidenced in this report. Instead, prevention requires a multi-pronged approach 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 MONTENEGRO



Base: 1,039 households

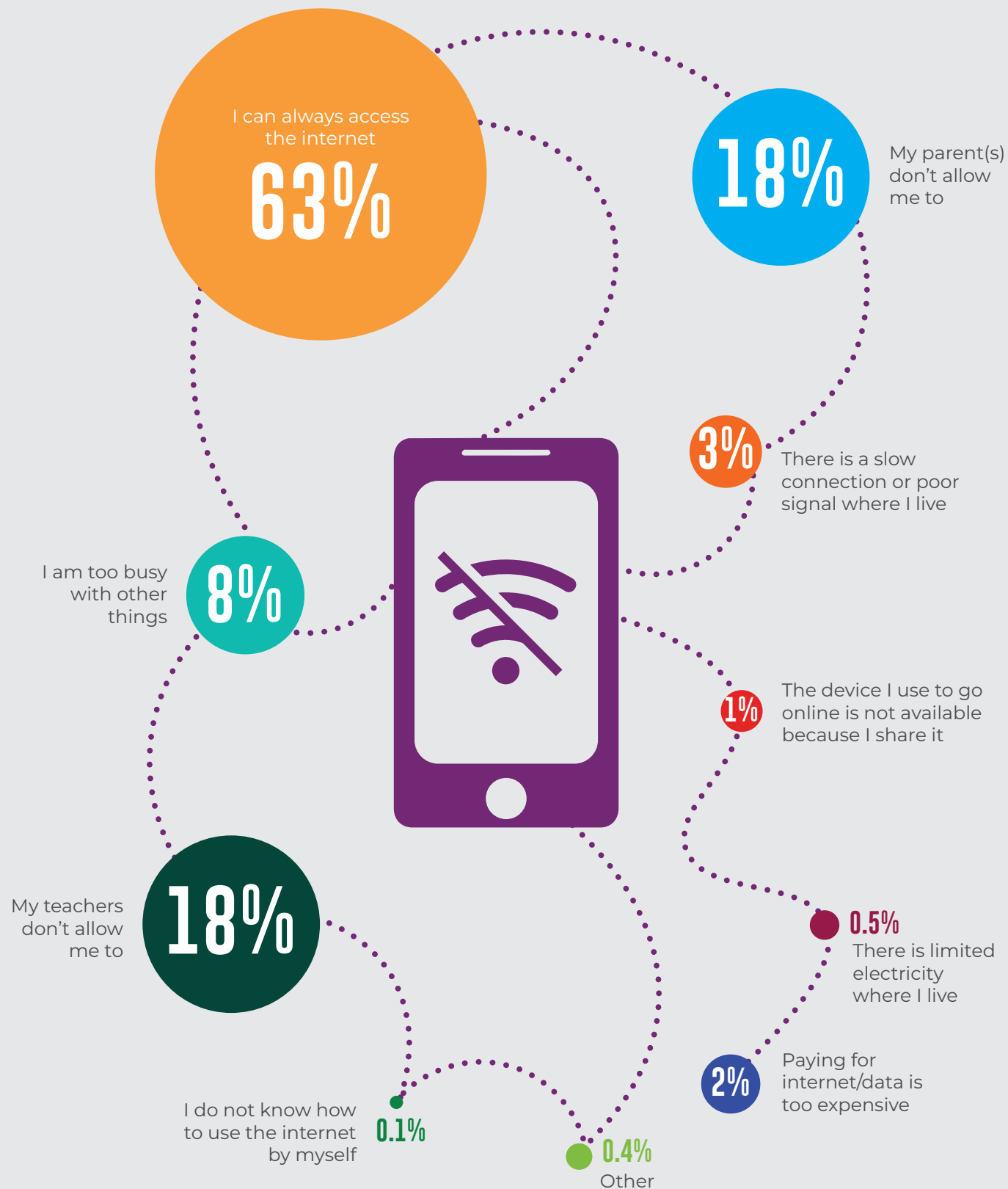
MOST POPULAR DEVICES TO ACCESS THE INTERNET AMONG 12–17-YEAR-OLDS



Base: 1,039 internet-using children

INTERNET USE IN MONTENEGRO

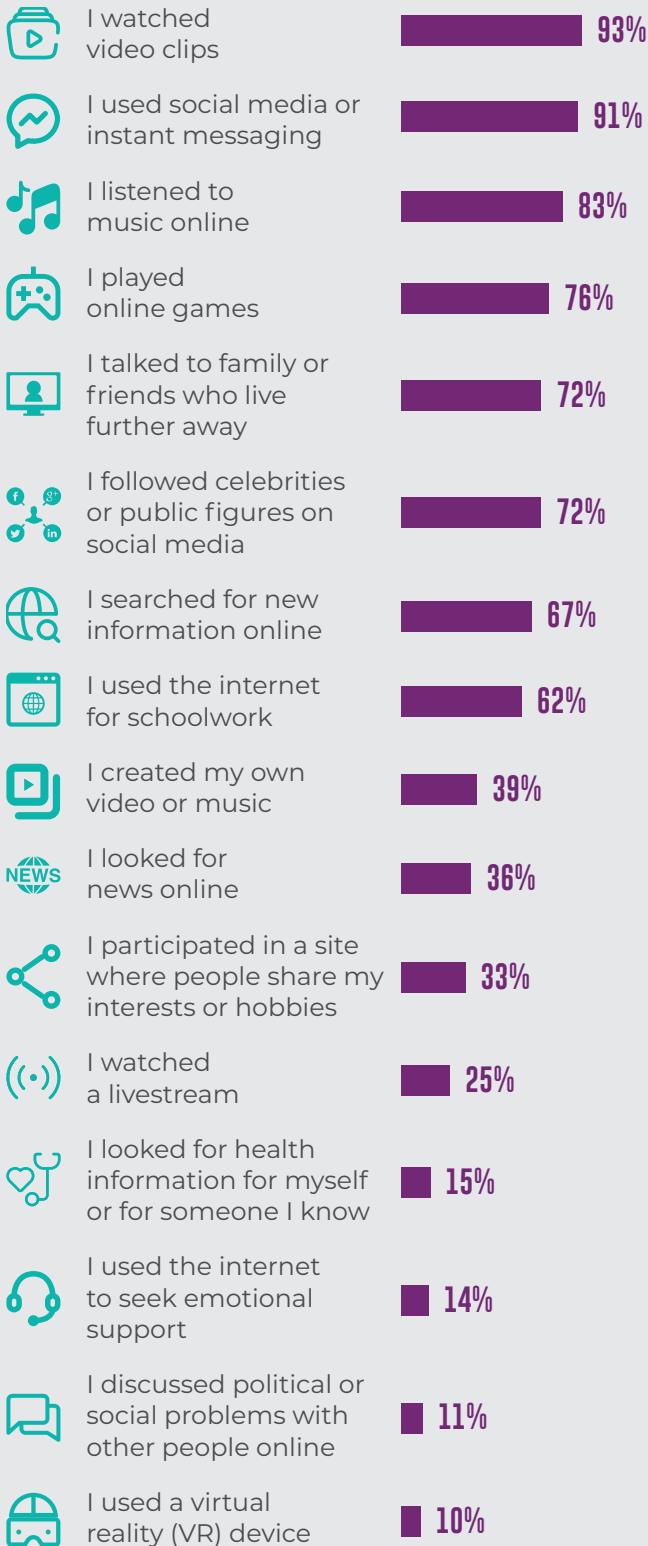
BARRIERS TO INTERNET ACCESS AMONG INTERNET-USING 12–17-YEAR-OLDS



Base: 1,039 internet-using children

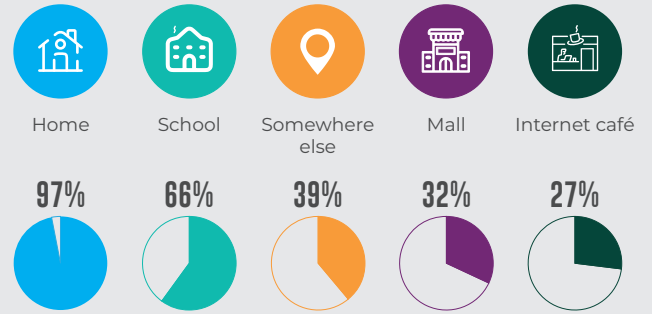
INTERNET USE IN MONTENEGRO

ACTIVITIES CHILDREN ENGAGE IN ONLINE AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK



Base: 1,039 internet-using children

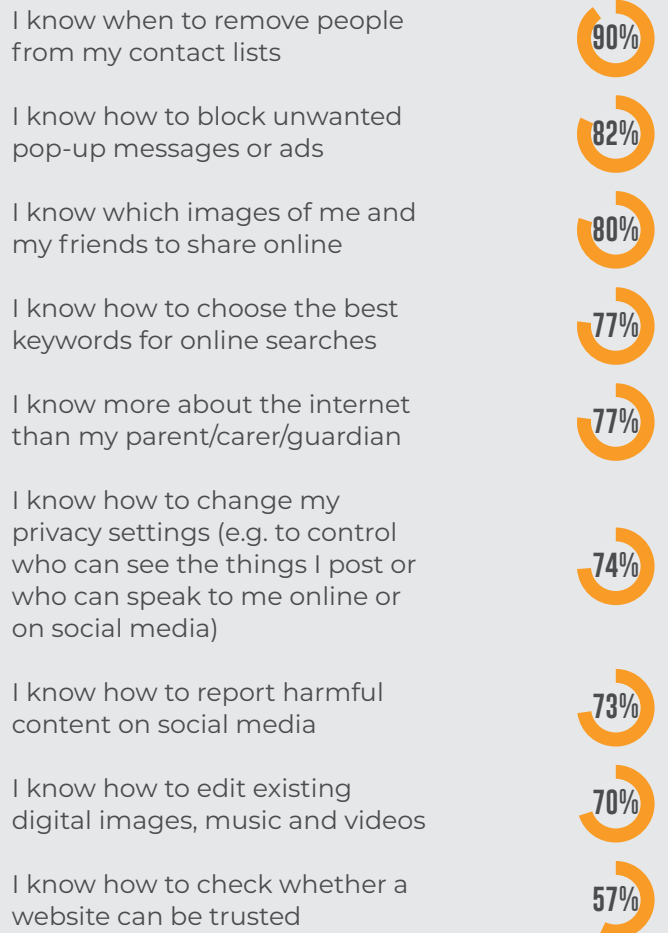
MOST POPULAR PLACES TO GO ONLINE AMONG INTERNET-USING 12-17-YEAR-OLDS*



Base: 1,039 internet-using children

*Multiple-choice question

DIGITAL SKILLS AMONG 12-17-YEAR-OLD INTERNET USERS IN MONTENEGRO*

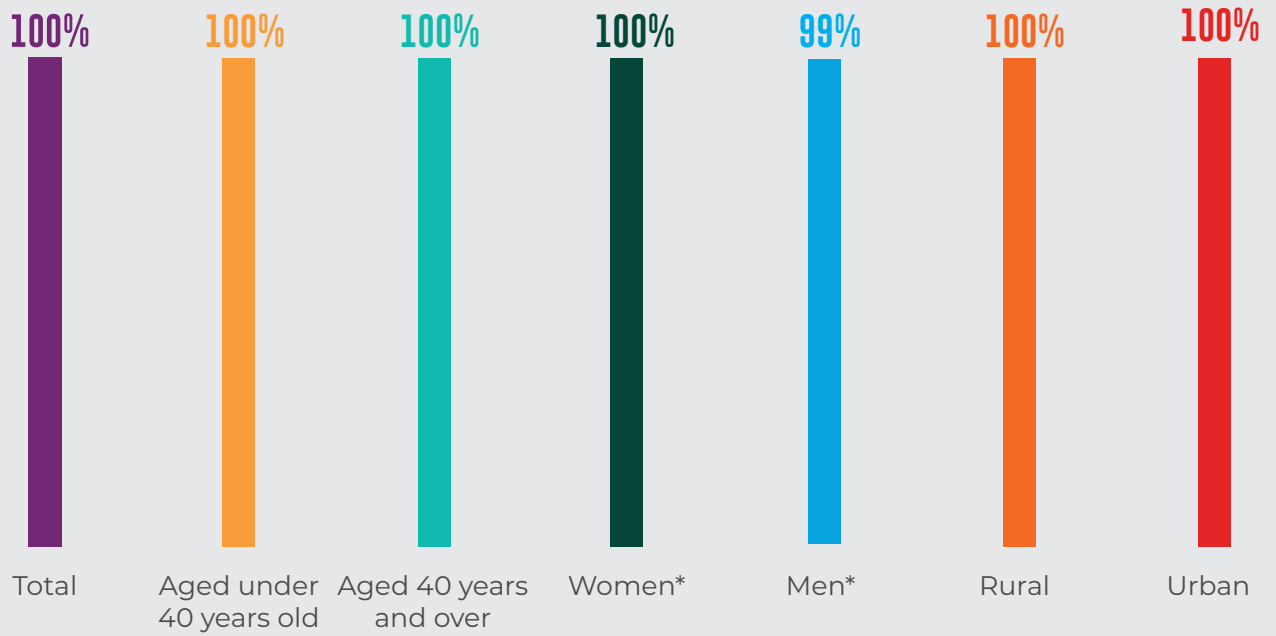


Base: 1,039 internet-using children

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

INTERNET USE IN MONTENEGRO

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



Base: 1,039 parents of internet-using 12–17-year-old children

* The parents' sample has a low proportion of men (30 per cent). These results should be interpreted with caution.

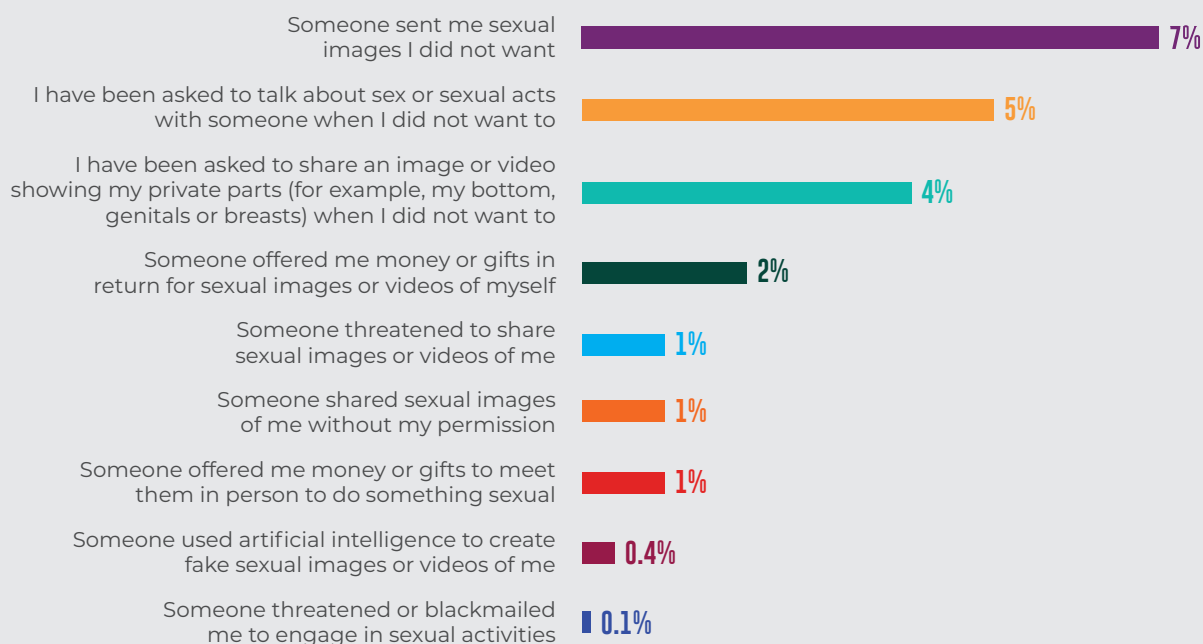
1. TECHNOLOGY- FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN MONTENEGRO



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

Based on the household survey, 11 per cent of internet-using children surveyed in Montenegro were subjected to at least 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 in Montenegro, this represents around 4,900 children who have been subjected to any of these harms in the span of a single year.

Percentage of children surveyed who said that the following things happened to them online in the past year



Base: 1,039 internet-using children aged 12–17 in Montenegro.

This section presents findings from the household survey with 1,039 children and 1,039 parents or guardians, and from interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children, front-line workers and justice professionals. It explores the nature and scope of exploitation and abuse, detailing how they manifest, the proportion of those affected and the circumstances in which they occur.

When interpreting these findings, it is important to recognize that the true extent of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Montenegro is likely to be underestimated in this report. Contextual factors such as social norms surrounding abuse, childhood, gender and sexuality contribute to widespread underreporting. Young people, front-line workers and justice professionals participating in the study repeatedly described victim-blaming attitudes and social stigma around

sexual abuse. In such an environment, children may not feel safe or supported enough to disclose the exploitation or abuse they have been subjected to.

The Disrupting Harm household survey measured nine different forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (see *Infographic*). The survey data reveals that more than 1 in 10 children aged 12–17 years (11 per cent) were subjected to at least one measured form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed.

Over 40 per cent of children who reported being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse in the year prior to being surveyed were subjected to more than one form. In total, the survey captured **214 instances of sexual exploitation and abuse among 106 children**, forming the foundation for many of the statistics presented in this report.

1.1 RECEIVING UNWANTED SEXUAL IMAGES

The most frequently reported form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse among children in Montenegro was being sent sexual images when they did not want them. According to the survey, 7 per cent of children were subjected to this in the past year alone.

Such conduct is, in principle, criminalized under the Montenegrin Criminal Code, which prohibits selling, giving, showing or otherwise making pornographic content available to children – whether in the form of images, texts, audiovisual material or other items – including through information and communication technologies. Penalties vary depending on the child’s age, ranging from 2 to 10 years in prison when the child is under 14, and from one to eight years when the child is 14 or older.⁵

In interviews, young people and front-line workers described how receiving such images has become increasingly normalized in children’s online experiences. One young woman shared how she began receiving unwanted sexual images on social media from a young age:

“

I was really young when I opened it [Facebook], I mean back when I was in elementary school (...) In the beginning it was more closed off, but then groups started, meeting other people and things like that, and then it started happening – I had some of those minor experiences where adult men would simply send me pictures of their genitals in a message request, even though they knew – I mean, I had my profile picture, you could see I was a child, and that didn’t bother them at all. (YP)

”

Some of the cases described by front-line workers involved perpetrators known to the child, even if only as an acquaintance. A social worker described a case of a girl receiving messages from a boy she knew:

“

He’s just her friend, not a crush, just simply a boy who is in high school, and she’s in elementary school. He very transparently sends her pictures of his private parts, where he says things like, ‘Come over, I’m home alone,’ etc., and she might know him by sight, or perhaps have met him at a gathering once. (FW)

”

Perpetrators, whether strangers or peers, often initiated contact abruptly and intrusively, sending explicit images and sexual propositions without prior discussion or interaction.

While such behaviours cause harm, they are not fully addressed by the current legal framework in Montenegro. In theory, these actions may fall under the definition of “sexual harassment”, which includes verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour of a sexual nature intended to violate the dignity of a person or create a hostile, intimidating or offensive environment.⁶ However, this definition does not fully account for offences committed through information and communication technologies, and leaves gaps when applied to children. In particular, the provision refers to children only under aggravating circumstances, limited to those considered “particularly vulnerable due to age”.⁷ This wording creates uncertainty about whether all children, regardless of age, are equally protected. This classification also has procedural consequences: only cases involving “particularly vulnerable” victims can be prosecuted without a formal complaint.⁸ As a result, some children may face a greater procedural burden, potentially resulting in unequal access to justice.

⁵ Montenegro, [Criminal Code](#), (2003), arts. 211-1, 211-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, art. 211c-3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 211c-2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, art. 211c-4.

Survey findings further show that 43 per cent of children in Montenegro were exposed to unexpected sexual content online. One young man explained how a platform designed for rapid, real-time connections with strangers exposed him to unexpected and unwanted sexual content:

“

There was that site, Omegle, it's a site that basically connected strangers via audio and video (...) there was an endless amount of naked content on the site. (...) There was a man who showed nudity to me and my friends (...). (YP)

”

Young people and front-line workers often described situations involving unexpected or unwanted exposure to sexual content as less serious. A young woman who discussed receiving unwanted sexual images on Facebook concluded her account by saying, “*However, I also had some bigger experiences, so to speak.*” (YP) Front-line workers also tended to mention such cases more in passing or as tangential, suggesting that this form of abuse was commonly perceived as less severe. The tendency of both children and adults to view such incidents as ‘normal’ or inevitable risks obscuring their seriousness and could prevent children from seeking help and support.

Importantly, sending unwanted sexual images was not always an isolated act. In some instances, it acted as a precursor to further exploitation and abuse, including attempts to coerce children into creating and sharing sexual content or engaging in harmful interactions.

1.2 GROOMING OF CHILDREN FOR SEXUAL PURPOSES

Survey data and interview findings provide evidence of perpetrators intentionally attempting to build relationships with children for the purpose of sexual exploitation or abuse, commonly referred to as ‘grooming’.

The Montenegrin Criminal Code criminalizes adults who, with the intent to commit sexual offences against a child under the age of 14, use information and communication technologies to arrange a meeting and then take steps to make it happen. Penalties range from 5 to 10 years in prison.⁹ This reflects a relatively traditional understanding of grooming as a preparatory stage leading to in-person abuse.

In practice, some cases do follow this pattern, with digital spaces facilitating initial contact and relationship-building with a child. In interviews, justice professionals most often described grooming in connection with subsequent in-person sexual abuse, while front-line workers more frequently emphasized cases in which grooming served as a pathway to sexual extortion.

Professionals explained that these situations were often perceived by the child as voluntary engagement or ordinary relationship-building, despite involving careful manipulation on the side of the perpetrator. Grooming typically began on social media, where the perpetrator acted in a friendly manner and often used their real identity and age, making the child feel safe. Over time, communication became frequent and continuous, gradually building trust, normalizing sexual discussion and blurring boundaries of appropriateness. Professionals reported that in some cases, these online interactions led to in-person meetings, which sometimes involved repeated rape.

The gradual and deceptive nature of grooming can make it especially difficult for children to recognize exploitation, particularly when the perpetrator presents the relationship as caring, trusting or affectionate.

A lawyer described this complexity:

“

With her knowledge, believe me, she agreed to it. He was like they were boyfriend and girlfriend, so they're filming themselves, so nobody will see that, so it's just for him, (...) while that was happening, she turned the phone towards the mirror (...) She participated, that's how it was. (...) but still she is a child regardless of that. (...) It wasn't against her will, but still the law protects, at any cost, the law must protect children. (JP)

”

Because of the manipulation involved, children often understood these relationships as romantic rather than abusive, and, in some cases, even tried to protect or defend the perpetrator.

A judge described a case in which a young girl actively defended the innocence of the person who had groomed and sexually abused her:

“

This girl, who is 12 or 13 years old (...) she started communicating with him (...) there is a big age difference between them [and] they had already entered into an emotional relationship at that point (...) That is what he was later charged with, sexual intercourse on two occasions. (...) she was writing to the court that she wanted to testify, that he wasn't guilty of anything and that she actually wanted him to be released because it was all her will. (JP)

”

⁹ Ibid., art. 211b.

Grooming is not always carried out with the aim of in-person sexual abuse. Front-line workers also described grooming patterns that transitioned into sexual extortion. Typically, a perpetrator initiated what appeared to be a romantic relationship, during which the child created sexual content. This material was then retained and later used as leverage. When the child attempted to end the relationship, the perpetrator resorted to blackmail, coercing the child into producing additional sexual content, engaging in further sexual acts or providing other benefits.

Cases were also described in which the child insisted that they had been aware of and had consented to the production of sexual content.

While the Montenegrin Criminal Code does not explicitly include the production of sexual content as an objective of online grooming,¹⁰ it does criminalize inducing or using a child to produce “pornographic materials”.¹¹ Penalties depend on the child’s age: 3 to 10 years in prison if the child is under 14, and one to eight years if the child is 14 years or older.¹²

The cases described above show how grooming can evolve over time, shifting from seemingly consensual dynamics to coercion and exploitation. However, by focusing narrowly on the arrangement of in-person meetings and related preparatory actions, Montenegrin legislation overlooks the broader and more complex process of trust-building and emotional manipulation. It also fails to capture cases in which the perpetrator never intends to meet the child in person but exploits them entirely online, for example through coercion and extortion to produce and share sexual content.

Children aged 14 to 17 are also excluded from the scope of online grooming provisions, despite being equally at risk of manipulation. This approach is not aligned 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.*”¹³ This definition recognizes grooming as a crime of intent aimed at sexual abuse and/or exploitation that can take place entirely online or involve in-person elements, and ensures equal protection for all children, regardless of age. As this broader understanding of grooming emerges as the new international standard, it offers important guidance for aligning the legal framework in Montenegro with evolving international best practices.

¹⁰ Ibid., art. 211b.

¹¹ Ibid., art. 211-2.

¹² Ibid., arts. 211-2, 211-4.

¹³ United Nations, [United Nations Convention Against Cybercrime](#), General Assembly Resolution 79/243, 24 December 2025, art. 15.

1.3 NON-CONSENSUAL, ABUSIVE OR EXPLOITATIVE ACTS INVOLVING CHILDREN'S SEXUAL CONTENT

Creating and sharing sexual content online is a complex issue, both socially and legally. For some children, it forms part of exploring relationships and intimacy. In Montenegro, 4 per cent of the children surveyed reported sharing sexual images or videos with someone online in the past year. Children responded that they did this for reasons such as attention, being in love, trusting the recipient, flirting or having fun.

However, 5 per cent of children surveyed said that they had been asked to share an image or video showing their private parts when they did not want to – highlighting how image-sharing can involve pressure and coercion. For some children, sharing sexual content may be a way of expressing affection, trust or curiosity; for others, it may feel uncomfortable, unwanted or pressured. The line between consensual and non-consensual sharing of sexual content can sometimes be unclear, especially in relationships marked by unequal power, emotional dependence or limited understanding of privacy and consent.

Under criminal law, these acts could be considered offences, regardless of context. Montenegro sets the age of criminal responsibility at 14,¹⁴ meaning that children aged 14 or older could technically face prosecution for voluntarily creating, possessing or sharing their own sexual content, as it would qualify as child sexual abuse material. This leaves children at risk of criminal liability for non-malicious behaviours arising from sexual exploration, trust or peer interaction. In 2023, this legal shortcoming led the Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention to request that Montenegro ensure that its legal framework protected children from prosecution for possessing self-generated sexual images or videos of themselves or peers shared consensually or received passively without solicitation, and for voluntarily sharing their own self-generated material with peers for private use.¹⁵

Non-consensual sharing of children's sexual content

Children's sexual content can also be shared without their consent. In the survey, 1 per cent of the children reported that someone had shared sexual images or videos of them without their permission.

Interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children, and with professionals, add further nuance to these findings. In some cases, the content was created and shared consensually within what the child perceived to be a trusted relationship, but was later distributed without consent, for example as retaliation following the end of a relationship. In other cases, sexual content was created or obtained without the knowledge of the child.

One front-line worker recalled a case involving a 12-year-old girl:

“

So, they were in some kind of emotional relationship and they agreed to film themselves. (...) After they broke up, the boy started spreading that content among peers (...). (FW)

”

In both scenarios, these acts would fall under existing provisions related to child sexual abuse material. The Montenegrin Criminal Code criminalizes unlawfully recording, producing, offering, making available, distributing, importing, exporting, obtaining, selling, giving, displaying, publicly exhibiting or possessing “any material that visually depicts a child engaged in real or simulated sexually explicit conduct, or any depiction of a child's sexual organs for primarily sexual purposes”, with prison sentences ranging from 3 to 10 years.¹⁶

¹⁴ Montenegro, [Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings](#) (2011), art. 2.

¹⁵ Council of Europe, [Lanzarote Committee Implementation Report on “The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies \(ICTs\): addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos \(CSGSIV\)” – Factsheet: Montenegro](#) (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2023), p. 5. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-montenegro-the-protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploit/1680acde92>.

¹⁶ Montenegro, [Criminal Code](#), arts. 211-2, 211-3, 211-7.

While it is positive that mere possession – namely, without the intent to further distribute – is criminalized, the legislation does not appear to cover explicitly mere access to such material when it is not downloaded or stored. This creates a potential loophole whereby individuals may deliberately seek out and view child sexual abuse material online without facing legal consequences. Such gaps risks undermining efforts to reduce demand for this material and to hold perpetrators fully accountable.

Words matter: ‘Child sexual abuse material’ versus ‘child pornography’

The Montenegrin Criminal Code continues to use the outdated term “*child pornography*” to refer to child sexual abuse material. Although still present in many legal systems, this terminology is inappropriate and misleading, as it implies that images or recordings of child sexual abuse are a form of pornography. This framing risks diminishing the seriousness of the abuse, trivializing harm or implicitly legitimizing acts that constitute sexual exploitation and/or abuse of children. The term ‘child sexual abuse material’ should therefore be used instead, as it more accurately reflects the nature of the harm involved.¹⁷ This switch in terminology was also recommended by the Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention in 2023.¹⁸

In other cases, perpetrators used children’s sexual content to blackmail them, shifting into sexual extortion.

Sexual extortion

Sexual extortion occurs when perpetrators use the threat of distributing sexual content as leverage to coerce children into the production of further sexual material and/or acts, money or other

benefits. In Montenegro, 1 per cent of children reported that someone had threatened to share their sexual images or videos and 0.1 per cent that someone had threatened or blackmailed them online to engage in sexual activities. Professionals interviewed explained that sexual extortion is one of the most common forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse they see in their caseloads.

Interviews revealed multiple patterns to sexual extortion. As highlighted previously, in some cases, perpetrators groomed children into creating sexual content by posing as friends or romantic partners, often through flattery or ‘love-bombing’. Once trust was established and sexual content had been shared, perpetrators turned aggressive, using threats and blackmail to maintain control over the child.

A young woman described how she was subjected to sexual extortion by a person she met online who presented himself as a 16-year-old boy:

“

In the beginning, I was sending [photos] to him because he was nice and he was like: ‘Come on, please, this means so much to me’ and then he would thank me. However, later when he realized that I was avoiding him, he became more aggressive, he started to curse at me, to threaten me, to tell me all kinds of things and I, I wasn’t even opening the messages (...) before that I thought several times about just blocking him, (...) however I didn’t, again because he was really that nice and he was convincing me that he was my boyfriend and that... (...) I remember that the last message was something like: ‘If you don’t send me a picture, all your friends and your parents will see these pictures of yours, I’ll send them to everyone’. (YP)

”

¹⁷ Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, 2nd Edition (ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2025). Available at: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Second-Edition-Terminology-Guidelines-final.pdf>.

¹⁸ Council of Europe, *Lanzarote Committee Implementation Report on “The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos (CSGSIV)” – Factsheet: Montenegro* (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2023), p. 6. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-montenegro-the-protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploit/1680acde92>.

1.3 NON-CONSENSUAL, ABUSIVE OR EXPLOITATIVE ACTS INVOLVING CHILDREN'S SEXUAL CONTENT

Justice professionals shared similar examples. A prosecutor explained how a man built a relationship with and obtained sexual content from a 15-year-old girl and then used this material to blackmail and extort her. Eventually, he tried to extort the girl's parents for money by threatening to share the material online.



He asked...they usually ask for some recording, hers or... some picture, something. And as soon as he got that, he started. 'If you don't do that, I will publish pictures, recordings, to your friends.' Then he connected with her friends and girlfriends and she entered into one vicious circle in which she was for about a year. (...) To the point that he was blackmailing her, that he even raped her. (...) the mother managed to find out. (...) And then he came to threaten, to demand money from the parents, that he would publish all of that. In the end he published all those recordings and ran away. (JP)



In other cases, perpetrators bypassed trust-building altogether, quickly obtaining sexual material and resorting to threats almost immediately.

Professionals also discussed cases where children resisted extortion attempts. They noted that some children refused to comply, particularly when the perpetrator's demands were perceived as abrupt or inappropriate.

Cases where the child resists still amount to attempts at abuse, underscoring the pervasiveness of this issue.

Despite evidence that such tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children occurs, it is only partially addressed under the Montenegrin Criminal Code. Threatening to disclose sexually explicit material to a third party without the consent of the person depicted is criminalized,¹⁹ with harsher penalties when that person is a child.²⁰ However, this provision does not fully reflect a key feature of sexual extortion of children, namely the use of such threats to coerce the child into sexual acts or providing money or other benefits, and existing provisions on extortion and blackmail only target conduct aimed at obtaining unlawful financial gain.²¹

In addition, prosecution may also depend on the perpetrator's goal: if the aim is to obtain sexual material, offences related to child sexual abuse material and corruption of children may apply, with aggravated penalties for using threats; if the goal is to coerce sexual acts, charges can include sexual abuse of a child, exploitation of children in prostitution, corruption of children, human trafficking, or solicitation; and if the purpose is financial gain, provisions on exploitation of children in prostitution or participation in "pornographic performances" could apply.²²

While this shows that the current framework enables 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 categories, hindering clear classification and the collection of accurate data on recorded cases and how this issue manifests, which are essential for the development of effective responses and prevention strategies.

¹⁹ Montenegro, [Criminal Code](#) (2003), art. 175a (1), (3).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, art. 175a (5).

²¹ *Ibid.*, arts. 250, 251.

²² Council of Europe, *Lanzarote Committee Implementation Report on "The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos (CSGSIV)" – Factsheet: Montenegro* pp. 4–5 (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2023). Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-montenegro-the-protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploit/1680acde92>.

Recognizing this issue, in 2023 the Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention invited Montenegro to introduce a specific criminal offence to address situations in which child self-generated sexual images and/or videos are “used to force, coerce or threaten the child to give additional self-generated sexual images and/or videos, other sexual favours, a financial gain or other gain to the offenders”.²³ Alternatively, the Committee recommended that the Montenegrin authorities ensure prosecution of both the possession of these materials by the perpetrator and the subsequent act of extortion.²⁴

Artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material

Emerging technologies have introduced new risks. The rise of artificial intelligence image-generation tools has introduced new and urgent challenges in addressing tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Increasingly embedded in apps and online platforms, these tools can be used to generate fake sexual material depicting a child, meaning that a child can be portrayed in sexually explicit ways without their consent or even their knowledge.

Even when it portrays non-existent children, child sexual abuse material generated through artificial intelligence can normalize exploitative representations and contribute to increased demand for child sexual abuse material involving real children. Although this form of abuse is still emerging, evidence shows that it is already occurring in Montenegro.

According to the survey data, 0.4 per cent of children said that someone had used artificial intelligence to create fake sexual images or videos of them in the past year. Interviews described digitally manipulated content ranging from superimposed nude bodies to sexually explicit captions and audio. A young woman recounted receiving a digitally altered image of herself:

“

(...) it was break and I open mine [a photo received from an Instagram profile], a friend opens hers a minute or two later, (...) and as one by one opens their phone, we're somehow holding the phone like: 'Look at this, is this me?' And then another one turns around like: 'Here, it's me, here I am.' (...) And they managed to use my picture, to take my head and put it on another person's body and spread it around that this is actually my photograph, that it's me. (YP)

”

The harms mirror those of other forms of image-based abuse: fear of exposure, shame, stigma and judgment. Digitally created sexual content can also be used by perpetrators for extortion and blackmail. As these technologies become more accessible, there is an urgent need for legislation, as well as child protection and justice systems, to recognize and respond to artificial intelligence-generated sexual abuse.

In this context, the Montenegrin Criminal Code does not explicitly refer to digitally generated material, including artificial intelligence-generated content depicting non-existent children, within the legal definition of child sexual abuse material.²⁵ At the same time, other provisions of the Criminal Code may, in theory, be relied upon to address some of this conduct. In particular, the offence criminalizing the creation of sexually explicit material, or the alteration of existing material to make it sexually explicit, whether by computer system or other means, where the material depicts or seems to depict a real person and is disclosed to a third person as authentic,²⁶ is formulated broadly enough to encompass cases of artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material. However, its wording suggests it does not extend to content depicting non-existent children.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Montenegro, [Criminal Code](#) (2003), art. 211-7.

²⁶ Ibid., art. 175a (2).

1.3 NON-CONSENSUAL, ABUSIVE OR EXPLOITATIVE ACTS INVOLVING CHILDREN'S SEXUAL CONTENT

This provision is not located within the child sexual abuse material framework and is primarily framed as an offence related to the misuse of sexual content, including of adults. Given that digitally generated depictions of child sexual abuse involving non-existent children can normalize or fuel demand for child sexual abuse material, it is important for Montenegro to amend the legal definition of child sexual abuse material to explicitly include such content. This would provide greater clarity and reinforce the seriousness of the harm involved, without the need to rely on interpretative approaches or offences not specific to child sexual abuse material. The Draft Law on the Protection of Minors in the Digital Environment, submitted to Parliament on 28 January 2026, represents an important step in this direction by prohibiting the production, dissemination, acquisition or display of sexual content depicting children that is generated or manipulated by artificial intelligence. However, this prohibition is framed primarily within the context of platform obligations and does not amend the Criminal Code's definition of child sexual abuse material, nor does it establish a corresponding criminal offence.²⁷

A similar interpretative issue exists in relation to livestreaming of child sexual abuse, which is also not explicitly criminalized. While using a child in a “pornographic performance” is punishable by up to eight years' imprisonment – or up to 10 years if the child is under the age of 14,²⁸ the law does not specify whether this applies to performances that are livestreamed online. Moreover, existing provisions on child sexual abuse material seem to require the material to exist in the form of “items”,²⁹ which may exclude livestreamed abuse that is not downloaded or stored as a file. Without explicit legal provisions for these forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, perpetrators can operate with little fear of consequences. Strengthening the legal framework to clearly define and criminalize both artificial intelligence-generated sexual abuse material and livestreamed abuse is therefore essential.

For some children, sharing sexual content may be a way of expressing affection, trust or curiosity; for others, it may feel uncomfortable, unwanted or pressured. The line between consensual and non-consensual sharing of sexual content can sometimes be unclear.

²⁷ Montenegro, [Draft Law on the Protection of Minors in the Digital Environment](#) (2026), art. 17.

²⁸ Montenegro, [Criminal Code](#) (2003), arts. 211-2, 211-4.

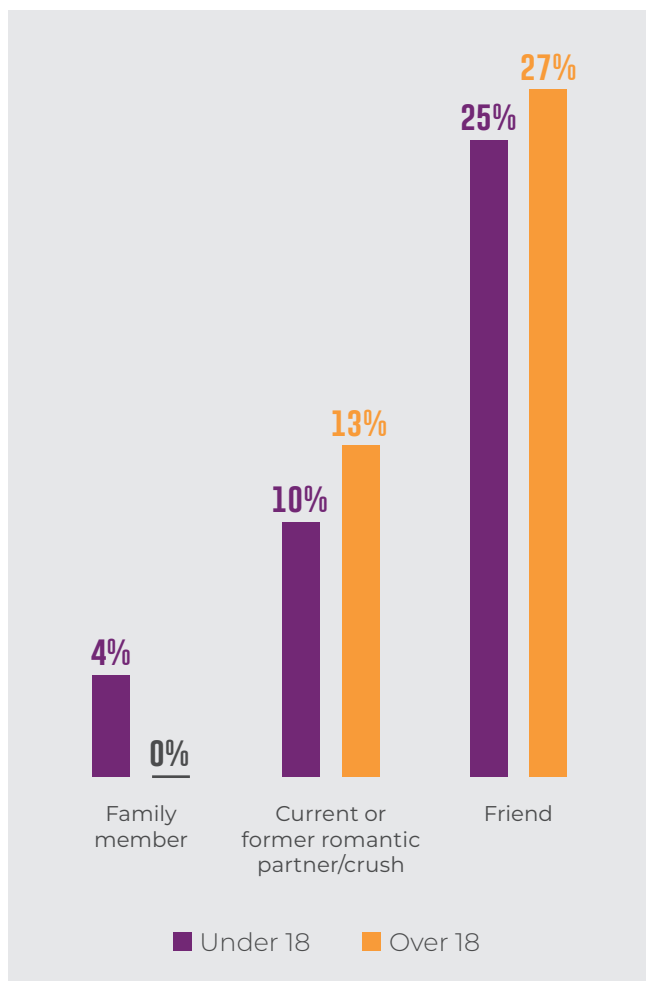
²⁹ *Ibid.*, art. 211-6.

1.4 PERPETRATORS OF TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Understanding who commits tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is essential to addressing it effectively. Public discourse often centres on the narrative of ‘stranger danger’, but the data collected in Montenegro reveal a more complex reality. While abuse by strangers certainly occurs, a significant proportion of instances involve people within the child’s social circle.

According to survey findings, 66 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse were perpetrated by someone the child knew. Interviews reinforced these patterns, with young people and professionals describing exploitation and abuse within existing relationships characterized by manipulation, control and other forms of violence. In such situations, technology was often just one part of a broader dynamic of coercion and abuse.

Chart 1: Perpetrators of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse



Where does tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse take place?

The findings show that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse do not occur only online. Rather, the patterns observed reflect a continuum of abuse in which digital and in-person elements are closely intertwined.

According to the survey, 82 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse involved social media, most commonly Instagram (45 per cent), Viber (42 per cent), Snapchat (22 per cent) and Facebook (9 per cent). Moreover, 5 per cent occurred on gaming platforms. This highlights the role of digital spaces in facilitating initial contact, communication or the sharing of sexual content.

However, as described in detail in previous sections, interviews with young people, front-line workers and justice professionals highlight that these interactions frequently extend beyond the digital sphere, with tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse including both digital and in-person elements.

Survey data also found that the most common responses to where children met the perpetrator were at school (37 per cent), in public places (30 per cent) and on the internet (30 per cent).

These findings underscore the importance of moving beyond an ‘online versus offline’ framing and recognizing how tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are frequently embedded in children’s broader social environments and relationships.

Peer abuse

Abuse by peers emerged as a strong theme across both survey and interview data. As seen above, in 25 per cent of cases, the perpetrator of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was a friend or acquaintance (under the age of 18) of the child.

1.4 PERPETRATORS OF TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Justice professionals and front-line workers described cases where children engaged in sexual extortion of peers. In these situations, digital tools were used to escalate or sustain the abuse. A social worker described a case involving sexual bullying and blackmail of a girl by a group of peers:

“

That was from her peer, (...) he made her believe they were in a relationship, however it was all staged to humiliate her. (...) he led her to come to some place, where they had some sexual act and the boys filmed it, two boys, as she said from the bushes. (...) later they sent her that recording, forwarded it to her phone and from then the blackmail starts. (...) 'Give me money, otherwise I'll publish the pictures,' (...) [she] gave money for a whole year. (FW)

”

Some cases extended beyond individual incidents into prolonged abuse. Both professionals and young people described coordinated abuse in which multiple peers obtained sexual material from a child and circulated it within the peer group. This often took place in schools, sports teams or other environments where young people gather and could continue for months before being disclosed, if at all. One front-line worker recounted:

“

At this moment in a football club, a local one, there's a recording circulating of a girl, (...) who is explicitly showing her genitals to them, like that, and the boys are filming her. (...) And the perpetrators are two boys who are under 14 years old. And she's under 14 years old (...). (FW)

”

Legal response to peer abuse

When such crimes take place, Montenegrin legislation prioritizes rehabilitation over punishment for children who have (allegedly) committed sexual crimes against other children.

According to the **Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings**, criminal sanctions are intended to support the child's education and development by providing protection, assistance, supervision and specialized training. The overarching goal is to prevent reoffending.³⁰ The law stresses the need for cautious treatment of children during legal proceedings: all those involved must act with care and consideration, taking into account the child's maturity, individual circumstances and the need to safeguard their privacy, so as to ensure that the procedural actions do not adversely affect the child's development.³¹ In addition, children accused of a crime must be provided with qualified legal representation. If neither the child nor their legal representative appoints a lawyer, the court or prosecutor will select one from a pool of practitioners with expertise in child rights.³²

Children aged 14–17 typically face educational measures, such as a judicial reprimand, intensified supervision or placement in a relevant institution.³³ Imprisonment is considered an exceptional measure and may only be applied to children aged 16–17 for offences punishable by more than five years in prison.³⁴ While capped at five years, it may be extended to up to 10 years for serious crimes.³⁵ Sentences must be served in juvenile facilities,³⁶ where children are provided with education or professional and vocational training, tailored to their needs and delivered by specially trained staff.³⁷

³⁰ Montenegro, [Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings](#) (2011), art. 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, art. 49.

³² *Ibid.*, art. 50.

³³ *Ibid.*, arts. 14, 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, arts. 14-3, 32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 33-1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, art. 168-2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 169.

However, interviews with front-line workers and justice professionals indicated a lack of comprehensive support and rehabilitation services for children who have committed crimes. Professionals explained how, even if provided for under legislation, if the court imposes a correctional measure, specialized institutions for the implementation of such measures and arrangements for the implementation of community services are lacking. In one case recounted by a justice professional, the educational measure had to be suspended as there was no institution where it could be implemented.

Professionals also explained that children may be placed at the Ljubović Centre for Children and Youth, which provides specialized support for children who are subject to non-institutional criminal sanctions by the courts. However, they explained the scarce availability of psychosocial services and how implementation of this measure may be delayed due to long court procedures, impacting the effectiveness of the measures imposed.

Abuse within romantic relationships

Abuse in the context of romantic relationships also featured prominently in the data. According to the survey, 22 per cent of perpetrators of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse were previous or current romantic partners and/or crushes. In 10 per cent of instances, it was a partner/crush under 18, and in 13 per cent the partner/crush was 18 or older. As previous sections have shown, boundaries between sexual abuse, bullying and abuse within relationships are often blurred, making it difficult to separate one form of abuse from another.

Tech-facilitated forms of violence within relationships involving children and young people discussed in interviews often involved emotional manipulation, coercion and control. Professionals described cases in which romantic partners made escalating demands, using digital tools to monitor, pressure or intimidate the child. In some situations, arguments or disagreements triggered threats, online humiliation or the public exposure of private conversations or images.

Sexual material was sometimes obtained without the child's knowledge – for example, through hidden recordings – or through pressure to prove affection or commitment. Professionals described two common ways this material was used once obtained. In some cases, images were shared during the relationship within peer groups as a form of 'showing off' or to gain social status. More frequently, the material was used as a tool of coercion or retaliation, with threats to share the content online if the child attempted to end the relationship, or with images being shared after the relationship ended.

A young woman described discovering that sexual content she had shared with a boy with whom she was in a relationship had been circulated by him in peer Instagram groups.

1.4 PERPETRATORS OF TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

“

I vividly remember that moment (...) I was sitting with my friends in [a café] (...) and one of my friends called me on the phone and tells me like... tells me all sorts of things, like 'Shame on you', that kind of thing, (...) and I just know that my stomach literally sank. (...) I received messages like, 'Is that you, is it possible?'. There were really a few messages like: 'Is it possible that she did that?' and so on. (YP)

”

Abuse within relationships can result in long-lasting emotional and psychological impacts. Data from interviews highlighted children feeling guilty or responsible, fearing they would not be believed or would face moral judgment if they told anyone or sought help.

Abuse by persons unknown to the child

While the majority of cases involved individuals known to the child, abuse by strangers was not absent in the data. Survey data and interviews showed how children were approached by unknown perpetrators online, often through social media. These instances typically involved unsolicited sexual images, coercive sexual propositions or demands for sexual content. However, when viewed alongside the data on peers and partners, these instances represented a smaller share of perpetrators (25 per cent) in the survey.

Although tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are perpetrated by persons not previously known to children, and should remain a concern, these patterns underscore the need to move beyond assumed notions of the perpetrator being a stranger, and to recognize how technology can reinforce and amplify existing dynamics of coercion, bullying and control within children's social circles.

2. INTERSECTIONALITY AND ABUSE



2. INTERSECTIONALITY AND ABUSE

Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse do not occur in a vacuum. The data suggest a range of intersecting factors that shape how children are affected by exploitation and abuse. A child's identity – for example their gender, sexual orientation and age – may influence not only how they are targeted, but how the abuse unfolds, how the child interprets and responds to it and whether they are able to disclose it or seek support. In these instances, individual-level identities and circumstances intersect with larger systemic and social dynamics that perpetrators use to their advantage.

Accounts by young people and professionals in Montenegro underscore the persistence of victim-blaming attitudes in relation to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse. These attitudes are deeply rooted in gendered social norms that transcend beyond Montenegro and shift responsibility away from perpetrators and onto children.

2.1 HOW DOES GENDER INFLUENCE TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

This section explores how gender and social norms influence tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Montenegro.

According to the survey, 13 per cent of girls (N=63) were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, compared with 8 per cent of boys (N=43). While prevalence rates are relatively similar between boys and girls, interviews reveal how gender shapes both the context and consequences of abuse. Societal expectations about gender influence how perpetrators target children, how children perceive abuse and the reactions they receive from peers, family members and institutions.

Interview participants reflected on how girls are particularly impacted by societal expectations and gender norms. Dominant beliefs about women's bodies often extend to girls, shaping how they are perceived, sexualized and blamed for the violence they have endured. Front-line workers and justice professionals commented that girls who experienced early puberty were particularly targeted. Despite still being children, their physical development is often used to justify or normalize perpetrators' actions.

A social worker referring to a child she had been working with said:

“

She is a typical example of a girl who could be a potential victim of sexual violence, both through the internet and in person, (...), if someone really approaches her, someone older, because she simply radiates that. She's pretty, she's sweet, she's smart, she dresses... Well now we haven't been able to make her aware that it's not okay to dress like that because she might attract someone who isn't her age. (FW)

”

This illustrates how deeply embedded gender beliefs and biases can shape professional's interpretation of vulnerability. By suggesting that a child's appearance or behaviour makes her 'attractive' to perpetrators, responsibility is displaced from the perpetrator onto the child.

Such beliefs not only obscure the severity of exploitation and abuse but also reinforce harmful ideas that children – especially girls – must modify their appearance or behaviour to prevent abuse, rather than recognizing that responsibility lies solely with the perpetrator.

Moreover, shame rooted in gendered social norms contributed to children feeling responsible for the abuse they endured. Girls are often judged for creating sexual content – consensually or non-consensually – or for being sexually active, reinforcing a culture of victim-blaming. In one case, a mother told service providers how she considered her daughter – who had been drugged, raped by two boys and filmed while unconscious, with the video shared widely on social media – to be solely responsible for the abuse to which she had been subjected.

Additionally, interviews described cases where girls suffered severe peer bullying following abuse. In addition to others passing judgment and name-calling, they were subjected to secondary victimization by peers. As one young woman explained:

“

They were making some indirect jokes, meaning someone actually added some picture to that screenshot, like some text, now it doesn't matter what's written there, I don't remember the exact part well, but they would talk about it and they would say it even in front of the teacher, but nobody would understand what it was about. (YP)

”

The survey data also highlight a gendered pattern. Nine per cent of girls (N=42) had been asked to share an image or video of their private parts when they did not want to, compared with 2 per cent of boys (N=10). Similarly, 9 per cent of girls (N=45) had received unwanted sexual images, compared with 4 per cent of boys (N=22).

2.1 HOW DOES GENDER INFLUENCE TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

Interviews suggested that while boys may sometimes gain peer approval or validation for engaging in sexual acts, girls may be condemned for anything related to sex or sexuality, regardless of their involvement or consent. Girls were ostracized, stigmatized and made to feel 'dirty' or responsible for the abuse to which they were subjected. One young woman stated that no matter the circumstances, "(...) *again everyone blames the woman.*" (YP)

Conversely, tech-facilitated child sexual abuse or exploitation of boys is often minimized or overlooked. The barriers boys face are different but equally real. Professionals and young people interviewed explained that boys are often perceived as the ones who should be in control, not as individuals who can be manipulated or exploited. This perception not only serves to silence boys who are subjected to abuse but also contributed to a broader denial that they can be victims at all.

As one social worker explained:

(...) and then children are ashamed to admit it, especially if it happens to male children, some kind of violence, (...) Because we're still in this patriarchy. (...) Well, what pressures him [a boy] is that he has to be strong, that he simply can't give in to something, to some kind of influence, that he [can't] be sexually exploited. On the contrary, if they teach him anything, he's the one who maybe has those characteristics to exploit others, something like that. (FW)

These expectations create serious barriers to disclosure. Professionals described boys feeling intense embarrassment and shame within their families and communities, sometimes experiencing rejection. In one extreme case, a professional from a civil society organization described the reaction by a father whose son had been manipulated into a sexual act that was also filmed:

(...) his father disowned him. He literally told him: 'It would have been better if we had never given birth to you, created you, than for me to live through this shame of you doing this through cameras, you're disgusting, you're completely perverted, I don't recognize this as my child (...). (FW)

Such reactions illustrate how rigid ideas of masculinity that equate manhood with dominance, control and invincibility deny boys the space to be heard. This not only discourages them from disclosing abuse but can also exacerbate trauma by layering feelings of failure and rejection onto the abuse. Professionals stressed that patriarchal norms, which define masculinity as strength and dominance, leave boys with little space to be recognized as having been subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse.

2.2 VICTIM-BLAMING ATTITUDES

Accounts by young people and professionals in Montenegro underscore the persistence of victim-blaming attitudes in relation to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse. These attitudes are deeply rooted in gendered social norms that transcend beyond Montenegro and shift responsibility away from perpetrators and onto children.

Interviews described instances in which girls who had been filmed without their knowledge or consent were publicly condemned, mocked and stigmatized when this material was spread, while perpetrators received sympathy or even support. A young woman referred to cases published in the media where children's sexual content was distributed, and the children were then condemned:

“ *And there were disgusting cases happening in Podgorica, (...) that girl last year, she was 13 years old, some porn video came out and she was lynched (...). It was complete chaos and everyone was saying all sorts of things about her. (...) I felt so sorry for her, because she didn't know that guy was filming her. (...) And it [happened] with another girl too, whose father beat up that guy. Everyone, absolutely everyone, took his [the male who subjected the girl to the abuse] side, both the news and the newspapers. (YP)*

Such examples highlight how children are often subjected to secondary victimization through stigma and public shaming.

A professional working in the justice system reflected on how judgment is passed on girls and women due to their physical appearance, invoking victim-blaming attitudes. She explained how she caught herself feeling relieved in cases when a girl presents as younger and less developed as she would then be less likely to face such judgment:

“ *Because I caught myself [thinking] when a child comes to me for that assessment and preparation meeting, I feel relieved when I see it's a real child, without secondary sexual characteristics, and then I realized I'm concerned about how other participants will look at a girl who came in a shirt where her stomach is showing, or who has bigger breasts than me, or whatever. Then I realized there is room [for education]... (JP)*

Front-line workers also reflected on victim-blaming narratives being reinforced within families. Some parents, for example, attributed abuse to how their daughters dressed, spoke or socialized, suggesting that girls were somehow 'provoking' the perpetrators.

Data from the interviews also indicated how children are commonly held responsible for avoiding abuse through their behaviours and actions, rather than holding perpetrators accountable. A prosecutor described a case in which community members, including parents and professionals, questioned whether the sexual act was consensual, based on the girl's age, appearance or behaviour:

“ *That's one extreme case, because the mother didn't believe the child when she said that she was raped by her stepfather, because it was a 16-year-old girl, beautiful, developed, everything and everyone was like... The stepfather was much younger than the mother and everyone suspected that it was consensual. I realized I was the only one who believed that girl. The prosecutor believed her too, but the social worker from the Centre directly told the girl: 'Your mother doesn't believe you, and neither do I (...).' That's the hardest thing for me when I see that, that somehow everyone either feels sorry for the perpetrator, but somehow they don't side with the child who was obviously raped. (JP)*

2.2 VICTIM-BLAMING ATTITUDES

Professionals stressed that these attitudes are not isolated but systemic, embedded within broader patriarchal structures. They explained that in many communities, sexual abuse remains a taboo subject and disclosures are often met with minimization, disbelief or blame directed at the child. One social worker pointed out that while progress has been made in shifting public attitudes, the change has been gradual and patriarchal attitudes remain widespread.

Data from the interviews also indicated how children are commonly held responsible for avoiding abuse through their behaviours and actions, rather than holding perpetrators accountable.

2.3 TABOOS AROUND SEXUAL ABUSE

A prominent driver of victim-blaming attitudes in Montenegro is the strong taboo around sex and sexuality. Interview data consistently highlighted how conversations with children about sex remain difficult for adults and are generally avoided or silenced altogether. This taboo around sex shapes not only how abuse occurs, but also how children understand and respond to it, ultimately discouraging open and honest dialogue within families, schools and communities.

This lack of dialogue is compounded by limited access to comprehensive sexuality and relationships education. According to the survey findings, only 48 per cent of children in Montenegro reported receiving some form of formal or informal sex education.³⁸ While education alone cannot prevent (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse, it can play a critical role in helping children understand consent, recognize abusive behaviours and feel empowered to set boundaries. Without these foundations, harmful norms are left unchallenged, reinforcing stigma, victim-blaming and silence. This makes it easier for perpetrators to exploit children's lack of knowledge and harder for children to recognize or disclose abuse.

Interview participants explained how this taboo is not only about sexuality itself but also about protecting family reputation and social standing. As the young man explained:

“

Again it's that taboo moment, it's a tribal way of thinking where people are not seen as individuals but are seen through their surname, and then the wrongdoing of one person is seen as the wrongdoing of that entire family (...) people somehow still decide to cover it up and live, they think they can remain functional in everyday life but again it surely doesn't sit well with them. The fact that they're okay within four walls, as long as society doesn't discover it, our honour is preserved, some performative form of behaviour (...). (YP)

”

This highlights how disclosure and reporting are discouraged not only by shame but also by fear of bringing dishonour to one's family or community.

Justice professionals echoed this, noting that even when children may be willing to share information, parents or relatives may oppose disclosure or reporting because of the stigma attached to sexual abuse. As one professional explained:

“

You sometimes have a child who consents to give some information, however you have parents who do not consent. It comes down to the community in which we live. This is still some kind of taboo topic. (YP)

”

In such settings, perpetrators benefit from and can also further exploit social norms and taboos that foster silence around sexual abuse, knowing that they can prevent children from speaking out. By leveraging stigma, shame and fear of blame, perpetrators can manipulate children into compliance. Examples included threats to expose the child's interactions with the perpetrator, especially in cases where the child had shared sexual content, or to tell parents and peers about the abuse. Such threats are powerful precisely because they draw on prevailing attitudes that stigmatize children's sexuality and may frame them as responsible for the abuse.

Taken together, these findings show how taboos around sexuality create conditions where abuse is hidden, disclosure and reporting are discouraged and children are left unsupported. Societal conversations need to shift to place responsibility solely on perpetrators and ensure that children feel safe to speak out without fear of bringing shame on themselves or their families.

³⁸ This term is used to mirror the term used in the survey.

2.4 HOW DOES AGE INFLUENCE TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

Children's age can shape how tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse unfold and are understood. Among the 12-to-17-year-olds surveyed, older children reported considerably higher rates of abuse. While 2 per cent of 12-year-olds had been subjected to some form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, this was the case for 25 per cent of 17-year-olds.

Importantly, this does not necessarily mean that younger children are less likely to be affected. Rather, older children may have been more likely to recognize abusive situations or felt confident enough to disclose them in the survey.

An analysis shows that while older children spend more time in digital spaces, this does not increase their likelihood of being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse or other forms of online harm. This may sound counter-intuitive but is a consistent finding across over 20 countries in the Disrupting Harm study – time spent online does not seem to be a main driver of exposure to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.³⁹ Older children may be more exposed because they are at a point in life where they engage more with other people online and in person, have more freedom and agency, and start exploring romantic relationships and sexuality.

Despite the data suggesting that older children could be more exposed to certain forms of exploitation and/or abuse, Montenegrin criminal law does not always offer equal protection for these age groups. In fact, penalties for showing pornographic content to children, or inducing/using them to produce child sexual abuse material or “*pornographic performances*” are lower when the child is 14 or older.⁴⁰ This discrepancy stems from the fact that, while the Criminal Code defines a child as anyone under 18, it also uses the term “*minor*” to refer to children aged 14 to 17.⁴¹ Lower penalties apply to the two offences described above when they are committed against “*minors*”.

This disconnect is further exemplified by the fact that children aged 14 or over are excluded from legal protections against online grooming;⁴² likely because Montenegro sets the age of sexual consent at 14.⁴³ However, basing the scope of grooming offences solely on the age of sexual consent overlooks the reality that older children can be manipulated and coerced for sexual purposes in the digital space, leaving them at heightened risk of harm. Eliminating distinctions in the severity of penalties and closing gaps in protection so that tech-facilitated sexual offences apply equally to conduct targeting all children, regardless of age, are therefore essential to ensure that no age group is left less protected.

³⁹ UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti, *Childhood in a Digital World: Screen time, skills and mental health* (UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, 2025). Available at: www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/childhood-digital-world.

⁴⁰ Montenegro, *Criminal Code* (2003), arts. 211-1, 211-2, 211-4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, arts. 142-7, 142-8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, art. 211b.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, art. 206-1.

3. DISCLOSURE



3. DISCLOSURE

Disrupting Harm defines disclosure as a child conveying or attempting to convey that they are being or have been sexually exploited or abused.⁴⁴ Disclosure can take many forms: some children may speak explicitly about what happened, while others may express themselves indirectly through changes in behaviours, body language or other non-verbal cues.⁴⁵ Disclosure is not always deliberate; it can be accidental, partial or unclear, and is rarely a one-time event.⁴⁶ More often, it unfolds gradually as part of an ongoing process, shaped by the child's evolving sense of safety, trust and readiness.

This section of the report explores the factors that influence whether, how and to whom children in Montenegro disclose tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. It examines the people to whom children are most likely to disclose, the ways in which disclosure occurs, and the barriers that prevent it.

Understanding the circumstances around children's disclosures is essential to designing effective responses. This provides insight not only into how children themselves seek support, but also how families, peers and professionals can be better equipped to recognize and respond to signs of exploitation and abuse. Importantly, the study does not assume that children disclose abuse primarily to access formal mechanisms. Disclosure is often personal and complex, and may not lead to formal reporting.

Data on disclosure for this study come from multiple sources, including survey responses from children who reported being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse during childhood, front-line workers and justice professionals.

Of the 214 instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse reported among children aged 12 to 17 in the year prior to being surveyed, 59 per cent were not disclosed to anyone (N=120). In other words, in almost three out of five instances, children did not tell a parent, friend, teacher or any other trusted person about the abuse or exploitation. This means that the people from whom we hope children will seek help often remain unaware of the abuse.

⁴⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: Final Report, Volume 4 – Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse*, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), p. 22. Available at: https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_volume_4_identifying_and_disclosing_child_sexual_abuse.pdf.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

3.1 WHOM DO CHILDREN DISCLOSE TO?

When children in Montenegro did disclose tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, survey data indicate that the most common confidants were friends (20 per cent), followed by a brother or sister (9 per cent) and then their mother or a female caregiver (8 per cent). This suggests that children tend to turn first to those within their immediate social circle rather than to formal support systems.

Although interview data on disclosure pathways are limited, the young people who participated described disclosing to individuals they perceived as safe, understanding and emotionally supportive. Peers frequently emerged as key confidants, consistent with the survey findings. Interviews further illustrated how friends could offer empathy and reassurance, particularly when they had shared similar experiences or felt able to relate to what the child was going through.

However, disclosure that remained within peer networks rarely led to further action or formal intervention. This was especially the case when the abuse was normalized or perceived as ‘less serious’, such as receiving unwanted sexual content or when extortion attempts were dismissed or denied. A young woman described what happened when she confided in a friend:

“

I only told my best friend, she's the only one [who knows] today. Maybe I told one cousin and that's it, so nobody knows. My parents don't know, thank God, and they never will find out, hopefully. (YP)

”

Her account illustrates how disclosure can remain contained within peer relationships, providing emotional relief, but often without access to protection, accountability or support beyond the immediate social circle.

Taken together, these patterns highlight that disclosure is shaped not only by *whom* children confide in, but also by *when* and *why* they feel able to speak out. The following section explores these dynamics further, examining the circumstances under which disclosure occurs.

3.2 WHEN AND WHY DO CHILDREN DISCLOSE?

Disclosure is rarely immediate – it is often a prolonged and emotionally challenging process. Many children endure abuse for extended periods before reaching a point where they feel able or compelled to tell someone.

While survey data cannot reveal the reasons behind disclosure, interviews with young people subjected to exploitation or abuse, front-line workers and justice professionals provided important insights into what may support or prompt children to speak out.

In some cases, disclosure occurred only when the child reached an emotional breaking point. Interviews described feelings of distress and exhaustion after prolonged periods of blackmail, manipulation or escalating demands from perpetrators. Unable to continue meeting these demands, disclosure became a last resort. One front-line worker illustrated this dynamic in a case involving a 17- or 18-year-old boy:

“ (...) he established some kind of virtual relationship with an adult woman, they had sex over the internet, (...). And at one point she moved away and a man appeared. Our guy sees a man who tells him ‘OK, we’ve recorded all of this, everything you did’ (...) ‘everyone at your home will see this soon, in your class, everywhere you go, but everything can be OK if you pay us a certain amount of money’ – we’re talking about several thousand euros. (...) because he was making video games, he was able to earn some money, but it didn’t last long before he could no longer pay that blackmail, so when nothing more could be done, he told his family what was happening. (FW)

A young woman who was subjected to multiple incidents of tech-facilitated sexual abuse when she was under the age of 18 described the desperation she felt when manipulated sexual content of her was shared online and how this led her to reach out for help:

“ And at that moment I fell apart, (...) both this first time and this second time, it all caught up with me. Then I was so desperate that I contacted the Safe Women’s House, because they had posted that video on some like Tračara [Gossip girl] profile. (YP)

Another pathway to disclosure discussed by professionals involved children who, overwhelmed by the abuse, stopped complying with perpetrators’ demands in the hope that the situation would resolve on its own. Instead, this sometimes led the perpetrator to follow through on threats, such as distributing the child’s sexual content, resulting in humiliation, bullying or secondary victimization. A front-line worker described this cycle for a 13-year-old girl who had been in a relationship with a slightly older boy:

“ (...) he was sending her photos and video recordings, she was sending him video recordings. (...) When she upset him at one point, of course that recording was saved, and when a conflict situation arose, simply the desire to break up and leave that relationship, first came the blackmail that the recording would be sent, and it was done. The recording was sent through social networks, Snapchat too, and it reached, believe me, at the speed of light – children, adults, even children in lower grades. She was mocked... (FW)

Sometimes disclosure was not initiated by the child, but by people around them. Parents, siblings or peers noticed changes in the child's behaviour such as withdrawal, changes in their physical appearance or mood shifts that raised concern and prompted attention. These observations sometimes led to conversations, checking devices or other forms of intervention. A justice professional recounted a case in which a mother noticed changes in her daughter's behaviour:

“

She was (...) locked in her room at home and wasn't coming out. The mother became suspicious and somehow got hold of the phone, and that's how everything was discovered. (JP)

”

There were also instances of accidental discovery, where abuse was exposed unintentionally. In one case, a perpetrator physically approached the child's home, where the mother uncovered the situation. In another case a professional referred to how social services uncovered abuse through their work with a family.

Overall, findings in Montenegro as well as in other countries where this research was conducted highlight that many children disclose abuse under dire circumstances. Disclosure tends to be delayed until the harm escalates, the child is no longer able to cope with the perpetrator's demands or someone else notices warning signs. This highlights the limited enablers of disclosure compared with the many barriers children face.

Delays in disclosure also have profound implications for access to justice. In Montenegro, statutes of limitations – the period after which legal action can no longer be initiated for a criminal offence – typically range from 10 to 20 years for offences related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse,⁴⁷ depending on the sentence imposed. Importantly, this time is counted from the point when the child turns 18,⁴⁸ a positive provision that acknowledges the difficulties of disclosure during childhood. Yet the very existence of statutes of limitations risks shielding perpetrators from accountability: by the time the person subjected to abuse or exploitation is ready to speak out, the window for prosecution may already have closed. To truly protect children and uphold their right to justice, statutes of limitations for all sexual offences against children should therefore be abolished.

⁴⁷ Montenegro, [Criminal Code](#) (2003), art. 124.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, art. 125-3.

3.3 BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

Children often face a range of systemic, social and personal barriers that prevent them from speaking out about abuse. Both survey and interview data highlight key barriers, including whether children recognize abuse, their perception of seriousness, feelings of shame, social norms around violence and sexuality, and fears about other people's reactions.

Awareness and perceived seriousness

The most commonly reported barrier to disclosure in the survey was that children did not think the abuse was serious enough to disclose (21 per cent). This finding suggests that many children struggle to recognize certain behaviours as abusive or do not view them as serious enough to warrant help-seeking, perhaps due to a normalization of violence in society.

Interviews also pointed to a widespread lack of recognition of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, linked to limited understanding of what constitutes abuse and the specific dynamics of digital interactions. As one front-line worker explained, when children do not recognize violence, especially online, they may not understand its seriousness:

“

It should be brought closer to children through workshops and games – how they can recognize that they're victims, that they can end up at risk, that they can be exposed to both peer violence and online violence and domestic violence, and that such things shouldn't be acceptable. (FW)

”

Several professionals emphasized that many children lack the tools to understand the boundaries of consent, coercion and manipulation in digital spaces.

Participants also noted that some forms of online violence have become so normalized within peer groups, in the media and on digital platforms that children often do not recognize them as serious. Service providers and justice professionals described how aggressive, sexualized and hostile communication has become a normalized part of interactions among young people. Behaviours such

as teasing, joking at someone else's expense, or sending unwanted sexually suggestive messages are dismissed as 'typical peer dynamics', rather than recognized as harmful. This normalization was also reflected in survey data with the barrier of not caring enough to tell anyone about the abuse accounting for 19 per cent of instances.

The young man who participated in an interview described how his peers viewed receiving unwanted sexual images or propositions:

“

(...) it's become so normalized that I come and tell my straight friend, he says, 'Well, even I, who am a straight guy, get such messages from gay guys'. I go to my girlfriends, and I can't even talk to them about it anymore, they've become so desensitized to it that it's just part of everyday life, like 'forget about it', they've moved past it so much that they can't lower themselves to that level, it doesn't touch them, they've become so callous about it. (YP)

”

Such comments reflect broader social attitudes in which certain harmful behaviours may be downplayed or normalized and perceived as insignificant or even as common aspects of social interactions.

The combination of a lack of awareness of what constitutes tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, along with a normalization of harmful behaviours, can significantly influence whether children disclose. If children do not see a situation as abusive, or if they view it as 'normal', they are unlikely to seek support.

These findings raise concerns in relation to safeguarding and education systems in Montenegro, suggesting that while some education on online harms exists ([see section 6](#)), it may not be comprehensive or consistently implemented across all settings, as reflected in previous sections of this report. Addressing this gap requires comprehensive sexuality and relationship education that helps children understand the different forms abuse can take, both online and in person. Education should also build skills around healthy relationships,

communication, boundary setting, consent and recognizing coercive and manipulative behaviours. Equipping children with these tools is essential to help them navigate interactions and relationships, and to build confidence in seeking help when something goes wrong. Adults in turn need to learn to recognize signs of abuse and how to respond to disclosures in a manner that makes children feel heard and supported, without placing any blame or responsibility on the child.

Children should never be held responsible for the abuse they endure – regardless of whether they interacted with the perpetrator, voluntarily shared sexual content or were manipulated into doing so. A child is never at fault. Yet, prevailing societal attitudes often shift the burden of responsibility onto those subjected to exploitation and abuse rather than perpetrators, reinforcing silence and self-blame. Addressing these narratives requires broader societal change: communities must move away from stigmatizing children and create safe, supportive environments where accountabilities lie solely with those who perpetrate abuse.

Shame, guilt and fear of judgment

According to survey data, feeling embarrassed (20 per cent) and not wanting anyone to know what happened to them (16 per cent) were also among the most common reasons provided by children for not disclosing tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. These feelings are closely tied to the social taboos around sex and sexuality in Montenegro, described by professionals and children in interviews, which discourage open discussion around these topics and silence children, even in situations of exploitation or abuse.

Feelings of shame were evident in children and young people across different forms of abuse – whether receiving unwanted sexual content, being coerced into producing sexual material or having sexual content distributed without consent. However, according to some professionals, self-blame was especially pronounced in cases where children perceived themselves as having taken action or ‘participated’ in the abuse.

A young woman who had her sexual content distributed online without her consent reflected on how she internalized the stigma and labels imposed on her by her peers. She described how the social judgment reshaped her own sense of identity:

“

But my main problem was that I myself (...) just like others were convinced, I convinced myself I am what they're saying. (...) Somehow, I was already thinking: 'Aha, well they're already saying that, that's already who I am, like nothing new', which was not true (...) I was labelled, I accepted my label, thinking I'm doing great. (YP)

”

Over time, the internalization of stigma led her to feel undeserving of support or understanding. Believing she had lost her ‘innocence’, she no longer considered her parents as a source of support, concluding that she had forfeited her right to seek their help.

This tendency towards self-blame was also visible in the language used by young people subjected to abuse, who often framed it in terms of responsibility, asking “*What did I do...*” (YP) or “*Why me?*” (YP). The interviews highlighted children’s beliefs that their physical appearance, clothing or behaviour had triggered the perpetrator’s actions. Children felt that if they had interacted with the perpetrators, especially if they had produced and shared sexual content with them, they were at fault for the subsequent abuse.

Shame and guilt also arose from other forms of abuse that did not involve producing or sharing sexual content. Feelings of guilt and embarrassment were described by young people themselves and professionals in cases where girls had their images digitally altered and shared online, children were targeted in extortion attempts and in the case of a boy who was photographed naked while sleeping as part of ‘a game’.

3.3 BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

Many children also avoided disclosure because they feared judgment, blame or stigma from those in their social network. Narratives by young people in interviews revealed how they often assumed responsibility for protecting their parents and family from shame or other negative views.

One young woman expressed concern that her parents would blame themselves if they learned about the abuse she was subjected to, which in turn deepened her own feelings of guilt and failure:

“

I would be uncomfortable because I already know they would first ask themselves why I did that. I mean, they probably wouldn't say anything to me, but still, I just know they would think like: 'Where did we go wrong with you?' I don't want them to know, simply. (YP)

”

Front-line workers described how children may hesitate to disclose when they anticipate dismissiveness, criticism or misunderstanding, underscoring the need for stronger family- and community-based support systems. Children feared that, instead of being met with support, they would be judged, punished or blamed for the abuse to which they had been subjected. These fears often reflect the broader victim-blaming attitudes in society that place responsibility on children rather than perpetrators.

The fear of being judged, blamed or stigmatized highlights the critical need to equip professionals and parents with the knowledge and skills to respond constructively to disclosure. Children should not hesitate to confide in their networks out of fear of criticism, blame, punishment or shame. Nor should they feel responsible for protecting their parents or family's reputation at the expense of their own safety and well-being. Building a culture of open dialogue, empathy and belief in children is essential to end these fears and to ensure that disclosure is met with support rather than further harm.

4. REPORTING



4. REPORTING

In the context of Disrupting Harm, formal reporting refers to disclosures made to law enforcement authorities, social workers or helplines. The survey data showed that less than 1 per cent of disclosures by children were made through these formal channels, with only one child reporting directly to the police. When asked why they did not report through these formal avenues, more than half of the children responded, “don’t know” or “other”.

As discussed in previous sections, children may not recognize that they have been subjected to abuse, nor do they necessarily understand that what they were subjected to was illegal or something they could report to the police or other authorities.

Children often rely on their families to access justice, yet stigma, fear and lack of trust in institutions leave many unable or unwilling to do so.

4.1 BARRIERS TO REPORTING LINKED TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

A significant barrier to formal reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse arises from the close link between procedures and parental involvement. Under Montenegrin law, children are generally required to submit criminal complaints through their legal representative,⁴⁹ typically a parent or caregiver. Although children aged 16 to 17, may in exceptional circumstances, file a complaint independently,⁵⁰ the system largely assumes parental mediation as the primary route to access justice. This legal framework could pose a significant barrier to reporting, especially when the perpetrator is a family member or when shame and stigma discourage children from disclosing the abuse to their parents.

In the interviews, young people described their fear of their parents finding out about the abuse as a decisive factor for not reporting. The young man explained:

“

And reporting to the police would be a big deal and I knew it would affect my parents, that I wouldn't be able to handle it myself and I would worry about my freedom. Like would my parents be even more, let's say, tense, my mother has those moments of paranoia, worry, if we're not physically there, in her sight, then she always imagines some horrible things, and so I didn't want for that reason to add more anxiety. (YP)

”

In the survey, 63 per cent of parents and guardians responded that they would report to the police if their child was subjected to sexual harassment, abuse or exploitation. Data collected by INTERPOL also show that most cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse reported to the police originate from family members, while a much smaller proportion are initiated by children themselves.

This pattern may suggest a relatively high level of awareness and willingness among families to intervene. However, it also underscores children's dependence on their immediate support networks to access reporting channels. In situations where abuse occurs within the family, this dependency can severely limit children's ability to seek help, meaning many cases never reach the authorities.

⁴⁹ Montenegro, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2009), art. 53-1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, art. 53-2.

4.2 TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

While data in relation to trust in institutions were limited, interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse during childhood highlighted how perceptions of law enforcement could affect reporting. While none of the young people interviewed reported the abuse to the police, some discussed in general terms how they believed the police would dismiss their reports or fail to investigate if they did report such abuse. The young man said:

“

Surely if I went to some official or police officer... (...) I know that quite often some second level of victimization happens, in the sense someone comes, they laugh, in the sense they relativize it: 'Ah forget that, you know how much of that we have, and someone sent you a message'. (YP)

”

A young woman made a similar point expressing how she believed reporting to the police would be futile:

“

I've never reported anything personally. I just know that people who did weren't getting adequate help at all on that issue, that it was just like: 'Come on, leave me alone, I have better things to do'. (YP)

”

This lack of confidence in the police as a supportive and protective institution even if only based on perception, could influence children's reluctance to report.

4.3 EXISTING REPORTING MECHANISMS

At present, Montenegro lacks a dedicated online portal for children to report tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, although one is planned under the Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2025–2029.⁵¹

In the meantime, children can seek help through existing avenues. These include the 24/7 National SOS Line for Victims of Domestic Violence, established in 2015 by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and coordinated by the SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence Nikšić. The line is staffed by trained professionals with specialized knowledge in gender-based violence and women's human rights, providing information about rights and the forms of assistance available, and supporting the person in their contact with the police and relevant local services.⁵² In addition, children can call the 24/7 National Child Helpline (116 111) to report violence and abuse anonymously. While the helpline does not function as a formal reporting platform, it provides a confidential first point of contact, with trained counsellors offering support and guidance.⁵³

According to data collected by INTERPOL, very few cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are reported through civil society organizations or helplines, indicating gaps in the visibility, accessibility and perceived reliability of these services.

Overall, the low rate of formal reporting reflects a combination of legal, procedural and social barriers. Children often rely on their families to access justice, yet stigma, fear and lack of trust in institutions leave many unable or unwilling to do so. Expanding accessible, child-friendly reporting avenues – and building institutional trust through consistent and empathetic responses – will be vital to improving children's access to formal protection.

51 Montenegro, *Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2025–2029* (2025), p. 45.

52 Smolović, Ivana, *Case Study: National SOS helpline for victims of domestic violence – Country: Montenegro* (Iris Network, 2016) p. 3. Available at: <https://iris-see.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/web-Montenegro.pdf>; Women Against Violence Europe, *#WAVEmembers: SOS Hotline for Women and Children Victims of Violence Nikšić, Montenegro* (Women Against Violence Europe, 2020). Available at <https://wave-network.org/wavemembers-sos-hotline-for-women-and-children-victims-of-violence-niksic-montenegro>.

53 Dom Bijela (accessed on 22 September 2025). [SOS Telefon za djecu i mlade](#).

4.3 EXISTING REPORTING MECHANISMS



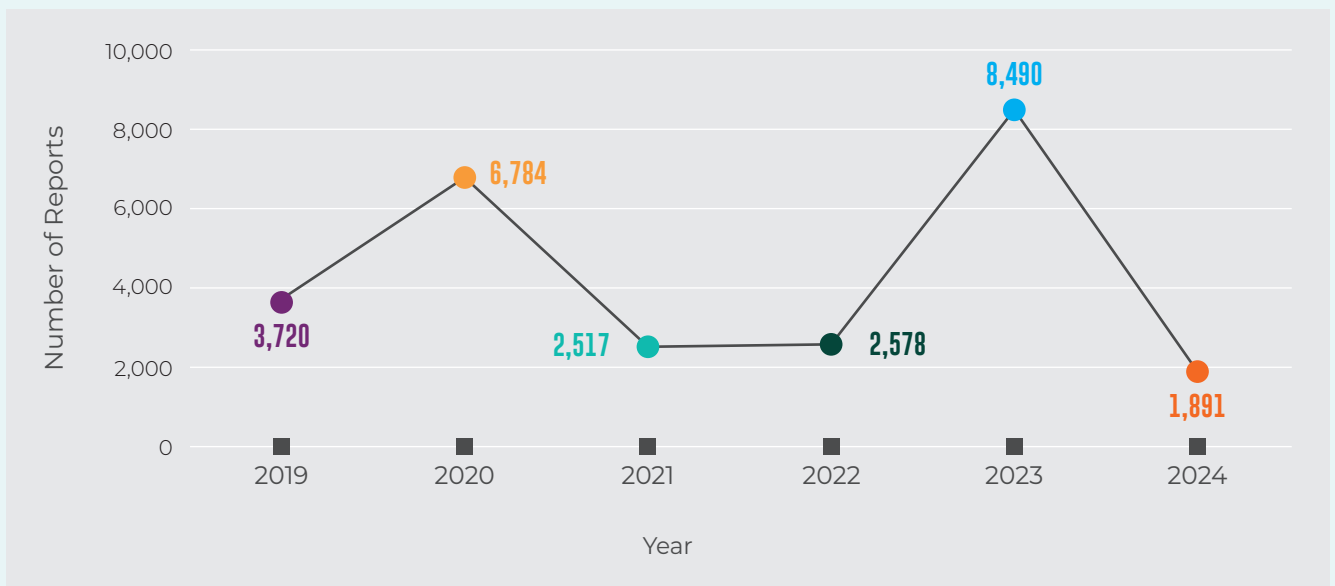
Spotlight: International detections and referrals of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children CyberTipline Reports

Reports developed and disseminated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in the United States of America, known as CyberTips, shed some light on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse taking place in a country.

United States legislation requires electronic service providers (i.e. technology companies) based in the country to report suspected cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to NCMEC, which then forwards them to law enforcement via a CyberTip report. However, it should be noted that these reports only provide a partial picture of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse globally, as they only capture content reported on social media platforms that comply with this legislation.

Montenegro was connected to the CyberTip Management Tool in 2023 and has received NCMEC reports directly since then.



The number of CyberTip reports sent to Montenegro between 2019 and 2024 shows sharp fluctuations rather than a steady trend. Reports rose significantly from 3,720 in 2019 to 6,784 in 2020, likely reflecting the surge in online activity during the pandemic, before dropping sharply in 2021 and stabilizing at a lower level in 2022. In 2023, the reports spiked dramatically to 8,490, the highest figure in the period, followed by a steep decline to 1,891 in 2024, the lowest figure recorded. Overall, the data suggest that reporting volumes are highly volatile and shaped by external factors.

- Enhanced detection and reporting mechanisms: platforms such as Meta, Google and others have improved their artificial intelligence -driven detection of child sexual abuse material, leading to higher numbers of reports.
- Underreporting: It is also possible that the significant increase in reports in 2023 partially reflects underreporting in previous years. As awareness, detection mechanisms and the ease of reporting improve, cases that might have gone unreported in the past may now be captured, contributing to a rise in numbers.

Conversely, the drop in reports in 2024 should not be viewed as a reduction in actual harmful activity, but rather the result of two major industry-wide changes. In 2024, NCMEC implemented a 'bundling' system to streamline reporting. Previously, every individual share of a specific illegal file could trigger a separate report. Under the new system, electronic service providers can group thousands of related instances into a single 'bundle' report. While the total number of reports has decreased, the actual number of unique files and incidents remains at record highs. Furthermore, Meta (Facebook and Instagram), which historically accounts for the vast majority of NCMEC reports, rolled out default end-to-end encryption across its messaging services throughout 2024. Because end-to-end encryption prevents service providers from scanning the content of private messages for illegal material using automated hashing tools, the volume of automated flags therefore dropped.

5. IMPACT



5. IMPACT

Sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood can have a profound and long-lasting impact on children's physical, psychological and social well-being. Research has documented a wide range of short- and long-term consequences.⁵⁴

While evidence on the broader impacts of child sexual exploitation and abuse is growing, understanding of the specific impact when such abuse is facilitated through technology remains limited.⁵⁵ Gaining a deeper understanding of its impact is essential to ensure that support and services adequately address the needs of children affected.

This section does not attempt to quantify the impact. Instead, it centres the voices of the young people who shared what they had been subjected to in interviews. Their accounts, alongside insights from professionals, illustrate how tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse can impact children's lives in complex and lasting ways.

The findings presented in this section draw primarily on interviews with the four young people, reflecting the particular forms of abuse they were subjected to, including receiving unwanted sexual content, non-consensual sharing of sexual material and distribution of digitally manipulated sexual images. Survey data are used where helpful to add additional information.

It is important to recognize that the impact of sexual abuse and any path forward is deeply personal and varies for each child. These impacts are shaped by multiple factors, such as the child's age at the time of abuse, their relationship to the perpetrator, the duration and nature of the abuse and their experiences of disclosure and reporting.⁵⁶

54 See, for example: Helen P. Hailes and others, "Long-term outcomes of childhood sexual abuse: an umbrella review", *The Lancet Psychiatry*, vol. 6, No. 10 (October 2019), pp. 830–839, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(19\)30286-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30286-X); Lane Strathearn and others, "Long-term Cognitive, Psychological, and Health Outcomes Associated With Child Abuse and Neglect", *Pediatrics* vol. 146, No. 4 (September 2017), e20200438, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-0438>; Kristen Springer and others, "The long-term health outcomes of childhood abuse. An overview and a call to action", *J Gen Intern Med*. vol. 18, No. 10 (October 2003), pp. 864–870. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1525-1497.2003.20918.x>. PMID: 14521650; PMID: PMC1494926; 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*. vol. 5, No. 4 (February 2024), pp. 253–262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26318318231221948>.

55 See, for example: Elly Hanson, "The Impact of Online Sexual Abuse on Children and Young People", in *Online Risk to Children*, Jon Brown, ed. (Wiley Online Library, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118977545.ch6>; Felipa Schmidt and others, "Understanding the prolonged impact of online sexual abuse occurring in childhood", *Front. Psychol.* vol. 14 (October 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1281996>; Amanda Champion and others, "Examining the gendered impacts of technology-facilitated sexual violence: A mixed methods approach." *Archives of sexual behavior*, vol. 51, No. 3 (April 2022), pp. 1607–1624, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02226-y>.

56 Fiona Vera-Gray, "Key Messages from Research on the Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse" pp. 3–4, (Barkingside, Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.47117/XHGX7049>.

5.1 SHOCK AND CONFUSION

Young people and professionals described a range of immediate reactions to the abuse, including shock and confusion.

When sexual content was shared without their consent or their photos were digitally manipulated to create sexual content, young people spoke about struggling to comprehend what was happening and why they had been targeted. Many described feeling confused and overwhelmed in the moments and days following the abuse.

A young woman whose photos were digitally altered to create sexual content and shared on Instagram said:

“Well, I was shocked. All I could think was what if someone sees this.” She continued: “Somehow, one picture started circulating, mine, then another, then another and then as a child I was really confused, like what do I do, what am I going to do now?” (YP)

Discomfort, fear and distress were also common responses, varying in intensity depending on the context of abuse. A young woman who was groomed by an adult posing as a 16-year-old boy when she was 13 described how her fear escalated as the pressure to share sexual content increased:

“ (...) I started to realize that it was uncomfortable for me and that I would simply get scared every time I saw a notification from him. (YP)

Another young woman recounted the despair she felt after discovering that digitally manipulated sexual content of her had been shared online:

“ And at that moment I fell apart (...) I was so desperate that I contacted the Safe Women’s House, because they had posted that video (...) that Tračara [Gossip girl] profile was opened, and now everyone knew about it. (YP)

These accounts illustrate how shock and confusion were often accompanied by a profound sense of helplessness and loss of control, particularly when the abuse involved online dissemination of sexual material beyond the child’s reach or ability to stop it.



5.2 FEAR, ANXIETY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Young people described a range of emotional and social reactions following tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. These reactions reflected both the immediate shock of what had happened and ongoing anxiety about how others would perceive them if the abuse became known.

For some, fear stemmed from the perpetrator's actions, such as receiving messages, threats or reminders about what had occurred. As expressed in the quote above, a young woman who was pressured into sexual acts online said that she was afraid every time she saw a notification on her phone that the perpetrator had messaged her.

The young man explained how he felt unsafe and exposed when an adult who had messaged him online claimed to have seen him in person. After creating a Facebook account around the age of 11, he received messages from an older man saying things like "Oh, pretty boy" or "How are you, doll?". Initially, he did not pay much attention to these messages. However, when the man wrote that he had seen him in the neighbourhood, he explained:

“

(...) I felt that this was crossing that sense of security of mine.

Clinical researcher: You had some feeling?

Yes, like it was violated and that it wasn't nonchalant (...) like a moment of feeling insecure, you lose your sense of privacy in your own neighbourhood. (YP)

”

In other cases, fear was linked to the possibility of exposure – that parents, peers or the community would find out. Young people described heightened anxiety around how others would react, worrying about judgment or blame.

The survey data also showed that children who were subjected to any form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse reported noticeably higher levels of anxiety. On average, their anxiety scores were about 10 percentage points higher than those of children who were not subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year.⁵⁷

One young woman who had her sexual content shared online without her consent described how the embarrassment impacted her:

“

And I was really ashamed for someone to see, to literally show my face (...). I asked my parents (...) I wanted to transfer, to attend elementary school in [town where she spent the summer]. That was an idea I had from before, so it wasn't suspicious to them. Basically, that idea was rejected and I had to return to Podgorica. I had to go to the square, alone, to buy books [for the start of the school term]. So, I remember that well, I know I was preparing myself for hours before going out, because I knew I would run into someone. (YP)

”

These accounts illustrate how shame and fear is often internalized and can profoundly affect children's sense of belonging and safety in their own communities. Fear of judgment can lead to isolation, avoidance and in some cases, long-term disruptions to children's lives.

The same young woman discussed how she later realized how her sexual content existing online might impact her in the future:

⁵⁷ Estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals. Average differences are reported for anxiety. Anxiety scores range from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating more frequent or intense symptoms.

5.2 FEAR, ANXIETY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

“

(...) and [I] realized what things exist about me and that this is enough for me to never succeed in the things I was thinking about and I'm so afraid (...) if I'm successful in anything, in any career that involves the public. Like, if I go into politics, someone can just see that, forward it, I mean release it, and it's all over. (YP)

”

The harm caused by the online dissemination of sexual material involving children is profound and enduring. Children suffer from the anxiety tied to the permanence of such content and the lack of control over its circulation can create ongoing stress, fear and a persistent sense of constraint over their lives.



Spotlight: Safeguards and gaps in platform regulation for preventing the dissemination of child sexual abuse material

This account highlights the profound and lasting harm caused by the online dissemination of sexual content and underscores the need for strong safeguards that ensure its swift removal, while noting that permanent removal remains technologically difficult. The obligations on internet service providers and online platforms that exist in Montenegro are largely reactive. **The Electronic Commerce Law** requires providers of information society services (a term that encompasses both internet service providers and online platforms) to inform the competent authorities immediately upon becoming aware of a reasonable suspicion that users are engaging in illegal activities through their services.⁵⁸ However, they are not required to monitor the data they store, transmit or make available, nor are they obliged to actively seek out illegal activities by users.⁵⁹ This limits early detection of child sexual abuse material, potentially allowing it to circulate unchecked until someone reports it.

Compounding this issue, providers can only be held liable for illegal third-party content, including child sexual abuse material, if they fail to promptly remove or block access to it once they become aware of its illegality or receive an order to do so from a court or other competent authority.⁶⁰ Furthermore, there is no explicit obligation to establish clear, accessible and user-friendly mechanisms for reporting illegal content, leaving such mechanisms to the discretion of individual platforms, potentially denying children a clear path to trigger content removal.

The **Draft Law on the Protection of Minors in the Digital Environment**, submitted to Parliament on 28 January 2026, introduces strict age-based access rules, prohibiting platform use by children aged under 13 (with exceptions for platforms adapted to younger children and used with the consent of a guardian) and requiring verified parental consent for users aged 13 to 16, supported by reliable age-verification systems that cannot rely on self-declaration.⁶¹ Digital platform providers are required to conduct regular risk assessments addressing, among other things, systemic risks arising from the design of the digital platform or related to exposure to harmful content or abusive interactions, as well as risks linked to artificial intelligence. They must then implement concrete mitigation measures that can be subject to review by a dedicated supervisory authority.⁶² The Draft Law also imposes operational obligations to protect children from sexual harassment, abuse, threats and other harmful interactions through blocking tools, age-appropriate reporting mechanisms and safeguards against repeated harassment.⁶³

58 Montenegro, [Electronic Commerce Law](#) (2004), art. 22.

59 *Ibid.*, art. 22.

60 *Ibid.*, arts. 18–20.

61 Montenegro, [Draft Law on the Protection of Minors in the Digital Environment](#) (2026), arts. 8–10.

62 *Ibid.*, art. 11.

63 *Ibid.*, art. 14.

It further requires platforms to detect and prevent grooming and to respond immediately by restricting communications, preserving evidence, reporting to the authorities and notifying legal guardians.⁶⁴ Artificial intelligence platform providers must also ensure the rapid detection and removal of artificial intelligence -generated or manipulated sexually explicit content involving children.⁶⁵ Non-compliance is subject to fines ranging from €1,000 to €20,000.⁶⁶

Overall, the Draft Law represents a shift from a framework based primarily on notice and removal towards one that places greater emphasis on prevention, structured risk management and child-specific protective obligations for digital platform service providers that offer services to users in Montenegro, regardless of where the provider is established or registered. However, it does not yet fully embed safety-by-design requirements, for example default privacy settings.

64 Ibid., art. 15.
65 Ibid., art. 17.
66 Ibid., art. 21.

5.3 FURTHER MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS AND WIDER PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS

Professionals emphasized that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse can be highly traumatic, with long-term impacts on children's mental health.

Front-line workers described cases of self-harm, suicidal ideation and attempts, and post-traumatic stress disorder, often linked to guilt, social rejection and stigma following the abuse.

A social worker described a case where a girl was extorted for money over sexual content that had been filmed without her knowledge, explaining how *"the girl couldn't sleep, she started self-harming, she cut her hair really short."* (FW)

A psychologist noted the severe impact also caused by fabricated material:

“

Experience shows that whatever the situation is, whether someone faked your profile and you actually never made such recordings, or you really made those recordings consciously or under some pressure, victims suffer equally. I, even though I'm a psychologist, expected that those whose profiles were hacked would say 'Well that's not me, I don't feel good, but it's OK', however we had only one case where the person wasn't thinking about suicide (...). (FW)

”

The survey data complement these findings. Children who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were six times more likely to report suicidal thoughts or behaviours, and 11 times more likely to report self-harm in the past year, compared with children not subjected to such abuse.⁶⁷

Beyond the immediate mental health outcomes, the interviews with young people highlighted how the impacts of abuse can extend over time and shape broader aspects of their lives, including social relationships, behaviour and decision-making.

One young woman who had been subjected to various instances of tech-facilitated abuse reflected on how it had affected her life in the years that followed. She described navigating bullying and peer rejection without professional support. She explained:

“

I also think that's some kind of trauma response. (...) but first I suffered by shutting myself off completely, and then somehow I expressed it later by being the most arrogant person I've ever met. That went on for a long time and I don't remember that period, but actually much worse was what I was doing to myself back then. That's when I started, that's when I had a terrible crowd around me (...) who were doing drugs and stuff like that. (...) I would fight with my mother, get into trouble, leave home. That's when I started seeing this guy, who recently got out of prison. (YP)

”

Overall, the mental health impacts of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are complex, enduring and deeply intertwined with social and emotional experiences, extending well beyond the immediate aftermath of abuse.

⁶⁷ Estimates are based on smaller subsamples and should be interpreted with caution due to wide confidence intervals. Binary outcomes (e.g. self-harm, suicidal thoughts and behaviours) reflect adjusted relative risks. All models control for age, gender, parental education and urban residence, and change to: Estimates should be interpreted with caution due to wide confidence intervals, indicating limited precision in the magnitude of the association, although the direction remains consistent. Binary outcomes (e.g. self-harm, suicidal thoughts and behaviours) reflect adjusted relative risks. All models control for age, gender, parental education and urban residence.

6. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES



6.1 POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The previous sections of this report shed light on the broader societal and systemic factors that enable violence against children. A strong understanding of these underlying factors is crucial to effective prevention. This section outlines some existing initiatives in Montenegro as well as key considerations for existing and new prevention efforts based on the data.

The Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2025–2029 identifies significant gaps in the current prevention landscape in Montenegro. It notes the lack of schools and community-based programmes addressing online risks, as well as limited initiatives to educate children about their rights and protection mechanisms.⁶⁸ Planned measures include expanding the “*My value and Virtues*” programme to all schools to reduce peer violence through workshops and discussions that also address its online dimensions⁶⁹ and developing two new prevention programmes to be piloted in three regions by 2026.⁷⁰

Importantly, the Strategy commits to developing targeted programmes and mechanisms for preventing tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse based on recommendations from the current Disrupting Harm study, with €600,000 allocated for implementation by 2026. However, the Strategy does not specify the concrete actions or partnerships that will underpin these programmes.⁷¹ Ensuring that future prevention measures are evidence-based, multisectoral and responsive to children’s realities will be critical to their success.

As well as prevention, the Strategy also prioritizes capacity-building for relevant professionals to ensure the effective implementation of standard operating procedures for intersectoral cooperation in working with children subjected to violence and exploitation. The goal is to improve identification, reporting and support for anyone subjected to violence, including exploitation and abuse facilitated by technology. One of its operational objectives focuses on creating safe spaces and strengthening children’s resilience, including online. Other key planned actions include establishing a web platform for reporting inappropriate online content and strengthening the capacity of the Cyber Incident Response Team in Montenegro to respond to tech-facilitated violence against children.⁷²

The Education System Digitalization Strategy 2022–2027 also places a strong emphasis on prevention. Under its Objective 3.3 on “*Improvement in safe use of technology*,” the Strategy foresees the development of educational materials for children on cybersecurity, including infographics and videos, as well as awareness-raising activities focused on identifying potential online risks. The Strategy further provides for the development and accreditation of training programmes for information technology teachers, pedagogical experts, psychologists and educational institution managers, including self-guided training courses that are accessible not only to education staff but also to parents.⁷³

These policy commitments build on existing digital infrastructure within the education system. One relevant initiative is the Digital School Platform, developed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation with UNICEF support.⁷⁴ The platform includes educational materials addressing online violence and is designed to support schools and teachers in raising awareness and strengthening students’ digital safety and resilience.

68 Montenegro, [Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2025–2029](#) (2025).

69 See e.g. Montenegro Bureau of Education Services and UNICEF (2018). [Development of Social and Emotional Skills in Primary School My Values and Virtues Curriculum Guide](#), Podgorica.

70 Montenegro, [Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2025–2029](#) (2025).

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.; UNICEF Montenegro, personal communication (2025).

73 Montenegro, [Education System Digitalization Strategy 2022–2027](#) (2021), pp. 55–56.

74 Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation. (n.d.) [Digital School Platform](#).

6.2 THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IN PREVENTION

Despite such frameworks and previous initiatives, many professionals described prevention efforts as sporadic and primarily focused on children's online behaviour rather than the underlying social and structural conditions that allow abuse to occur.

As in other countries involved in the Disrupting Harm study, schools emerged as the main entry point for prevention activities. Front-line workers and justice professionals described how prevention typically takes the form of occasional workshops or lectures, often initiated in response to incidents of violence, rather than as systematic, long-term programmes. One justice professional reflected on this, stating:

“

I mean in our country, there's no prevention for anything, no preventive activities. I think this requires broad preventive activity. So, we somehow consider it prevention if we've told children in some class: 'There are dangers on the internet', but it has to be systematic education (...) for children from the earliest ages, teaching staff, meaning parents, citizens, everyone. (JP)

”

Professionals also noted that while schools are well positioned to facilitate prevention efforts, their potential remains underutilized. They emphasized the need to include these topics in the formal curriculum through interactive, age-appropriate methods such as workshops or games. One social worker said:

“

I would like there to be a special subject at some point during the adolescent period where these kinds of topics would be discussed (...). It should be brought closer to children through workshops and games – how they can recognize that they're victims, that they can end up at risk, that they can be exposed to both peer violence, online violence and domestic violence and that such things shouldn't be acceptable. (...) If we don't have that moment when children are made aware, then they won't even know to report it (...). (FW)

”

While these initiatives are important, the focus on individual awareness risks overlooking the root causes of sexual exploitation and abuse and the mechanisms that facilitates their continuation, such as harmful gender norms, social stigma and lack of community-level accountability. By emphasizing children's responsibility to recognize and report abuse, this approach can place the burden of prevention on the child, rather than on the systems and adults meant to safeguard them.

As several professionals pointed out, prevention cannot rely solely on children's ability to protect themselves. It must also engage parents, caregivers and adults who regularly interact with and support children – such as teachers, school psychologists and pedagogues, sports coaches, youth workers and others in positions of trust – alongside communities and digital platforms, to create safer online and in-person environments. As well as schools, professionals highlighted the role of Centres for Social Work, youth clubs and civil society organizations in conducting project-based prevention activities. However, such efforts are often dependent on external funding and implemented in the short term, limiting their sustainability. Law enforcement was also cited as being involved in prevention, though its role was not clearly described.

The survey data underscore the fact that parents play a crucial role in children's online safety. Nearly half (47 per cent) of parents reported receiving information about supporting their child's internet use from family and friends, followed by schools (37 per cent), television (24 per cent) and social media (10 per cent). However, almost one third (28 per cent) said that they receive no information at all. These findings suggest that while schools are a key channel for reaching families, more coordinated efforts are needed to provide parents with reliable guidance and support networks.

6.3 SHIFTING THE FOCUS FROM CHILDREN TO PERPETRATORS: UNDERSTANDING PERPETRATORS' STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

The data reveal several patterns of how perpetrators operate. Even though their tactics may change over time, these findings remain an important starting point to identify pathways for systemic prevention and response.

Unwanted contact online: Professionals and young people frequently described children receiving sexual images or videos, or unwanted messages requesting sexual talk or acts. These incidents ranged from one-off abusive interactions to ongoing, sustained efforts to build familiarity, test boundaries and gradually desensitize children to sexual content. In some cases, they formed part of broader grooming processes or ongoing sexual exploitation and abuse.

These accounts point to safety gaps across social media, instant messaging and online gaming platforms, where perpetrators can easily contact children via their online accounts. Prevention efforts frequently focus on teaching children to block or report perpetrators. However, these measures typically occur after abuse has already occurred and do little to prevent perpetrators from creating new accounts or targeting other children. Platform design features – including weak age verification, default open messaging and ease of account re-creation – create structural opportunities for repeated abuse. This raises broader questions about why responsibility for managing risk is so often placed on children rather than on platforms implementing stronger preventive safeguards.

Creation of fake profiles: Qualitative data show how perpetrators take advantage of the anonymity provided by the internet to reach out to children, gain their trust and build a relationship with them. Fake profiles are used to misrepresent age, gender or identity in order to initiate and sustain contact. While awareness-raising among children is important, rapid technological developments, including generative artificial intelligence, make verifying identity increasingly difficult, even for adults. Prevention strategies that rely primarily on children detecting deception are therefore insufficient in an evolving digital environment.

Threats to share a child's sexual images or videos: Threatening to distribute sexual images or videos emerged as a common tactic used to secure compliance and silence. The growing accessibility of generative artificial intelligence tools has further lowered the barrier to creating realistic sexualized images of children, whether based on real images or entirely fabricated. Debates that focus narrowly on whether content was self-generated risk shifting attention away from coercion, power dynamics and perpetrator responsibility. Such framings can reinforce self-blame and undermine safeguarding efforts.

These developments underscore the need for robust platform detection and rapid take-down mechanisms, alongside consistent, timely and child-centred law enforcement responses to both real and artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material.

Taking advantage of social norms and stigma: Interviews with professionals and young people highlighted how rigid social norms and taboos around sexuality contribute to silence. Perpetrators leverage anticipated shame, fear of punishment and concerns about family reputation to deter disclosure. In many cases, children internalize blame, particularly when sexual images are involved, reducing the likelihood that they will seek help.

Creating better conditions for safe disclosure therefore requires more than awareness-raising; it demands active efforts to challenge harmful norms and ensure that children are met with understanding, protection and support rather than disbelief or punishment.

Taking advantage of power dynamics: Perpetrators also exploit power imbalances to secure compliance. This includes leveraging age differences, authority positions, emotional dependency within romantic relationships, financial incentives, gifts, deception or direct threats. Not all perpetrators are unknown adults; peers, including current or former partners, can also engage in coercion and image-based abuse. The normalization of sexual pressure within relationships can obscure abusive dynamics and make them harder to identify and challenge.

Across these patterns, responsibility is frequently displaced onto children – who are expected to block, report, verify identities or manage shame – while structural safeguards remain insufficient. Effective prevention must therefore move beyond child-focused risk management towards systemic accountability, stronger platform protections, changing norms and early disruption of perpetrator tactics.

Prevailing societal attitudes often shift the burden of responsibility onto those subjected to exploitation and abuse rather than perpetrators, reinforcing silence and self-blame (...) communities must move away from stigmatizing children and create safe, supportive environments where accountabilities lie solely with those who perpetrate abuse.

7. CROSS-CUTTING BARRIERS IMPACTING SERVICE PROVISION TO CHILDREN



7. CROSS-CUTTING BARRIERS IMPACTING SERVICE PROVISION TO CHILDREN

This section examines cross-cutting barriers identified by professions that affect the availability and the quality of services available to children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. It focuses on systemic challenges that cut across institutions and shape service provision more broadly.

As young people who participated in interviews had very limited contact with institutions or services, this section relies primarily on interviews with professionals. As a result, it offers only limited insight into the experiences of children subjected to exploitation and abuse, leaving an important gap.



7.1 LIMITED HUMAN RESOURCES AND EXCESSIVE CASELOADS

A central barrier identified by professionals was the shortage of human resources and excessive caseloads within public institutions.

A social worker described her situation at the Centre for Social Work:

“

And despite all those obligations I have, I have my 50 cases, but (...) the case manager, has 120, 130 each. We all do everything, so it's not like we're specialized to work on violence cases, to do checks, contacts... (...) There are very few of us and we work afternoons and weekends when needed, to finish what we can't get to. (FW)

”

Professionals described how high caseloads limit their ability to dedicate sufficient time to individual cases and often force prioritization based on perceived severity, resulting in more limited support for some children. Understaffed teams also struggle with heavy administrative demands, which further reduce time available for direct work with children and families. Administrative burdens were particularly highlighted in schools and Centres for Social Work.

Justice professionals similarly noted that heavy caseloads in prosecutor's offices contribute to lengthy procedures and delays in investigations. INTERPOL's analysis of law enforcement capacity also points to understaffing as a factor in delayed case resolutions. While cooperation between the State Prosecutor's Office and law enforcement, particularly the Cyber Crime Department, was described as strong, staffing shortages across law enforcement units affect their ability to engage consistently with prosecutors and respond to the growing number of cases.

A prosecutor further described the impact that staff shortages may have:

“

You all know how many problems we have with capacity. In the police too. Then they'll assign an inspector who isn't specialized in minors, so he won't do it properly. And the same can happen with us, and it does happen that we never have enough people and when needed someone else has to jump in. (JP)

”

Concerningly, this could mean that child-centred practices may not always be consistently implemented.

7.2 NEED FOR FURTHER AND CONTINUOUS TRAINING AND CAPACITY-BUILDING

Front-line workers and justice professionals emphasized the importance of specialization and continuous training for those working with children subjected to violence. Judges and prosecutors handle both child and adult cases, which limits their ability to maintain specialization in child-sensitive approaches. Professionals stressed that specialization is essential for safeguarding the best interests of the child.

While some considered existing training opportunities sufficient, many stressed the need for ongoing capacity-building. Priority areas included recognizing signs of abuse, building trust with children and developing practical skills for applying legislation and guidelines. Justice professionals also underscored the value of multidisciplinary training. Such training was seen as improving understanding of institutional roles, strengthening collaboration and enhancing personal skills.

As one prosecutor noted:

“

(...) the best training courses are those organized for representatives of different institutions, where we all participate together – police, prosecutors, courts, Centres for Social Work and lawyers – because that way we get a comprehensive picture of how it should look. (JP)

”

Participants also highlighted the growing need for knowledge and understanding of digital technologies and their rapid evolution. INTERPOL's analysis identified a particular need for specialized training for prosecutors to understand both the technical aspects of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, and its psychological harm. Training on social media platforms was seen as crucial to understanding online grooming, coercion and manipulation.

Professionals expressed concern that law enforcement struggles to keep pace with technological developments, particularly when perpetrators act anonymously. Combined with heavy workloads, this can result in cases being shelved or discontinued. As one social worker explained:

“

However, in this case there was no specific perpetrator, actually they couldn't be found or there wasn't capacity somewhere to find them, they [law enforcement] closed that case as far as they were concerned, so they didn't get very involved. Usually that's how it goes, their job is to detect some things if that doesn't exceed their capacities, but usually all these cases regarding some perpetrator end up in a drawer after a while. (FW)

”

Justice professionals also noted limited capacity to intervene proactively. One judge described a case in which a man was reported for photographing children at a beach, leading to the discovery of over 3,000 photos and videos of child sexual abuse material:

“

My colleagues from the police, you can't blame them, but I simply say, it's so hard to catch someone until something happens, so we're always behind.”

Interviewer: “I understand, meaning that if he hadn't approached those girls, if he'd only been taking pictures, no one would have ever discovered it?”

Judge: “That's right, literally like that.” (JP)

”

INTERPOL data show that some cases are identified through proactive investigations, demonstrating positive steps. However, current investigative capacity and technological resources remain insufficient to detect cases at scale. Expanding specialist training, investing in advanced digital tools and stronger international cooperation could significantly enhance proactive detection.

7.2 NEED FOR FURTHER AND CONTINUOUS TRAINING AND CAPACITY-BUILDING

Professionals also stressed the need for training to counter societal biases and ensure trauma-informed responses. A professional from a civil society organization emphasized the need to address victim-blaming, particularly when sexual content was initially shared voluntarily:

“

They [professionals in the justice system] perfectly understand cases when the victim is photographed without their knowledge, filmed, however it happened, but in all other cases they're ready to shift the blame onto the victim. So, their education is really needed (...). (FW)

”

The same professional highlighted how minimization of harm can have devastating consequences:

“

(...) she's a pupil who walks to school and on that path (...) her best friend and four other guys intercepted her; they attacked her, tried to take her clothes off, and one of them was filming. (...) in that recording of her body you can see like one glimpse of her back (...) you can't even see her butt, nothing explicit like that, but she was also on the edge of suicide. I'm telling you this because people's tolerance thresholds for that kind of violence vary greatly, and that's especially important to explain to people like judges and prosecutors – some would say 'Come on, what happened to you?' or 'What's your problem?' (FW)

”

Concerns about training and capacity-building were raised across institutions and sectors.

7.3 FURTHER STRENGTHENING OF MULTISECTORAL COLLABORATION

While many professionals discussed strong working relationships and effective collaboration, they also pointed to a need for more formalized multisectoral coordination.

Several professionals noted that solutions often depended on individual commitment rather than systemic processes. Positive outcomes were frequently attributed to professionals going beyond their formal responsibilities. At the same time, poor coordination, lengthy administrative procedures and limited resources were seen as undermining timely and comprehensive responses.

To overcome these barriers, professionals described relying on personal contacts to accelerate processes. A school pedagogue explained:

“

Every connection I made with another institution was through informal channels, to find people I could cooperate with, and I don't need anything personal, just professional. You have to build a personal relationship with people from other institutions so that they'll show up, so that they'll make time for you when there's an urgent situation. (FW)

”

While the small size of Montenegro can facilitate informal networking, reliance on personal relationships highlights the need for clearer protocols and formalized collaboration mechanisms. Some professionals observed gradual improvements, but many felt that institutions still operate largely within their own mandates, with limited coordination.

Professionals also referred to programmes intended to improve intersectoral cooperation, but these were typically project-based and lacked sustainability.

Encouragingly, the Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2025–2029 allocated €450,000 to establish a Barnahus Centre in Podgorica for the whole of Montenegro.⁷⁵ The Barnahus model consists of child-centred, multi-agency centres where children subjected to violence, including (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, can access all the services they need from specially trained professionals under one roof. Under the Strategy, a road map will also be developed to revise existing regulations, protocols and standard operating procedures in line with the model, promote a multisectoral approach and identify training needs for relevant professionals.⁷⁶ If effectively implemented, this reform has the potential to create a more consistent, coordinated and child-centred response across institutions.

⁷⁵ Montenegro, [Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2025–2029](#) (2025), p. 47.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

8. PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT



8. PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Montenegrin legislation guarantees the right to psychosocial support for children subjected to domestic violence,⁷⁷ including sexual violence.⁷⁸ Yet there is no equally explicit provision extending this right to all children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse occurring outside the domestic violence context. However, **the Law on Social and Child Protection** considers children who were subjected to abuse or exploitation a “*specially protected*” category,⁷⁹ which entitles them to targeted social and child protection support, including therapeutic, socioeducational and other services.⁸⁰

None of the young people who participated in the interviews had sought or received psychosocial support in relation to the tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse to which they were subjected. As a result, the direct voices of those subjected to exploitation and abuse on access to psychosocial services and quality of such services is absent from this report. Information on the provision of psychosocial support therefore relies primarily on interviews with professionals.

Professionals explained that, following an initial response, children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse are typically referred to psychosocial support services. These services are most commonly provided through the public health system – such as the Centre for Early Development or local health centres – as well as through the Centre for Social Work or through civil society organizations. In describing these pathways, professionals identified several challenges that affect the availability, continuity and specialization of psychosocial support for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

⁷⁷ Montenegro, [Law on Domestic Violence Prevention](#) (2010), art. 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, art. 2.

⁷⁹ Montenegro, [Law on Social and Child Protection](#) (2013), art. 4-1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, art. 60.

8.1 BARRIERS IMPACTING THE PROVISION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL SERVICES

Professionals consistently pointed to a lack of psychosocial services, particularly outside the capital and major urban areas. As one social worker said:

“

Psychosocial and socioeducational services, counselling and therapy aren't developed. I mean not anywhere. Maybe sporadically, in Podgorica and Nikšić, but in the north, there are no licensed service providers. (FW)

”

Professionals also highlighted a shortage of specialists trained to work with children and young people, especially those subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Professionals working in institutions that provide psychological services further emphasized that existing services are unable to meet demand. They described difficulties in ensuring regular and continuous support due to limited staffing.

A professional from the Centre for Early Development explained:

“

Counselling support is offered, treatments are offered if the case is a bit more severe, as much as we are able to due to the reduced number of staff. We somehow adapt to the patient so that it's intensive, every week at least one meeting. If that can't work, then at least one meeting every 15 days. (FW)

”

Similarly, a psychologist described how overburdened services affect the continuity of care:

“

Now I'd like to take the opportunity to say it would be much more useful if we had better continuity of monitoring. Given how busy we are, these aren't regular appointments, but simply in such cases – regardless of whether sexual harassment is involved as an additional factor or not – there should be a more frequent monitoring schedule. (FW)

”

Professionals discussed how psychosocial services provided through the Centre for Social Work including counselling and, in some cases, psychotherapeutic support. However, the qualitative data do not allow for a comprehensive overview of service availability, especially given regional differences. While some social workers described limited services being provided, others emphasized their absence. Professionals explained that children and their families are often referred to civil society organizations or private psychologists due to gaps in public provision. These referrals may create logistical and financial barriers, particularly for families outside urban areas, and may limit the continuity of care.

Overall, these accounts point to a general lack of accessible and specialized psychosocial services for children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The concentration of services in urban areas poses additional challenges for families in other parts of the country, while reliance on private services risks excluding those unable to afford ongoing care.

While relevant to a smaller number of cases, multiple front-line workers also highlighted the lack of psychiatric services for children in Montenegro. Outpatient psychiatric care was said to be available through a single institution, but with no facility providing inpatient psychiatric hospitalization for children with severe mental health needs.

As one social worker explained:

“

Regarding Montenegro specifically, we have such a situation that we absolutely do not have a single specialized institution that deals with children who develop either some post-traumatic stress disorder or any clinical disorder, nor for their hospitalization, except in extreme cases when they are in some agitated state, until some level of stabilization [is achieved]. (FW)

”

For children and young people with severe mental health issues, the lack of domestic inpatient services presents a significant risk. Referral to services abroad may further exacerbate distress by separating children from their families and support networks.

Overall, accounts from professionals highlight significant barriers to ensuring that children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse receive timely, specialized and continuous psychosocial care.

Front-line workers also emphasized the importance of family involvement in a child's recovery. As one social worker noted, comprehensive support requires working not only with the child but with the family as a whole, addressing family dynamics, peer relationships and the wider social environment.

Professionals further highlighted the limited availability of psychosocial support for family members. Interviews indicated that such support is often provided on an ad hoc basis, rather than through systematic programmes. Access to support frequently depends on the perceived severity of the case, assessments of family functioning, socioeconomic status and families' persistence in seeking help.

8.2 SOCIAL STIGMA AROUND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

As seen in the sections on disclosure and reporting, social stigma surrounding sexual abuse can significantly influence whether children and families seek support or services.

In addition, professionals highlighted limited awareness of mental health services and persistent stigma associated with mental health care. A school pedagogue explained:

“

I sometimes suggest to a parent that they find a psychotherapist to work with the child when I notice there's some problem that's really holding them back. They immediately [say]: 'Does he need to take pills?' They can't distinguish at all what a psychologist is, what a psychiatrist is, (...). They want [their children] to stay with me, then I say I'm not trained for that. (FW)

”

She further noted that resistance increases when referral to specialized health services is required:

“

When there's a problem and you refer them to the Health Centre where there's an Institute for Mental Health, it's hard to convince them, they won't accept going there (...) They could get a much broader spectrum of help there but they don't want to because it's a small community. (...) someone will see you there, they'll definitely see you - that stigma. (FW)

”

These accounts suggest that lack of knowledge about available services, combined with stigma surrounding mental health, may deter children and families from seeking psychosocial support, even when such services are needed.

9. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES



9. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

This section examines the response by the justice system to cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. It focuses on how institutions and professionals address children's needs, protect them from further harm and uphold their rights, particularly through the use of child-centred procedures. It also assesses the extent to which the legal framework provides for such procedures.

As none of the young people interviewed had direct experiences with law enforcement or the justice system, the findings presented here draw primarily on interviews with professionals. When interpreting these results, it is important to acknowledge the missing voices of children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.



9.1 CHILD-CENTRED JUSTICE SAFEGUARDS IN CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

The **Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings**, adopted in 2011, is the main law governing child-centred justice in Montenegro. It requires that cases involving child victims or witnesses of crime be handled by professionals with specialized knowledge of applicable procedural rules. Throughout the proceedings, these professionals must also consider the child's age, personal characteristics, level of education and overall circumstances,⁸¹ reflecting the principle that the child's best interests should guide all decisions.

The law also establishes safeguards to mitigate revictimization risks arising from repeated or insensitive questioning. As a rule, child victims or witnesses of crime can only be interviewed by a public prosecutor and a judge with special knowledge of child rights and of the same gender, in a special room equipped with technical devices for audiovisual recording.⁸² Questions from the defence and other parties must be asked through the prosecutor or judge, rather than directly to the child.⁸³ Repeat interviews are allowed only in exceptional cases and for justified reasons.⁸⁴

Additionally, the authorities conducting the proceedings must prevent any contact between the child and the accused within official premises,⁸⁵ including visual contact during suspect identification.⁸⁶ Confrontations between children under the age of 14 and the accused are prohibited.⁸⁷ For children aged 14 or older, confrontations may take place unless the child is in a particularly "*difficult psychological state*" due to the nature or consequences of the offence.⁸⁸ This distinction can result in weaker and more discretionary protections for older children.

In court proceedings, the **Criminal Procedure Code** further requires special measures to protect children's mental well-being, including the possibility that the child is interviewed with the assistance of a psychologist or another expert when necessary.⁸⁹ Children are also entitled to testify from a separate room, with only the judge and a court reporter present. The prosecutor and other parties can observe from another location and may submit questions for the child, but only with the court's permission.⁹⁰

Safeguards are also in place to protect the child's privacy and well-being. Criminal hearings in Montenegro are open to adult members of the public by default.⁹¹ However, the court may, either on its own initiative or at the request of the parties, close all or part of the hearing to protect the interests of a child.⁹² When a child is to be examined as a witness, the court can also exclude the public for the duration of the examination.⁹³ Child victims or witnesses of crime must be removed from the courtroom once their presence is no longer required.⁹⁴

Professionals discussed the importance of this law as providing safeguards for children subjected to (sexual) exploitation and abuse, and expressed strong commitment to implementing child-centred procedures designed to minimize additional trauma. Most of the justice professionals also highlighted efforts to reduce the number of times that children are interviewed and their exposure to multiple institutions to limit retraumatization, though several interviewees acknowledged that this is not always possible.

81 Montenegro, [Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings](#) (2011), art. 92.

82 *Ibid.*, arts. 92, 93-1.

83 *Ibid.*, art. 93-4.

84 *Ibid.*, art. 93-1.

85 *Ibid.*, art. 94-3.

86 *Ibid.*, art. 96.

87 *Ibid.*, art. 94-1.

88 *Ibid.*, art. 94-2.

89 Montenegro, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2009), art. 113-4.

90 *Ibid.*, art. 113-5.

91 *Ibid.*, art. 313.

92 *Ibid.*, art. 314.

93 *Ibid.*, art. 347-3.

94 *Ibid.*, art. 347-4.

9.2 STATEMENTS TAKEN BY THE POLICE

Under the Criminal Procedure Code, police officials must inform the prosecutor where there are grounds to suspect a crime. They may then, independently or under the direction of the prosecutor, take steps to identify the perpetrator and gather relevant information.⁹⁵ While these provisions may appear to allow police to interview children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation or abuse, this should never occur, as only prosecutors and judges have the legal authority to hear child victims of crime under the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings.⁹⁶

Professionals participating in interviews generally indicated that this legal framework is followed in practice, with cases involving children being forwarded to the juvenile prosecutor, and interviews taking place at the prosecution stage. However, some professionals reported that children may, in practice, still be interviewed by law enforcement.

“

What we advocate for, and what many police inspectors (...) and we ourselves insist on, is that no statement should be taken from the child, especially if the child has been sexually abused, in front of the police officers, but rather from the person the child confided in and who came to report the case. That usually contains enough details for the prosecutor to decide what kind of criminal act it is and whether to initiate criminal proceedings. However, many prosecutors still order that the child be interviewed. (JP)

”

While information from the interviews in relation to this is limited, professionals explained how prosecutors may request that the police interview the child when it is unclear whether the incident constitutes a criminal offence, including when parents or caregivers cannot provide sufficient information or evidence. As explained by one participant, tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse may only involve the child and the perpetrator, making corroboration difficult. Regardless of the rationale underpinning it, this

raises concerns, as the law does not regulate police questioning of children. Thus, there is no guarantee that interviews will be subject to legal safeguards aimed at reducing the risk of revictimization.

In practice, professionals described efforts to mitigate potential harm during police interviews. They reported that the Centre for Social Work is usually involved, with social workers present during the process. They also stressed how questions should be kept to the minimum necessary to establish whether a criminal offence occurred and to identify the perpetrator. However, participants noted that initial contact with the police may not always be handled by officers trained in child-sensitive approaches. This situation is likely to be compounded by shortages of qualified professionals, as outlined previously ([see section 7](#)).

This raises concerns that children may be exposed to insensitive or repeated questioning prior to a forensic interview by a judge or prosecutor, carrying risks of harm despite the largely preliminary nature of such interactions. Indeed, several participants noted that statements taken by the police cannot be used in later judicial proceedings. A prosecutor reflected on this as well as the multiple times a child may have to recount the abuse they have been subjected to before the forensic interview:

“

The law prescribes that a child can be questioned twice, exceptionally. Now, you have that formal-legal perspective, which considers that questioning of a child means before the prosecutor's office and before the court, and that can happen twice at most. However, from my professional standpoint, questioning of a child is also when a parent questions them and half the relatives (...) and a teacher, and a doctor, and the Centre for Social Work, and the police, although none of that constitutes evidence in criminal proceedings, except for the medical report, (...) So, some children have been questioned countless times by the time they arrive at the prosecutor's office. (JP)

”

⁹⁵ Ibid., arts. 257-1, 257-2.

⁹⁶ Ibid., art. 262.

The same professional further stated that, under these circumstances, police officers should not take statements directly from children subjected to sexual abuse. While this position reflects the applicable legal framework, the findings outlined in this section indicate that implementation remains inconsistent in practice. This points to the need for clearer understanding and training among both law enforcement and prosecutors regarding their respective roles and responsibilities under the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings, particularly at the initial stages of case handling.

Procedural delays not only impede accountability but also undermine access to protection, support and care, highlighting the need to identify and address systemic bottlenecks that hinder the timely delivery of justice in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

9.3 FORENSIC INTERVIEWS

Alternatives to forensic interviews

Prosecutors interviewed emphasized the challenge of balancing the need to collect sufficient evidence with the responsibility to protect the child's well-being. They discussed how cases involving children require particular sensitivity, dedication and attentiveness, and that interviewing children requires a child-centred approach focused on their needs, protection, recovery and empowerment.

They noted that interviews with children should be avoided, explaining that by relying on other available evidence, including interviews with parents or caregivers as witnesses or to corroborate evidence, interviewing the child may not be needed at all.

One prosecutor explained how even when interviews contained oversights or missing information, they would seek to avoid re-interviewing the child, citing the potential for further harm:

“
Even if I miss something, the mistake is mine, I have to deal with it, because I'd rather... somehow try to correct that mistake in another way than correct it by questioning the minor again. (JP)
”

Multisectoral cooperation, particularly with schools and the Centre for Social Work, was identified as essential in receiving information from other sources to limit the need to interview children.

The Professional Support Service

The Professional Support Service, a multidisciplinary team composed of professionals from various fields, including social workers, psychologists and special educators, plays a key role in supporting child victims or witnesses of crime during forensic interviews.⁹⁷ The team prepares the child for the interview, assesses whether they are able and willing to testify, determines the appropriate interview approach and conducts it using audiovisual equipment.⁹⁸ The Professional Support Service also identifies needs for additional psychosocial support and facilitates referrals to other services.

Under the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings, the involvement of a professional service such the Professional Support Service in interviews is strictly mandatory, but only when the child is under the age of 14.⁹⁹ For older children, this requirement can be bypassed if it is deemed contrary to the interests of the proceedings or of the child, which could lead to uneven levels of protection depending on the discretion of the authority conducting the proceedings.¹⁰⁰

This age-based distinction was reflected in practice. One professional interviewed discussed a case in which the involvement of the Professional Support Service was considered unnecessary because the child was over 14:

“
She was over 14 years old, so there was no need for [name of professional from Professional Support Service] to conduct an interview for that assessment of how credible the child is (...). (JP)
”

97 Irina Urumova and Maja Velimirović, *Feasibility Study for Barnahus in Montenegro* (UNICEF Montenegro and Council of Europe, 2022), p. 10. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/barnahus-feasibility-study-montenegro-eng/1680ab5c16>.

98 Ibid., p. 11.

99 Montenegro, *Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings* (2011), art. 93-3.

100 Ibid., art. 93-2.

Beyond the formal age threshold, another professional noted that the need to systematically involve the Professional Support Service is not uniformly recognized across institutions:

“

The law stipulates that it is done with the help of an expert and professional service, but we always get asked whether or not the support and the presence of a professional service is necessary. (JP)

”

This suggests that, despite the availability of specialized support aimed at reducing the risk of revictimization during forensic interviews, its use remains uneven and dependent on individual discretion, further constrained by legal limitations. Making the involvement of the Professional Support Service of the Prosecutor’s Office mandatory whenever a child is heard, regardless of age, and ensuring that clear protocols and adequate resources are in place to apply this requirement systematically, could help ensure more consistent and effective protection. This view was echoed by a lawyer, who emphasized the importance of systematically involving the Professional Support Service to ensure child-sensitive interviewing practices:

“

I also proposed [the default involvement of the Professional Support Service] during the recent amendment to the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings, and [the professional at the Professional Support Service], of course, always insists on that, because you prepare a child in a certain way for questioning, and it’s much easier for the them to communicate through [the Professional Support Service] than for someone to come directly and ask them questions, which very often allows even questions that aren’t related to the offence but are traumatic for the child. (JP)

”

Process and audiovisual recording

If the Professional Support Service of the Prosecutor’s Office is involved, interviews of child victims of crime take place in specially adapted rooms designed to be child-friendly and equipped with audiovisual recording equipment. The child is interviewed by a representative of the Professional Support Service, with other professionals, such as the prosecutor and defence attorney located in another room and following the interview with the help of the audiovisual equipment. The professional from the Professional Support Service receives the questions from the prosecutor or defence attorney through headphones and rephrases them in a way that is suitable for the child. The interview is recorded and then used in subsequent court proceedings.

According to one professional, however, only a minority of children are referred to the Professional Support Service and are interviewed using audiovisual recording equipment. As she said:

“

Although we have equipment in six prosecutor’s offices that enables that, well, still only a small number of children go through the criminal proceedings in that way. (JP)

”

This account suggests that the legal provisions aimed at protecting children during interviews are not being consistently implemented. While the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings allows interviews to be conducted at the child’s home or in another room or institution where the child is staying, regardless of whether technical equipment is available there, the wording makes it clear that this option is only to be used exceptionally when there are “justified reasons.”¹⁰¹

The availability of rooms and audiovisual recording devices was reported to be a barrier in some cases, since it is not available at all Prosecutor’s Offices. However, according to one professional, while

¹⁰¹ Ibid., art. 93-6.

9.3 FORENSIC INTERVIEWS

ensuring that equipment and separate rooms are available in all locations could further secure its use, the current situation should be possible to overcome by conducting the interview in an office where equipment is available, as distances are not far.

Participants from the Professional Support Service and prosecutors argued for the increased use of audiovisual recording equipment and recommended that the decision as to whether this procedure is used should not be based on the prosecutor's opinion.

However, it is important to note that the practice of recording forensic interviews has not yet been tested from a trauma-informed perspective for children and adolescents subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse that involved the use of digital technologies, including but not limited to cameras. While the use of recording is well intentioned, children and adolescents subjected to these types of abuse may have heightened sensitivity to being recorded or to the use of cameras by an adult. For some, 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. 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 children subjected to these forms of abuse on a case-by-case basis.

Cooperation between prosecutors and the Professional Support Service

In general, the prosecutors who participated in the interviews emphasized the importance of the Professional Support Service, its responsiveness and commitment, and having good communication and cooperation.

However, some examples brought up by participants, while not always pertaining specifically to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse but concerning other forms of sexual abuse, indicate that there is room for further capacity-building among prosecutors, particularly in relation to best practices for

interviewing children in a trauma-informed manner, understanding the role of the Professional Support Service and strengthening collaboration with the service.

One professional noted that insufficient time for joint preparation, such as preparatory meetings between the Professional Support Service and the prosecutor to agree on the interview approach and topics, can leave the Professional Support Service insufficiently prepared, which in turn may affect the interview with the child.

The same professional also explained how some prosecutors do not recognize the need for support from the Professional Support Service or understand its role as merely being present or acting as an interpreter during forensic interviews:

“

And we had cases (...) in the last year and the year before that, where the prosecutor entered the room for the conversation with the child and questioned the child themselves and only requested the passive presence of a representative from professional services, which is completely pointless. (JP)

”

However, she added that she had not observed any such situations in the current year.

Findings from interviews indicate that, while the Professional Support Service is formally part of child-centred procedures, its role has not always been consistently understood or respected in practice. Two of the professionals interviewed described instances in which prosecutors conducted direct questioning of children during forensic interviews, treating the presence of the Professional Support Service as passive or symbolic. Such interventions were observed to cause distress to children and risk undermining the protective purpose of specialized interviewing arrangements. At the same time, professionals noted that these practices appear to be declining, suggesting some improvement in recent implementation.

9.4 THE RIGHT TO FREE LEGAL AID

In December 2024, Montenegro amended its legislation to guarantee free legal aid for victims of sexual offences,¹⁰² thereby also covering children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse. The amendments further established that public defenders in proceedings involving children must be lawyers with at least three years of legal practice and have completed specialized training in child rights at the Judicial and Prosecutorial Training Centre.¹⁰³ Under the new rules, the same public defender must also represent the victim of a sexual offence in all related proceedings to ensure continuity of protection and to reduce the risk of retraumatization.¹⁰⁴

This reform marks a significant step forward, as prior to these amendments, children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse were not automatically entitled to free legal aid, with eligibility depending on their financial status.¹⁰⁵ In 2022, the Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children highlighted this shortcoming, urging Montenegro to ensure that all children subjected to sexual exploitation receive free legal assistance from lawyers with specialized training, without the need for case-by-case assessments.¹⁰⁶ The new provisions directly address these concerns, thus removing barriers to legal aid and ensuring it is provided by qualified lawyers.

Justice professionals noted the importance of providing public defenders to protect the best interests of children subjected to abuse, especially since children themselves and their parents or caregivers may have limited understanding of court proceedings. In particular, they emphasized the relevance of public defenders in cases where the child faces additional vulnerabilities or circumstances affecting the case, such as reduced cognitive capacity or a lack of adequate protection from their family.

Under the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings, the decision to appoint a public defender rests with the judge or the president of the panel handling the case, who may exercise this authority independently if they determine that it is in the child's best interests. While the public prosecutor and the guardianship authority can request such an appointment, the decision ultimately lies with the court.¹⁰⁷ Some professionals observed that public defenders are generally provided, although one participant suggested that this may depend on the prosecutor's discretion. Amendments to the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings that were under consideration as of February 2026 would require prosecutors, judges or presiding judges to systematically appoint legal counsel to children subjected to sexual violence, at the expense of the prosecution service or the court.¹⁰⁸ If adopted, these amendments would shift access to legal representation from a discretionary decision to a legal obligation, strengthening procedural safeguards for children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse.

Professionals explained how public defenders communicate regularly with the child and their guardians during court proceedings and may attend interviews or court hearings together with, or in lieu of, their legal guardian. However, some participants said that they do not see the role of the public defender as being significant and influential in practice, and that their support to the child is dependent on the individual's commitment. Individual prosecutors also mentioned that public defenders are not as familiar with the case as the prosecutor's office, limiting their ability to be meaningfully involved.

¹⁰² Bojana Malović, *Free Legal Aid in Montenegro: Progress, Challenges, and Recommendations*. (Podgorica, Akcija za ljudska prava – Human Rights Action (HRA), 2025), p. 5. Available at: www.hracion.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Free-legal-aid-in-Montenegro-4-7-2025.pdf.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ Montenegro, *Law on Legal Aid* (2011), art. 13.

¹⁰⁶ A/HRC/49/51/Add.1, p. 14.

¹⁰⁷ Montenegro, *Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings* (2011), art. 95.

¹⁰⁸ Montenegro, *Draft Law Amending the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings, art. 95(2)* (2023).

9.4 THE RIGHT TO FREE LEGAL AID

One lawyer referred to a case where the child and their parents were not made aware of their right to a public defender, explaining that:

“

(...) when they came to the inspector, they didn't think at all about having the right to have lawyers, they just went through that whole procedure at the police station, the boy gave a statement, his mother gave a statement, then the prosecutor determined that these were elements of a criminal offence. (...) only when this boy who was the injured party was supposed to be questioned, the mother found out in some everyday conversation, probably with friends, that he has the right to hire a lawyer and then she called me. (JP)

”

This reflects a broader systemic issue: while the Criminal Procedure Code requires prosecutors and judges to inform victims of crime of certain procedural rights (such as presenting or reviewing evidence, questioning witnesses and, in sexual offence cases, requesting to be heard by a judge of the same gender),¹⁰⁹ it does not impose a clear obligation on other authorities to inform victims of crime of their broader entitlements, including the right to free legal aid. This gap risks leaving children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse and their families unaware of their rights, weakening their ability to navigate the justice system.

¹⁰⁹ Montenegro, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2009), art. 58.

9.5 GENDER CONSIDERATIONS IN ASSIGNING PROFESSIONALS TO CASES RELATED TO CHILDREN

Professionals discussed children subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse being assessed or interviewed by a person of the same gender to create more trusting and comfortable circumstances (i.e. applicable to police, prosecutors, judges, legal representatives and health services). They explained how the applicable protocols provide that the prosecutor, legal representative and judge should be selected, giving priority to a professional of the same gender as the child.

While professionals generally perceived this to be positive and support the well-being and protection of the rights of the child, they highlighted some barriers to its implementation and related considerations. One of those barriers was the lack of female justice professionals, particularly judges. However, it was explained how this can be overcome through the use of an intermediary during questioning namely, a social worker or representative of the Professional Support Service.

Importantly, some justice professionals also pointed out that strict adherence to these protocols may not always be in the child's best interests. One prosecutor explained that selecting professionals based on their gender could lead to professionals with less experience or specialization handling the case, in particular considering the limited human resources and heavy workloads of professionals already impacting the availability of specialized professionals.

Additionally, it may not necessarily be in the best interests of a child if the perpetrator is of the same gender as the child, or if the child has a particularly close connection with a trusted person of the opposite gender. In such cases, a professional of the opposite gender may be more suitable, considering the individual child's circumstances and needs.

One prosecutor explained how this had been implemented in a case they had worked on:

“

So, we start from the assumption that a child will feel more comfortable – let's say a girl talking about something that happened to her in front of a woman. However, for instance, I had one specific case where the victim was a boy and the perpetrator was male, and in that case I received a recommendation from the representative of the Professional [Support] Service (...) that it would be advisable for the case to be handled by a person of the opposite sex from the perpetrator, meaning a woman should handle it. (...) Also, there was a recommendation that the child's attorney should be a female lawyer as well. (JP)

”

These accounts highlight the importance of systematic, individualized assessments that take into account the specific circumstances of each child, the skills and expertise of available personnel, and the child's own preferences when determining who should interact with them during legal proceedings. While the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings prescribes that interviews should be conducted by judges or prosecutors of the same gender as the child,¹¹⁰ the wording “as a rule” indicates that this requirement is not absolute and allows for flexibility where strict adherence would not be in the best interests of the child. In practice, such flexibility is essential and should be actively applied, with children – where appropriate – being asked about and supported in expressing their preference.

¹¹⁰ Montenegro, [Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings](#) (2011), art. 93-1.

9.6 PROTRACTED JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS

Montenegrin legislation states that proceedings related to child victims of crime shall be “expedited,” and instructs the authorities involved to “act expeditiously”.¹¹¹

However, while both justice professionals and front-line workers emphasized the importance of this principle and their efforts to uphold it, they also provided examples of where the justice process extended over long periods of time.

One social worker described how she had not received any information on a case in seven to eight months and how after this time it had still not been established whether there was a criminal case:

“
After that, we [the Centre for Social Work] sent a report, the police sent everything further, meaning further in the sense of investigating his laptops, (...) and it's such a long process, so simply it's reached seven to eight months and we still don't have any information, it hasn't even been qualified as whether it's a criminal offence, because all of that still hasn't been investigated. Now, why that is, I don't know. Whether it's a lack of some resources, services, I don't know (...). (FW)

Another example was provided by a lawyer where a case involving child sexual abuse material had been ongoing for over two years. In this case, the issue seemed to be in relation to whether the person subjected to the abuse and the perpetrator were children at the time of the abuse.

Taken together, these accounts point to shortcomings in the timely assessment of evidence, the determination of the age of a victim of crime at the time of the offence and the prompt legal classification of conduct, which in turn contribute to stalled investigations and prolonged uncertainty. In interviews, justice professionals also discussed the contradiction between the legal requirement that cases involving child victims of crime should be expedited and the lack of both human and material resources, including technological resources, necessary to adhere to this in practice.

One social worker pointed to the negative consequences of protracted criminal proceedings, including the risk of children losing trust in institutions they had initially turned to for support:

“
(...) it's very important for a victim to know that the perpetrators who put that victim at risk have been punished. (...) Now somewhere there perhaps (...) we're losing the victim's trust in institutions and in the work of institutions, given that such cases are being prolonged. So somewhere what we should improve as a state is that the urgency of proceedings precisely of this nature should be as short as possible, if that's achievable. (FW)

Overall, professionals explained how in the absence of a final court ruling, institutions are unable to act in a timely and appropriate manner, leading to serious and long-lasting consequences for children. This indicates that procedural delays not only impede accountability but also undermine access to protection, support and care, highlighting the need to identify and address systemic bottlenecks that hinder the timely delivery of justice in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

¹¹¹ Ibid, art. 5.

9.7 PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Montenegrin law provides for the protection of child victims or witnesses of crime, and of their families, when their testimony may endanger their life, health or physical integrity.¹¹² Potential measures include safeguarding their privacy during testimony, including through the use of pseudonyms or voice and face distortion devices,¹¹³ and broader witness protection mechanisms.¹¹⁴

While the Law on Witness Protection provides for physical protection, relocation or change of identity in such cases,¹¹⁵ it applies only to organized crime or offences punishable by 10 or more years in prison.¹¹⁶ This limitation may exclude children subjected to certain forms of (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse that do not meet these thresholds, such as showing “*pornographic content*” to,¹¹⁷ or inducing or using a child aged 14–17 to produce “*pornographic materials*” or “*pornographic performances*”.¹¹⁸ Further, this again raises the issue of uneven protection based on age, as younger children would potentially benefit from safeguards that older children might be denied. Moreover, these protective measures are only available when a child’s testimony is considered instrumental to proving the offence,¹¹⁹ which may not always be the case for tech-facilitated crimes where digital evidence plays a central role.

Courts in Montenegro can also impose “*surveillance measures*” on suspects. These can include prohibitions on leaving their residence, visiting specific areas or contacting certain persons, and can be monitored through electronic surveillance.¹²⁰ Judges can also issue restraining orders, prohibiting perpetrators of sexual offences against children from approaching certain persons or visiting specific locations for a period of one to five years.¹²¹ While removing perpetrators from their place of residence is also possible, this measure is allowed only in domestic violence cases,¹²² thereby excluding (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse committed by non-relatives.

Professionals discussed the implications for children and their families, as perpetrators may not be held in custody during criminal proceedings and, depending on the crime, may be back in the community after a short period. They also described how a lack of institutional protection and support can lead to situations where families feel compelled to relocate to avoid seeing or meeting the perpetrator in their local community. Referring to a specific case, one social worker explained:

“

If they are released, if they are somewhere near the victim, those are the first obstacles, (...) That fear [of reporting] is real (...) because it turned out here, for example, that the girl reported it (...) that man was released after 30 days while he’s the [closest] neighbour. They are 10 metres away as the crow flies, the balcony looks at their balcony and when we last spoke she told me: ‘I regret the day I reported that.’ (...) So now that family is practically forced to move from there. (FW)

”

The account above suggests that the protective measures outlined in legislation are not applied systematically, potentially leaving many children and their families vulnerable to intimidation and retaliation by perpetrators. This points not only to the need for more effective use of the safeguards already available under Montenegrin law, but also to the importance of expanding their scope to ensure that all children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse are eligible for protection, regardless of the specific offence. Strengthening both the application and coverage of these measures is essential to ensure that children are safeguarded throughout the criminal process and beyond.

112 Montenegro, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2009), art. 120.

113 *Ibid.*, art. 121.

114 *Ibid.*, art. 120-3.

115 Montenegro, [Law on Witness Protection](#), (2004), art. 27.

116 *Ibid.*, art. 5.

117 Montenegro, [Criminal Code](#) (2003), arts. 211-1, 211-4.

118 *Ibid.*, arts. 211-2, 211-4.

119 Montenegro, [Law on Witness Protection](#), (2004), art. 5.

120 Montenegro, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2009), art. 166.

121 Montenegro, [Criminal Code](#) (2003), art. 77a.

122 *Ibid.*, art. 77b.

9.8 ACCESS TO COMPENSATION

Access to compensation is an essential element of the right to justice for survivors, providing both recognition of and material redress for the harm they have suffered. Under Montenegrin law, any victim of crime may seek compensation by filing a property claim during criminal proceedings,¹²³ and/or by initiating a separate civil action.¹²⁴ In the case of a child victim of crime, the child's legal representative may submit a motion to the State Prosecutor requesting that the property claim be pursued within the criminal proceedings.¹²⁵ This motion must be filed before the conclusion of the main hearing in the court of first instance and should specify the nature and amount of the claim, along with supporting evidence.¹²⁶ If the court acquits the defendant or discontinues the criminal proceedings, the child or their legal representative retains the right to pursue compensation through civil proceedings.¹²⁷

Although no direct questions were asked about compensation during the interviews, professionals and young people did not discuss cases in which financial compensation had been pursued or awarded through the formal justice system, despite the existence of a legal framework that would allow children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to pursue such remedies.

Spotlight: Media reporting - Protecting the privacy of children subjected to exploitation or abuse

The Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings includes safeguards to ensure the privacy of child victims and witnesses of crime, by requiring participants in such proceedings, authorities and the media to protect the identity of the children involved.¹²⁸ It also prohibits the publication of any information that could reveal their identity without the explicit permission of the judge or public prosecutor handling the case.¹²⁹ Media organizations that disclose the identity of child victims or witnesses of crime either directly or indirectly are liable to fines under the Media Law.¹³⁰

Professionals discussed the importance of, and sometimes challenges in, protecting the anonymity of children subjected to exploitation or abuse. They referred to the small and close-knit communities in Montenegro making it easier to identify individuals, including how individuals may be identified by others if visiting certain services.

Both young people and professionals discussed the role of the media in relation to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. They described how media reporting can contribute to further victimization of children and their families. One problematic aspect of media reporting brought up was perpetrators being depicted in favourable ways, shifting the focus away from the impact of the abuse on the child and perpetuating victim-blaming narratives.

¹²³ Montenegro, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2009), art. 234.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 239.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 236-1.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, arts. 236-2, 236-3.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 239-2.

¹²⁸ Montenegro, [Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings](#) (2011), art. 91.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, art. 91.

¹³⁰ Montenegro, [Media Law](#) (2024), arts. 50, 72.

One of the young women discussed how a girl whose sexual material was shared online without her consent was portrayed by the media:

“

Everyone, absolutely everyone, took his side, even the media and the newspaper. (...) I reached out to her and said if she needs anyone to talk to, she should talk to me. (...) because I simply cannot just sit and watch that, watch how everyone condemns that girl. (YP)

”

Some media outlets were also characterized as using sensational and excessively detailed reporting in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse cases. As one lawyer explained:

“

For example, the Law on the Treatment of Minors in Criminal Proceedings states that the media are not allowed (...) to publish things where the identity of a minor could be determined (...) and put, for example, initials and things like that, which in Montenegro is completely... we all basically know who it is... if not all of Montenegro, then that town knows for sure. (JP)

”

This kind of reporting could potentially interfere with the police investigation and justice process. Further, it may lead to the identification of children subjected to exploitation and abuse as well as perpetrators. Considering the stigma and victim-blaming attitudes around sexual abuse, this could have severe negative impacts for children and their families. Children and families could also be at risk of retaliation for reporting abuse to authorities if their identities are revealed.

The persistence of harmful reporting practices also indicates that existing legal safeguards are not being effectively implemented, either because oversight mechanisms are failing to enforce compliance or because penalties are not strong enough to deter violations. Strengthening both enforcement and accountability is therefore essential to ensure that the privacy of child victims and witnesses of crime is effectively protected in practice.

10. CONCLUSION



10. CONCLUSION

In the year prior to the survey, more than 1 in 10 children aged 12–17 in Montenegro were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse. While enabled through digital technologies, this violence frequently unfolds across both online and in-person settings and is most often perpetrated by individuals already within a child's social environment. Many children are subjected to multiple and overlapping forms of abuse, underscoring that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are rarely isolated incidents, but part of broader patterns of coercion, manipulation and control.

Despite its prevalence, much of this abuse remains hidden. Almost 60 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were not disclosed to anyone, and very few disclosures reached formal reporting channels. Survey data and interviews consistently highlight shame, self-blame, fear of judgment and concerns about family and social repercussions as key barriers to disclosure. Gender norms and stigma surrounding sexuality shape how children interpret the exploitation or abuse they have been subjected to and whether they feel able to seek help.

Montenegro has legal and institutional frameworks intended to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse; however, professionals identified challenges related to implementation, uneven protections by age, limited resources and gaps in trust in institutional responses. Barriers to disclosure and reporting not only delay access to support, but can also hinder accountability and access to justice, particularly when abuse remains undisclosed until adulthood. At the same time, interviews underscored the critical role of trusted adults, peers and trauma-informed professionals in supporting children and enabling disclosure.

Addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse requires recognition of the interconnected online and in-person nature of harm, as well as the social norms and structural conditions that allow abuse to remain hidden. This report concludes with evidence-based recommendations, developed in consultation with national stakeholders, to strengthen prevention, improve child-centred responses and ensure that children in Montenegro are better supported to seek and obtain protection, care and justice.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS



11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Disrupting the harm caused by tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse against children requires comprehensive and sustained action from all stakeholders – families, communities, government representatives, law enforcement agencies, justice and social support service professionals, and the national and international technology and communications industry.

While children are part of the solution, the harm caused by these forms of sexual violence obliges adults to act to protect them; care must be taken not to put the onus on children to protect themselves from harm without support. The following detailed recommendations for action in Montenegro are clustered under six key insights from the Disrupting Harm data and are signposted for different stakeholder groups. However, all these recommended actions are interlinked and are most effective if implemented in coordination.

INSIGHT 1

Findings show that rigid gender norms, stigma around sexual abuse and widespread silence about sex and sexuality create enabling conditions for tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Many children lack comprehensive education about sex, relationships, consent, boundaries and digital interactions, leaving them less prepared to identify abuse, navigate abuse, identify coercion or seek help.

The survey data further suggest that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse frequently involve peers, acquaintances or romantic partners. Social norms – particularly gender norms – minimize abusive behaviours, blur boundaries around what constitutes exploitation and abuse, and shape children’s feelings of shame and self-blame, influencing whether and how they disclose harm.

Interviews indicate that prevention efforts remain fragmented and often focus narrowly on children’s online behaviour, rather than addressing the broader social and structural factors that shape and facilitate exploitation and abuse. A holistic, multilevel prevention approach is needed, which challenges harmful norms, strengthens supportive adult responses and ensures that responsibility for protection remains with systems and adults, not children.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Relevant for: Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Social Welfare, Family Care and Demography; Ministry of Sports and Youth; and Ministry of Interior.

Recommendation: Strengthen comprehensive, quality and age-appropriate relationship and sexual and reproductive health education and challenge the normalization of peer-based sexual exploitation and abuse

1.1 Integrate comprehensive sexuality and relationship education into existing education reform and school systems

Integrate evidence-based, age-appropriate education on relationships, consent, sexuality, boundaries and digital interactions into the Education Reform Strategy (2025–2035), ensuring that this education is grounded in a rights-based, gender-transformative approach that challenges harmful gender stereotypes, power imbalances and victim-blaming norms. This should be achieved by:

- a) Developing a clear national curriculum that explicitly address both online and in-person forms of pressure, coercion, manipulation, grooming and peer-based abuse, while ensuring that core concepts of bodily autonomy and consent are meaningfully applied within both forms.
- b) Including content on unwanted sexual exposure, non-consensual creation and sharing of sexual material, artificial intelligence-generated sexual material and sexualized bullying and harassment, reflecting children's reported experiences.
- c) Develop strategies to reach children outside the formal education system.

1.2 Equip teachers and schools to deliver prevention programmes and activities in practice

Prevention cannot rely solely on curriculum content, but needs to be supplemented with trusted adults and supportive school environments by:

- a) Revising existing school regulations and guidance to strengthen prevention of and responses to child sexual exploitation and abuse – online and in person – including trauma-informed approaches, safeguarding procedures and clear referral pathways to health and social welfare services. In parallel, mandatory and accredited teacher training programmes should be developed and delivered to school staff as part of their continuing professional development, to equip them to address peer abuse and provide age-appropriate, rights-based and gender-transformative sexuality and relationship education.
- b) Allocating dedicated time and resources within schools for prevention programming, rather than treating it as an ad hoc activity, by integrating programming as part of existing national and multisectoral strategies such as the Education Reform Strategy (2025–2035) and the Strategy on the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence (2025–2029).
- c) Creating safe spaces in schools with trusted adults where children can ask questions and discuss sexuality, relationships and digital behaviours without fear of shame or punishment.

1.3 Include children's perspectives and peer-led approaches

Given the high proportion of abuse involving peers (as friends and romantic partners), prevention efforts should reflect children's realities by:

- a) Co-designing education and awareness materials with children and young people to ensure relevance and content that reflects their realities.
- b) Supporting structured peer-led initiatives focusing on healthy relationships, respectful communication and building empathy.

1.4 Expand supportive parenting and caregiver programmes

The data showed how silence around sexuality limits children's ability to disclose abuse. Parenting support should therefore focus on trust and open communication rather than surveillance or restrictive approaches. Programmes should promote equitable parent-child relationships, support sensitive discussions on consent, bodily autonomy, sexuality and abuse (online and in person) and strengthen parents' understanding of children's digital lives through guidance rather than punitive control.

1.5 Develop sustained, child-centred public awareness and dialogue

Awareness efforts should move beyond separate and temporary campaigns and instead support long-term social change, taking a multisectoral approach to challenge the normalization of abusive behaviours and reduce stigma. This should involve:

- a) Sustained national messaging that frames child sexual exploitation and abuse (online and in person) as a violation of children's rights, not a source of shame or stigma.
- b) Community-based dialogue models that engage parents, youth, educators and community members in shifting harmful social norms and victim-blaming attitudes.
- c) Campaigns co-created with children, civil society and private-sector actors to ensure relevance and reach.
- d) Messaging that promotes empathy, accountability and trust in public institutions and services.

INSIGHT 2

The findings show that disclosure and reporting of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse remain very limited in Montenegro. Fifty-nine per cent of children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse did not tell anyone and only 1 per cent disclosed through formal channels such as the police, social services or a helpline.

Interviews suggest that low disclosure rates are shaped by multiple overlapping barriers. Many children have a limited understanding of what constitutes abuse, particularly in situations involving peers, romantic partners or the gradual escalation of harmful behaviours.

Social norms that perpetuate victim-blaming and taboos around sex and sexuality foster shame and self-blame, discouraging children from speaking out. Fear of judgment, social repercussions and low trust in institutional responses further deter children from seeking help.

These findings underscore the fact that improving reporting is not only a matter of increasing services, but of ensuring that children experience disclosure as safe, confidential, supportive and worthwhile.

Relevant for: Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation; Ministry of Social Welfare, Family Care and Demography; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Sports and Youth; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Interior; Police Directorate; Police Training Academy and the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms of Montenegro.

Recommendation: Strengthen child-centred disclosure, reporting and response systems

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Strengthen trusted-adult pathways across children's everyday environments

Given that many children do not disclose exploitation or abuse, prevention efforts must prioritize expanding the number of adults children trust and can turn to safely by:

- a) Building the capacity of teachers, school psychologists and pedagogues, youth workers, sports and youth activity coaches, health professionals and social workers to act as safe points of contact for children subjected to abuse.
- b) Ensuring that children know whom and where they can turn to and what will happen if they disclose, reducing uncertainty and fear.
- c) Integrating clear referral protocols so that trusted adults know how to connect children immediately to psychosocial support, protection services and law enforcement, as appropriate.
- d) Special attention should be given to abuse by peers, where children may not recognize this as serious enough to report or may fear social consequences.

2.2 Equip parents and caregivers to respond supportively to reduce fear of disclosure

The qualitative data highlight the fact that children often fear judgment, blame or repercussions. Parenting initiatives should therefore:

- a) Provide practical guidance on responding to disclosures with empathy and without blame, shame or punishment.
- b) Increase caregivers' understanding of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including grooming, pressure and coercion, and abusive behaviours in (friendly and romantic) peer relationships.
- c) Frame abuse as a child protection issue and a violation of rights, not a source of family stigma.
- d) Ensure that programmes are accessible to diverse families, including marginalized communities, and delivered through schools, health and social protection services, and community-based family support structures.

2.3 Expand child-friendly help-seeking, disclosure and reporting avenues

Low formal reporting rates suggest that existing disclosure and reporting options may not feel accessible or safe for children. Disclosure avenues should be diversified and strengthened, allowing children to seek support in ways that are easily accessible to them. Efforts should:

- a) Increase visibility of existing helplines, reporting mechanisms and support services through schools, youth and community spaces, media and social media.
- b) Develop multiple and diverse entry points for disclosure, including online and chat-based options, school-based reporting options and through youth-friendly community services.
- c) Ensure that reporting pathways are confidential, explained in clear and child-friendly ways and designed around children's needs and realities.
- d) Children should be able to understand: what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse online and in person, where they can seek help, how their privacy will be protected (including any limitations) and what support they will receive.
- e) Tailor messaging towards reducing stigma and shame, emphasizing that abuse is never the child's fault.

2.4 Ensure all disclosing and reporting mechanisms are staffed with trained, trauma-informed professionals taking a child-centred approach

Reporting mechanisms are most effective if children are met with safe and competent responses. All disclosure and reporting services should therefore:

- a) Be staffed by professionals trained in trauma-informed, gender-transformative and non victim-blaming practices and child-centred approaches.
- b) Provide psychosocial support alongside reporting, recognizing that children may disclose primarily to seek safety rather than justice.

2.5 Ensure children can report independently and safely

Legal and procedural barriers can prevent children from seeking help, especially if they do not want or are unable to involve a parent or caregiver. Reporting mechanisms should enable independent or trusted-adult reporting and be adapted to children's developmental stage and their rights to participation and protection.

2.6 Strengthen institutional trust through child-centred law enforcement responses

Low reporting rates through formal channels reflect not only stigma, but also limited trust that institutions will respond effectively in non-judgmental and supportive ways. Strengthening law enforcement capacity is therefore critical.

- a) Provide specialized and continuous training for police and justice professionals: All officers and professionals who might interact with children subjected to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse should receive mandatory training on:
 - child rights, child development and trauma-informed responses;
 - gender-transformative approaches and non victim-blaming practices;
 - tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including grooming, coercion and abuse by peers;
 - child-centred interviewing and evidence-handling procedures that minimize retraumatization.
- b) Institutionalize pre- and in-service training through the Police Training Academy and the Training Centre for Judges and Prosecutors to ensure sustainability beyond individual projects.

INSIGHT 3

Although several provisions exist, legal gaps leave children inadequately protected from some forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, including grooming and livestreaming of child sexual abuse. Uneven legal protection based on age persists, with penalties decreasing once a child turns 14 of age and some provisions excluding older children.

Relevant for: Ministry of Justice

Recommendation: Amend legislation to ensure that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be prosecuted effectively. This could also support prevention by strengthening deterrence and signalling that all forms of exploitation and abuse are serious crimes

3.1 A package of legislative reforms to align with international standards could include:

- a) amending existing criminal legislation on online grooming for sexual purposes to ensure the protection of all children under the age of 18 and revising the definition to encompass abuse occurring entirely online;
- b) amending legislation to explicitly criminalize 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 "pornographic performances" also apply when the abuse is livestreamed and materials are not downloaded or stored. Ensure that the offence covers both the use of children for such purposes and access to livestreamed abuse;
- c) adopting dedicated legal provisions for the explicit criminalization of tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children, with a definition that reflects its unique dynamics, including coercive use of self-generated sexual material to extort money or sexual acts from a child;

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

- d) amending the legal definition of child sexual abuse material to explicitly include digitally generated content depicting non-existent children, including artificial intelligence-generated material. This amendment would ensure legal clarity, avoid reliance on interpretative extensions or offences not specifically designed to address child sexual abuse material and recognize the harm caused by such content, including its role in normalizing or fuelling demand for the sexual exploitation and abuse of children;
- e) amending article 211 of the Criminal Code to replace the term “child pornography” with the term “child sexual abuse material,” to ensure the use of language that accurately reflects the abusive nature of such material, in alignment with the [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#),¹³¹
- f) amending criminal legislation to ensure that penalties for offences such as production of child sexual abuse material and exposure to pornographic content are not lower when the child is over 14 years of age, and ensuring that all children receive equal protection under the law, with penalties that reflect the severity of the offence, rather than the child’s age;
- g) in line with the 2023 Lanzarote Committee recommendation, amending criminal legislation to ensure that children are not prosecuted for creating, possessing or voluntarily sharing self-generated sexual content with peers, where informed consent and no evidence of coercion, exploitation or malicious intent exist. The legal framework should clearly distinguish consensual peer activity from exploitative and abusive conduct.

INSIGHT 4

The findings show that digital platforms are central to how tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse occurs in Montenegro. Eighty-two per cent of instances involved social media, underscoring the fact that prevention and response cannot rely only on children, parents or front-line services and justice procedures. Platforms and internet service providers are key stakeholders in shaping children’s online environments, including the design of safety features, reporting tools, and the rapid detection and removal of harmful material.

At present, legislation in Montenegro places minimal proactive obligations on platforms to prevent the dissemination of child sexual abuse material or mitigate risks before harm occurs. Reporting mechanisms are largely left to providers’ discretion.

The Draft Law on the Protection of Minors in the Digital Environment (January 2026) signals a shift towards a more preventive, risk-based approach. It introduces provisions related to age verification, risk assessments, obligations to address harmful content and enhanced supervisory oversight.

To translate these principles into meaningful protection, Montenegro will need structured implementation and sustained collaboration with digital providers as partners in child safety.

¹³¹ Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, 2nd Edition (ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2025). Available at: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Second-Edition-Terminology-Guidelines-final.pdf>.

Relevant for: Ministry of Economic Development; Agency for Electronic Communication and Postal Services; Agency for Personal Data Protection and Free Access to Information; Police Directorate; Ministry of Interior – Unit for Combating High-Tech Crime; and Ministry of Public Administration – Agency for Cyber Security.

Recommendation: Strengthen platform accountability and safety-by-design approaches to protect children online

4.1 Establish structured collaboration with platforms as child protection partners

Given the central role of social media in reported abuse, Montenegro should institutionalize regular engagement with digital platforms rather than rely on ad hoc cooperation. This should include:

- a) Formal mechanisms for ongoing dialogue between government, regulators, law enforcement and major platforms operating in Montenegro.
- b) Regular information-sharing on patterns of exploitation and abuse, emerging trends and platform-specific risks, including abuse by peers.
- c) Joint development of response protocols for urgent cases involving child sexual abuse material.
- d) Partnerships that include civil society and child protection actors to ensure that collaboration prioritizes children's rights rather than corporate interests.

4.2 Mandate safety-by-design to shift responsibility away from children

Findings suggest that children often consider harmful content and abusive interactions as normalized aspects of online experiences. Prevention therefore requires shifting the burden of safety away from children's individual behaviour and towards platform systems and design choices. Montenegro should require enforceable and universal safety-by-design safeguards, including:

- a) Privacy-by-default settings for all child users, limiting public visibility and unwanted contact.

- b) Restrictions on unsolicited messaging from unknown accounts to children.
- c) Stronger controls on content recommendation systems to reduce exposure to sexualized or exploitative material.
- d) Limits on data collection and profiling of child users.
- e) Clear safeguards addressing artificial intelligence-enabled risks, including synthetic sexual content or automated grooming behaviours.

4.3 Require proactive detection and rapid removal of child sexual abuse material

Current gaps in early detection and blocking highlight the need for clearer obligations on providers. Montenegro should strengthen requirements for platforms to:

- a) Detect, flag and rapidly remove child sexual abuse material, in line with international standards.
- b) Prevent re-uploading of known harmful content through hash-matching technologies.
- c) Maintain clear referral pathways with national law enforcement units for high-risk cases.
- d) Ensure that removal procedures are timely and transparent, recognizing the severe and lasting harm caused by continued circulation of abusive material.

4.4 Ensure child-centred, accessible and responsive reporting mechanisms

Young people reported that platform reporting mechanisms often feel ineffective or unresponsive. Reporting systems should be treated as core child protection infrastructure, not optional features. Platforms should be required to provide:

- a) Plain-language, age-appropriate reporting options that children can easily access and use, developed in collaboration and consultation with children as best practice.
- b) Dedicated child safety reporting channels with clear timelines for review and response.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

- c) Mandatory follow-up procedures so that children receive confirmation, information and support.
- d) Reporting mechanisms that link children to national support services where appropriate, rather than operating in isolation.

4.5 Embed child participation in platform safety development

Montenegro should promote child participation in the design and evaluation of digital protections to ensure that safety measures are age-appropriate, accessible and reflect children's realities. This includes:

- a) Consulting children when developing reporting systems and safety tools.
- b) Ensuring accessibility to reporting and safety tools for children with different needs, including children speaking non-official languages and children with disabilities.
- c) Testing platform safeguards with diverse groups of children, including children from marginalized communities.

INSIGHT 5

Professionals consistently reported that Montenegro faces a shortage of psychologists and psychosocial support services, with particularly limited specialized care for children subjected to sexual abuse, including tech-facilitated forms. Limited human resources and service capacity hinder children's ability to access consistent, trauma-informed support, especially over time.

The concentration of public services in urban areas creates additional logistical and financial barriers for children and families in rural or underserved communities. Professionals also emphasized that psychosocial care is often fragmented, project-based or dependent on individual providers, rather than embedded within a coordinated national system.

Given the long-term psychological and social impacts of sexual exploitation and abuse, ensuring access to specialized, child-centred psychosocial care is essential not only for recovery, but also for enabling disclosure, reducing stigma and preventing further harm.

Relevant for: Ministry of Health; Ministry of Social Welfare, Family Care and Demography; Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation; Institute for Social and Child Protection; Ministry of Finance; and University of Montenegro.

Recommendation: Strengthen specialized, accessible and trauma-informed psychosocial support systems for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse

5.1 Expand and institutionalize public psychosocial services beyond urban centres

Montenegro should prioritize sustained investment in public psychosocial and therapeutic services to ensure availability, continuity and equitable access for all children, regardless of geography. Efforts should include:

- a) Expanding the availability of child-focused psychologists and counsellors within public health, and the social and child protection system.
- b) Introducing incentives to attract and retain professionals in underserved municipalities, such as career advancement pathways, salary supplements and housing support.
- c) Ensuring that services are not dependent on short-term donor projects, but embedded in national budgets and institutional structures.

5.2 Strengthen specialized and trauma-informed workforce capacity across sectors

Montenegro should invest in building sustained national expertise in child sexual exploitation and abuse and trauma recovery, while ensuring that all child-facing systems operate according to trauma-informed, rights-based and child-centred principles. This should include:

- a) Expanding university training in child and adolescent psychology, trauma care, and sexual exploitation and abuse response.
- b) Developing specialized certification and subspecialization pathways for professionals working with affected children.
- c) Providing continuous professional development, structured supervision and support to prevent burnout and secondary trauma.
- d) Embedding trauma-informed, gender-transformative and child rights-based approaches across education, health, social welfare and law enforcement sectors.
- e) Establishing clear standards for confidentiality, dignity and respectful, non-stigmatizing communication in all child-facing services.

5.3 Develop sustained follow-up and long-term aftercare systems

Professionals noted that children's needs evolve over time and that recovery from exploitation and abuse is a process. Montenegro should strengthen systems that provide flexible, ongoing support catering for individual evolving needs. Efforts should include:

- a) Establishing structured follow-up protocols after initial disclosure or service contact.
- b) Ensuring children have access to longer-term counselling, peer support and reintegration services.
- c) Providing psychosocial support not only for children, but also for caregivers and families navigating the impact of exploitation and abuse.
- d) Integrating mental health support into broader child protection case management, recognizing abuse as a long-term developmental and social issue.

5.4 Strengthen referral pathways and inter-agency coordination

- Fragmentation between health, education, social and protection services, and justice sectors can delay access to care and force children to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences. Montenegro should develop clear, child-centred referral systems by:
 - a) Establishing standardized national referral protocols linking schools, Centres for Social Work, health services and specialized support providers.
 - b) Ensuring rapid coordination when a child discloses exploitation or abuse, with clear roles and responsibilities across institutions.
 - c) Reducing the burden on children by limiting repeated interviews and improving information-sharing with consent and safeguards.
 - d) Creating designated child protection focal points within key institutions to guide referrals and case follow-up.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.5 Promote help-seeking and reduce stigma around psychosocial support

- Low disclosure and reporting rates and shame-related barriers highlight the need to normalize help-seeking and mental health recovery.
 - a) Integrate mental health and trauma awareness into national curricula, parenting programmes and national prevention efforts.
 - b) Partner with youth organizations, civil society, media and private-sector actors to promote supportive narratives around disclosure and recovery.
 - c) Highlight available services clearly, including in child-friendly ways so that children and families know where to seek assistance.
 - d) Ensure messaging emphasizes that abuse is never the child's fault and that psychosocial support is a right, not a source of shame.

5.6 Ensure sustainable financing and national prioritization

- Expanding specialized psychosocial care requires long-term financial commitment. Montenegro should:
 - a) Allocate dedicated budgets for child trauma and sexual exploitation and abuse recovery services within health and social protection systems.
 - b) Invest in service expansion as part of broader child protection and mental health strategies.
 - c) Monitor service availability, workforce capacity and quality standards nationally to ensure equity and accountability.

INSIGHT 6

Limited human and material resources continue to hinder the consistent implementation of child-centred justice procedures in Montenegro. The qualitative data highlighted the need for sustained capacity-building across police, prosecutors, judges and legal professionals, particularly in relation to children's rights, child development, trauma-informed practice and gender-transformative approaches.

Without specialized training and safeguards, children may experience retraumatization through law enforcement and judicial processes, and cases may be delayed, withdrawn or inadequately pursued. Strengthening law enforcement and justice responses is therefore essential not only for accountability, but also for building trust in institutions and ensuring that children feel safe to seek protection.

Relevant for: Ministry of Justice; Centre for Training in Judiciary and State Prosecution; Law faculties; Bar Association; Ministry of Interior; Police Directorate; Police Training Academy; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Social Welfare, Family Care and Demography; and Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation.

Recommendation: Strengthen child-centred, trauma-informed and technologically equipped law enforcement and justice responses to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse

6.1 Institutionalize specialized training for professionals across the law enforcement and justice process: first responders, investigators, prosecutors, judges and defence lawyers

Montenegro should ensure that all professionals who might interact with children subjected to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse receive mandatory pre-service and continuous in-service training and capacity-building. This should include:

- a) Embedding child rights, child development and child protection modules into pre- and in-service police and judicial/state prosecution training curricula.
- b) Including recognition of trauma responses, including delayed disclosure, withdrawal or fragmented testimony in training curricula.
- c) Integrating gender-transformative approaches that address victim-blaming norms affecting both girls and boys.
- d) Revising training curricula regularly to reflect evolving technologies, emerging digital risks and perpetrator tactics, ensuring alignment with evolving best practice.

6.2 Strengthen capacity to investigate tech-facilitated forms of exploitation and abuse safely and efficiently

Professionals highlighted growing challenges related to digital evidence, online coercion and the rapid spread of child sexual abuse material. Montenegro should invest in specialized competencies to prevent cases from stalling or collapsing due to technical gaps. This requires:

- a) Expanding specialist units or focal points within law enforcement for tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- b) Providing pre- and in-service training on digital evidence preservation, victim identification and online investigative techniques, and ensuring that the curriculum is revised regularly to keep up to date with technological developments and emerging trends.
- c) Establishing protocols to ensure digital investigations are conducted without exposing children to revictimization.
- d) Strengthening cooperation with international mechanisms and databases, such as INTERPOL tools, to support intelligence-sharing and cross-border investigations.

6.3 Standardize child-centred procedures to prevent re-traumatization

Justice processes must minimize harm and ensure children are treated first and foremost as rights-holders in need of protection, not simply sources of evidence. Montenegro should:

- a) Develop and enforce Standard Operating Procedures for child sexual exploitation and abuse cases, including tech-facilitated forms.
- b) Ensure children are interviewed through child-sensitive methods, by trained specialists and in appropriate child-friendly environments, taking each child's best interests into consideration.
- c) Guarantee access to psychosocial support professionals throughout investigations and court proceedings, and after the court procedure.

6.4 Build institutional trust through child-centred practice and community engagement

Low trust in formal systems contributes to underreporting and case withdrawal. To build public confidence, Montenegro should:

- a) Conduct outreach explaining children's rights and available protections in clear, accessible ways.
- b) Ensure transparent, accountable and child-sensitive reporting processes.
- c) Train police and justice professionals to engage respectfully with children and caregivers.
- d) Collaborate with schools, social services and civil society to reinforce justice institutions as protective rather than punitive.

6.5 Strengthen multisectoral coordination across child protection systems

Children's needs extend beyond legal proceedings, requiring coordinated responses across social and child protection, health, education and justice sectors. Montenegro should:

- a) Establish clear referral and coordination pathways between Centres for Social Work, health services, schools and the police.
- b) Define roles and responsibilities at each stage of a case to prevent delays and institutional fragmentation.
- c) Ensure coordinated case management so children are supported holistically and do not fall through gaps.
- d) Integrate justice responses into broader child protection strategies, rather than treating cases as isolated criminal matters.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

- e) Invest in institutional resources and staff well-being.

6.6 Address resource limitations

Professionals consistently noted that resource limitations undermine implementation, even where legal frameworks exist.

Montenegro should:

- a) Increase staffing and technical resources for units handling (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse cases.
- b) Ensure adequate tools for digital investigation and evidence collection and management.
- c) Provide psychosocial support and supervision for professionals exposed to traumatic case material, to reduce burnout and possible attrition.
- d) Allocate sustained budgets so that capacity does not depend on short-term projects.

6.7 Harmonize procedural safeguards and strengthen legal protections for all children

Limited and, in some cases, uneven protections by age can leave some children without equal access to justice safeguards. Montenegro should:

- a) Harmonize procedural protections so that all children under the age of 18 benefit from child-centred safeguards, including bans on confrontations with the accused.
- b) Strengthen witness protection measures and access to support professionals during proceedings.
- c) Abolish or extend statutes of limitations to ensure that delayed disclosure does not prevent prosecution, recognizing that children subjected to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse often come forward long after the abuse, including in adulthood.

13. ANNEX: DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS



13. ANNEX: DEFINITIONS 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.¹³²

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.¹³³

Child sexual abuse material, including artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material: Photos, videos, audios or other recordings, or any other representation of real or digitally generated (including generated through/by artificial intelligence) child sexual abuse or sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.¹³⁴

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.¹³⁵

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.¹³⁶

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.¹³⁷

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.¹³⁸

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.¹³⁹

For further guidance on terminology and key considerations, refer to the [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#).¹⁴⁰

¹³² 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), pp. 31–34. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Second-Edition-Terminology-Guidelines-final.pdf>.

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 39–44.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 63.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 97–98.

¹³⁸ Ibid., pp. 36–38.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁴⁰ Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, 2nd Edition (ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2025). Available at: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Second-Edition-Terminology-Guidelines-final.pdf>.

