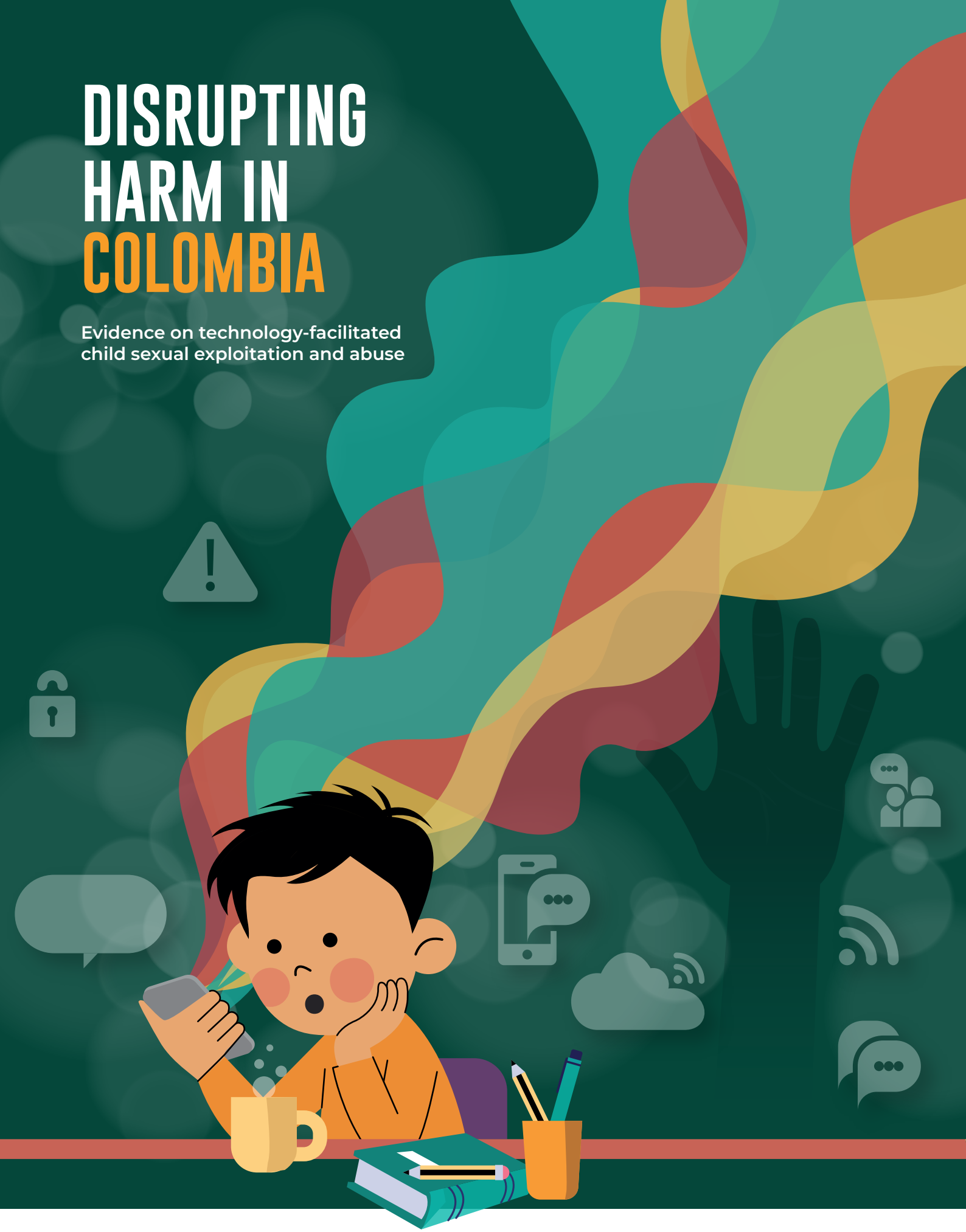
DISRUPTING HARM IN COLOMBIA

Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse



Funded by Safe Online

Implemented by ECPAT INTERPOL unicef for every child

Content warning:

This report discusses the sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Colombia. It includes accounts of child sexual exploitation and abuse cases as described by professionals in Colombia. 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:

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD BY THE COLOMBIAN INSTITUTE OF FAMILY WELFARE (ICBF)

The protection of children and adolescents is a priority for the government and society as a whole. In a context marked by rapid digital transformation, ensuring safe online environments has become one of the most urgent challenges facing public policy. While digital technologies open up unprecedented opportunities for learning, participation, and development, they have also given rise to new forms of violence that profoundly affect children, such as technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

In light of this reality, the *Disrupting Harm* study represents a milestone for Colombia in evidence generation. This research effort, developed in partnership with UNICEF Office of ; ECPAT International: End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes, and the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), as well as multiple national stakeholders, offers a comprehensive understanding of the issue, grounded in rigorous data and the experiences of children, adolescents, and professionals working to protect them. Its value lies not only in gauging the scale of the issue, but also in providing key elements to strengthen the institutional response from a rights-based perspective.

This document serves as a strategic tool to guide the formulation, implementation, and adaptation of public policies, as well as to strengthen protection, justice, and care systems. It also highlights the need to move toward increasingly coordinated responses that integrate the various sectors of the State, international cooperation, civil society, and the private sector.

We deeply recognize and value the inter-institutional collaboration that made this study possible, reflecting a shared commitment to the comprehensive protection of children. Such partnerships are essential for addressing complex issues that transcend borders and require coordinated action at the local, national, and international levels.

As the Government of Change, we reaffirm our commitment to continue strengthening prevention, protection, and response efforts against violence affecting children and adolescents in digital environments. This document highlights the existing challenges and calls on us to redouble our efforts to ensure that every child and adolescent in Colombia grows up in a safe, dignified, and violence-free environment.

Astrid Eliana Caceres Cardenas
Executive Director
Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF)

BIENESTAR FAMILIAR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Funded by Safe Online, 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, with funding from Safe Online. 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 Colombia, from 2023 onwards.

Between 2023 and 2025, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti conducted research in Colombia to understand tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse from multiple viewpoints. The data in Colombia were collected through a national household survey with 12 to 17-year-olds, interviews with justice professionals, front-line workers, young people who had been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, 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 preferred[1] to convey that this form of 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

The extent and nature of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Colombia

- According to Disrupting Harm survey data, 21 per cent of internet-using children in Colombia aged 12–17 years were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in only a one-year period.[2] Scaled up to the overall population of 12–17-year-old internet-using children, this represents around 860,000 children who were subjected to any of these harms in the span of a single year.
- According to the survey, 1 in 4 (25 per cent) girls were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, compared with 17 per cent of boys. Although both figures are high, girls are statistically significantly more likely to be subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse.
- Children living in rural areas (29 per cent) were significantly more likely to be exposed to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse compared with children living in urban areas (17 per cent), possibly linked to socioeconomic disparities.
- The most common form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that children in Colombia were subjected to was unwanted exposure to sexual images.

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

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- Both social media and online gaming are popular online activities for children in Colombia: 83 per cent of children used social media weekly, while 64 per cent played games on a weekly basis. Perpetrators frequently use these platforms to target children. Around half of cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia occurred on social media platforms, while 14 per cent of cases occurred on gaming platforms.
- Out of the cases that occurred on social media platforms, children were most commonly abused on Facebook (80 per cent), followed by WhatsApp (30 per cent) and Instagram (17 per cent). These platforms are all owned by Meta.
- Around 70 per cent of children who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse first encountered the perpetrator in person. By comparison, 30 per cent of children first met their perpetrator online.
- The most common in-person settings where children met their perpetrator were in school (28 per cent), followed by their home (22 per cent) and public spaces (18 per cent).
- The survey data showed that half (50 per cent) of all reported instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were perpetrated by someone the child already knew, while one in five (21 per cent) was perpetrated by strangers.
- Specifically, 22 per cent of cases involved family members, 14 per cent involved a romantic interest (a crush or girlfriend/boyfriend) and another 14 per cent involved friends. During interviews, young people who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and/or abuse, and professionals, frequently identified perpetrators who were brothers-in-law, uncles, cousins, neighbours, classmates and romantic interests.
- Two per cent of children in Colombia said that someone had used artificial intelligence tools to generate fake sexual images of them in the year prior to being surveyed. There is real concern that this form of abuse might become more common as these tools become more accessible.

Causes and enablers of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia

- Interviews demonstrated how gender inequality, poverty and power imbalances enable sexual abuse of children, while social norms that normalize sexual violence and stigmatize victims silence those affected:
  - Societal beliefs around women's bodies and sexuality often extend to girls, shaping how they are perceived and targeted by perpetrators of abuse. For example, social norms that frame women as either seeking out the abuse or as a source of 'temptation' to men promote victim-blaming attitudes towards girls and young women.
  - Boys are also subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, yet their victimization is frequently hidden. Pervasive beliefs about masculinity prevent boys from being recognized as victims and can inhibit disclosure. Boys may fear judgment, ridicule or being perceived as weak if subjected to abuse.
  - Online sexual interactions and exposure to sexual content are often normalized as routine experiences that children today are expected to navigate on their own.
  - Unsupportive or unsafe family and community environments can drive children to seek connection and validation online, increasing vulnerability to manipulation.
  - Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is often rooted in existing relationships, not just anonymous online interactions. The data suggest that proximity and trust, whether familial or social, can be further exploited through digital means, making it harder for children to recognize, report or resist abusive behaviours.

- Poverty and other forms of adversity create circumstances that perpetrators exploit to manipulate, coerce and abuse children:
  - According to the survey data, 6 per cent (56 children) of children were offered money or gifts in exchange for sexual images or videos. Two per cent (22 children) were offered money or gifts to engage in sexual acts. Financial pressure can lead children and young people to engage in sexual activities online as a means of improving their economic situation, without always recognizing that these are exploitative and harmful acts that take advantage of their hardship.
  - Interviews revealed how the economic condition of families can lead parents to exploiting and/or abusing their children as a means of survival. Professionals described cases of parents recording themselves sexually abusing their child(ren) with the aim of selling the images to foreign consumers.
  - The growth of webcam modelling businesses illustrates how organized sexual exploitation for commercial purposes can take hold in contexts of limited employment and economic insecurity. Webcam modelling businesses involve studios that record and transmit online sexual content. These businesses have become a source of employment in contexts where job opportunities are scarce. Young adults or peers sometimes recruit other young people into this form of exploitation.
  - As discussed by interviewees in Colombia, another facet of the economic vulnerability of children and young people is that it can be exploited by human traffickers. Children and young people in search of job opportunities that allow them to support themselves and their families are deceived with the promise of job opportunities (e.g. in call centres) and are sometimes trafficked to other countries.
- Social media platforms are actively used by perpetrators to identify, groom and sexually exploit children at scale, highlighting critical gaps in platform design and regulatory enforcement that enable abuse:
  - The data pointed strongly to perpetrators actively using social media and online platforms as a tool to facilitate abuse. This includes stalking and identifying which children to victimize, or taking advantage of the relatively easy access they have to large numbers of children. Interviewees discussed several cases where perpetrators use social media platforms to cast a wide net by sending sexual content to many children at once and waiting for one or more of them to engage.
  - The design of social media platforms, where safeguards are limited and identity verification is weak, makes it easier for perpetrators to identify, contact, groom and exploit children. As a result, perpetrators and criminal networks have also recognized social media as a powerful tool for recruiting and exploiting children for commercial purposes.
  - Current law does not mandate internet service providers or online platforms to establish notice-and-takedown mechanisms through which users can report illegal content, such as child sexual abuse material. Although providers are already obliged to curb the dissemination of such material, the mandatory introduction of user-driven reporting mechanisms could help strengthen enforcement.

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Consequences of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse for children in Colombia

- Children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse experience feelings of self-blame, shame and violation. Victim-blaming by their families, peers and communities contributes to their trauma. Some experience challenges with future social or romantic relationships and others have to change schools or move to another city due to intense bullying following disclosure.
- Children may blame themselves for the abuse, especially if they initially and consensually shared sexual content with the perpetrator, which keeps them silent and suffering. More conservative families often avoid talking about healthy relationships, consent and sexual abuse, leaving children with little knowledge, and reinforcing fear and misinformation.
- Children who are subjected to abuse are at significantly increased risk of suicide, self-harm and anxiety.
- There appear to be certain misconceptions surrounding the long-term consequences of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Service providers and professionals do not always understand how the circulation of child sexual abuse material online can continue to victimize children or how the fear of others discovering the abuse material can create long-term anxiety.
- Victim-blaming attitudes in society also influence the practices of front-line workers, which compounds trauma and contributes to the revictimization of children and young people.
- Caregivers and families are sometimes seen as playing a role in the prevention of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. When caregivers feel judged or blamed by professionals for the abuse their children were subjected to, it can reduce their ongoing engagement with service providers or inhibit the quality of the care they provide.

Disclosure of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- According to the household survey data, just over half of the children who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse disclosed the incident to someone (52 per cent), while 34 per cent chose not to tell anyone.
- Children are more likely to turn to peers and maternal figures when sharing experiences of abuse. The survey data show that among children who disclosed the abuse they had been subjected to, 17 per cent confided in a friend, 15 per cent spoke to their mother, stepmother, foster mother or another female caregiver, and 8 per cent disclosed the incident to a sibling.
- Young people often reach out for help only when the abusive situation begins to escalate and becomes unmanageable, for example if they are pressured to send more sexual content or money under threat that the content already shared will be made public.
- The most common reason why children in the survey did not disclose was because they did not know where to go or whom to tell (36 per cent). Violent, judgmental or authoritarian parenting styles can prevent children from disclosing to their caregivers.
- In interviews with young people who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse in childhood, several mentioned that they did not tell anyone about the abuse they had been subjected to because they blamed themselves. Children and young people are influenced in their disclosure decisions by social attitudes that shame and stigmatize victims.
- Abuse within close networks makes disclosure riskier and more emotionally complex. Many professionals stated that a large majority of their caseloads included perpetrators from within the child's family, friend or social networks.
- Colombia has established a unified service provision pathway aimed at ensuring the protection, recovery and restitution of rights for victims of sexual violence. There are, however, no specific standard operating procedures for tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including in the Code Fuchsia protocols.

Formal reporting and children's experiences with the justice process

- Children in Colombia can report abuse through multiple mechanisms (such as the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare helpline, the online portal Te Protejo, the online national reporting system ¡ADenunciar!, the police and the Prosecutor's Office), including anonymous options, enabling both immediate protection and access to criminal investigations.
- Despite these mechanisms, none of the children who shared through the survey that they had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and/or abuse, reported it to the police, a helpline or a social worker. Based on the interview data, low reporting is due to fear, lack of information, shame, distrust in authorities, peer discouragement and the belief that reporting will not lead to meaningful action.
- Colombia has a robust legal framework recognizing children's right to justice, with child-centred safeguards, confidentiality protections and crimes against children classified as offences of public prosecution.
- Legal provisions exist to protect children's privacy and safety during proceedings, including closed hearings and alternative testimony methods, but inconsistent implementation and protection gaps continue to undermine confidence in the system. In particular, fear of retaliation from perpetrators or criminal networks, insufficient protection measures, breaches of confidentiality and economic coercion frequently deter reporting or lead children to withdraw complaints.
- While the justice system is overstretched and can expose children to revictimization through delays and repeated questioning, examples of effective coordination and trauma-informed practice demonstrate that child-centred justice is possible with improved resources and capacity.

Criminalization of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- Colombia criminalizes a wide range of conduct related to child sexual abuse material and the use of information and communication technologies to obtain sexual contact from children, and recent legislative and policy initiatives indicate growing recognition of remaining protection gaps.
- The law does not explicitly criminalize exposing children to sexual content, despite its use as a grooming tactic, and early-stage grooming remains largely unpunished unless it leads to other specific offences.
- Efforts to comprehensively criminalize online grooming (in line with the most recent international guidance provided in the United Nations Convention Against Crime) have advanced but remain incomplete. Earlier bills were archived and the latest September 2025 proposal, still pending, may be narrowly framed, excluding some forms of online-only abuse.
- While the production, possession and dissemination of child sexual abuse material depicting real children are criminalized, mere access without downloading is not, creating a loophole for intentional viewing without legal consequences.
- The legal definition of child sexual abuse material excludes digitally generated or manipulated content, including material produced through artificial intelligence. Further, Colombian criminal law uses the term 'child pornography' to refer to child sexual abuse material, despite international consensus that this terminology is inaccurate and harmful.
- Tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children is not defined as a specific offence and could only be prosecuted under general extortion provisions, which do not fully capture the coercive dynamics or harms involved.

This report ends with a set of data-driven recommendations. They include action to be taken by key actors across government, law enforcement, justice and social services sectors, by communities, teachers and caregivers, and by digital platforms and service providers. These are too detailed to be recounted in the executive summary, but can be found on page 88 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 Colombia. The quantitative data provide an understanding of the scope of this issue among children in Colombia. 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 sexual exploitation and abuse. It also offers 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 or perpetration?
3. How do children protect themselves against, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child 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, educators, healthcare and industry) protect, 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 was aimed at identifying legal gaps, assessing compliance with international obligations and highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in national responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The legal and policy analysis was developed using a detailed checklist consisting of over 140 items, ensuring consistency across the countries analysed. This tool, based on international legal standards and best practices, evaluates areas such as legal definitions, criminalization, jurisdiction, child-centric justice, private-sector responsibilities and child protection policies.

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

The draft analysis underwent internal and external expert reviews, including review from the local ECPAT member organization 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

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

Telecommunications Union.[3] The term 'household survey' or 'survey' is used throughout the report to indicate findings that come from this specific research activity.

To achieve a nationally representative random sample, the survey used random probability sampling with national coverage. Fieldwork coverage in Colombia was 99 per cent. 'Coverage' is defined as the proportion of the total population that had a chance of being included in the survey sample – meaning that the fieldwork would cover the area where they live if sampled. Sections in Amazonia, Vaupes, Vichada, San Andres and Providencia were excluded due to security-related issues and restricted access enforced by the police. Six regions of Colombia were represented in the sample: Caribe, Centro Sur, Centro-Oriente, Eje Cafetero, Llano and Pacífico.

The sampling followed a three-stage random probability clustered sample design. The response rate in Colombia was 44 per cent, and the sample achieved included 999 children and 999 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	56%
15–17 years	44%
Girls	48%
Boys	52%

Age and gender distribution of parent sample:

Under 40 years	45%
Over 40 years	55%
Women	86%
Men	13%
Other	0.2%

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 during childhood

This research activity aimed to include the voices of children and young people (16–24 years) who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood.[4] Children and young people who were currently 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 Colombia. Two engagement strategies were developed to connect children and young people with a research team trained in trauma-informed research practices to share their experiences during an interview:

The qualitative component of the research implemented a contextualized outreach strategy to investigate tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia, focusing on four key cities: Bogotá, Medellín, Cúcuta and Cartagena. These cities were selected due to early warnings reported by government agencies about potential human rights violations and high levels of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

The outreach process was adapted according to the different target groups. First, for young people between 16 and 17 years old, contacts were established with institutional social services and private organizations, which shared information about the study with potential participants, along with a registration link in case they wished to be contacted by the recruitment team prepared for the study. If the young person showed interest, they were asked for consent to contact their caregiver and signed consent was obtained from the latter, a legal requirement in Colombia. Then, an informative call took place with the young person where the study was presented in detail, questions were

3. International Telecommunications Union, *Manual for Measuring ICT Access and Use by Households and Individuals, 2020 edition*, ITU, Geneva, 2020. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/manual/ITUManualHouseholds2020_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.

answered and their assent was obtained. Finally, the logistical aspects of the interview were coordinated, ensuring that it could take place in a safe space.

Secondly, for young people between 18 and 24 years old, invitations were published on the social networks of Valientes Colombia[5] and networks of organizations associated with Valientes. Interested young people completed a verification survey to confirm eligibility criteria. Those who met the requirements were sent official information and consent forms, followed by a telephone call to provide detailed information about the study and verify their willingness to participate. Logistical aspects were coordinated, and participation was confirmed by text message if the participant consented to it.

Thirty young people who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse under the age of 18 in Colombia were interviewed for this study, of whom 28 were female and 2 male.

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 justice professionals and front-line workers

For justice professionals and front-line workers, an official letter signed by UNICEF Innocenti was distributed to relevant organizations and entities, and the contact mapping of Valientes Colombia and Ipsos was used to identify professionals with experience in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Direct contact was also established with civil society organizations with experience in the research topic, and additional contacts were requested from the UNICEF Colombia Office. Additionally, a call for participation was published on social networks, which included a link to a verification survey, and calls were made to interested professionals to inform them about the study and coordinate interviews.

A trained researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 front-line workers and 11 justice professionals in Colombia. Interviews were conducted between July 2024 and March 2025.

Throughout the report, attributions to data from front-line workers will be indicated with (FW) and data from 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 in Bogotá and Medellín as well as child protection units, and trusted civil society partners and NGOs. 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.

5. A multi-stakeholder platform focused on addressing child trafficking and sexual abuse and exploitation: Valientes Colombia.

Ethical approval

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

National consultation

Representatives across sectors including government, law enforcement authorities and civil society in Colombia were asked to provide input on the Disrupting Harm findings and recommendations to enhance their relevance for the Colombian context in a national consultation in November 2025.

Understanding the data

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nonetheless, the findings presented in this report go a long way towards unpacking tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia. 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.

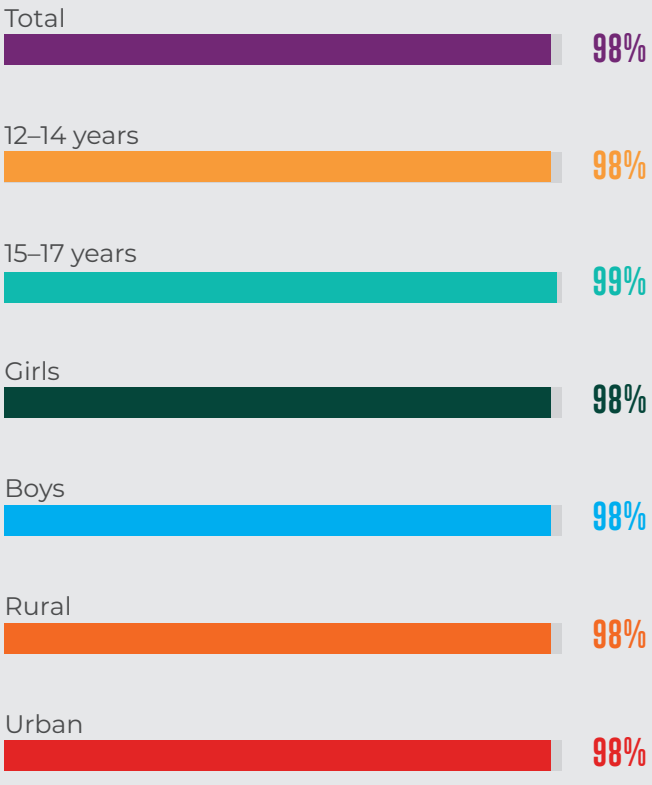
INTERNET USE IN COLOMBIA

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

Understanding how children access the internet, whether they go online regularly or not, what they do online, and how parents engage with their internet use, may provide insights into how to create a digital environment that is safer and more enjoyable for children. However, prevention of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse is not primarily about what children are doing online. Disrupting Harm data consistently show that perpetrators act opportunistically, using coercion and manipulation while taking advantage of existing social, economic and gender inequalities, unequal power dynamics, misogyny, the lack of adequate support networks and gaps in protection systems to commit abuse against children online and/or in person.

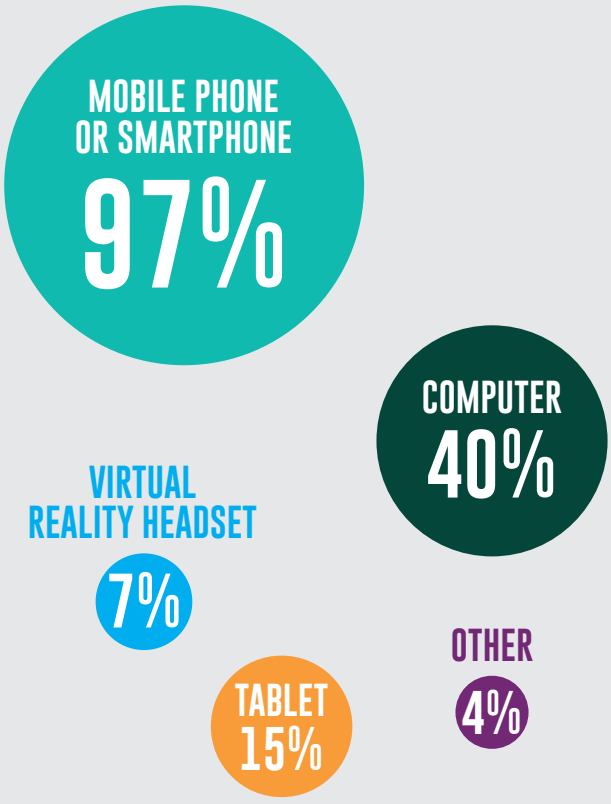
Any effort at prevention must therefore look beyond what children are (or ought to be) doing online; not doing so often results in victim-blaming or treating children as complicit in the exploitation and abuse they have been subjected to, as evidenced in this report. Instead, prevention requires a multi-pronged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



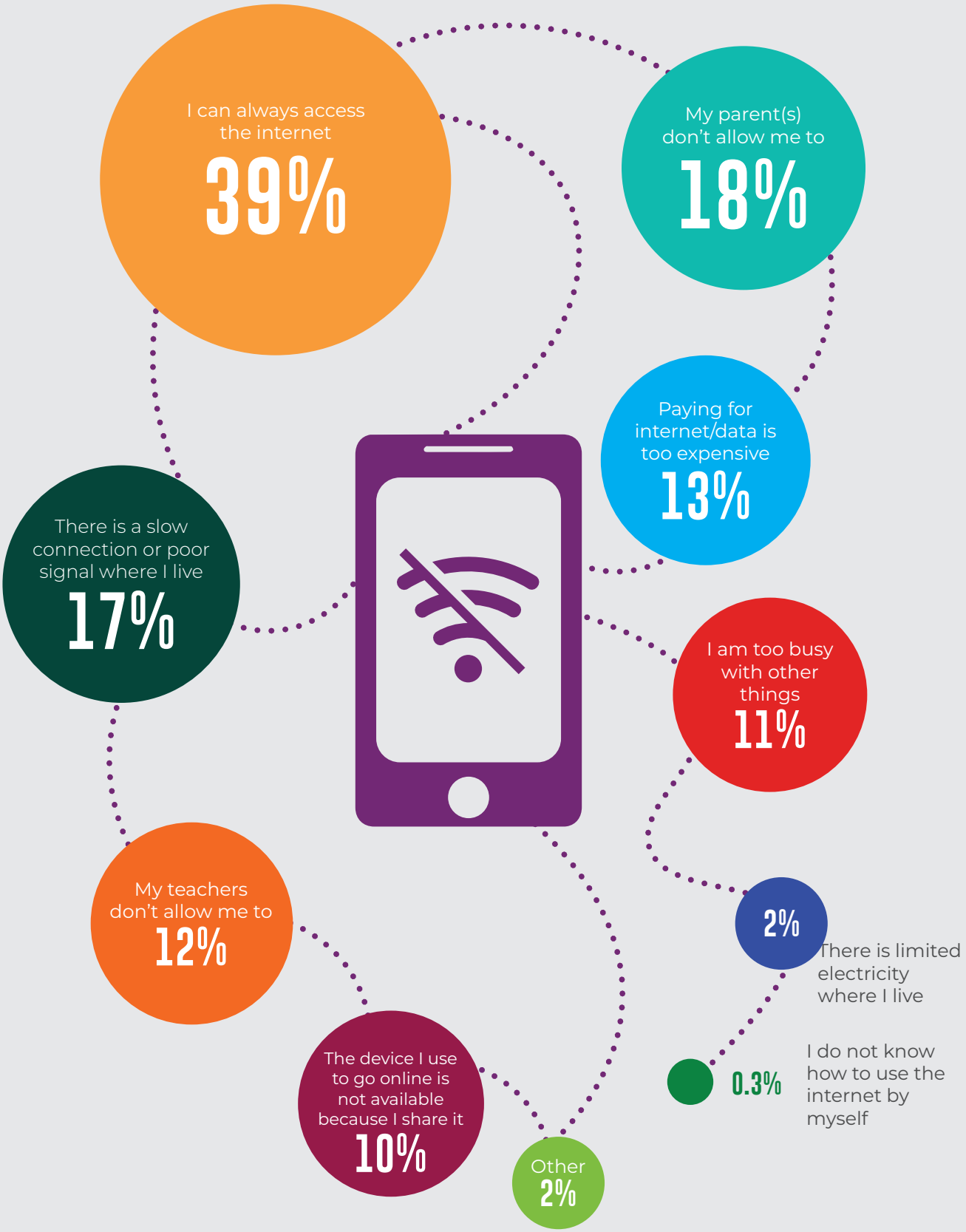
Base: 1,309 households.

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



Base: 999 internet-using children.

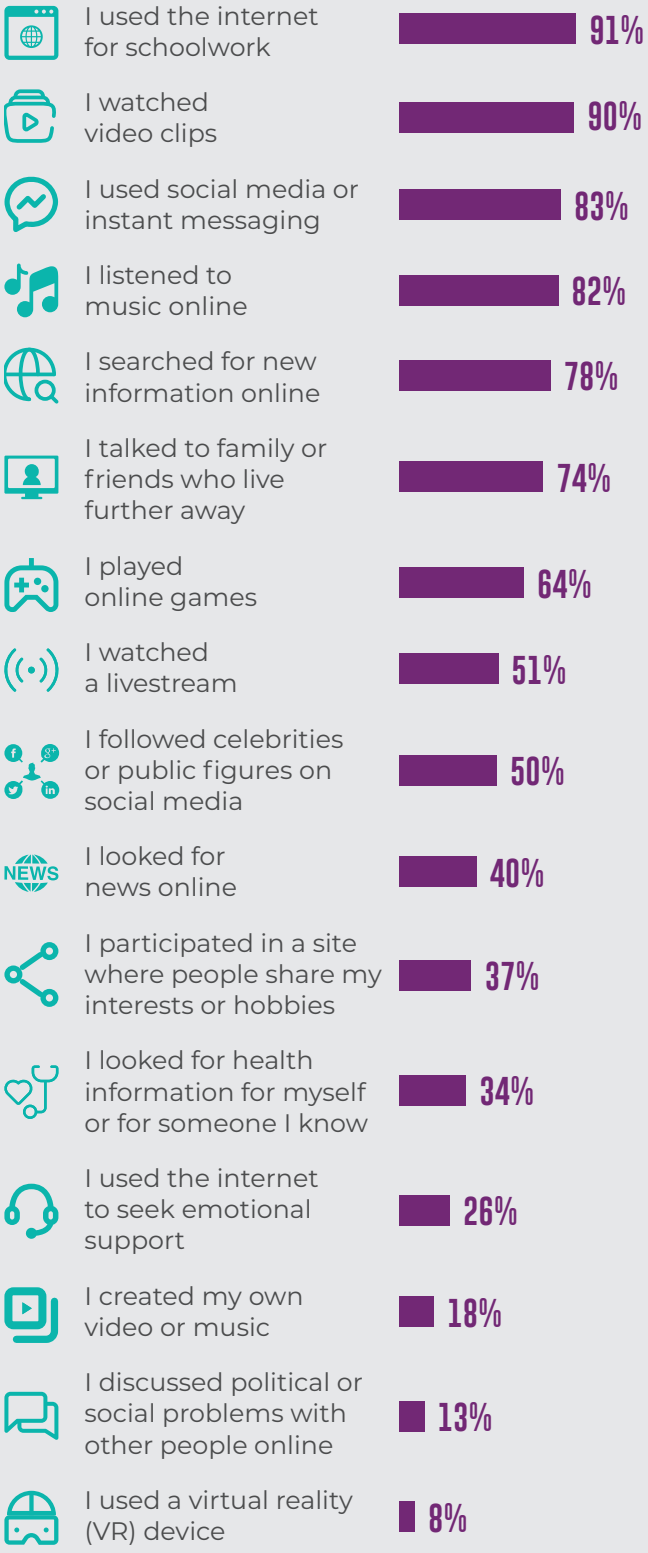
BARRIERS TO INTERNET ACCESS AMONG INTERNET-USING 12–17-YEAR-OLDS



Base: 995 internet-using children.

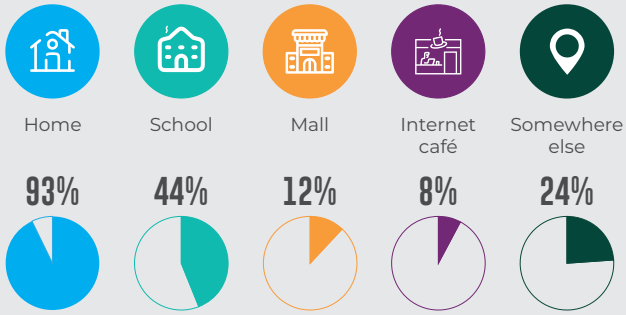
INTERNET USE IN COLOMBIA

ACTIVITIES CHILDREN ENGAGE IN ONLINE AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK



Base: 999 internet-using children.

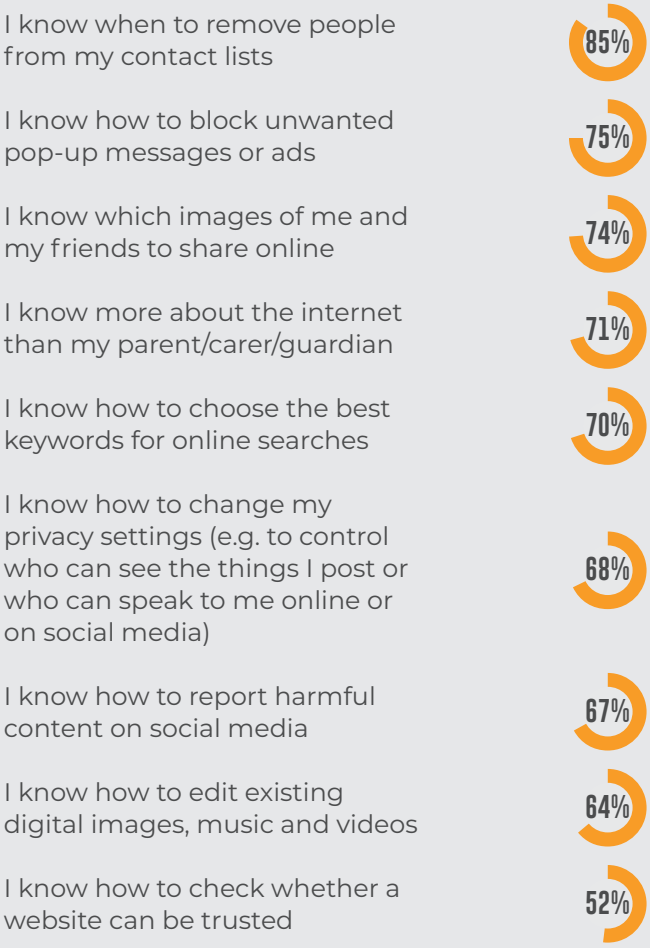
MOST POPULAR PLACES TO GO ONLINE AMONG INTERNET-USING 12–17-YEAR-OLDS*



Base: 999 internet-using children.

*Multiple-choice question.

DIGITAL SKILLS AMONG 12–17-YEAR-OLDS INTERNET USERS IN COLOMBIA*

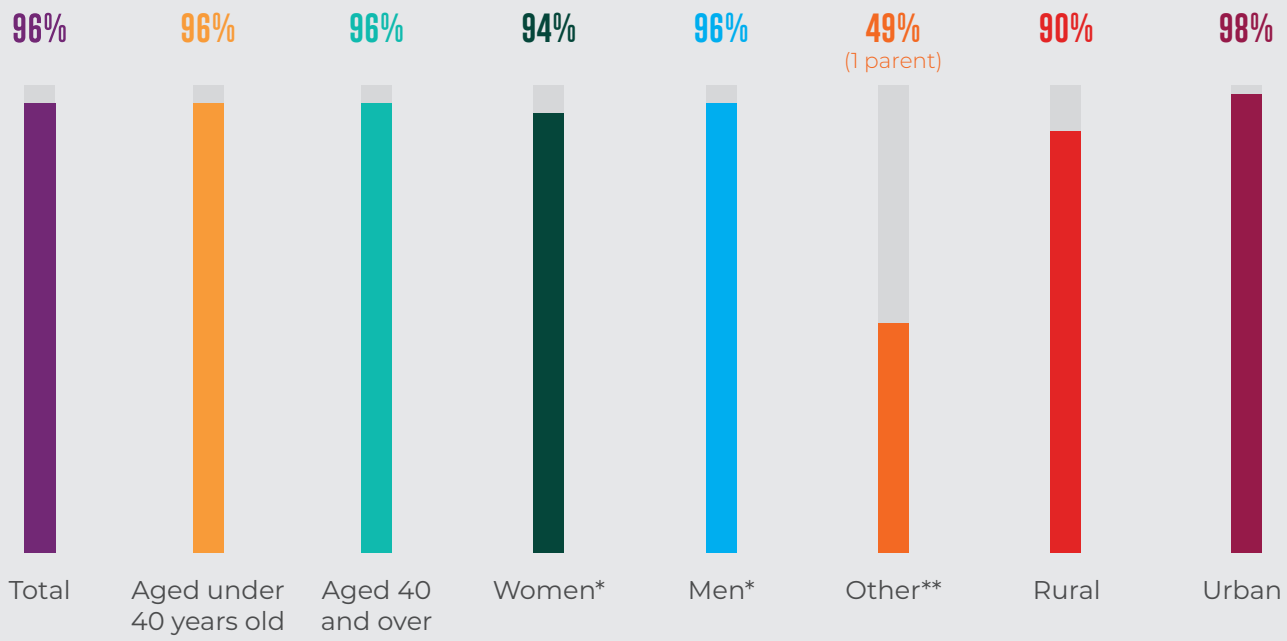


Base: 999 internet-using children.

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

INTERNET USE IN COLOMBIA

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



Base: 999 parents of internet-using 12–17-year-old children.

* Women made up a majority of the parents' sample (86 per cent), so these results should be interpreted with caution.

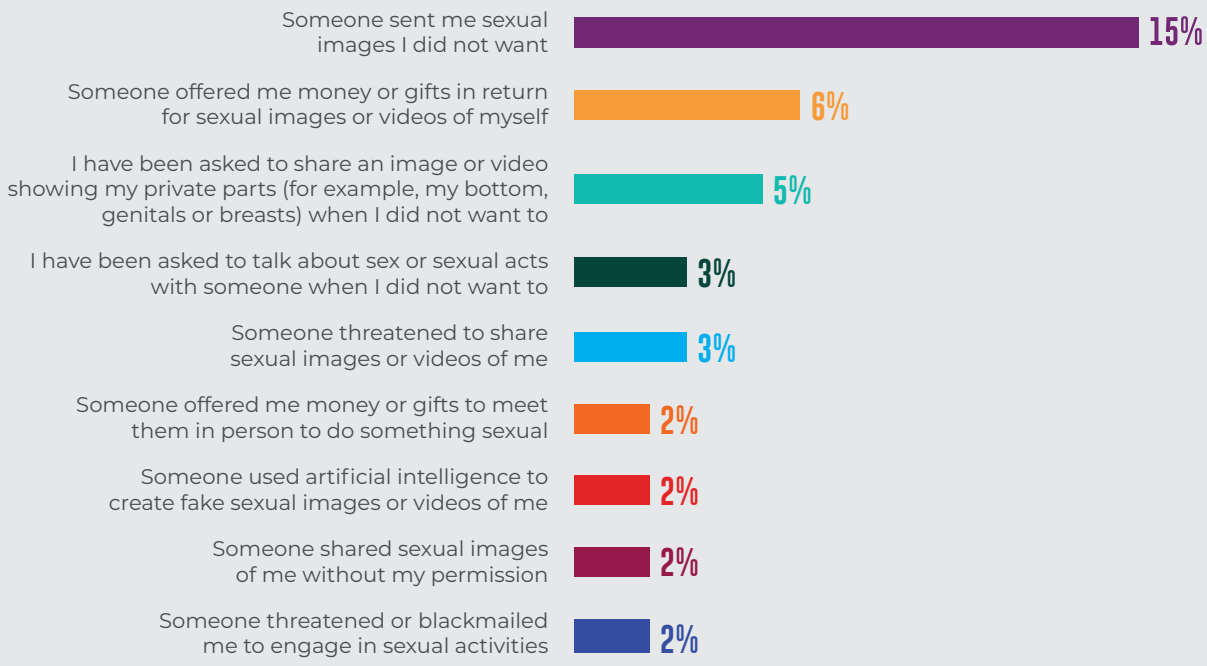
** Only two parents in the sample selected "other" when asked to state their gender.

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

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

Based on the household survey, 21 per cent of internet-using children surveyed in Colombia 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 Colombia, this represents an estimated 860,000 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: 999 internet-using children aged 12–17 in Colombia.

Many of the children were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and/or abuse more than once during this period. In fact, almost 39 per cent of the 190 children who reported any experience of abuse described being subjected to more than one of the measured forms. In total, the survey captured 379 instances of abuse, forming the foundation for much of this report.

More girls (25 per cent) were subjected to these forms of tech-facilitated sexual abuse than boys (17 per cent), and more older children (21 per cent of children aged 17) than younger (7 per cent of children aged 12). Children in rural areas (29 per cent) were significantly more likely to be exposed than children in urban areas (17 per cent).

By comparing data from public sources such as the media, and interviewing law enforcement investigators, it is evident that cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are recorded in nearly all regions of the country, with particularly high rates in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Santa Marta. Reported cases include grooming for sexual purposes, sexual abuse, production of child sexual abuse material, and online abuse and exploitation for financial gain. Between 2020 and 2021, the Cyber Police Centre reported a 43 per cent increase in grooming cases, likely linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting quarantine measures. From 2021 to 2023, approximately 20 per cent of the unit's annual arrests were related to sexual abuse and exploitation of children.

Receiving unwanted sexual images

The most common form of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia according to the household survey was children being sent sexual images when they did not want them (15 per cent), followed by children receiving unwanted offers of money or gifts for their sexual content (6 per cent) and unwanted requests to share sexual content (5 per cent).

Interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and/or abuse in childhood, as well as with professionals working in the field, consistently highlight that this form of abuse often begins with perpetrators sending unsolicited sexual messages or images, which may then escalate to requests for sexual content or participation in sexual acts online. In many cases, these interactions evolve into blackmail and sexual extortion, trapping children in cycles of fear, coercion and manipulation.

> ***You start chatting on Facebook with your friends and, all of a sudden, a message request arrives with a photo of an intimate part of who knows who and inviting you to do racy things. And it wasn't just once, but several times. And you [think]: 'But well, what's happening at this moment? I'm not talking to you, I don't know who you are'.*** **(YP)**

Participants also described cases where perpetrators had initially exposed many different children to sexual content, made possible by the relative ease of access to children on popular digital platforms, for example social media sites.

Exposing children to sexual content is not explicitly criminalized in Colombia, even though perpetrators seem to deliberately use it as a tactic to normalize sexual behaviour and groom children for subsequent sexual exploitation and abuse. This gap underscores the need for specific legal provisions that recognize unwanted exposure to sexual content as a distinct offence, reflecting its role as both a form of, and a gateway to, further abuse. In September 2025, the Chamber of Representatives introduced a bill proposing the criminalization of online grooming, defined to include the sending or offering of sexual material to a child under 18 years of age.[6] As of January 2026, it was pending approval by both chambers of Congress.

Grooming of children for sexual purposes

The survey data and data from interviews show evidence of perpetrators intentionally attempting to build a relationship with children for sexual purposes – commonly referred to as 'grooming'. This includes sending children unwanted sexual images, as discussed above.

Based on interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse under the age of 18, as well as professionals working with such cases in Colombia, perpetrators identify possible victims by monitoring them and assessing their behaviour on social media platforms.

Prior to making first contact, perpetrators stalk and study individual children to identify those with whom an abusive interaction or relationship can be more easily established. Once identified, the perpetrators try to establish an emotional connection with the child, for example by establishing trust so that the child gradually accedes to their requests. Several young people and professionals described how this began with the perpetrators misrepresenting their identity, such as pretending to be around the same age as the child or using a fake profile to appear more relatable or peer-like. This tactic was used to lower the child's guard and make the interaction feel safe and comfortable.

> ***Sometimes men post photos of young people my age, pretending to be young, texting you, just being normal, and then they ask you out, and that's when things start to get really bad. It happened to me... and I felt like it wasn't true, like I had a feeling he wasn't a young man my age... He would make video calls and only show me where he lived, but he didn't show his face.*** **(YP)**

6. Republic of Colombia, Bills: Law 306/2025C against grooming (2025).

Once contact was established, perpetrators would try to create a sense of connection by offering praise, attention and emotional validation. They might compliment the child's appearance, express interest in their daily life, or offer support and understanding to make the child feel understood or special. Over time, these conversations would progressively shift tone, becoming increasingly personal or sexual.

In several cases, young people reported that they did not recognize what was happening to them as the onset of abuse, even when they felt a sense of unease. Several participants described experiencing initial curiosity about the situation before realizing its exploitative nature.

While the use of global information networks to obtain sexual contact or offer sexual services to children under 18 is criminalized in Colombia,[7] the Supreme Court of Justice has confirmed that grooming in itself is not.[8] According to the Court, such conduct only falls within the scope of criminal law when it results in typified offences such as the inducement of a child aged under 14 to engage in sexual acts, or the creation of child sexual abuse material, among others.[9] This interpretation is reflected in practice by the Prosecutor's Office, which indicated in discussions with INTERPOL that authorities rely on these existing criminal provisions to investigate and prosecute cases involving grooming. This approach allows them to recognize and document the harm of early-stage grooming and to take such conduct into account when charging and investigating cases. While this approach enables some grooming-related behaviour to be addressed, criminalizing grooming would provide additional tools for protecting children and resources for supporting prosecution.

To address this gap, a bill to criminalize the use of information and communication technologies to contact a child for the purpose of committing a sexual offence against them was first introduced in 2023.[10] This recognizes grooming as a crime of intent aimed at sexual abuse and/or exploitation taking place entirely online (e.g. coercing a child into sharing sexual content) or involving in-person elements. The bill was adopted by the Senate in August 2024,[11] but was not taken up by the Chamber of Representatives before the end of its legislative session in June 2025.[12] Because no proposal may be considered for more than two legislative sessions,[13] the bill was ultimately archived.

The September 2025 bill mentioned in the previous section proposes a new definition of grooming centred on the use of information and communication technologies to contact a child in order to solicit sexual content or to invite the child to an in-person or digital meeting for sexual purposes, even when the intended acts do not ultimately take place.[14]

While this represents a welcome step forward, it remains unclear whether its focus on inviting a child to a digital 'meeting' would encompass all forms of online-only abuse. In particular, practices such as coercing or manipulating a child into sending sexual images through messaging only, without any proposal for a meeting, may fall outside the scope of the provision as currently worded. By tying liability to explicit invitations or solicitations, the bill may narrow grooming in a way that is not fully aligned with the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime,[15] the most recent international standard on grooming, which centres on criminal intent rather than specific acts.

7. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 219-A.
8. María Camila Correa Flórez, "La regulación del grooming en Colombia", Universidad Externado de Colombia, 28 August 2024. Available at: https://blogpenal.uexternado.edu.co/la-regulacion-del-grooming-en-colombia/ in Spanish].
9. Ibid.
10. Republic of Colombia, Committee Report for the First Debate on Draft Law No. 309 of 2024 (Chamber of Representatives) – 061 of 2023 (Senate) (2024).
11. Republic of Colombia, Final text approved in the plenary session of the Senate of the Republic on 28 August 2024 for Bill No. 61 of 2023 (2024).
12. Universidad de los Andes, Congreso visible: Chamber Bill 309/24 – Senate Bill 61/23.
13. Republic of Colombia, Law No. 5 of 1992, art. 19.
14. Republic of Colombia, Bills: Law 306/2025C against grooming (2025).
15. A/RES/79/243.

Sexual extortion

According to conversations with young people and professionals, sending a child unwanted sexual images, or asking them to talk about sex or to share sexual content, can all represent an escalation of the grooming process. Once children engage, a process of blackmail and extortion begins in which they are pressured to send images with increasingly explicit and/or violent sexual content (such as self-harm or degrading acts) or to have intimate face-to-face encounters in exchange for not publishing the images.

> ***I told him I didn't want to have that kind of relationship anymore, he showed me a video and told me that in that case I wouldn't want to, that he had no problem, he would just publish the video and that things would be left at that, that I should figure out what to do... At that moment, I felt that there was no solution.*** (YP)

A concerning form of abuse that was prevalent in the data involves the non-consensual recording of sexual acts, followed by the distribution of this material for financial gain or to further coerce and exploit children.[16] One young woman who had been coerced into having sex for money explains how the perpetrator recorded the act and later used the material to further exploit her:

> ***...So I went into the room with him and we started having sex. He told me to put two little buns in pigtails here, two pink bows and I put them on. But I noticed something very strange, that he only looked at a specific point in the room and I was like, that's weird. And there was a little black frame on the black table, it didn't look like a camera, it was a little black frame like that and I looked there and I [thought] that's kind of weird, it's kind of weird. Well, we had sex and he grabbed me super roughly, I noticed like there was something suspicious and I covered my face, I covered myself like this, he took my hands off super roughly, super roughly he took them off, In fact, well in the videos you can see how he grabbed me, he took my arms off and I tried to like cover myself and he took them off, he took my arms off. And he always put me like towards that place.*** (YP)

While the Criminal Code criminalizes compelling a person to do something with the purpose of obtaining an unlawful benefit for the perpetrator or a third party,[17] this broad definition of extortion fails to fully capture the specific harm and methods outlined above, namely the use of threats to disseminate a child's sexual content as a means of coercing that child into engaging in sexual acts or providing more sexual content, money or other benefits. Without a dedicated framework, tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children lacks a clear legal basis for prosecution and risks being absorbed into general extortion offences, hindering clear classification and the collection of accurate data on recorded cases, which are essential for the development of effective responses and prevention strategies.

16. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 218.
17. Ibid., art. 244.

Exploitation or abuse involving children's self-produced sexual content

Creating and sharing sexual content online is a complex issue, both legally and socially. For many young people, it has become part of how they explore relationships and intimacy in the digital age. From a legal standpoint, however, such acts may still fall within the scope of criminal law.

Specifically, the Colombian Criminal Code prohibits a wide range of conduct related to material representing sexual activity involving children, including its production, dissemination, sale, purchase, storage, possession and upload to Internet databases.[18] Mere access to such material, however, is not criminalized,[19] which creates a loophole that allows individuals to intentionally seek out and view it online without legal consequences. Because Colombia sets the age of criminal responsibility at 14,[20] children of that age or older could technically face prosecution for voluntarily creating, possessing or sharing their own sexual content. This leaves children at risk of criminal liability for non-malicious behaviours arising from sexual exploration, trust or peer interaction.

Four per cent of children surveyed in Colombia reported having shared sexual images or videos of themselves with someone in the past year. Most often, they said they did so because they were flirting or having fun, were in love, trusted the recipient or did not believe there was anything wrong with sharing such content. A young woman who had suffered various situations of abuse and harassment since childhood, both in person and online, explained:

> ***When I had my first boyfriend, we sometimes sent each other photos. But it was very much from, yes, I mean like from… Well, he was my first boyfriend, it was something very respectful, in quotes, I don't know how to explain it … Because I remember that my parents found out about those conversations I had with my boyfriend and they scolded me a lot: 'It's that you don't make yourself respected', all that. And I would say, but, I want to do it, I mean, he's my boyfriend, I like him.*** **(YP)**

However, this content can be misused to exploit or harm children, even when it was originally shared consensually. Interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and/or abuse under the age of 18 revealed that, in some cases, the person who received the images decided to share them with friends and family or post them on social media, with the aim of harming the child portrayed in the images or, as reported by some justice professionals, for fun and due to a lack of empathy. From a legal perspective, this conduct amounts to dissemination of child sexual abuse material and carries penalties ranging from 10 to 20 years in prison, irrespective of the intent behind it.[21]

Two per cent of children surveyed in Colombia said that sexual images of them had been shared with others without their consent. A justice professional who has been working with children who displayed harmful sexual behaviours for several years, described the situation as follows:

18. Ibid., art. 218.
19. Ibid., art. 218.
20. Republic of Colombia, Code for Children and Adolescents (2006), art. 142.
21. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code, art. 218.

> ***What catches my attention is the boys who [do] it without the permission of the people, of those who sent it. They send photos because the boys take it as very natural, like 'It was a mistake' and they don't look at the damage. They don't realize the damage that these types of actions cause. That catches my attention, more than the fact itself. Well, what stands out is how adolescents take it, like 'Oh yeah, well I made a mistake, I shared that.' But they don't realize [that] that generates a very big impact on the victims and that many have even had to change schools or friends because that greatly affects their reputation.*** (JP)

Young people and professionals described a range of different circumstances surrounding the creation and sharing of sexual content. While some young people had shared their own content willingly within relationships or as an expression of trust or love, others experienced varying degrees of direct or indirect pressure. This pressure could be in the form of subtle social expectations – such as a perceived norm or expectation among peers – or more explicit requests backed by pressure. The line between consensual and non-consensual image-sharing can sometimes be unclear, especially in relationships marked by unequal power dynamics, emotional dependence or limited understanding of privacy and consent. As mentioned previously, 5 per cent of children in Colombia have been asked to share an image or video showing their private parts when they did not want to.

The interviews suggest that the relatively small number of children who disclosed this form of abuse in the survey may reflect underreporting, likely driven by social norms surrounding sex, sexuality and victim-blaming attitudes. Many of the cases discussed in the interviews began with the child voluntarily creating or sharing their own sexual content, often within a context of trust. When that trust was later violated, young people frequently described experiencing intense feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame, which makes disclosing difficult.

In some cases, children and young people remain in abusive situations for fear of having intimate images revealed. In other cases, young people do not recognize that they are being abused but are deeply afraid of being exposed due to shame and social punishment. One of the young women interviewed was pressured into long-term sexual relations for fear of intimate photos being published. She did not reveal the situation to anyone out of shame:

> ***I didn't want to seek help either. Because I talk about it now, calmly, because it happened a long time ago, but for me, that was a matter of shame, because, anyway, from the beginning, I was the one who agreed. Even if it was sudden, in my ignorance, but I did agree. Back then, I was very ashamed, and I didn't tell anyone.*** (YP)

These reflections indicate how societal norms can shape the way children interpret abuse – in this case as something they brought upon themselves through their actions. Even years after the abuse, some children continue to carry a sense of responsibility for what happened. As discussed further in Chapter 3, internalized shame can be a major barrier to disclosure and help-seeking.

A front-line professional from a civil society organization highlighted the importance of recognizing the severe impacts that can stem from the ongoing circulation of a child's sexual images or videos, because the young person is repeatedly victimized:

> ***...it sounds ugly, they are sexually abused once, but not only were they sexually abused, they were recorded and this recording is going around globally, well because we know that geopolitical borders do not exist on the internet, this is going to generate much more, much more say remembrance and it will be much more revictimizing throughout their whole life.*** (JP)

These accounts highlight the fact that not all sexual content is created or shared under the same conditions, and that it is essential to understand the social and relational context to avoid oversimplified assumptions. Recognizing this complexity without ever placing blame on the child is imperative when managing this type of abuse.

Child sexual abuse material generated using artificial intelligence

The rise of powerful image-generation tools leveraging advances in artificial intelligence further complicates challenges with abusive acts involving children's sexual content. These tools are increasingly embedded in apps and can produce fake sexual images or videos by superimposing a person's face onto sexual content, often without their knowledge or consent. This means that adolescents who have never shared sexual material can now be falsely depicted in sexually explicit scenarios, exposing them to the same harm as those whose real images are misused, and providing perpetrators with yet another tool to manipulate, coerce and blackmail children.

Such fabrications carry emotional and social consequences. Children whose likeness is used in this material may suffer from social stigma, shame or moral judgment, especially if the content circulates online. This new form of abuse is already a reality in Colombia.

According to the survey data, 2 per cent of children said that someone had used artificial intelligence to create fake sexual images or videos of them in the year prior to the survey.

As these technologies become more widely used, there is a real concern that this form of abuse will be more common. This raises the question of how legislation and child protection frameworks will prevent, identify and respond to these fast-evolving crimes. Efforts to address this urgent issue are already evolving in some countries that could serve as potential models for Colombia to follow.[22]

Because the Colombian Criminal Code defines child sexual abuse material as limited to real representations of sexual activity involving a child,[23] it excludes digitally generated or manipulated material, including content created through artificial intelligence. As a result, the creation, possession and dissemination of such material are not expressly criminalized, despite causing comparable harm to children whose likeness is used or whose abuse they may simulate. This gap is reinforced by the case law of the Supreme Court jurisprudence, which has confirmed that the scope of child sexual abuse material is limited to depictions of real children.[24] Consequently, digitally generated representations of non-existent children fall outside the scope of the law, even though they can normalize or fuel demand for child sexual abuse material portraying real children.

22. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, "New law to tackle AI child abuse images at source as reports more than double", 12 November 2025. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/new-law-to-tackle-ai-child-abuse-images-at-source-as-reports-more-than-double.
23. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 218.
24. Republic of Colombia, Supreme Court of Justice, SP123-2018 (45868), Judgment, 7 February 2018, pp. 26–27.

Child sexual abuse material in Colombian legislation: Definition, gaps and terminology

Under the Colombian Criminal Code, any real representation of sexual activity involving a child under 18 years of age qualifies as child sexual abuse material.[25] This definition, however, is narrower than that contained in article 2 (c) of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, as it does not include material depicting simulated sexual activities or representations of the sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.[26]

Although the wording of the Protocol has been used for regulatory purposes in Colombia since as early as 2002,[27] the legislature opted for a more restrictive criminal definition of child sexual abuse material when amending the Criminal Code in 2009. As a result, conduct involving sexualized or exploitative material that does not depict real sexual activity risks falling outside the scope of criminal liability. The lack of clear legal basis for prosecution risks leaving such children without effective protection or recourse, while contributing to impunity and continued circulation of harmful material.

In addition, the Colombian 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.

Sexual exploitation for financial gain

The commercial nature of sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Colombia was prevalent throughout the data. This is due to several factors, including the economic vulnerability of some communities in Colombia and the proliferation of organized criminal activity related to child sexual exploitation and trafficking for sexual purposes. Perpetrators using financial incentives to lure children into abusive circumstances is evident throughout the results; the survey data show that 2 per cent of children aged 12 to 17 in Colombia had accepted money or gifts in exchange for sexual images or videos in the year prior to being surveyed.

Both professionals and young people described cases where the abuse started with a perpetrator offering a child money for sexual images and acts. In some cases, this led to extortion, while in others, children were offered money to coerce them into participating in recorded sexual activities, such as those produced in webcam studios:

> ***...when I realized that it was not a call centre, it was not anything of the sort... It was where I realized that it was not a customer service company, but a webcam model studio. I, honestly... I said: 'Model? I'm not a model.' No ...and they explained to me: no, what happens is that this is a clandestine studio where no one can know what a studio is, that there are people inside doing sexual things. And I said to him: 'There are sexual things? And with minors? And this is known?' No, what happens is that the IDs they made were fake and they had a different age.*** **(YP)**

25. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 218.
26. A/RES/54/263.
27. See Republic of Colombia, Decree 1524 of 2002, art. 2(2).

There were also cases of parents producing child sexual abuse material for financial gain and of tech-facilitated human trafficking, where digital platforms are used to recruit, exploit and transport children and young people. Because this form of economic exploitation was particularly evident in the data, the issue will be further unpacked in Chapter 2: "Drivers of abuse and tactics used to victimize children".

Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is not confined to the digital environment but frequently embedded in children's broader social environments and relationships.

1.1 WHERE DOES ABUSE OCCUR?

The findings from this study show that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse do not take place solely within the digital environment. Rather, the patterns observed reveal situations of sexual abuse where online and in-person elements are closely connected.

For example, cases of blackmail and sexual extortion may begin online and later escalate into in-person abuse. Children also reported being offered money both online and in person in exchange for sexual images, sexual acts or participation in recorded sexual content. These offers were made through social media but also in schools, public offices and community spaces, as well as through webcam studios, where children are persuaded or coerced to produce sexual material.

It should be recalled that 83 per cent of children used social media weekly, while 64 per cent played games on a weekly basis. Perpetrators know where children spend time online and frequently use popular platforms to target children. In Colombia, around half of cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse occurred on social media platforms, by far most commonly on Facebook or Facebook Messenger (80 per cent), followed by WhatsApp (30 per cent) and Instagram (17 per cen). It occurred less commonly on Snapchat (8 per cent), TikTok (6 per cent), and YouTube (6 per cent). Telegram and X (formerly Twitter) were also mentioned, though less frequently (3 per cent and 2 per cent, respectively). Around 14 per cent of cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse happened on gaming platforms. The top three social media platforms where children in the survey reported being subjected to this type of abuse are all owned by Meta.

The data pointed strongly to perpetrators actively using social media and online platforms as a tool to facilitate abuse. This includes stalking and identifying which children to victimize or taking advantage of the relatively easy access they have to large numbers of children. Participants discussed several cases where perpetrators used social media platforms to cast a wide net by sending sexual content to many children at once and waiting for one or more of them to engage.

While this highlights the role of digital spaces in facilitating initial contact, communication or the sharing of sexual content, it is important to note that 70 per cent of children who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse first encountered the perpetrator in person, not online. The most common in-person setting where children met their perpetrator was in school (28 per cent), followed by their home (22 per cent) and public spaces (18 per cent). By comparison, 30 per cent of children met their perpetrator online. This was supported by interviews with several professionals and a number of young people who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse under the age of 18. According to these accounts, peers and even teachers acted as facilitators of abuse. As suggested by a justice professional, in some cases teachers may even be linked to criminal networks:

> ***The impact also extends to educational institutions [because] we have received comments from the children we serve and from their families [indicating] that there are teachers in these institutions who are linked to these networks, who facilitate and give permission to the children to go and 'do their thing'. [In other words,] they know about it and they let them do it and facilitate it. There is also the issue of links with gangs, with illegal groups in the neighbourhoods.*** **(FW)**

This demonstrates that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is not confined to the digital environment but frequently embedded in children's broader social environments and relationships. Interventions to prevent this type of violence need to take place across all spaces where children spend time.

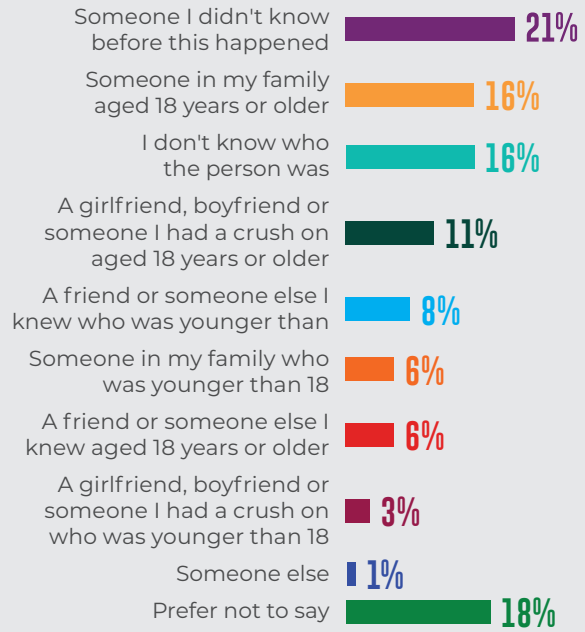
1.2 WHO PERPETRATES ABUSE?

Understanding who commits tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is essential to addressing it effectively. One participant emphasized that perpetrators can be anywhere, online or in person, and in any setting:

> ***Mothers believe that predators are monsters out there from the jungle, you know, and before they realize it, it's the neighbour, the neighbour who has sons, who has daughters, who you see with the baby at night, lulling. We've managed to identify [...] even very young boys, gentlemen, teachers from the same school as the girls.*** **(FW)**

Public discourse often centres on the narrative of 'stranger danger', but the data collected in Colombia reveals a more complex reality. The survey data showed that around 50 per cent of all reported instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were perpetrated by someone the child already knew, while 21 per cent were perpetrated by strangers.

Chart 1: Who perpetrates tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (by relationship to the child and age)?



Base: 379 instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that children were subjected to up to one year prior to being surveyed.

Specifically, 22 per cent of cases involved family members, 14 per cent involved a romantic interest (a crush or girlfriend/boyfriend) and another 14 per cent involved friends. A considerable number of children (18 per cent) did not want to reveal in the survey who the perpetrator was.

These survey findings are supported by interviews with professionals, who stated that a large majority of their caseloads include perpetrators from within the child's family, friend or social networks . During interviews, young people who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse under the age of 18, along with professionals, frequently identified perpetrators who were brothers-in-law, uncles, cousins, neighbours or romantic. As described in one case where a boy was abused: *"The adult was his father... he was a teacher, a super-respected person, a neat man..."* (JP)

When perpetrators are people close to the child or young person, they may use proximity to facilitate approaches, proposals and subsequent blackmail. The following account is from a 16-year-old girl who began receiving messages on a messaging app from her boyfriend's brother-in-law, who was 38 years old:

> ***He is my boyfriend's brother-in-law, and he got the number and wrote to me. And well, I already knew who the guy was, I never gave the guy any trust or anything... After two weeks [of conversations], he wrote me a message and said: 'Hello, my love, what are you doing?' That was the word he said to me, hello, my love. And I was like in shock, it was like weird because I didn't even know what to answer him... I told him to respect me, that I had my boyfriend and to respect his wife. What he told me was: 'You relax, just don't say anything and delete conversations and that's it'. (YP)***

The interaction led to a request for intimate images by the adult man who, when faced with the refusal of the adolescent girl, tried to launch a smear campaign by telling the family that she had indeed sent him images:

> ***Then he started saying that I had sent him nude photos. And I had never sent him nude photos… he started telling my boyfriend that I had sent him photos… What I did was take screenshots and send them to my mom and my boyfriend, in case there was any doubt or in case they didn't believe me or for whatever reason.*** **(YP)**

Conversely, 21 per cent of cases involved a stranger or someone the child did not know prior to the abuse. The involvement of strangers was highlighted by professionals when discussing cases of grooming where children received unsolicited sexual messages and content or were pressured to engage in sexual behaviours online. Girls and young women who were subjected to several abusive situations when strangers approached them on social networks recounted the following:

> ***There was a time when there was a girl, she put 'Hello! How are you? Pretty, can we be friends?' And I [said]: 'Yes, of course'. At that age [I] didn't have such an open mentality, [she] tells me we can be friends and I [answered] yes of course. About three days passed and she wrote to me normally every day: 'How are you? What did you do? Did you eat, did you not eat?' In other words, that girl asked me even if I bathed. One day she sent me a message and says can I video call you? And I [said]: 'Yes, of course'… when she starts and starts masturbating and told us to do it… she kissed her breasts.*** **(YP)**

While strangers online continue to pose a risk, the survey data together with the accounts of professionals and young people challenge the assumption that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is primarily a risk posed by strangers. Rather, it suggests that – as with sexual violence against children more generally – the risk often lies closer to home. As one front-line worker explained:

> ***The people who victimize children and adolescents do not inhabit a distant and dark swamp. They are closer to the victims than we believe and think. They are in the places where the safe environments for children and adolescents should be. And when I'm talking about safe environments, I'm talking about family environments, I'm talking about their own homes and houses, and I'm talking about academic places or school environments. There are these victimizers who, in one way or another, begin to gain the trust of children or are known by the children and begin to investigate where the vulnerability of these children is in order to attack that vulnerability and obtain their petty interests of sexual abuse.*** **(JP)**

Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is often rooted in existing relationships and not just anonymous online interactions. The data suggest that proximity and trust, whether familial or social, can be further exploited through digital means, making it harder for children to recognize, report or resist abusive behaviours.

Abuse perpetrated by peers

In nearly one fifth of cases (17 per cent), the perpetrator of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was another child. Children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviours may be influenced by dynamics such as economic pressures, peer pressure, bullying or a lack of understanding about relationships, consent and boundaries.

1.2 WHO PERPETRATES ABUSE?

The young people and professionals interviewed described cases in which sexual images of children were shared on social media by peers with the intent to cause reputational harm, most often targeting young women. Many also recounted incidents where children were contacted online by peers online – typically schoolmates – who offered money in exchange for sexual images, and some children agreed to do so.

In other cases, peers acted as facilitators of sexual exploitation by adults. In one example. a teenage girl was sexually exploited by her schoolmate, when she was convinced to exchange sex for money to supplement her spending money. During the exploitation she was also secretly recorded. First, the young person narrates the invitation of a schoolmate to have sex with a stranger in exchange for money. Secondly, she narrates the experience in which she had sex with a foreigner she did not know in exchange for money. Approximately a year after this event, she understood that she had been recorded because she appeared on a page where sexual videos were sold.

In these cases of abuse, as described in the interviews, facilitators were often friends or family members of similar ages. Once trapped in a cycle of sexual exploitation, adolescent girls were used to recruit more victims; they invite their peers to exchange intimate material or, directly, to have sexual relations with strangers in exchange for money. This was also the case for children exploited via webcam studios. In those cases described by interviewees, it was the children who had been subjected to abuse themselves who went on to recruit other young people or run their own studios. Drawing on their own experiences, these young women recruited even more children and adolescents and showed them the economic benefits they could obtain from this activity:

> ***Sometimes it is the same young girls who, in some way, we have known, going back to the webcam issue. We have met girls from webcam studios who, when they learn how it's done, they leave and set up their own studio, their own webcam studio and bring their sisters, their cousins.*** **(JP)**

In this way, the vulnerability of one child can snowball into the victimization of many. It is critical that prevention efforts focus on addressing underlying factors – particularly economic and social vulnerabilities – that children face so they do not continue to be targeted by perpetrators.

These findings also raise difficult legal questions about the treatment of children who, while having been subjected to exploitation themselves, may then engage in conduct against peers that falls within the scope of criminal law. Colombia does not emphasize punishment for children in conflict with the law. The age of criminal responsibility is set at 14,[28] with children who are 14 or older at the time of the offence being subject to the Juvenile Criminal Responsibility System.[29] The Code for Children and Adolescents states that both the process and the measures adopted under this system must be pedagogical in nature, guided by the principles of comprehensive protection and the best interests of the child.[30] Possible sanctions include admonition, the imposition of rules of conduct, community service, supervised release, placement in semi-closed facilities and temporary deprivation of liberty in a specialized care centre, depending on the gravity of the offence.[31] However, custodial measures can be applied in cases of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse, as these offences carry penalties of at least six years;[32] children aged 16–17 convicted of such crimes may therefore be temporarily deprived of their liberty, as may children aged 14–17 convicted of (sexual) extortion.[33]

28. Republic of Colombia, Code for Children and Adolescents (2006), art. 142.
29. Ibid., art. 139.
30. Ibid., art. 140.
31. Ibid., art. 177.
32. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2006), arts. 210-A, 218, 219-A.
33. Republic of Colombia, Code for Children and Adolescents (2006), art. 187.

In such situations, children must be separated from adults and have access to essential public services, facilities appropriate to their holistic development and the ability to continue their education according to their age and academic level.[34] Deprivation of liberty can only be applied until the age of 21 and part of the sanction may be substituted with measures such as periodic reporting, community service a commitment not to reoffend, and good behaviour.[35]

The data suggest that proximity and trust, whether familial or social, can be further exploited through digital means, making it harder for children to recognize, report or resist abusive behaviours.

34. Ibid., art. 188.
35. Ibid., art. 187.

2. DRIVERS OF ABUSE AND TACTICS USED TO EXPLOIT AND ABUSE CHILDREN

This chapter discusses the drivers of abuse that were prevalent in the data analysed. These are intersectional and span interpersonal, sociocultural and system-level domains, all representing potential situations of which perpetrators can take advantage to abuse and exploit children more easily. For this reason, these factors are presented together with tactics that perpetrators use to target children, especially those who are emotionally or economically at risk.

Gender and social norms

According to the survey, 25 per cent of girls were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse compared with 17 per cent of boys. Although both figures are high, girls are statistically significantly more likely to be subjected to abuse.

The findings show that while both girls and boys in Colombia experience tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, gender fundamentally shapes its dynamics, impacts and the social responses that follow. It is clear across the data that gendered social norms such as stereotypes and discrimination intersect with a range of other drivers, such as economic inequality, to further influence who is abused, how and where the abuse takes place, and the community and institutional response to it.

Sexualization of young girls

Societal beliefs around women's bodies often extend to girls, shaping how they are perceived and targeted by perpetrators of abuse. Girls are routinely treated as older than they are, sexualized in everyday environments and positioned as objects of male entitlement. Early and repeated exposure to sexualized comments, harassment, unwanted sexual content and coercive online interactions were described as common and were rarely problematized. These experiences are often dismissed as 'normal'," by both peers and adults. One young woman described years of sexualization by classmates, adults and even school staff – encounters that no one around her perceived as abusive:

> ***When I was like 11 [years old] my breasts started to grow and it was already more, it was noticeable... Yes, and at school too my classmates tried to touch me or touched me. I remember a lot that my breasts were very noticeable, I mean, it was very obvious, they tried to lower my blouse or things like that.*** **(YP)**

She also described grooming by a teacher who later attempted to initiate sexual contact:

> ***And I remember a lot that, talking to that teacher, he had like a bar near the school, and he invited me and a friend and I remember that I hung out with him, he gave us drinks, it was weird. And at one point I felt like I liked that teacher, I mean, authentically. And once, leaving school, I wrote to him, I told him if we could meet. And, well, he was there, at the bar, we met, and we kissed and he, obviously, told me that he wanted something more to happen.*** **(YP)**

These accounts illustrate how the sexualization of girls can create the social conditions in which grooming and exploitation are easily disguised as consensual, or dismissed as normal, rather than as harmful behaviours. They also suggest a challenging experience for girls and young women growing up in environments that normalize relationships that represent a clear imbalance of power.

Victim-blaming attitudes

Related to the sexualization of girls, gendered social norms that frame women as either seeking out the abuse or as a source of 'temptation' to men can promote victim-blaming attitudes towards girls and young women subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. This phenomenon was observed by both the professionals and young people interviewed.

A few professionals observed that this is particularly relevant for girls as they enter early adolescence in Colombia. According to their accounts, when girls reach the age of 14 they are seen by society as adult women, rather than as children. This means that sexual exploitation and abuse can be socially justified as consensual, even when the perpetrator is a much older adult man. Young women are positioned as responsible for the abuse either 'choosing' or 'provoking' it with their 'overt sexuality'. These beliefs are seen not only in Colombia, but commonly observed internationally. A justice professional recounted hearing the following from neighbourhood police:

> ***...if she is already over 14, well then, oh no, well if this is already normal, she is big, she already knows what she does and the decisions she makes... No, it's that here girls get boyfriends from the age of 14 and the boyfriends are 50, but that's normal.*** (JP)

Such narratives exemplify how sexual relationships between adolescent girls and adult men are normalized, which legitimizes sexual abuse and shifts accountability onto the child. As a result, adult men who target young girls can face fewer consequences. When the abuse of children is framed as consensual, it becomes easier to perpetrate and harder to prevent.

This may be even more evident in urban areas in Colombia, for example Medellín, where sexual exploitation for financial gain has been historically more publicly visible. One young person recalled hearing a legal professional explain to the court during a trial that it should be considered that *"It's normal that there are prepaid girls in Medellín from the age of 13."* (YP) It is possible that young women who have been subjected to abuse in these environments may internalize the normalization of abuse and self-blame.

Girls who are subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia also face intense social condemnation from peers, family or community members for the abuse. In some instances, they are blamed, ostracized, bullied and even forced to change schools or neighbourhoods. As highlighted by one young person, these stereotypes continue to influence the impacts of abuse, as young girls are disproportionately vulnerable to secondary victimization. For example, in the case outlined below, after sexual images of a young girl were circulated without her consent, others in the community further shamed and stigmatized her by sticking the images up around the town. This extends the abuse and creates specific experiences of ongoing victimization beyond the initial instance of abuse.

> ***Some had to leave school, even change neighbourhoods because the bullying was very strong. And, besides,... they printed the photos and stuck them on the doors of the house.*** (YP)

Meanwhile, perpetrators often face minimal scrutiny. One young woman, who was raped after months of online harassment, recounted being shamed by her own family and first responders:

> ***My mom starts to criticize me, she starts to tell me... [that] I'm a loose cannon, she starts to insult me, she starts to tell me that I disappointed them, that she had always known that I was going to disappoint them, that that's why she didn't want to have me. I mean, without knowing everything that had happened to me, without asking me... she started to judge me, she started to criticize me without knowing.*** (YP)

Together, these accounts show how gendered social norms not only shape the abuse itself but also compound the harm to girls and young women through victim-blaming, minimizing their experiences and institutional neglect.

Silencing of boys

Boys also experience tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, yet their victimization is frequently hidden. Interviews from other countries participating in the Disrupting Harm study suggest that pervasive beliefs about masculinity prevent boys from being recognized as victims and inhibit disclosure. Boys may fear judgment, ridicule or being perceived as weak if subjected to abuse. These dynamics are visible in the survey and interview results from Colombia: despite survey results indicating that a high proportion of boys are subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse (17 per cent), only two boys came forward to participate in the in-depth interviews conducted for this study.

Other work with boys in Colombia, by ECPAT International and Fundación Renacer, supports the notion that gender norms and rigid ideas of masculinity mean that boys may deny the pain resulting from abuse,[36] or exacerbate the image of strength and self-control to deal it. They may be reluctant to recognize the abusive situation and instead position themselves as voluntarily participating or even being in charge. All of these factors lead to silencing, underreporting and a reluctance to disclose, which in turn is likely to result in less support and more negative mental health outcomes.

Unmet emotional and social needs

Some participants pointed out that the digital environment can offer children and young people benefits that are not always possible via their face-to-face interactions. These benefits cover a wide spectrum of needs and/or expectations ranging from companionship, friendship, recreation, recognition and refuge to information on topics considered taboo (mainly sex) or access to economic resources. One participant reflected on a conversation with an adolescent that demonstrates how online interactions can be a lifeline for some children:

> ***…and I asked him about the risks [of social networks] and he said to me: 'Risks? That has saved my life. Having those friends there, being able to connect and play online and talk about our things, that has saved my life because I am very lonely'.*** **(FW)**

Many professionals, as well as young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood, told us that family environments with a lack of communication, distant relationships and, in some cases, situations of abandonment or neglect, led children to seek emotional connection online. Unfortunately, those children were not always met by supportive and safe communities of people, but rather by perpetrators who took advantage of the isolation they were experiencing to sexually abuse or exploit them. In the following quote, a young woman reflects on the impact of not having trusted adults to support and guide her decision-making alongside acute economic needs:

> ***And sometimes, because of the same desperation of needing to do something, well, one sees that [it's] a good opportunity. Well, one makes bad decisions, right? And especially when one is alone. Maybe there are many girls who are alone, like that, without [family] support. So, one makes decisions adrift, without consulting, without anything… Well, that's what one hopes for, right? Maybe [one thinks]: 'Oh! an excellent opportunity came up for me, my life is going to change, I'm going to earn better, I'm going to be well'.*** **(YP)**

Rather than focusing on the decisions made by children, these findings highlight the need to address underlying structural vulnerabilities – such as a lack of family support, sometimes combined with a challenging financial situation – that can be exploited by perpetrators to abuse children.

Exposure to domestic violence or in-person violence

Interviews with young people demonstrated that the most extreme cases (encompassing a greater number of victimizing elements) and recurrent or longer-term cases of abuse often affected young people in difficult and complex family conditions, characterized by economic poverty and/or domestic violence. According to the survey data, children who witnessed violence at home were twice as likely to be subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse compared with those who had not been exposed

36. ECPAT International, *Case study: Fundación Renacer in Colombia* (Bangkok, ECPAT International, 2023). Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CaseStudy_Colombia_GBI_EN_2023.pdf.

to domestic violence. Witnessing violence at home can contribute to emotional distress, reduced self-esteem or a lack of trust in protective adults. These factors can make children more susceptible to manipulation by perpetrators.

The survey also indicates that children subjected to in-person sexual violence are three times more likely to be subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse compared with children who have not been subjected to in-person violence. This underscores a significant overlap between in-person and online forms of sexual violence. It could suggest that in-person sexual abuse today often involves a technological component, or that children who are already vulnerable due to prior abuse are at a heightened risk of being targeted again in digital spaces. This may be due to a combination of psychological trauma, disrupted protective environments and behavioural patterns that increase exposure to online threats. Justice professionals and front-line workers also highlighted the connection between tech-facilitated and in-person sexual exploitation and abuse in their caseloads.

> ***Normally, girls or boys who have already suffered other types of violence are also very easy to induce into these types of situations; for example, parental abandonment or having suffered domestic abuse or even sexual violence at another time in their life. It's like, what starts to predominate in the framework of these situations and, well, adolescents and young people who spend a lot of time alone in their family context.*** **(FW)**

Unequal power dynamics

Children navigate the world with relatively less power than adults and perpetrators continue to take advantage of this. Beyond adults in their immediate environment, several professionals described cases where exploitation and abuse were perpetrated by public officials. These cases included police officers, professionals in charge of administering justice, politicians (FW) and officials at educational institutions who have taken advantage of their position and access to information to sexually exploit and abuse children. One participant working against child exploitation and trafficking pointed out several cases in which the perpetrators were powerful officials and 'well-respected' men within their community:

> ***...We had a [case] very serious with an official, an official with enormous power, [who] made the boys and girls watch pornography, literally, and then he touched them, recorded it and sold [the videos] to Chile.*** **(FW)**

Professionals also described cases where teachers facilitated the abuse. This facilitation was described by interviewees as either knowing that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was taking place and not acting against it, or by actively collaborating with the perpetrators.

In one interview, a young woman described how a public official in charge of determining whether a mother was fit to receive her children back from foster care, used his power to make sexual advances towards the mother:

> ***And he was like a commissioner, well, he had a position at the House of Justice. He was the one who helped us... so he scheduled an appointment to go to the house to see if we were fit to receive the girl and all that. And the day he went [to the house] he started asking us all questions and asked for my cell phone number. Well, without any malice, I gave it to him, because he was an official. The delay was that he left my house to start writing to me, telling me he fell in love with me, that I was a very beautiful brunette, that we should go out, that if I wanted, he would help me financially.*** **(YP)**

Such accounts are especially troubling given that Colombian law assigns public officials a primary responsibility for children's protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. Indeed, any person who, by virtue of their job or activity, becomes aware of the (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation of children and fails to report it to the competent authorities can be fined up to 75 times the monthly minimum wage. If the offence is committed by a public official, they may also be dismissed from their position.[37] In addition, public officials are legally required to report any indication or case of sexual abuse against children to the competent authorities within 24 hours of becoming aware of it.[38] Teachers are mandated to notify the appropriate administrative and judicial authorities of any offence or suspicion of violence or sexual abuse against children that comes to their attention.[39]

The testimonies presented in this chapter point to a serious institutional failure: individuals legally mandated to safeguard children are, in some cases, those implicated in their exploitation or abuse. This highlights a critical gap between the robust child protection framework in Colombia and its implementation.

Normalization of sexual abuse

Interviews with professionals and young people pointed to a perception that sexual abuse and exploitation of girls is normalized in Colombia. Online encounters of a sexual nature, including exposure to sexual content, are framed as normal interactions that the child can deal with at a personal level. This was articulated by several professionals, who highlighted a social acceptance around adult men approaching girls online and suggested that these interactions may lead to validation of desirability or eventually, in-person sexual contact.

> ***We are normalizing sexual abuse, unfortunately... and for example... a minor tells her mother: 'My relative touched me,' and the mother responds, 'Don't pay attention to that, better not go near him'.*** **(JP)**

This is compounded by the sexualization of adolescents online (globally) and may also contribute to adultification of children and the normalization and social acceptance of abuse and exploitation in Colombian communities. One of the young women interviewed suffered sexual harassment in different areas of her life (in her family, neighbourhood and school) and has been exposed to highly sexualized online content since she was eight years old. She recalled experiences in which she was the object of sexualization by several of the people around her in a way that was not problematized. The young woman who recounted this experience realized years later that it was a case of abuse. Because she had been exposed for years to an environment in which girls and adolescents were sexualized, she did not recognize the situations she suffered at the time as abusive, in either online or in-person settings.

Professionals also reflected on how children in their adolescence or pre-adolescence are often considered adults and, in many contexts, their bodies are highly sexualized and instrumentalized for male consumption. Thus, in general, children and adolescents over the age of 14 are not necessarily considered victims of abuse and/or exploitation but rather decision makers who are complicit in or even instigators of their own abuse. This does not only contribute to placing children in vulnerable situations that can be exploited by perpetrators, but it also limits the support that children receive to escape abusive situations.

37. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 219B.
38. Republic of Colombia, Law 1146 of 2007, art. 15.
39. Ibid., art. 12.

One professional recounted the response they received from witnesses of cases of sexual abuse and/or exploitation of adolescents when they were questioned about the fact that they had failed to report tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse:

> ***…And do you know what they answer us?… Because we have done this social experiment… They always [answer] the same thing that investigators and police officers mention it's that '…she says she's of legal age', 'she says…', 'it's that she looks big', 'it's that she looks like an adult', 'it's that…'.*** **(FW)**

Colombian legislation sets the age of sexual consent at 14, without any close-in-age exemption.[40] While this legal threshold may partly explain the perception that sexual relations with children aged 14 to 18 are acceptable, it is particularly concerning that law enforcement professionals fail to distinguish between consensual relationships and exploitative or abusive dynamics. The law itself is clear: provisions on sexual harassment,[41] use of global information networks to obtain sexual contact with a child[42] and child sexual abuse material[43] criminalize conduct against all children, regardless of age. Likewise, soliciting or demanding sexual activity from a child under 18 in exchange for any benefits or the promise thereof is always a criminal offence,[44] regardless of the child's consent. The legal framework is therefore adequate, but its protective effect is undermined by the prevailing social attitudes outlined in this section.

Against this legal backdrop, the normalization of abuse and exploitation in children over 14 years old is further exacerbated in some regions of the country, where the problem of sexual exploitation has been constant for decades. Some professionals reflected on the normalization of exploitation of children in prostitution in certain areas of cities such as Medellín or Cartagena, where it is common to accept these dynamics as part of everyday life and therefore risk situations are not identified. A young person who had been subjected to exploitation in prostitution reflected on the attitudes of community members and police, which normalized the sexual exploitation of adolescents over 14 years of age, particularly in the city of Medellín. The situation took place during a criminal trial conducted in the United States of America, in which the defendants openly expressed prevailing prejudices about the city and the justification of the crime due to the stigmatization of adolescent women from the same city.

> ***We [the victim/survivor] started to hear that they were saying: 'No, it's that the paisas [people from the Paisa region] are whores.' […] It's that it's normal that, in Medellín, that you go to the [specific location], you meet and know that there are all kinds of women, from the age of 13. I mean, it's normal that there are prepaid girls [local term referring to girls exploited in prostitution] in Medellín. That's the most common thing you see on every corner, in every neighbourhood, you're always going to find whores, prepaid girls.*** **(YP)**

In addition to the normalization of sexual exploitation of abuse more generally, interviewees pointed to the widespread perception that online interactions are not entirely real and that cases are only classified as abuse or exploitation if contact sexual abuse takes place. The absence of specific provisions criminalizing online grooming for sexual purposes may reinforce this perception, as it leaves preparatory online interactions outside the scope of criminal law until an actual offence

40. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 209.
41. Ibid., art. 210-A.
42. Ibid., art. 219-A.
43. Ibid., art. 218.
44. Ibid., art. 217-A.

is committed. In this sense, common aspects of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, or precursors to it, are made invisible in the legal system.

Economic vulnerability

One key factor in many of the cases discussed by professionals and young people included the precarious economic environment that many children were in prior to the abuse. This, combined with the normalization of sexual exploitation described above, puts children in a particularly vulnerable position of which perpetrators can take advantage.

Several young people subjected to sexual exploitation while they were children described difficult economic conditions and material shortcomings in their families. In this sense, some also reported social expectations they sought to fulfil, such as acquiring clothes, cell phones and other items that were normal among their peers. One young woman, for example, recounted that at the age of 15 she engaged in a relationship with an adult in jail for the murder of another woman, in which she shared intimate photos and videos in exchange for money. The interaction took place during a time of personal economic crisis, in which she had a child and had separated from the father, but it continued over time and led to a situation of blackmail, harassment and extortion by the adult who received the images.

> ***I had just broken up with my son's father. I started talking to this guy, chatting, all chat. A friend passed me the contact [and], well, I started chatting with him and yes, we talked every day, this and that. We started exchanging what were intimate photos, my videos, for money and what else. Well, up to there, all good, all normal. Then, after a while, I wanted to like stop talking to the guy because he's in jail... Some time passed and he talked to me again and I talked to him again. And he would send me money. The exchange was always of my videos and photos for money.*** **(YP)**

The case above demonstrates how exploitation can occur in exchange for money needed to meet basic needs, but this is not always the case. In other situations, there appears to be a complex interaction between the promotion of digital consumerism as a means to achieve status, social validation or belonging – and sexual exploitation. Children and young people aspire to obtain items such as high-end cell phones, designer clothes, money for personal care, outings, trips or the possibility of accessing a lifestyle they see on social media. Unable to achieve these goals in their immediate surroundings, children and young people may attempt to obtain them via online interactions with adults who exploit these aspirations to create abusive relationships and situations of sexual exploitation. A young woman reflected on these complex feelings and how an adult man exploited them to record himself sexually abusing her:

> ***I am very vain, I always like to have my nails, my eyelashes, to be organized. And at home they give me everything, but I felt embarrassed to ask my mom, 'Will you give me money for nails or mom will you give me [money] for that.' I felt embarrassed, because, apart from the fact that they support me, they give me everything, education, clothes and asking for more things. So my friend told me: 'Oh, I have a friend who can give you money for having sex with him.' And I said, 'How much?' She told me, 'about 200 or so' and, I said, 'Oh, okay, let's go.'*** **(YP)**

Regardless of how young people perceive the exchange of sex for money, many may not recognize the exploitative nature of these interactions, nor do they identify them as a violation of their rights or as a crime. This is evident in the quote above where the young woman interviewed describes exchanging her intimate photos with an adult when she was still a child as *"all good, all normal"*. An analysis of the survey data shows that 2 per cent of children aged 12 to 17 in Colombia had accepted money or gifts in exchange for sexual images or videos in the past year alone.

Interviews with young people reveal that they see in these offers an opportunity to improve their economic conditions and thus access possibilities that would otherwise not be available to them. One young woman who was interviewed recalled that when she was a child, she was contacted by a man who offered her money in exchange for having sexual relations with him. She reflected on the fact that she was not aware of the abusive and illegal nature of the situation, given that he provided her with financial support:

> ***I was going through a lot of needs. Then the guy contacted me through social media, he proposed good, well, for me, it was a good amount of money. Because, from having nothing to having what he offered me, well, it was good. Then, well, [after] he was arrested by the police, I realized that he took a lot of photos without me realizing it, without my consent.***
>
> ***At no time did I say things that were not true, because he also helped me with groceries, with things like that. And I didn't know that was a crime, I mean, I saw it as normal. But now that I understand things, I see more, I have matured, well, I see that it is a crime, that one's body costs, I mean, not even a lot of money covers the expenses of one's body.*** (YP)

The example highlights how children and young people may have confusing or complex feelings towards abuse.

In some contexts, severe financial hardship may drive parents to facilitate or tolerate their children being abused and/or exploited online as a means of survival. This risk is compounded by a widespread misconception that non-contact sexual violence is not harmful, which undermines adults' understanding of the serious and lasting impact of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse.

The following quote is from an interview with a social worker with decades of experience in monitoring and attending cases of sexual and domestic violence in the district of Bogotá:

> ***It was the parents themselves who were exposing their daughters. They were girls of 7, 8, 9, 10 years old [who] were already being exposed. They [their parents] said: 'No, but it's nothing, the girl only shows herself on a camera and well, she shows her parts, nobody is touching her, I mean, nobody touches the girl, nobody does anything to her.'*** (FW)

In addition, several professionals described cases of parents recording themselves sexually abusing their child(ren) with the aim of selling the images to foreign consumers:

> ***The roommate one day calls the police and says: 'No, I can't take it anymore. It's that my roommate uses her 18-month-old baby to take photos, make videos and sells them to a foreigner on the internet.' Those photos included all kinds of abuse, of aberrations. The result of that case is that the police captured that woman, seized her cell phone and there she had, indeed, ... around 25 videos made of her own little daughter related to child sexual abuse material.*** (JP)

Colombian law recognizes the heightened gravity of offences related to child sexual abuse material when committed by a relative of the child depicted, providing for an increased penalty of one third to one half in such cases.[45]

45. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 218.

When family members sexually assault children and young people in order sell images of the abuse material, they may seek out consumers who are willing to pay for it, and even research their preferences to guide the creation of future child sexual abuse material.

There remains a demand for this content from foreign perpetrators who are likely access it from a jurisdiction outside of Colombia. This highlights the need to understand how to address the crime of accessing child sexual abuse material from abroad, as well as the international coordination required in these contexts.

Structural conditions such as economic vulnerability will continue to be the main sources of risk for these crimes, as most adolescent girls report having agreed to virtual or face-to-face sexual relations with adults in exchange for money, motivated by situations of poverty, abandonment, domestic violence and the desire for status. This desire for belonging, combined with the early sexualization of girls in Colombia and the cultural acceptance of their bodies as objects for consumption, facilitates vulnerability to exploitation, especially in tourist environments, impoverished communities and cities with a proliferation of webcam studios, such as Medellín or Cúcuta.

Organized child sexual abuse and exploitation in the webcam and tourism industries

According to the accounts of professionals and young people, the proliferation of both the webcam and tourism industries in Colombia contributes to the facilitation and normalization of tech-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation, partly due to the economic vulnerability of families. Webcam modelling businesses involve studios that record and transmit online sexual content.

These businesses have become a source of employment in contexts where job opportunities are scarce. The lack of regulation and control has made it easier for children to be sexually exploited in these places. As a representative of organized civil society pointed out:

> ***At the end of last year there was a scandal in the national news where it was seen that there were webcam ads in front of a school. And children were invited to participate and be part of that.*** **(JP)**

In some cases, working in the webcam industry is perceived to be the only viable option by young people to meet basic economic needs or to access extra income.

In many cases, people (adults and adolescents) who participate in these businesses know the type of activity for which they were recruited. However, it is also common for people to respond to a false job offer and get trapped in an exploitation network. This is narrated by a boy who migrated to Colombia with his partner in search of economic opportunities to support their families in Venezuela, and thought he was starting a job at a call centre:

> ***...when I realized that it was not a call centre, it was not anything of the sort... It was where I realized that it was not a customer service company, but a webcam model studio. I, honestly ... I said: 'Model? I'm not a model.' No... and they explained to me: no, what happens is that this is a clandestine studio where no one can know what a studio is, that there are people inside doing sexual things. And I said to him: 'There are sexual things? And with minors? And this is known?' No, what happens is that the IDs they made were fake and they had a different age.*** **(YP)**

This account raises the issue of livestreaming of child sexual abuse, which is not expressly criminalized in Colombia. Article 218 of the Criminal Code prohibits transmitting or exhibiting child sexual abuse material,[46] yet neither the law nor the case law of the Supreme Court explicitly addresses livestreamed abuse,[47] leaving uncertainty as to whether it falls within this category. Even if it did, mere access would not constitute an offence.[48] Likewise, recruiting, coercing or otherwise involving a child in, as well as viewing 'pornographic performances' are not directly criminalized, but organizing or participating in the sexual exploitation of another person to satisfy the sexual desires of others is.[49] In 2023, Colombian police arrested two women accused of livestreaming child sexual abuse for profit.[50] Law enforcement representatives engaged in Disrupting Harm confirmed that existing provisions on child sexual abuse material and sexual acts with children were used to prosecute this conduct. However, given the growing use of livestreaming technologies to facilitate and commit acts of child sexual exploitation and abuse, specific provisions should be adopted to clearly distinguish such conduct within existing offences, enabling the collection of more accurate data on recorded cases.

Additionally, professionals explained that sexual exploitation of children by adult foreign tourists has expanded in cities in Colombia, where, according to the professionals interviewed, historically it has been assumed as a legitimate form of work and local economic development. The proliferation of these practices and the possibilities of online contact have multiplied the opportunities for perpetrators to sexually exploit and abuse children via digital technologies. Thus, many perpetrators make initial contact with the children or facilitators through social medias or platforms set up for this purpose. In this sense, according to the experts consulted, figures such as 'passport bros'[51] or 'virtual girlfriends'[52] have become popular, under which interactions of sexual exploitation are camouflaged, and often involve adolescents being exploited:

> ***So, if you take the passport bros and take the virtual girlfriends, right? You see that the crime disappears there. Because what is even proposed is a love relationship. And with a love relationship after 14 years of age, where is the crime? And if you have a boyfriend who gives you gifts because you send him photos, you start like a consensual exchange, there is no crime there. No matter what age the man is, no matter what images he asks for. So, it's like it's very difficult to say that with this movement that exists today with networks, one manages to identify sexual crimes in digital environments. Can there be deception? Of course, that they show themselves younger and that when they come here, no, they are in their 40s, they are in their 50s. But, still, the expectation that the adolescent girl or boy has is that they have an opportunity, right? An opportunity that is not offered here in the environment in which they are.*** **(JP)**

Another facet of the economic vulnerability of children and young people as discussed by interviewees is that it can be exploited by human traffickers. Some of the cases discussed related to children who migrated to Colombia (particularly from Venezuela) or Colombians living abroad. Children and young people in search of job opportunities that allow them to support themselves and their families are deceived with the promise of decent work (e.g. call centres) and agree to move to other countries. A long way from their own home and support networks, the vulnerable circumstances of these children are

46. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 218.
47. Republic of Colombia, Supreme Court of Justice, SP123-2018 (45868), Judgment, 7 February 2018.
48. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 218.
49. Ibid., art. 213-A.
50. INTERPOL, "Colombia: Two arrested for live streaming child sexual abuse", 27 February 2023. Available at: https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2023/Colombia-Two-arrested-for-live-streaming-child-sexual-abuse.
51. Groups of men who travel with the intention of having dates or sexual relationships with local women.
52. Sexual-affective relationships established via virtual means.

exacerbated and exploited by perpetrators. This is the case of the following young Colombian woman who got a job on the internet, followed the entire process to start working and travelled to Peru with a friend; once they arrived at the workplace, the conditions changed, they were deprived of their freedom for several weeks, and sexually exploited and abused:

> ***I was out of work and had to pay rent. So, well, I started looking for a job on the internet and a girl contacted me and told me that there was an opportunity for several girls to go to Peru as waitresses... And so it was, I had an interview with her, I talked to her and we also contacted the bosses virtually and everything was excellent... they asked for a résumé, normal, everything was virtual at first, then here in Bogotá, I had an appointment with her and it was also, we talked like that also virtually with the people there. Well, we didn't see a problem, really... So, the whole issue started when we were going to arrive in Lima [...] when we got there [they told us]: 'No, it's that you come to whore, there's nothing here, you're with us, you have a debt of 25 million pesos, you can't leave here.'*** **(YP)**

Prosecuting (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse across borders

Strong legal provisions on extraterritoriality and extradition are critical for prosecuting (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse across borders, as weak or misaligned systems allow perpetrators to evade prosecution.

Colombian courts may prosecute offences committed abroad when either the victim or the accused is Colombian, the act is punishable under Colombian law by at least two years' imprisonment, the accused is present in Colombia and the case has not been tried elsewhere.[53]

Extradition is possible for offences carrying a minimum penalty of four years' imprisonment, subject to double criminality, meaning the conduct must be criminalized in both jurisdictions.[54] This framework encompasses (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse offences, as these typically carry higher penalties. However, the double criminality requirement can hinder extradition when offences are not criminalized in both countries, creating potential safe havens.[55] The Committee on the Rights of the Child has argued that this requirement "creates a gap in the law which enables impunity," and that States should remove it for offences related to sexual exploitation.[56]

While not fully embracing universal jurisdiction (i.e. the capacity to exercise jurisdiction over crimes committed abroad by foreigners against foreign victims of crimes), Colombian law notably allows the prosecution of foreign offenders for non-political crimes against foreign victims when the offender is in Colombia,[57] marking an important advance in addressing cross-border, technology-enabled abuse.

53. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 16.
54. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Procedure Code, art. 493.
55. ECPAT International, *Extraterritorial Jurisdiction and Extradition Legislation as Tools to Fight the Sexual Exploitation of Children*. (Bangkok, ECPAT International, 2022), p. 7.
56. CRC/C/156, p. 15.
57. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 16(6).

Limited safeguards in digital spaces

Social media platforms can be spaces where children and young people can socialize, meet new people and express themselves. However, interviews with professionals and young people in Colombia demonstrate that these are also spaces where perpetrators operate, observing children to potentially abuse, generating emotional bonds and eventually involving them in dynamics of grooming and sexual extortion that escalate into further abuse and exploitation.

For the children and young people interviewed about the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to, going online was driven by the many benefits offered by the digital environment. This included a desire to interact with friends or peers but also to meet new people. However, when social media platforms and other online spaces are actively being monitored by perpetrators, spaces that should be safe for children become risky.

In the cases described by professionals and young people, it is clear how the online environment, with its limited safeguards, makes it relatively easy for perpetrators to make contact with children. This plays into the tactics used by perpetrators, especially in the grooming process. Based on conversations with young people, a common first stage of grooming involves making initial contact with the child. As discussed above, this can follow a more targeted approach of identifying specific children that perpetrators deem easier to abuse, or could involve perpetrators sending messages and images to a large number of children and young people).

The difficulty of verifying someone's identity is another feature of online platforms that facilitates abuse. Some young people reported being misled about the identity of the person who contacted them online, with the individual pretending to be young. This deception often involved sustained interactions, where the perpetrator gradually built trust under a false identity before the abuse occurred. One young woman interviewed described being contacted by an older man posing as a young man. Despite her suspicions and discomfort, the interaction continued until she sought advice from her cousin, who alerted her to the possibility that she was being deceived by an older man who wanted to abuse her.

This illustrates how the lack of safeguards on digital platforms and a lack of guidance from trusted adults can leave the door open for perpetrators to make initial contact with children. This contact is often unsupervised and in some cases, children have no way to understand whether the interactions are abusive and deceitful or not. As outlined above, once perpetrators can coerce and control children, the abuse can snowball from seemingly innocent messages to sexualized interactions, sexual extortion and so on.

These risks and harms are also shaped by the legal and regulatory safeguards – or lack thereof – that govern digital spaces. Colombia has established legal safeguards aimed at protecting children in the digital environment by prohibiting providers, administrators and users of global information networks from hosting child sexual abuse material, links to such material or any images, texts, documents or audiovisual files that directly or indirectly reference sexual activities with children.[58] They must also report any criminal act against a child of which they become aware, including the dissemination of child sexual abuse material, take all available technical measures to prevent its dissemination and roll out tools that allow users to protect themselves or their children from illegal, offensive or age-inappropriate material.[59] Non-compliance with these obligations may result in fines of up to 100 times the monthly minimum wage and the suspension of the website concerned.[60]

However, these safeguards are largely reactive and content-focused. Current law does not mandate internet service providers or online platforms to establish notice-and-takedown mechanisms through which users can report illegal content, such as child sexual abuse material.

58. Republic of Colombia, Law 679 of 2001, art. 7.
59. Ibid., art. 8.
60. Ibid., art. 10.

In July 2025, Colombia adopted a Law establishing provisions for the development of healthy and safe digital environments for children and adolescents nationwide, which mandates coordinated government action to ensure that the software industry contributes to protecting children from online harm, including abuse and exploitation.[61] The Law's draft implementing decree, still pending as of February 2026, would require online platforms used by children to embed the identification, assessment and mitigation of foreseeable risks into their services' architecture. In addition, they must automatically apply the most protective privacy settings[62] and implement graduated restrictions calibrated to the level of risk associated with each age group, including adjustments to functionality access, interaction with other users, profile visibility, use of chat features and receipt of content.[63] The draft also tasks the Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies with issuing technical guidelines to assist service providers in implementing these obligations[64] and requires platforms to submit annual implementation reports to the Ministry.[65]

Notably, the draft decree also mandates the establishment of a multi-agency Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System for the Protection of Children and Adolescents in Digital Environments, tasked with developing and implementing advanced technological tools for the early detection and prevention of risks such as cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content and tech-facilitated sexual exploitation.[66] If effectively adopted and implemented, this framework could significantly strengthen the capacity of Colombia to operationalize platform accountability and shift from reactive safeguards to systemic child protection online. Safety-by-design requirements would embed protection at the system level, ensuring that safeguards apply by default across services, independent of user intervention. By promoting stronger detection tools, including effective notice-and-takedown procedures and the use of technical solutions to proactively detect child sexual abuse material, the Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System could also enable earlier intervention and help curb the dissemination of illegal content.

61. Republic of Colombia, Law 2489 establishing provisions for the development of healthy and safe digital environments for children and adolescents nationwide (2025), art. 9.
62. Republic of Colombia, Draft implementing decree of Law 2489 of 2025, art. 2.2.3--.3.
63. Ibid., art. 2.2.3--.5.
64. Ibid., art. 2.2.3--.6.
65. Ibid. art 2.2.3--.9.
66. Republic of Colombia. (accessed on 25 February 2025). Draft implementing decree of Law 2489 of 2025, art. 2.2.3--.11.

3. AFTER THE INCIDENT

Findings from this research in Colombia suggest that the impacts of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse may be similar to the impact from other types of child sexual exploitation and abuse, in terms of their mental, social, emotional and physical consequences.

Nonetheless, tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is associated with certain distinctive emotional, psychological and social consequences that emerge across various cases, irrespective of the type of abuse, its modality or duration, whereas the physical effects reported were limited to particular cases.

Internalized shame and self-blame due to victim-blaming

Two types of overlapping victim-blaming were identified from conversations with young people and professionals. Both led to feelings of extreme shame. The first relates to blame by others, including family, peers and the wider community, while the second relates to self-blame.

Internalized shame

As mentioned previously, a certain level of normalization of sexual abuse and intense social condemnation of children and young people who are victimized were reported during interviews in Colombia. Perpetrators seem to receive less censure or reprimand, while children and young people bear many of the physical and psychological consequences of the abuse they are subjected to, in addition to the social stigma that follows. According to one young Colombian woman, children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are sometimes even forced to leave school due to the bullying and revictimization they endure after having their sexual images shared online without consent:

> ***Anyway, that stays there. Nothing is done with that... And even I have received those photos of my classmates and I'm like, 'Wow! What are we going to do here? Let's talk to the school psychologist to see what she can sort out for us.' But, in the end, nothing happens, there is no solution... The thing remains the same, there is no support for the person, but it stays there. Some had to leave school, even change neighbourhoods because the bullying was very bad. And, besides, ... they printed the photos and stuck them on the doors of the house.*** (YP)

One young girl interviewed, who was raped after several months of online and in-person harassment, was judged by her family, her schoolmates, and even the paramedics:

> ***My mom starts to criticize me, she starts to tell me... [that] I'm a loose cannon, she starts to insult me, she starts to tell me that I disappointed them, that she had always known that I was going to disappoint them, that that's why she didn't want to have me. I mean, without knowing everything that had happened to me, without asking me... she started to judge me, she started to criticize me without knowing.*** (YP)

Another young woman was abused by someone who used intimate material to extort her and who later sought revenge when she tried to stop all contact. According to her testimony, the perpetrator posted this material daily for several weeks, during which friends and neighbours contacted her to show the images circulating on social media.

> ***People are so ignorant, they don't see what could happen to them. For example, my friends used to text me a lot: 'Look what they're putting up about you, look at this.'... So, they're always pushing, pushing. And it's very hard... it was like a very hard pressure.*** (YP)

The same norms that normalize older men sexualizing and pursuing younger women also police and stigmatize women's sexual behaviour, ultimately shifting blame onto the victim. Young people are acutely aware of this double standard and live in constant fear of social repercussions if their abuse becomes known. They fear being perceived not as underage victims, but as women whose behaviour is deemed shameful or immoral.

Self-blame

Feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame were particularly common in cases where children sent sexual content or had had sexual encounters with adults that were unknowingly recorded, compared with cases where there is no digital evidence of what happened. This may be because young people experience an additional violation when they lose control and privacy over their bodies and reputations through the sharing of images. The harm is further compounded by the perceived absence of physical coercion or force. Without an understanding of the power dynamics at play, children and young people often internalize blame and hold themselves responsible for their own abuse.

The following testimony exemplifies the reasoning of many of the children and young people interviewed:

> ***For me that was [a] shameful thing. Because, in the same way, from the beginning, I was the one who agreed. Even if it was, maybe, in my ignorance, but I did agree. It was not something like … it was not forced, I agreed. So, it made me very ashamed, and I didn't tell anyone.*** **(YP)**

As described here, children and young people blame themselves because they opened a link, answered a message, had a conversation, built a relationship, shared photos or videos, or saw an opportunity to generate income. They did not recognize that what happened constitutes a violent or abusive act but see the negative outcomes as a consequence of their own behaviour.

When perpetrators circulated sexual content or sexual abuse materials, young people both blamed themselves, and expected blame and ridicule from others. This expectation of victim-blaming can compound other emotional impacts and lead to serious negative consequences for young people's well-being. The following testimony was provided by a young woman who had sex with a stranger in exchange for money. She later discovered that she had been recorded without her knowledge, and only then did she experience acute fear, shame and self-blame:

> ***So, my guilt was like, 'Why did I do it? Because I was with him?' And also because he was an older man, he was a foreigner. I have many friends, I know a lot of people, everyone has very positive expectations of me. So I was like, 'Oh! What are they going to say?' Well, I don't know, I had everything going through my mind … I said, 'If they find out, I'm leaving the country or I'm going to another city, I don't know.'*** **(YP)**

In this example, the young woman did not necessarily recognize the situation as inherently abusive at the time. In retrospect, and once she realized it had been recorded, she was concerned with how others would react and how it might impact her reputation. This situation highlights the potential for abuse and exploitation to go unrecognized.

The self-blame and shame identified mean that that many children and young people suffer alone for long periods of time, as these feelings prevent them from reporting the abuse or seeking help. When society blames children and young people for their own abuse, it allows perpetrators to act with impunity. If children and young people know they will be subjected to ridicule and further abuse when they disclose, they are more likely to remain silent and the negative impacts on their emotional health become more acute. In this sense, safeguarding children and young people requires society to challenge stigma, address the underlying drivers of abuse or exploitation, and hold perpetrators accountable, rather than placing responsibility on children and young people.

Emotional impacts

Many of the young women interviewed reported feeling fear, disgust and violation during and after being subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. From the accounts provided by these young people, the feelings

arise when girls or young women are sent or exposed to explicit content without their consent. The following account illustrates the feelings of disgust, anxiety and violation that a young woman experienced during and after she was subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse by an adult man:

> ***Those approaches I think made me feel like, I don't know, I felt violated, I didn't like it. Let's say, when I see this guy masturbating, well it was, it made me feel disgusted, like I didn't know what to do, but I hung up and blocked the person. And it made me very nervous, that's what it gave me, it made me nervous … So yes, I think what made me feel that the most was like nerves, like, like, like, as if something was wrong with that fact. And, of course, I mean, it is wrong, but it was weird. And I remember it and I feel weird.*** (YP)

This reaction is understandable for someone exposed to sexual content without consent, but it can be amplified by the shock and unexpected nature of the experience. The sense that a private or previously safe space has been invaded by a stranger can further exacerbate the emotional impact.

Understanding these impacts is critical, considering the opportunistic and wide-reaching communication weaponized by perpetrators online. When online abuse is judged only in terms of how serious each incident seems, it overlooks how the negative effects can build up over time when online spaces repeatedly create feelings of fear, disgust and a loss of control over safety.

Withdrawal and isolation

Withdrawal and social isolation were frequently observed among children and young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Justice and front-line professionals point out that these feelings are important indicators to help identify cases of sexual abuse in children and adolescents, because there are not always obvious physical manifestations. The assumption that sexual abuse has primarily physical impacts contributes to caregivers being less responsive to the emotional or psychological symptoms that children present. Caregivers may subsequently miss opportunities to intervene or respond to their child's needs.

Anxiety, depression, substance abuse and self-harm

Many of the young people interviewed had not sought or received professional support to address the social, emotional or mental health consequences of their abuse. However, the impacts on their mental health and well-being were clear across the data, among both young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and professionals reflecting on these issues. A statistical analysis of the survey data shows a strong association between tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and negative mental health among children aged 12 to 17. Children who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse showed a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing anxiety, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and self-harm during the previous year.

In the following account, a psychologist with experience from several state entities in caring for victims of sexual violence, describes the mental health consequences when children are not supported in a timely or effective manner:

> ***That type of thing is generating more dissatisfaction in them, self-image problems, self-esteem problems, they consider, even … For example, a girl that I met with some photos, she thought it was someone who liked her, that it was a boy her age who was asking her for photos. Then he started extorting her with more photos, that is, if you don't send me, I'll publish them and, after she realized that it was not a person of her same age, but that it was an older man who was from another account, the girl had suicidal ideation. Another began, as a result of that, to develop another disorder, she began to [engage in] cutting, to self-harm.*** (JP)

In another case, young women were lured via an online advertisement to become babysitters and ended up being sexually exploited. According to the front-line professional, managing the young women's trauma was further complicated by their use of illicit substances:

> ***So, they would have to serve approximately 30 to 50 clients a day. They were under hallucinogenic drugs to be able to serve that number of clients. So, they arrived in extremely deplorable conditions... they came with a lot of trauma: they cried all the time, they were aggressive, they had suicidal behaviour. They came with many difficulties even in being able to speak, in being able to maintain a dialogue, they were very distrustful.*** (FW)

When emotional responses to distress and trauma are not addressed in a timely and appropriate manner, it can lead to longer-term emotional and mental health issues that complicate recovery and risk derailing children's and young people's lives.

Social impacts

Difficulties in relationships

Children and young people subjected to sexual abuse can experience difficulties in their social, romantic and sexual relationships. Among the young women interviewed, most experienced a distrust towards men, who were predominantly the perpetrators of abuse in these cases. This distrust impacts their relationships with men in different settings.

For example, some of the women expressed feeling a deep resentment, which led them to want to take revenge on all the men who sought to approach them. Others completely rejected any contact with men, including members of their family, for a short period of time. Yet others had (or continue to have) difficulties with establishing relationships that involve physical intimacy. The following is an account from a young man who began exploring his homosexuality via social media, which eventually led to prolonged in-person sexual abuse. At the time of the interview, despite having received formal support from a non-governmental organization, he still has difficulties in having sexual relationships:

> ***For me, today, talking about sex is not so pleasant. I mean, I have a partner and the last thing I think about is having sex with him. I mean, like I don't want to, like that has already moved to the background for me ... like it already generates that repudiation of everything that happened... I mean, I can have a person that I can love very much and the last thing I can think about is that.*** (YP)

Such medium- and long-term social impacts must be considered when addressing cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. In many cases, these impacts are not obvious and are identified by the young people long after they have suffered the abuse, sometimes only when they consider themselves to have moved past it.

Avoidance of online social connections and spaces

Some children and young people limit their use of technology or social media platforms after being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. In this sense, it seems that some children and young people believe that the best way to stay safe is to move away from spaces in which they were violated. This can result in them missing out on the advantages of technology and the possibility of developing skills for education and work. In the words of one front-line professional:

> ***What it has generated in them is an issue of phobia and [of] restriction regarding technology. Because they feel that they were abused, not by the perpetrator or by the pimp or by the one who was pretending to be in grooming, but by technology. So, they start to generate an issue of phobia and isolation from technology.*** (JP)

This response is reflected across multiple interviews. Given the potential risks that technology can introduce into the social, economic, romantic and sexual lives of children and young people in Colombia, recognition of these spaces as unsafe among children and young people who have been subjected to abuse is understandable. As one young person commented:

> ***Well, with social media, I would consider that minors, like me, shouldn't have social media. It's logical, that is, they should have a certain amount of restrictions on that subject.*** (YP)

This underscores the urgent need for digital spaces, especially social media, to be recognized as shared domains of responsibility by the companies that profit from them, as well as by communities and governments. It should not fall solely to children and young people to regulate their own behaviour, such as avoiding social media, in order to protect themselves from widespread abuse.

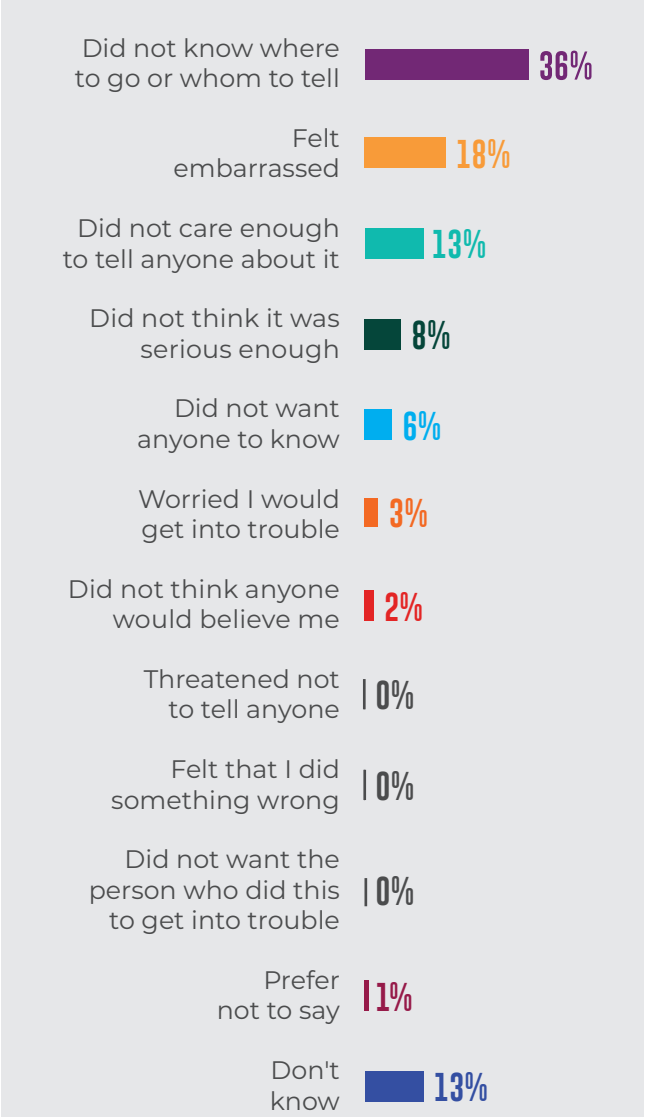
When society blames children and young people for their own abuse, it allows perpetrators to act with impunity.

4. DISCLOSURE

According to the household survey data, just over half of the children who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse disclosed the incident to someone (52 per cent), while 34 per cent chose not to tell anyone. While it is encouraging that half of children felt able to speak up, the fact that over one third never spoke to anyone about their abuse suggests significant barriers to disclosure in Colombia.

The lack of disclosure may stem from fear, shame, confusion or a perceived absence of trusted adults or safe spaces, which will be explored further in this chapter. It also suggests that many children endure abuse in isolation, without access to emotional support or protective intervention.

Chart 2: Barriers to disclosure and reporting



Base: 135 instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to which children were subjected but did not tell anyone about them.

According to the household survey data, the most frequently cited barrier to disclosure among children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse was uncertainty about where to go or whom to tell, reported by 36 per cent of respondents. This finding highlights a critical gap in children's access to trusted support systems and information about the help available. When children do not know whom they can safely turn to, it not only delays intervention but also increases the risk of prolonged harm and emotional distress.

Based on interviews with young people subjected to abuse under the age of 18, it emerged that they weigh both the details of the abuse and other circumstances in their lives when deciding whether to disclose. A young woman who was sexually exploited and blackmailed by a man she originally met on Facebook, and who was in prison, explains this:

> ***...in the moment, I was thinking of telling a friend, no, then telling let's say my boyfriend... no, then I thought about telling my mother, no well how embarrassing, I would rather not. So it's in these moments when you really need someone who knows how to react... and who knows what to tell you, because any little poorly said word they tell you, in that moment you are super-sensitive, you are super-vulnerable, what you need is someone who really is understanding of you.*** (YP)

Whom do children disclose abuse to and why?

The household survey data show that among children who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, 17 per cent confided in a friend, 15 per cent spoke to their mother, stepmother, foster mother or another female caregiver, and 8 per cent disclosed the incident to a sibling. These disclosure patterns suggest that children are more likely to turn to peers and maternal figures when sharing tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. The relatively high rate of disclosure to friends may reflect the trust and immediacy of peer relationships, especially in adolescence, while the significant role of mothers and female caregivers highlights the importance of nurturing and emotionally available adult figures in children's lives.

This is also apparent from interviews with young women; some told family members, mainly their mothers. This suggests that these young women had a level of confidence that they would provide both support and help to navigate the situation.

For example, one 14-year-old girl disclosed receiving exploitative requests to her mother. The young girl was looking for work through Facebook and was contacted with a job offer, but when she went to the interview, she learned the conditions of the work:

> ***Because when he told me what the job was, that I had to attend to men and that, it did not scare me and I left, I told my mom. I told my mom and with my mom we blocked them from Facebook and then we deleted them, and they wrote me from another Facebook (message).*** **(YP)**

The young people interviewed further revealed that in cases where children and young people are unable to tell their parents or caregivers, some seek out other trusted family members, including siblings and cousins. This was described by young girl whose partner manipulated her to send him intimate photos and then threatened to share them online if she did not send more:

> ***Well, obviously I never tell my parents anything because I do not have that communication with them, I do not know, I do not feel that good relationship because they follow their religion and obviously they will not accept many things so, well I turned to an (older) cousin...*** **(YP)**

In a separate case, a 13-year-old girl was sexually abused by a neighbour, who had previously attempted to communicate with her through Facebook. After her parents found out she was pregnant, they made her move out of the house. At that time, she turned to her brother:

> ***Because I had confidence in my brother and I did tell him more or less what had happened to me, but I did not tell him who it was.*** **(YP)**

In general, interviews with young people make clear that having or finding trusted people makes it easier to disclose. But supporting children to disclose sexual abuse requires more than just creating opportunities for them to speak; it also depends on the readiness, openness and understanding of the adults and peers around them. This means that parents, teachers, caregivers and peers would benefit from education on appropriate responses, including listening empathetically, validating the child's experience and taking action to ensure safety.

When do children disclose abuse?

One of the main reasons for children and young people to reach out for help is when a situation begins to escalate, for example if they are pressured to send more sexual abuse material or money under the threat that their sexual content will be made public. This was explained by a young woman whose sister-in-law's partner asked her for photos via WhatsApp, and when she refused, he threatened her:

> ***Because I always saw that the guy was like good, I never thought that he would go that far and I did feel very bad and that's why what I preferred to do was like tell my mom what had already happened... if that went viral on the internet then I said, son of a bitch, how am I going to tell my dad, how am I going to tell my mom, how am I going to tell people, I mean, everything clouded over for me.*** **(YP)**

In many cases, though not always, young people tell someone they trust about their abuse in order to seek help. This was the case for a young woman who was recorded without her consent and had the videos uploaded to a pornographic website. When she found out about the abuse she sought help from her mother:

> ***I told my mommy I am very ashamed that people found out, that they saw those videos of me, that well, everyone will find out and that they will see me naked or that they will know my body. She (her mother) told me calm down, everything will be fine, I am with you, let's seek help.*** **(YP)**

The possibility that the sexual content or abuse images will go viral pushes some children and adolescents to tell someone about what happened, in order to get immediate help to reduce the dissemination of the content. However, according to a few young people in these situations, they were only seeking practical support to stop content from circulating further, rather than intentionally seeking emotional support.

Self-blame and shame

The household survey data show that 18 per cent of children who experienced tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse chose not to disclose the incident because they felt embarrassed. This finding highlights how feelings of shame and self-blame can act as powerful barriers to disclosure. Embarrassment may stem from internalized stigma resulting from victim-blaming (see section on "Internalized shame and self-blame due to victim-blaming"), fear of judgment or confusion about the nature of the abuse – especially in cases where manipulation or grooming was involved. These responses can silence children and prevent them from seeking help. In interviews with young people who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, several of them mentioned that they did not tell anyone about the abuse because they blamed themselves. As described elsewhere in this report, children and young people who have been groomed, pressured or abused in the context of an existing relationship sometimes falsely consider themselves as complicit. Some even internalize the abuse as punishment for having facilitated, allowed or accessed relationships or sexual content online.

As noted earlier in this report, children and young people do not come to blame themselves on their own; they are influenced by a wide range of norms and social attitudes, including those that shame and stigmatize victims.

Violent, judgmental or authoritarian parenting styles can prevent children from disclosing to their caregivers. This is evident in the decisions made by many young people interviewed who never told anyone about the abuse.

Similarly, a young woman was filmed without her consent by an older man who was sexually exploiting her, and who then threatened to share the abuse materials online when she asked him to stop. Despite her need for support, she never considered telling her parents. She feared that they would blame her 'rebellious nature' for the abuse, after her father had already warned her that he was not going to take care of her anymore due to her lack of respect for his authority:

> ***I didn't have the tools or someone I could turn to at that time. What was my dad going to tell me? I told you so, and well that's not what you expect them to say, so I never talked to anyone about it.*** **(YP)**

Another young woman who received sexual video calls through Facebook similarly shared how disclosing to her mother was not an option, because when she was 10 years old and first set up a Facebook account, her mother beat her:

> ***We didn't feel safe telling our parents, our mothers, because first Facebook was without permission, they didn't know, my mom when she found out that I had opened Facebook she beat me, there is no other word for it, she beat me until she got tired because without her permission we can't do such a thing.*** **(YP)**

In this situation, the young girl felt it would be impossible to tell her mother that she had been abused, because it happened on a platform she was not supposed to be using. This shows how rules or restrictions that limit children's access to social media, whether set by parents or governments, can make it even harder for them to speak up when they are harmed online.

In yet another example, a young girl experienced multiple instances of grooming on Facebook, starting at the age of 12 when perpetrators sent or requested images or asked to meet her in person. She chose to delete or ignore the messages rather than tell her caregivers, because she had created her Facebook account without their permission. She perceived the benefits of communication via Facebook to outweigh the potential harms:

> ***...Well really I did not tell even my family because my grandmother does not let me have Facebook, I created the Facebook account to supposedly talk with my mom and it was used for other things by bad people and yes, so instead, I preferred to delete or ignore those messages.*** **(YP)**

Together, these accounts highlight the risks children face when they are unable to turn to adults for support due to fear of consequences such as physical violence, punishment or being banned from using online platforms. In such situations, perpetrators continue to exploit the vulnerability of children and young people who cannot disclose their abuse or access support when they need it most.

Normalization of abuse

The household survey data indicate that 13 per cent of children who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse did not disclose the incident because they 'did not care enough' to report it, while 8 per cent believed the incident was not serious enough to report. These responses reflect a troubling normalization or minimization of abuse among some children. When children perceive abuse and exploitation as insignificant, it may signal a lack of understanding about what constitutes abuse or a coping mechanism to downplay distressing experiences.

As with young people who chose to confide in a peer rather than a parent or caregiver, these disclosures often stemmed from experiences perceived as not particularly serious or memorable, yet still worth mentioning to friends. What stands out in these interactions is that the intent was not necessarily to seek help, but simply to share something that had caught their attention or curiosity, or as a shared experience. This pattern frequently appeared in cases where children or young people were sent or asked for photos through Facebook, reflecting the growing normalization of being asked for or receiving sexual content online:

> ***I would talk about it (sexual messages received on Facebook Messenger) with my friend because with my mom it couldn't be and well in a few days everything would pass and I even forgot about it.*** **(YP)**

> ***Like I no longer paid attention to those things, didn't even see it, sometimes I even took it as a joke, I would tell my friends, look what they sent me, I mean normal.*** (YP)

As highlighted in these interviews, these experiences were so common that the young people simply perceived them as normal and felt that disclosing them to adults or caregivers was unnecessary.

Children and young people do not come to blame themselves on their own; they are influenced by a wide range of norms and social attitudes, including those that shame and stigmatize victims.

5. REPORTING, ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

Children have a fundamental right to live free from abuse and exploitation. If this right is infringed upon, States must ensure access to justice and effective legal remedy. Yet, engaging with the justice system can exacerbate fear, anxiety and re-victimization for children. Child-centred justice practices and safeguards aim to make legal processes fair, timely, and supportive, while minimizing further harm through procedures that respect and account for children's needs, preferences and rights. This chapter examines key elements of Colombia's formal justice process – from procedural barriers to reporting to access to compensation – through a child-centred justice lens.

5. REPORTING, ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

Colombian procedural rules provide several safeguards that make it easier for children to report tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Unlike certain offences that require a private complaint (*'querella'*) by the victim or their legal representative, crimes against children,[67] including (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, are classified as offences of public prosecution. This means that criminal proceedings do not depend on the initiative of the child or their legal representative.

Complaints (*'denuncias'*) can be made to public servants or the police, who must in turn refer the case to the Prosecutor's Office,[68] which is responsible for leading the investigation and bringing the criminal action on behalf of the State. They can also be submitted directly to the Prosecutor's Office itself.[69] This can be done verbally, in writing or through any technical means that allows the identification of the perpetrator. While anonymous reports are allowed, they must include sufficient evidence or specific information to guide the investigation.[70]

Apart from the criminal justice system, children also have access to reporting channels that may offer less intimidating and more accessible entry points. The Colombian Institute of Family Welfare has a 24/7 helpline (141), staffed by specially trained professionals, to receive reports of sexual violence or any other violation of children's rights.[71] The Public Prosecutor's Office and the National Police also operate the online national reporting system (¡ADenunciar!), a platform that allows reports of child sexual exploitation material, extortion, cybercrime and other offences.[72] Lastly, the online portal Te Protejo Colombia, a member of the International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE), enables internet users, including children, to anonymously report child sexual abuse material, as well as instances of child sexual exploitation and abuse or cyberbullying.[73] Nonetheless, the availability of formal reporting channels does not necessarily translate into greater accessibility for survivors.

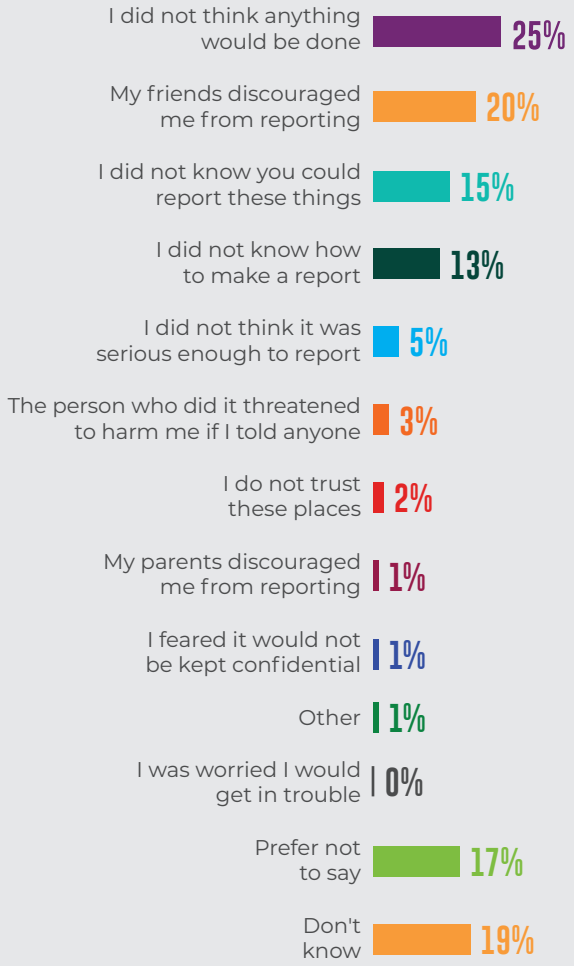
According to data provided by Child Helpline International (CHI), the child helplines that are members of the CHI network in Colombia provided 344,648 counselling sessions to boys and girls in 2024. Violence was logged as the topic of concern 136,543 times, accounting for 40 per cent of all counselling sessions.[74] Of those, 35,445 (26 per cent) concerned sexual violence – both tech-facilitated and not (the child helplines concerned do not log them separately). Generally, girls were more likely than boys to contact a child helpline in Colombia. These gender differences do not necessarily reflect differences in prevalence but could also be a reflection of gendered social norms around help-seeking.

Indeed, based on the survey findings, it was rare for the children surveyed to report tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse via formal channels. None of the children who shared through the survey that they had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and/or abuse, reported it to the police, a helpline or a social worker. From the survey, it is unclear if these reporting statistics include formal complaints via the Prosecutor's Office.

Many children, young people and professionals face barriers when trying to formally report abuse. The children surveyed expressed a range of barriers to formal reporting, from not knowing where to go or if such cases could be reported, to being discouraged by their peers or a perception that nothing would be done.

67. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Procedure Code (2004), art. 74.
68. Ibid., arts. 67, 205.
69. Ibid., art. 66.
70. Ibid., art. 69.
71. Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, Helpline (accessed on 22 August 2025).
72. Public Prosecutor's Office and National Police of Colombia, Online National Reporting System (accessed on 22 August 2025)
73. Te Protejo Colombia, Reporte confidencialmente situaciones con personas menores de 18 años (accessed on 22 August 2025).
74. Child Helpline International, Child Helpline Global Data 2020–2024 [Data dashboard] https://childhelplineinternational.org/research-and-child-helpline-data/ (2025).

Chart 3: Barriers to disclosure or reporting through formal channels



Base: 216 children who did not tell police, helplines or social workers about tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse they were subjected to.

Interviews with young people who had been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse under the age of 18, and professionals, illustrate intersecting barriers to reporting and accessing justice in Colombia.

Lack of understanding and problematic attitudes minimizes the issue of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

Limited knowledge and prevailing attitudes towards tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, combined with the lack of clear criminalization of some of its forms, can lead to these crimes being minimized and even deprioritized by caregivers, front-line workers and justice professionals. Although this was not the most common barrier to reporting captured in the survey, 8 per cent of children said they did not report exploitation and abuse via formal channels (police, helplines or social workers) because they thought it was not serious enough to report.

Where conduct is not clearly recognized as criminal, it is more likely to be perceived as harmless, trivial or unworthy of formal intervention. Insights from professionals and young people interviewed suggest that certain types of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, which are not fully criminalized, may be deemed more serious than others. In particular, online grooming of children for sexual purposes is sometimes dismissed as not serious. For example, a young woman who received inappropriate messages through Facebook from an adult male neighbour, described how justice professionals minimized the grooming incident because no contact sexual abuse had occurred:

> ***My mother filed a lawsuit (formal complaint) but as they said that it had not come to [...] a more serious situation, they only scolded him and that's it. ...they practically told her not to exaggerate things because nothing else had happened, well and my mother did not get back on that subject anymore.*** **(YP)**

This is a serious issue because it prevents action from being taken before a child is abused.

Understanding grooming behaviours as a serious crime, as well as intervening urgently, is critical to protect children and prevent ongoing perpetration. As mentioned in Chapter 1, "Grooming of children for sexual purposes", Colombian legislation does not comprehensively criminalize grooming for sexual purposes, creating a legal vacuum that undermines preventive action.

This lack of legal recognition also shapes professional attitudes towards tech-facilitated forms of abuse, with several front-line workers noting in interviews that they believe these to be less serious than in-person abuse:

> ***...as officials and our judicial system say, the virtual is not real, no, those are the answers they have given us. Well, it is a computer, finally he was not touching you... [...] ... right, but there are photos left, there are threats left, they are exposed and even if it's something very small, the threats, the ways these girls were seduced, how they were deceived...*** **(FW)**

This account reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of how tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse occur in practice. Online and in-person forms of abuse are often intertwined and digital interactions can cause profound and lasting harm, even in the absence of physical contact. Failing to recognize and adequately criminalize this conduct not only minimizes the harm suffered by children but also undermines their access to justice because professionals often lack a legal basis to initiate proceedings.

Even among justice professionals, lawyers may be less likely to take a case if the young person is over 16 years old because such cases are considered more difficult to win:

> ***One looks for lawyers in Colombia who are experts in these topics and many say I will take the case, but only if [the victim] is still a minor, because as a minor I can win, but if they are already of age, no, because that becomes difficult. So imagine, if it happened to you at 17, at 18 years old nobody wants to defend you anymore.*** **(FW)**

Incorrect assumptions linked to the age of sexual consent therefore risk resulting in weaker protection for older children and adolescents, as they operate as a practical filter that limits access to justice. Cases may not be taken forward at all and where they are, prevailing biases could make it more difficult to secure effective legal representation. Addressing this gap requires targeted capacity-building for service providers and justice professionals to ensure that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is first and foremost addressed as criminal conduct, regardless of the child's age.

Perceived procedural barriers to reporting and case progression

When children or young people do attempt to report tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, they frequently encounter procedural barriers that prevent cases from progressing within the criminal justice system. These barriers stem not only from legal gaps, but also from misunderstandings about reporting mechanisms and from discretionary practices by justice professionals. For example, children, young people and their families may assume that contacting helplines or emergency hotlines constitutes filing a formal criminal complaint, when in fact these mechanisms function primarily as referral channels:

> ***People are not clear about the complaint channels, they believe that the police's 123 hotline or the 141 ICBF hotline also can be used to file a complaint, because the mother of the minor called 141 and there was no response, so then this is not a complaint channel but a reporting channel, so it did not work.*** **(FW)**

In other cases, a barrier arises from professionals gatekeeping and the premature assessment of harm or criminality, with some believing that no harm occurred or no crime was committed because there was no physical abuse, and therefore the case did not progress.

Gatekeeping may also occur when service providers prematurely exclude cases based on an incorrect understanding of the applicable eligibility criteria for support. For example, one young woman contacted a women's hotline to report that a video of her having sex when she was 17 years old had been shared online without her consent. Because she was over 18 years old when she filed the report, they indicated that they could not assist her:

> ***I didn't know what to do, I started to call the women's [hot]line and there, well, they told me like, well, if you are not a minor, at this time they could not do much for me.*** (YP)

The material in question clearly constitutes child sexual abuse material, as it depicts a child engaged in sexual activity. Its dissemination is therefore criminalized.[75] The fact that the young woman was already 18 when she sought help should not have affected her right to access support and justice. Such dismissive responses reveal ongoing gaps in professional understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, which can lead to misclassification of cases, reinforce impunity and ultimately discourage survivors from seeking help.

An additional barrier concerns incorrect evidentiary requirements being imposed at the reporting stage, effectively shifting responsibilities onto children and their families. Indeed, in yet other cases, children and young people were turned away by professionals citing a lack of evidence. For instance, one young woman tried to make a formal complaint to the prosecutor about a man who had uploaded child sexual abuse material depicting her to a pornographic website: conduct that is expressly criminalized in Colombia.[76] However, when she could not give the full name of the perpetrator, she was turned away. According to the young woman the prosecutor advised her:

> ***I can't help you much without the full name of the man, get me the complete name of the man to be able to help you.*** (YP)

Such responses are inconsistent with the Prosecutor's Office's legal duty to exercise criminal action and investigate any facts that may constitute an offence, a duty that prohibits prosecutors from suspending, interrupting or renouncing prosecution once a possible crime has come to their attention.[77] They also reflect broader systemic weaknesses: where tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is poorly understood or insufficiently criminalized, discretionary decisions by justice professionals can prevent investigations from moving forward rather than enabling them. Together, these gaps in law and practice perpetuate impunity and limit children's access to justice.

Threats of violence and coercion hinder reporting

Threats of violence and other types of coercion can stop children, caregivers and even professionals from reporting in Colombia. These fears were consistently raised by professionals and children interviewed with respect to threats from both perpetrators and criminal organizations.

Because some perpetrators are associated with trafficking networks, criminal or informal gangs, there is a real risk of retaliation towards professionals, children and their families if they report or make a formal complaint. As described by a front-line worker and a justice professional, these fears influence both those subjected to violence and the professionals supporting them:

75. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 218.
76. Ibid., art. 218.
77. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Procedure Code (2004), art. 66.

> ***With commercial sexual exploitation one does not know how many people one is up against… and who is in the other side. And I think that influences [reporting]. Remember I told you that of those 90 cases only around 10.5 per cent report, because people do not report those cases for fear of those groups, and here in Colombia, one knows [those groups are involved].*** **(FW)**

> ***One hears they are gangs, then gangs […] then myself alone I have nothing, I am just a simple public employee.*** **(JP)**

In cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, children and young people may stay silent because criminal networks use extortion through various types of threats and violence to prevent them from seeking help. One young person who was sexually exploited through a webcam studio described how he was afraid to report because the perpetrators had access to information about his family:

> ***Don't do it, no, we didn't know what we were getting into, we don't know what problems we could be in, really, we don't have money to go anywhere, we don't…, what could really happen, they know the address of mommy, they know the address of your family, don't do this, really don't do it.*** **(YP)**

Similarly, fear of violence from individual perpetrators can impact the decision of survivors to make a formal complaint. An example of this is the case of a young woman who, at 16 years old, started to share videos with a man in prison in exchange for money. When she decided to stop the communication, he threatened to disseminate the material. She intended to file a complaint, but upon finding out that the perpetrator was in prison for murdering a woman, she feared for her safety:

> ***…I was going to file a complaint but when I found out about that [he was in prison for murdering another woman] I didn't do it. Because I said [to myself]: if he becomes so crazy just because I don't want to be with him, imagine if I report him? He kills me.*** **(YP)**

In addition to threats of violence, existing power dynamics can lead to a fear of confronting perpetrators. Some examples discussed by participants included cases where the perpetrator was a relative or held a prominent position within the community. When one front-line worker reflected on these challenges, they recalled a situation where a mother was afraid to file a complaint against her husband, a prominent community member:

> ***…the dad was the one who recorded this content of the boy, of the girl, and for the mother it was terrifying, since he was a teacher, a super-respected person, a neat man. And do you know what happens? That these women are afraid of filing a complaint, I mean they do not know what to do.*** **(JP)**

Against this backdrop of credible threats, coercion and power imbalances, it is understandable that some children and their families may choose not to access or pursue formal justice processes in the Colombian context. This reality makes the existence of strong, timely and reliable safeguards all the more critical for those who do decide to report, both to protect their safety and to ensure that confidence in the justice system is not undermined by fear of retaliation.

Withdrawal of complaints due to privacy and protection gaps

Even when children do make a formal complaint, various forms of intimidation and coercion can be used to get them to withdraw it. To prevent such situations, Colombian law requires judicial authorities to ensure that children under 18 are free from any form of pressure or intimidation during legal proceedings.[78] It also mandates prosecutors to proactively adopt the measures necessary to protect victims of crime[79] and empowers the judiciary to instruct that competent authorities adopt such measures whenever the safety of child victims of crime or their family may be at risk because of the investigation.[80] Victims themselves may request protection, either directly or through the prosecutor or their legal representative.[81]

The accounts of young people and professionals stressed the impact of the fear of retribution from perpetrators, some of whom are linked to criminal organizations. While protection for the child or young person, as well as their family, is critical in such cases, interviews suggest that it is not always available in practice or insufficient to mitigate retaliation risks. For example, in one case two young girls responded to a job offer on social media before being trafficked to Spain and sexually abused.

After seeking initially to make a formal complaint, the girls decided to 'disappear' because they could not be given guarantees of protection from the police or prosecutors. This was described by a front-line worker, who said:

> ***Despite the fact that she had knocked on doors, that she went to the police, went to the Prosecutor's Office, told them everything that had happened to her... there were none of those guarantees that would help to protect her, (so) then she decided just to disappear.*** **(FW)**

Even where some form of institutional protection is in place, children and their families living in contexts of economic vulnerability may accept money from the perpetrator not to testify or to drop the case:

> ***...before the trial [she] obviously spoke with me and told me that yes, she was obviously willing and that she was going to cooperate, that she was going to go, that she was going and all this and already in the trial the young woman's lawyer contacted her, she was in a programme of the ICBF, under the protection of the ICBF and the ICBF passed reports that she was progressing very well, that she was doing very well, but she ran away one day from the site, apparently they offered her 10 or 20 million pesos so that she would not testify and she did not testify, she escaped and to this day we could not find her.*** **(JP)**

Where participation in criminal proceedings exposes children to identification by alleged perpetrators or their associates, the risk of retaliation or financial coercion increases significantly. In a welcome move, several safeguards are in place to protect the identity of child victims of crime. The media are prohibited from interviewing, naming or releasing details

78. Republic of Colombia, Code for Children and Adolescents (2006), art. 193-13.
79. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Procedure Code (2004), art. 133.
80. Republic of Colombia, Code for Children and Adolescents (2006), art. 193-9.
81. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Procedure Code (2004), art. 133.

that could expose their identity without prior authorization from the parents, except when necessary to identify the child or their family.[82] Judges may also limit access to the public and the media during a child's testimony and[83] in cases of sexual violence, order closed hearings at the request of one of the parties or the confidentiality of the victim's personal identifying data.[84]

Despite these safeguards, a lack of protection of children's identities was recognized as a major barrier to accessing justice. For instance, one young person reported their abuse after escaping from a webcam studio. When officials inspected the studio based on the report, the perpetrators were able to identify the young person who made the complaint. The family of the perpetrators subsequently harassed the young person via social media to withdraw the complaint so that they would be released from custody:

> ***There were people who helped the boss [of the webcam studio] to get my information. There is a message I will never forget, which was from [the boss's wife's] daughter, who said: every person has a price, [she asked me] what price can I put so they can release her mother and her husband?*** **(YP)**

As indicated by a justice professional, in practice the identity of the person who files a formal complaint can become known to the accused, creating opportunities for intimidation or further exploitation:

> ***In a report the bad guys can know the girl's name, where she lives, her phone, because it is their right to know who reported them and what that means for our girls, is that the bad guys come to their house, say look here is $5000, you can take it or you can take this lead in the head, but she has to change her testimony.*** **(JP)**

It should be noted that, under the adversarial criminal procedure system in Colombia, materials relied upon by the prosecution are disclosed to the defence during the proceedings.[85] In cases where specific confidentiality or protection measures are not ordered or implemented in a timely manner, this may result in access to elements of the criminal case file that contain identifying information about the child, thereby putting them at risk of coercion or retaliation.

While the interviews did not make clear how this identifying information was obtained by alleged perpetrators or their associates, the accounts presented in this chapter highlight the need for closer examination of how such information is recorded, handled and disclosed once a formal complaint is filed, as well as scrutiny of the factors that prevent protection measures from being applied consistently and at an early stage. Addressing these issues is critical to ensuring that safeguards intended to protect children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse function effectively in practice, so that intimidation and retaliation do not become a common consequence of engaging with the justice system.

82. Republic of Colombia, Code for Children and Adolescents (2006), art. 47-8.
83. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Procedure Code (2004), art. 151.
84. Ibid., art. 149.
85. Ibid., art. 344.

Revictimization risks during hearings and testimonies

Colombian law establishes specific safeguards to adapt hearings and testimony to the age, needs and best interests of child victims of crime. Notably, they have the right to be represented by a qualified lawyer appointed by the Ombudsman's office[86] and to be assisted by an interpreter or communication specialist if needed.[87] When testifying against adults, a child's statement can only be taken outside the courtroom by a Family Defender from the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, using a list of questions provided in advance by the prosecutor or judge.[88] The Family Defender may ask only those questions that do not go against the child's best interests,[89] and the judge may only intervene in exceptional cases to get clearer answers.[90] The same procedure applies to interviews or statements given to the Judicial Police or the Prosecutor's Office.[91] At the judge's discretion, testimony may also be given through audio or video link, so the child does not have to attend court.[92]

Being exposed to the perpetrator during the justice process can create fear and trauma, influencing testimony and revictimization. Colombian law also includes safeguards to prevent such situations, requiring the use of technological means to avoid direct contact between child victims of crime aged under 18 and the alleged perpetrator during hearings. In such cases, it also provides that the child be accompanied by a trained professional who adapts the questioning and cross-examination to language appropriate to their age.[93]

Nonetheless, the account of a young woman who was subjected to sexual exploitation by a man via social media at the age of 14 suggests that this protection may not extend to survivors who were children at the time of the offence, but are adults by the time they appear before the court.

Despite being reassured by prosecutors that the perpetrator would not know who was testifying against him, the girl was nevertheless exposed to him during the hearing:

> ***They told me that they were never going, well the guy had many girls and he would not know then what people, what girls were like testifying for him, against him and in the last interview I was even with their lawyer and well they saw me, I don't know if maybe the guy saw me or the old woman, because his wife was also involved...*** **(YP)**

Another example of this was recounted by a young woman who was sexually exploited and unknowingly recorded by a foreign man. She described how she felt when the sexual abuse material was presented as evidence to a courtroom indictment session in the United States of America:

> ***Shame on myself ...what a shame to be in this situation... [...] ...doing these kinds of things. I felt moral shame... I saw all those lawyers and obviously, they had those papers, they had shots [of the child sexual abuse material], if you understand me, because they needed to present to the Prosecution and to the judge all the evidence, well I was embarrassed, ...that they see me all there.*** **(YP)**

While the presentation of evidence such as child sexual abuse material is often a legal necessity in prosecuting perpetrators, it can conflict with the child's right to dignity, privacy and protection.

86. Republic of Colombia, Code for Children and Adolescents (2006), art. 196-2.
87. Ibid., art. 41-36.
88. Ibid., art. 150-1.
89. Ibid., art. 150-1.
90. Ibid., art. 150-2.
91. Ibid., art. 150-3.
92. Ibid., art. 150-4.
93. Ibid., art. 194.

This process may unintentionally expose children to renewed emotional harm and trauma by re-exposing the material depicting the abuse to which they were subjected to scrutiny. Similarly, while protecting the identity of children and young people facilitates their role as witnesses in the hearings, which contributes greatly to the judicial process in Colombia, attending a trial is still a stressful process where the child or young person can be revictimized.

Balancing legal standards and these rights requires trauma-informed legal procedures, which could include, for example, restricting unnecessary viewing of sensitive material, using closed sessions or allowing children to testify and participate in the court processes through intermediaries if they wish to. Equally important is ensuring that children are adequately informed, prepared and emotionally supported throughout the proceedings, so that they understand what will happen and do not experience further distress.

Repeated and insensitive questioning as a source of revictimization despite legal safeguards

Colombian law establishes specific procedures to ensure that forensic interviews with children who have been subjected to sexual violence are carried out in a manner that safeguards their rights and well-being. Such interviews must be conducted by specially trained personnel from the Technical Investigation Unit of the Attorney General's Office, or another qualified professional,[94] in a room that consists of two separate areas divided by a one-way mirror or another child-friendly setting equipped with age-appropriate tools.[95] A legal representative or trusted adult relative may also accompany the child.[96] Interviews should be limited to a single session, except in exceptional cases, and always considering the best interests of the child.[97]

Despite these safeguards and the fact that the front-line workers and justice professionals interviewed displayed an awareness of the need to avoid revictimization, in practice children may still be asked to recount the abuse repeatedly. Indeed, investigations typically involve a series of preliminary hearings to assess whether there are enough elements to bring charges. Where the initial interview does not provide all the information required for this purpose, additional clarification may be sought from the child, as described by one state prosecutor:

> ***...obviously it is said that the victim cannot be interviewed more than once because it revictimizes [her/him],...[...]... and it is logically true, but if there is not a good initial interview, we necessarily have to do the second one and many people say no, [by doing so] you are going to revictimize [her/him]. It is revictimizing, [but, is either] not revictimizing or dropping the case, because if it is not clear, well, we cannot move forward, the idea is to do a good, unique and first interview, but unfortunately that is the wish to be, but it is not what really happens due to multiple circumstances.*** **(JP)**

This account illustrates the complexity of balancing the best interests of the child with evidentiary requirements, highlighting the dilemma prosecutors face when strict adherence to existing legal safeguards is perceived as preventing the justice process from moving forward. In such cases, additional forensic interviews may be regarded as unavoidable, despite demonstrated awareness of the potential harm they can cause. When further questioning does occur, it also adds to interviews conducted for protection, health and service provision purposes, resulting in a cumulative burden of repeated recounting. As described by one front-line worker, this can be distressing for the child:

94. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Procedure Code (2004), art. 206A (d).
95. Ibid., art. 206A (e).
96. Ibid., art. 206A (d).
97. Ibid., art. 206A (e).

> *Normally, a child goes through four interviews: the interview that the prosecution does, the interview that the Colombian Family Welfare Institute does and the interview that Forensic Medicine does, plus the socioemotional support that is received in the clinic or health centre where he or she is being treated, so these four interviews, even though they seek to activate the processes that ultimately will ensure the restoration of rights, when a child has to recount several times what has happened, it does not cease being a revictimizing fact, even when what is sought is a greater good in the framework of these cases.* (FW)

While relevant information pertaining to a criminal complaint is typically collated into a report and shared among subsequent service and justice providers to avoid repeated questioning, this account suggests that this process is either not systematically implemented or is insufficiently effective in practice to prevent multiple actors from interviewing the child.

Concerns regarding potentially insensitive or inappropriate questioning were also raised, pointing to capacity-building gaps or failures to systematically ensure that interviews are conducted by adequately trained personnel. This is elaborated through the experience of a young woman who was sexually exploited by a foreign tourist when she was 14 years old. The man recorded and posted the child sexual abuse material online. The interview conducted by a male justice professional raised traumatic memories and made the young woman feel uncomfortable about the intentions of the professional. As she remembered:

> *It was a very hard process, very hard, because many interviews, well I had to have many interviews and everything, then remembering each moment that and it was a moment that I had not managed to heal that, then I felt bad they asked me for many, many details of what had happened, that is, they asked for details [that were] like unnecessary and that made me feel very uncomfortable, I was like, well a man why he wants to know all those details if I already told him the things and I even asked my friends, in the interview did they ask you for all those details? [they said] no.* (YP)

A further account provided by a young woman who was subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse when she was 12 years old suggests that, in some cases, justice professionals' efforts to secure evidentiary statements can come across as taking precedence over children's safety and well-being considerations. She described feeling unsafe and harassed when they tried to reach out to her:

> *I was saying, but it is like, how dare they follow me, call my house, no I mean no, no, I was not okay with that.* (YP)

The cumulative effects of repeated or insensitive interviews, prolonged proceedings and limited outcomes can fundamentally undermine confidence in judicial proceedings. When children and young people reflect on their experience, some even regret reporting or entering the justice process, as noted by one front-line worker:

> *I have girls [who have been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse] who have gone through that many interviews, many rounds, very few results and they told us, in the end, it would have been better if I had never reported.* (FW)

The accounts of justice professionals, front-line workers and young people who have been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse reveal a gap between the protective legal framework and practice in Colombia, where procedural requirements and insufficient trauma-informed approaches often result in children being exposed to harm within the very systems meant to protect them. Standardizing trauma-informed protocols and training, and prioritizing the child's emotional safety at every stage of the process are therefore critical to making these legal protections meaningful in practice.

In addition, strengthening inter-agency coordination and information-sharing, alongside greater reliance on alternative forms of evidence, could help reduce the need for children to be interviewed by multiple actors. One professional interviewed highlighted how effective coordination and the use of therapeutic observations can be instrumental in supporting prosecutions without subjecting children to further questioning:

> *Thanks to the fact that the child, spontaneously, in the therapeutic setting, began to show on his body and through play what was being done to him and what was being said to him, saying things like 'He did this, this, and that to me', the therapist took great care to write everything down, to take detailed notes, and to report all of it to us. And thanks to that report, the judge had many elements as evidentiary material to issue a conviction.* (FW)

Unfortunately, such practices were described less frequently in the data, indicating an area for potential improvement. Expanding the use of coordinated, child-centred evidentiary approaches while safeguarding children's right to therapeutic care and support could help reconcile prosecutorial objectives with the imperative to prevent further harm.

The justice system is overwhelmed

The Code for Children and Adolescents states that the judiciary shall give priority to proceedings, actions and decisions related to cases involving child victims of crime,[98] ensuring that they are handled promptly and without unnecessary delay. However, according to many professionals, there is a shortage of trained personnel to respond to the huge volume of child sexual exploitation and abuse cases:

98. Republic of Colombia, Code for Children and Adolescents (2006), art. 193-1.

> *...a shortage of personnel, of prosecutors, they have their desks invaded by cases because they cannot, because they do not cope, sometimes we reminded them of this case, I am one who sends a lot, I go and talk to the prosecutor and tell him about his case, and it is with that purpose that the prosecutor remembers and moves the file, that moves the little folder, remembers it, because we cannot, we do not cope and here (NGO) it also happens... the volume of complaints that arrives, there are days of 19 complaints, of 20 complaints yes or there are weeks [in which each day has] 25.* (FW)

This can manifest in different ways across Colombia. In municipalities and departments where the required teams and resources are not available, teams are brought into the region for specific periods of time to conduct interviews with children and young people or relevant people related to sexual exploitation and abuse cases:

> *...when I worked in the department, everyone who came to report was on a list...[...]... every month and a half or two months, they sent some interviewers [from the city] in a decongestion session and then that day you had to have 30, 25 people in those two, three days that they [interviewers] were going to be there.* (JP)

According to professionals, this can result in other crimes being prioritized over child sexual exploitation and abuse. However as articulated below, professionals struggle with how to prioritize cases that all seem urgent:

> *When you are in the special unit where [all] crimes are associated with sexual violence [...] then what is the criterion you are going to have to attend to one before the other? And then we would go to the principle that says that in order of arrival, right? or maybe in order of threats? This one that is threatened, well you have to act now... When a unit is specialized, all the crimes that enter are priority and there are not enough personnel to say today I am going to receive a case and today itself I solve it, no, a process, an investigation takes months...* (JP)

The congestion described by professionals results in low confidence in the justice system among children and young people attempting to seek help.

> *I went (to the police) like three times, and they never gave me an answer about the matter, nothing, as if avoiding it and I feel that they did not help me at all.* (YP)

> *...we filed a complaint and they did nothing.* (YP)

Compounding these issues, professionals working in the overwhelmed justice system can experience burnout. As explained by one justice professional, the high number of cases can even lead to prosecutors requesting a transfer, while the emotional toll of reviewing case material has a substantial effect on the well-being of investigative and prosecutorial teams:

> *The burnout of prosecutors is very high, I have cases that get stuck because the prosecutors start to take sick leave, to ask for a transfer.* (JP)

> *...it is not easy for an investigator to process 45,000 – 20,000 images of content of sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.* (JP)

Importantly, as both professionals and young people highlighted, an overwhelmed or ineffective justice system can embolden perpetrators of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to continue without fear of consequences:

> *So, this also allows those who are harming others to continue doing so, because they know that although the consequences established by law are severe, the process takes a long time and often doesn't move forward. This situation, then, allows these problems to continue occurring.* (JP)

> *One feels like, if they do not do anything (those who are supposed to be the authority) ... [...] ... it gives people more confidence to continue doing bad things.* (YP)

It stems from the above that, while the judiciary is required to give priority to cases involving child victims of crime, in practice, structural barriers such as insufficient human and technical capacity, overwhelming workloads and limited specialized expertise undermine the effective implementation of this mandate. Consequently, the justice system, despite its legal obligations, often functions with delays and inefficiencies that diminish victims' confidence, contribute to professional burnout and enable perpetrators to act with a sense of impunity.

Legislation and sociocultural norms about the age of sexual consent create a grey area for perpetrators of abuse to exploit children

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Colombia sets the age of sexual consent at 14,[99] but interviews indicate that this provision is sometimes socially interpreted as granting full sexual autonomy, even in situations that are clearly exploitative and criminalized under the Criminal Code's comprehensive framework on child sexual exploitation and abuse. In many Colombian contexts, children are indeed considered adults from the age of 14 years old. This is particularly the case for girls and young women who are sexualized and objectified by men in contexts of exploitation in prostitution, including within tourism.

> *There is a very large legal vacuum within the age of 14 years 1 day, (...) up to 18 years minus one day. This population of girls between 14 years and 18 years are unprotected in Colombia in large numbers, because if they carry out an abusive touch on that girl, it will not be a violent sexual act, it will not be [classified as] abusive sexual acts with a person under 14 years.* (JP)

99. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 209.

> *I know that the Colombian law says look, from 18 downward you are a minor, we protect you, but if you are 14 and up you can do whatever you want with your body, so there is an ambiguity.* (JP)

These perceptions intersect with attitudes blaming young people for being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse because they are digital natives or due to their participation in online platforms. Both justice professionals and front-line workers drew attention to how victim-blaming reduces the support and access to justice offered to young people who are over 14 years old:

> *I think there are like two visions, when you are under 14 and you are a victim, but if you are 14, no, it's that you should already know, they are digital natives, there is no justification for them to have fallen there.* (FW)

> *Although they try to make an analogy that below the age of 14 years, the will, the consent is absolutely null, but that from there forward it is not absolutely null, does not mean that they do not require the protection that the previous ones, because while there is a little more awareness regarding the criminal part, you already enter the criminal responsibility system, because you assume that you have a slightly greater responsibility, you are still inexperienced and vulnerable, you are receiving some very strong adult pressures.* (JP)

In addition, according to some research participants, perpetrators of sexual exploitation manipulate the age of sexual consent provision by instructing young people (aged 14–17 years) to identify themselves as part of a consenting emotional and sexual relationship with the perpetrator. This is described by a front-line worker:

> *Pimps convince the girls and the boys very well, [they tell them]: "'Look, if the authorities come, [and] it's certain that they will come, it's your responsibility, if you lose your job, if you lose the income you have. So what you should say is the following: one, you are of legal age, or, two, if it is difficult to prove your age of majority, well you will simply say [that] he is my boyfriend, I consent, he gives me money, but not for sex, he gives me money because he loves me" … When we went in to intervene with authorities and the crime was proven, that he was giving her money, that he was taking her, that he was doing all that. Well, the girl said: "it's that I like him, I only want to be with him.* (FW)

As a result, exploitative practices like 'virtual girlfriends' are difficult to identify or report because perpetrators and the young people subjected to abuse claim that the relationship is consensual and not transactional in nature. As identified by a front-line worker, the issue of the age of sexual consent makes it difficult to demonstrate the crimes of sexual exploitation or abuse of adolescents over 14 years of age:

> *Proving they [the young girls] were deceived is quite complex, because many times they said: "no, but look, she began to go and no one forced her, she wanted to" And well, as they talk about ages of consent. When yes, okay, there is an age of consent which is 14 years old where you can consent to having a sexual partner, yes. But when there is a monetary exchange, when we talk about sexual exploitation, we talk about issues of crimes, [there] there is no consent.* (JP)

Some justice professionals perceive this as a legal void that creates favourable conditions for foreign perpetrators to exploit children and young people in Colombia. One justice professional explained that Colombia is a destination of choice for perpetrators who can easily access knowledge of the legislation and how to exploit it:

> ***Many of those people who come to Colombia to abuse those girls, know they are bad [for they are doing], that they are paedophiles, that they saw on Google that the age of consent is 14 years and that they come to do what they want to do [with the young people].*** **(JP)**

According to the professionals interviewed, gaps in Colombian regulations, legislation and justice result in a lack of accountability for perpetrators. This context is exploited and creates a unique vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse of Colombian children and young people.

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. In Colombia, the law establishes that anyone who commits a crime must compensate for both the material and moral harm caused,[100] and that such damages must be compensated by those held criminally responsible. Judges may, as part of this compensation, order the perpetrator to pay an amount of up to one thousand times the monthly minimum wage, depending on the nature of the crime and the extent of the harm caused.[101]

Once a conviction becomes final, the process of awarding compensation is handled through a dedicated procedure known as comprehensive reparation proceedings ('*incidente de reparación integral*'). At the request of the victim, prosecutor or Public Ministry, the judge must convene a hearing within eight days of the ruling to initiate this process.[102] At this hearing, the victim of crime presents their claim orally, specifying the form of reparation sought and the supporting evidence. The judge verifies the admissibility of the claim and invites the parties to attempt conciliation to reach an agreement.[103] If no agreement is reached, another hearing must be held within eight days to attempt another conciliation.[104] If it fails again, the judge will receive evidence and arguments on that same day,[105] before issuing a decision on the compensation.[106]

Before a decision on compensation is made, the Prosecutor may, at the victim's request, grant provisional financial assistance from the State-run Victims' Compensation Fund.[107] This mechanism can potentially play an important role in supporting children's recovery, as provisional assistance may help ensure timely access to essential services, including medical care, psychosocial support and other measures necessary for rehabilitation. However, the extent to which it is systematically implemented in cases of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse is unclear.

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.

100. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Code (2000), art. 96.
101. Ibid., art. 97.
102. Republic of Colombia, Criminal Procedure Code, 2004 art. 102.
103. Ibid., art. 103.
104. Ibid., arts. 103, 104.
105. Ibid., art. 104.
106. Ibid., art. 105.
107. Ibid., art. 99.

6. SERVICE UTILIZATION

This chapter provides insights from young people, justice professionals and front-line workers regarding the factors influencing the seeking and receiving of formal support for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia.

Colombian service provision pathway

The Code for Children and Adolescents guarantees children's right to comprehensive health, as well as the provision of all services, goods and actions necessary to ensure their preservation and restoration.[108] It further states that child victims of crime must be enrolled in a specialized care programme that ensures the restoration of their rights.[109] For children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, the implementation of these programmes is the responsibility of the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare , which operates specialized recovery and protection services offering care and psychosocial support.[110] Survivors and their families are entitled to psychotherapeutic services through the health sector,[111] and legislation establishes that the physical and mental rehabilitation of children subjected to sexual violence shall be provided free of charge and continue until full recovery.[112]

Colombia has established a unified service provision pathway aimed at ensuring the protection, recovery and restitution of rights for victims of sexual violence. Although there are no specific standard operating procedures for tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, the pathway guides responses and articulates management for care for sexual violence against children. The system includes key components:

- Initiation of services: Access to support can be initiated through various entry points (via Code Fuchsia), including complaints to the Prosecutor's Office, reports from schools, hospitals and Family Ombudsmen.
- Restoration of rights: Family Advocates registered with the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare are responsible for verifying compliance with rights and managing the administrative process of restoration of rights. This includes regular follow-ups and case plan adjustments involving a multidisciplinary team.
- Comprehensive care: The pathway aims to ensure that victims receive health services, psychological support, legal advice and follow-up care. Hospitals and health centres provide emergency care, while the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare oversees the restoration of rights and compliance monitoring. Centres for Comprehensive Care and Investigation for Victims of Sexual Crimes (CAIVAS) offer integrated services for victims, including medical, psychological and legal support.

According to the professionals interviewed, the effectiveness of the pathway in responding to cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse depends on the accessibility and effectiveness of implementation across locations as well as coordination between each institution.

Professionals commonly stated that when the route works it becomes the main response mechanism. According to a front-line professional who reflected on the care provided to a girl subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse:

> ***...the dad took her to the hospital, the hospital was very diligent, told the Prosecutor's Office and told the family welfare... We moved to the hospital, did the verification, immediately the process of rights restoration was opened because it was quite serious the situation and the complaint was created. So, we function almost alongside the three, the health sector did the activation, the Prosecutor's Office created the complaint, the criminal news, we did the verification, the case was opened.*** **(FW)**

However, in the experiences of professionals and young people interviewed, a range of important challenges relating to access to care for survivors were identified. Several professionals highlighted the need for a single entity to ensure coordination nationally.

108. Republic of Colombia, Code for Children and Adolescents (2006), art. 27.
109. Ibid. art. 60.
110. Fundación Renacer, personal communication, June 2023.
111. Republic of Colombia, Law 1438 of 2011, art. 19.
112. Republic of Colombia, Law 1616 of 2013, art. 25.

Identifying and classifying tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as sexual abuse (Code Fuchsia)

Because of the structured nature of the Colombia service provision pathway, it is important that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse crimes are understood by professionals so that they can identify and respond appropriately. If a case of child sexual exploitation or abuse is identified in the system, an emergency protocol (Code Fuchsia) is activated to provide specific services and responses as described above. However, one professional suggested that there were times when cases were overlooked by professionals due to misunderstandings and minimization of these crimes. As a consequence, the required response for these cases is not activated:

> ***They do not make the activation of Code Fuchsia in the EPS [health promotion centres] or in the hospitals because there was not, let's say an act of touching or penetration.*** **(FW)**

Further to this, the Code Fuchsia protocols do not include specific standardized procedures for tech-facilitated abuse (FW). Not having specific protocols can be a barrier for appropriate care for children and young people. There may be specific systems, services and knowledge that are required by service providers and that are overlooked without these protocols in place. One example of this could be related to how the child is supported with notices of ongoing management of removal of child abuse materials, as well as ensuring that evidence-informed psychological support is provided to survivors. Without formal protocols and capacity-building, children and young people subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse may not receive the standard of care available through the pathway.

Providing appropriate and adequate care

Even when service providers are aware that children and young people have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse, there appears to be misconceptions surrounding the impacts of this abuse. One way this can manifest itself is by diminishing the mental and emotional impacts and making a false distinction between online and contact sexual abuse:

> ***Culturally, people think that only sexual violence is physical abuse, so they will tell you [in the case of tech-facilitated abuse] at least they did not do anything [to a child or young person], it was something minimum, or 'at least they were not touched'.*** **(FW)**

Service providers explained that health professionals may not understand how the circulation of child sexual abuse material online can continue to victimize a person or how the fear of others discovering the material can create long-term anxiety:

> ***They also [other service providers] should understand the magnitude and difference between sexual abuse that occurs... [...] ...and when it was also recorded and this recording is going around globally...This is going to generate much more [to a child or young person], much more remembrance [because the content is circulating] and it will be much more revictimizing throughout their whole life.*** **(FW)**

According to some front-line workers, a service provision pathway that is responsive to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse would include assisting with content removal and developing mental health support to assist survivors of abuse with long-term coping strategies when content remains online:

> ***...the most complicated cases that have to do with digital context, because the state is not present, there is no commitment from the state to do a follow-up to this situation... You know that material is going to circulate, and it can get to them at some point in their lives. That is never, is never going to be out of the cloud, (...) so, it is a never-ending story, and if there is not a [prolonged] support process, then life will be harder for them.*** **(FW)**

Children and young people may experience physical impacts from tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. However, some front-line workers may not consider this when assessing the impact of these types of abuse. When this occurs, treatment and support of a child or young person can be delayed or ineffective. One front-line worker explains how this can occur when they seek medical examinations for a child or young person whom they are accompanying:

> ***When we come to activate Code Fuchsias at health institutions, sometimes the same doctors refuse to carry out the exams because they say, 'No, she was not touched'; 'No, but it was online'; 'No, but she was not violated'. And they don't recognize [...] that maybe, they need that medical assessment... We have had cases in which the family defender has to go with the rule in hand to tell the doctor yes, you have to attend ...for this, for this, for this and the doctor refuses because it is ...so those kinds of things hinder the process.*** **(FW)**

In a separate example described by a front-line worker, a young girl developed an infection after being forced to take pictures of herself inserting things into her body. The infection went untreated because a professional did not identify the possibility of physical impacts of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse:

> ***This girl ended up with an infection, but (...) since there was no physical abuse, since there was not direct contact with the perpetrator, (...) the health route is not considered. (...) a professional said, 'You are going to saturate the health system [with a case] where there was not a physical contact, everything was through the internet'. But, yes, all [the services] have to be done because nobody is going to imagine what she was being told to do, the elements that the girl was introducing into her body were dirty and they put her at a terrible infection risk.*** **(FW)**

As these examples highlight, professionals across the service provision pathway would benefit from sensitization to and protocols developed by the governmental entities responsible for their respective areas of work, including standardized and appropriate responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Parallel support via non-governmental organizations

Parallel to the formal service provision 'route', both front-line providers and justice professionals point out that there are programmes, strategies and tools for prevention, care and recovery, both public and private, national and international, that complement support via the formal service provision pathway (route). According to front-line workers and justice professionals from non-governmental organizations, they may be better equipped to provide supplementary and ongoing support to children and young people subjected to violence because their resources and less bureaucratic processes can improve the scope and timeliness of the support they offer:

> ***As we are not bureaucratized, girls and women have immediate access to available resources, so if one of our girls who are referred to us is sick or needs to buy a medicine, we do not have to go through a series of forms, formats, permissions, authorizations, but if the resource is available, we do it immediately.*** **(FW)**

Young people interviewed recalled the positive impacts of mental health support and accompaniment received via non-governmental organizations. Their positive experiences illustrate how active and unbiased listening can facilitate not only disclosure, reporting and justice processes but also recovery. For example, psychological support enabled one young girl to speak about being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse for the first time. She received support from a non-governmental organization after attempting suicide and suffering from drug addiction. Through her interactions with the organization's psychologist, she was able to reveal a history of sexual abuse, including contact sexual abuse and online video calls with foreign men facilitated by her mother:

> ***Most important was my first psychologist from an NGO... for me she was a supremely fundamental piece in my process, because without the motivation she gave me, I would have continued with that silence and would have kept everything to myself. (...) she gave me that trust so I could take the next step, because I was scared, if I had not sat down so many times to talk with her and to feel secure that I had to do it, I would never have been able [to tell anyone].*** **(YP)**

Alongside psychological support, it appears that non-governmental organizations can build relationships that enable children and young people to move towards recovery. From the perspective of the young people interviewed, it was clear that support was balanced with creating space for autonomy, while supporting children and young people across aspects of their lives impacted by abuse (including economic abuse). One example came from a young migrant man who became trapped in a webcam studio after responding to a job advertisement online. The young man recalled the work of a non-governmental organization to rebuild him 'piece by piece':

> ***They have many prepared people, many people prepared [to handle] what they were truly going to face with us. I mean, they knew how to treat us, they knew how to talk to us, they knew how to engage us in the sense of bringing out the bad things we had inside, to be able to bring them out, to be able to put good things in, to be careful.***
>
> ***What I loved the most... [...] ...was the psychological part ,10 out of 10, I loved it, I loved the creative part, administrative part, how to organize my life, their workshops.*** **(YP)**

Non-governmental organizations in Colombia evidently play an important role in supporting children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. However, it is critical that the formal service provision pathway is strengthened to provide a coordinated and cohesive response mechanism and avoid creating a parallel system of response and care.

Well-being of front-line workers

Insights from interviews with front-line workers consistently demonstrate a need for support because of vicarious trauma and case overload. There appear to be different levels of support provided to front-line professionals from across and within the public and NGO sectors:

> ***Our entity is lacking, that is, even though we request it, not only our entity but all the entities that handle these types of situations so strong for mental health, we should have more support for the support [...] in order to generate those catharses [...] protect our own mental health and that of our families.*** **(FW)**

However, front-line workers' mental health support was identified as critical to addressing their exposure to children and young people experiencing distress as well as child sexual abuse materials during their work:

> ***The organization had to offer us at least once a month a psychological session, so we had our psychologists who helped us manage situations in case it was something super difficult and also because they are like, you are exposed to heavy content, so heartbreaking, you can't go home and [start] telling like you can't imagine what I saw today, because first it affects yourself, but you are also affecting and exposing people who shouldn't be exposed to that, then part of the psychological support was like having a safe space to share the situations, for one to vent.*** **(FW)**

Several service providers spoke about accessing mental health support on their own to continue their important work, because their organization did not have services:

> ***...I have my consultations with my personal psychologist, if I feel that I am loaded with something from work then I talk to her.*** **(FW)**

> ***Generally emotional support we have to seek on our own independently, because these support for the support issues do not exist.*** **(FW)**

> ***In general, we all have our own therapist right, because we face difficult things on a daily basis, so we all have our therapist and we do those accompaniments with them, that they accompany us and also there are moments of technological disconnection right.*** **(FW)**

Vicarious trauma can intersect with burnout due to excessive caseloads among front-line workers. While increased community awareness of sexual violence is positive, the resources allocated have not kept pace with demand according to a few participants in this study. This has left organizations and workers overwhelmed:

> ***...The volume of cases presented related to sexual violence is high, I think it also has to do with the awareness people are having today, society itself, of what sexual violence implies and that invites to denounce, however, sometimes we are overwhelmed because there are too many, too many cases and we are few people working to attend to these situations.*** **(FW)**

For public-sector employees, there are some options for support via entities that manage the country's workplace injury and occupational disease insurance system, however without resourcing to manage caseloads, this may not be accessible:

> ***Sometimes you feel overwhelmed, and you cry, (...) and of course there is the ARL [workplace injury and occupational disease insurance system], the psychologist, but you do not have the time to ask an appointment, those appointments are really hard to get, it is not easy.*** **(JP)**

> ***I think that good emotional support would be important, at the same time as reducing working hours, the working hours of the professionals in research are long, so I think that wears down the human being who is behind those processes.*** **(FW)**

Active and unbiased listening can facilitate not only disclosure, reporting and justice processes but also recovery.

7. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The previous chapters of this report shed light on the broader societal and systemic factors that enable tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. A strong understanding of these underlying factors is crucial to effective prevention. This brief chapter outlines some existing initiatives in Colombia as well as key considerations for existing and new prevention efforts based on the data in this report.

7.1 POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

The National Strategy for the Prevention of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents 2018–2028 places prevention at the centre of the Colombian response to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. It prioritizes the creation of protective digital environments by promoting mechanisms that enable the information and communication technology industry to coordinate with competent authorities to prevent the circulation of child sexual abuse material, including through its timely reporting, blocking and removal.[113] The Strategy further seeks to ensure that internet service providers adopt preventive measures to reduce the risk of children being recruited online for sexual exploitation and to limit the dissemination of child sexual abuse material.[114]

Prevention is also addressed within the Strategy through sustained efforts to strengthen digital literacy and responsible online behaviour across all levels of education.[115] In addition, it envisions the inclusion of zero-tolerance clauses regarding sexual exploitation in all public servants' contracts, as well as the promotion of their adherence to the "Zero Tolerance for Child Pornography on the Internet and Other ICT Platforms in Colombia" Pact.[116] Launched in 2016 by the Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies, the Pact constitutes a multi-stakeholder commitment through which signatories agree to promote safe browsing practices, foster trusted and secure environments that encourage the reporting of child sexual abuse material, promote reporting and removal mechanisms, and mobilize community action against such content.[117]

Beyond this overarching framework, Colombia has implemented a range of complementary initiatives aimed at preventing (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse by addressing risk factors, strengthening resilience and fostering safer digital cultures. Most recently:

- **2021:** Colombia established a National Early Warning System for the Prevention of Sexual Violence against Children and Adolescents to detect risks of sexual violence and ensure a rapid and effective response by relevant State authorities aimed at preventing it.[118] However, the System was not implemented in practice, prompting the Administrative Tribunal of Cundinamarca, in July 2025, to order the adoption of its operational mechanism and regulatory framework within six months.[119]
- The **National Action Plan against Violence towards Children and Adolescents 2021–2024** identifies the digital environment as one of its six lines of action and sets out measures to prevent risks of rights violations in this sphere. Activities under this line are structured around two core components aimed at addressing risks such as trafficking and sexual exploitation, online grooming, and sexting: (i) risk awareness and situational analysis, and (ii) digital skills development.[120] As of February 2026, no information is publicly available regarding the development of a new iteration of the plan. Any future framework should build on the foundation of the 2021–2024 plan and continue to address the digital environment as a priority area, including the full range of forms and dimensions of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse examined in this report.
- The **National Digital Strategy 2023–2026** provides for the development of a programme to prevent digital risks and tech-facilitated crimes affecting all age groups, including children and adolescents, with a particular focus on incorporating a mental and emotional health approach. It also foresees the implementation of an awareness-raising strategy to strengthen digital habits and skills for the safe use of the internet and information and communications technologies.[121]

113. Republic of Colombia, National Strategy for the Prevention of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents 2018–2028 (2018), p. 41.
114. Ibid., p. 41.
115. Ibid., p. 41.
116. Ibid., p. 39.
117. Republic of Colombia, Ministerio TIC participó en firma del 'Pacto de Cero Tolerancia con la Pornografía Infantil en Internet (2016).
118. Republic of Colombia, Law 2137 of 2021, art. 5.
119. Aldes Infantiles SOS,. ¿Qué es el Sistema Nacional de Alertas Tempranas para la Violencia Sexual contra Niños, Niñas, Adolescentes y Mujeres y desde cuándo fue creado? (2025).
120. Republic of Colombia, National Action Plan Against Violence against Children and Adolescents in Colombia 2021–2024 (2021), p. 73.
121. Republic of Colombia, Estrategia Nacional Digital de Colombia 2023–2026 (2024), p. 26.

- **2024:** The Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies launched the *CiberPaz* programme to promote the *"conscious, empathetic, inclusive and responsible"* use of information and communications technologies through free awareness-raising sessions and workshops addressing issues such as cybersecurity, privacy rights and the ethical production and dissemination of online content.[122] In 2025, *CiberPaz* activities reached more than 1.4 million Colombians, 48 per cent of whom were children aged 12–18, who took part in activities implemented across 676 institutions and 703 educational sites, with a focus on self-protection from risks such as cyberbullying, grooming and online scams.[123]
- **2025:** The Law establishing provisions for the development of healthy and safe digital environments for children and adolescents nationwide established a multi-agency National Committee on Technology, Children and Adolescents to develop guidelines and policies to promote the safe use of technology among children and adolescents, particularly from early childhood. The Committee is also tasked with promoting the use of parental control tools and other available safety mechanisms that are accessible to parents, guardians, educators and communities.[124]

122. Republic of Colombia, Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies,. Ministerio TIC lanzó el programa CiberPaz que le apuesta a un Internet seguro, respetuoso e incluyente (2024).
123. Republic of Colombia, Presidency, Gobierno capacitó a 1,4 millones de personas en uso seguro de Internet en todo el país (2025).
124. Republic of Colombia, Law 2489 establishing provisions for the development of healthy and safe digital environments for children and adolescents nationwide (2025), art. 7.

7.2 MULTIPLE PREVENTION PATHWAYS IN COLOMBIA

The data presented in this report point to several prevention-related issues that extend beyond institutional responses. Data from the household surveys, as well as interviews with professionals and young people, show that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be understood as an exclusively online or stranger-driven phenomenon. The data demonstrate that digital technologies are frequently used to extend, intensify or conceal abuse rooted in existing relationships of trust, including within families and social circles.

At the same time, the involvement of strangers remains a significant concern in prevention efforts. Professionals highlighted cases of online grooming in which children received unsolicited sexual messages, images or requests from unknown individuals, often through social media platforms. These examples highlight the persistent risks posed by anonymous or deceptive online interactions and underscore the importance of strengthening safeguards on platforms where such interactions are likely to occur. While children should be informed of these risks and supported by trusted adults to navigate these situations safely, this must be situated within a comprehensive set of interventions that address platform failures and make offending more difficult for perpetrators.

Findings from the survey further highlight the strong overlap between in-person sexual violence and tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This blending of in-person and online components complicates the identification and response to harmful behaviour and contributes to underreporting, reinforcing the need for prevention strategies that address children's immediate social environments alongside digital spaces.

The data also point to structural and social factors that undermine prevention as much as response. Throughout the research, victim-blaming attitudes and the normalization of sexual abuse – particularly the perception of adolescents as adults from an early age – emerged as significant barriers to disclosure by discouraging it and shifting responsibility onto children rather than addressing the conditions that enable abuse, including limited family support, economic hardship and unequal power dynamics. The findings indicate that prevention must focus on addressing these underlying circumstances, rather than children's individual choices or behaviours.

Some cases of abuse and exploitation recalled during this study reflected complex family dynamics that provide important context for understanding these situations. Among some families with strongly conservative values, a reluctance to discuss topics related to sexuality created significant knowledge gaps about sexual health and rights, often fostering taboos or fear among children. The young people, justice professionals and front-line workers interviewed consistently emphasized the crucial role that family members and caregivers play, either in protecting children and adolescents or conversely, in increasing their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

Professionals repeatedly pointed out that family members and caregivers lack time, information about risks and specific skills to supervise, accompany and guide the online activities of adolescents. In the following testimony, a young woman recounts how, at the age of 12, she easily evaded the control of her father, who gave her her first cell phone as a reward for improving her academic performance. The girl opened a profile on a social network and evaded the platform's restrictions by registering with an older age. Shortly after, she started an interaction with an adult man who lived in her neighbourhood and who pretended to be a 25-year-old young man. The situation led to the girl's rape, an unwanted pregnancy because of the rape, the girl attempting suicide and the father being imprisoned for the murder (in self-defence) of the perpetrator.

> *My dad gave me my cell phone… I wanted to create a Facebook [account], but I couldn't because since I was 12 years old, Facebook didn't allow it… My dad found out that I had Facebook and took my cell phone away for a month. Well, he deleted my account. I made it again behind his back and I made it with another name. But I made it with another name, but I uploaded photos, I uploaded my photos. They started teaching me how I could block my mom, my dad, my siblings, my family, like so they wouldn't realize that I was, that I had Facebook at that time. Well, I started blocking them all. One day a guy wrote to me, he was about 25, 26 years old and the guy was nice, and we started talking and he asked me where I lived and I told him I live in such and such a place…* (YP)

While the parent is not to blame for this situation, prevention strategies that strengthen family-level support and digital literacy could play a part in informing children about online risks and in keeping them safer.

Finally, schools are identified as critical spaces for prevention beyond formal institutional interventions. While children and adolescents spend a lot of time at school, school as an institution was typically not identified as an environment that facilitated disclosure. In response to a question from the interviewer on whether she spoke with anyone other than her mother about the abuse, a young woman explained that she did not feel able to confide in teachers, as sexual abuse and related topics had never been discussed at school.

Front-line workers observed that prevention workshops for tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that are sometimes offered in school settings can enable communication and eventual disclosure or reporting. On the one hand, these workshops can help children identify that what has happened to them is abusive or exploitative, while also opening the door for them to ask questions and share their experience with adults. As one front-line professional pointed out:

> *The professional tells the children in the workshop that is an [inappropriate] touch and that word, that photo they received, or those things are sexual violence, then they say, 'So I was being abused, right?' The number of cases that are revealed from when the professional indicates to the children in the workshop that this touching, that word, that photo they received or those things are sexual violence, they say then "I was being abused, right."* (FW)

While educating children about online safety can be one part of addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, a prevention approach that focuses primarily on children's behaviours risks overlooking the broader, social and systemic drivers that enable perpetrators to commit crimes against children. It also fails to account for the increasing overlap between online and in-person violence. In addition, as demonstrated throughout this report, perpetrators often act opportunistically. They take advantage of any perceived vulnerability in a child's circumstances, as well as gaps in protection systems and in protective mechanisms of online platforms, to harm children.

This raises important considerations about both the fairness and effectiveness of prevention efforts that place heavy emphasis on children's knowledge and actions. Prevention efforts that focus heavily on children's internet use and actions online tend to prioritize individual behaviour and put the onus on children to protect themselves, which may divert attention from community- policy- and structural-level interventions that address the root causes of sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly the motivations and actions of perpetrators.

8. CONCLUSION

This report presents multiple viewpoints, including those of children and young people, parents, front-line workers, justice professionals and law enforcement, to offer a nuanced understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia. Taken together, the data collected reveal a complex story of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia, driven by interconnected factors that cut across existing gender, social and economic inequalities.

8. CONCLUSION

These children, whose rights have already been violated as a result of abuse and exploitation, face additional victimization through blaming attitudes and accusations that make disclosure and help-seeking difficult. They face a protection and justice system that is not always equipped to provide a child-centred response. As a result, much abuse remains in the shadows and children do not receive the support, access to justice or tools for healing and recovery that they have a right to.

While these issues are challenging, there are clear opportunities for Colombia to build on its existing legal framework and the hard-working and committed staff working across the social service and justice sectors to improve the situation for children. To that end, this report concludes with evidence-based recommendations that were developed together with national experts and stakeholders in a workshop in Bogotá in November 2025.

To support the effectiveness of these recommendations, it is essential to address the underlying social and economic conditions that enable perpetrators to exploit children, including through the use of technology. While programmes aimed at awareness-raising, skills-building and the economic empowerment of families and adolescents exist in Colombia and are a critical part of prevention, they do not yet extend to all territories, particularly remote and underserved areas. In addition, widespread distrust in authorities often undermines uptake, resulting in low participation and unfilled quotas in state-led employability and social protection programmes. Strengthening territorial coverage, rebuilding trust in public institutions and ensuring that state services are accessible, credible and responsive are therefore necessary to reduce vulnerability and enhance the protective impact of these interventions. In conclusion, significant financial investment will be needed to make these recommendations a reality.

9. 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 Colombia are clustered under seven 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

Deeply rooted sociocultural norms, gender inequalities and violence-supportive attitudes enable tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children. Perpetrators exploit power imbalances and the normalization of sexual violence, while online sexual interactions are often treated as routine experiences that children are expected to manage alone. Victim-blaming, stigma and rigid gender norms discourage disclosure, leading many children to experience internalized shame and remain silent.

Relevant for: Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies (MinTIC); Ministry of National Education (MEN) and the regional and local Education Secretariats; Colombian Family Welfare Institute (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF); National Family Welfare System (SNBF), Ministry of Equality and Equity; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Justice and Law; Local Departments of Women's Affairs; Ombudsman's Office; Public Prosecutor's Office; technology and media industries; civil society.

Recommendation: Tackle gender inequality, violence-supportive norms and victim-blaming attitudes and behaviours that enable tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Addressing these harmful norms requires long-term social change, through education, media engagement and community dialogue, to shift attitudes away from judgment and towards empathy, justice and accountability for perpetrators. Evidence-informed social and behavioural change programmes, supported by awareness and education campaigns for all citizens, should be developed, implemented and evaluated to shift violence-supportive norms and eliminate victim-blaming attitudes.

These efforts should:

1.1 Embed comprehensive, age-appropriate education on sexuality, gender equality, power dynamics, respect and consent into school curricula. Teaching children and adolescents how to build positive and healthy relationships and set personal boundaries can help challenge harmful norms that normalize sexual violence and shift blame onto victims. Such education should equip children and adolescents to recognize manipulation, resist coercion and seek help confidently. It should provide comprehensive coverage of topics such as sexuality, bodily autonomy and integrity, and consent. This education should also transfer core concepts of bodily autonomy and consent to online interactions and elaborate on what abuse might look like in digital and physical spaces.

1.2 Develop and fund sustained, evidence-based public awareness campaigns that challenge the stigmatization of victims for all citizens. While such campaigns have been tried in the past, it might be more effective to employ a community dialogue model to address deeply rooted cultural issues and reach more remote areas. It is critical that these campaigns contextualize the issue in a way that makes it understandable and relatable for communities and families. For example, campaigns could leverage community radio, local media and mobile outreach, while adapting materials to cultural, linguistic and regional realities. National-level mass campaigns could be combined with localized narratives that reflect community concerns and lived experiences.

1.3 Ensure adults and children understand when and why certain acts are unacceptable or even illegal, for example by distinguishing a normal age-appropriate relationship from the beginning of abusive encounters such as grooming. This is needed to address young adults abusing children as well as reduce peer-on-peer violence in Colombia and includes situations where young people recruit other young people into situations of exploitation. Children should be made aware of when they can report cases to law enforcement and have a right to professional support.

1.4 Integrate policies and practices in schools to ensure students who have been subjected sexual exploitation or abuse and disclose it are supported, not blamed or stigmatized. Teachers and school counsellors need training to recognize signs of trauma, respond sensitively to disclosures and refer students to appropriate support services. Specific budgets should be allocated to violence prevention in schools to ensure it receives appropriate attention.

1.5 Collaborate with survivor advocates, youth groups and civil society to amplify positive stories of resilience and justice. Highlight examples of community and institutional accountability to normalize protection and help-seeking, not violence, and to reshape public understanding of abuse as a societal, not individual, failure. At the same time, media, social media and other public actors must be held accountable for discriminatory content or misinformation that targets specific populations.

1.6 Provide investment in shifting public perceptions and training front-line workers and law enforcement to recognize (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse for what it is: a crime and a violation of children's rights, regardless of the child's age.

1.7 Coordinate these efforts through a group of state institutions, to support more effective implementation with a stronger joint mandate, human and financial resources for preventing different forms of violence, including online.

INSIGHT 2

Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is driven by a complex interplay of structural and economic factors that perpetrators exploit to harm children. These need to be addressed by a multitude of different interventions at interpersonal, structural and socioeconomic levels.

Relevant for: Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF); Ministry of National Education (MEN); Labour Inspectors under the Ministry of Labour; Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism; National Family Welfare System (SNBF), Attorney General's Office; National Police of Colombia; technology and media industries; civil society.

Recommendation: Strengthen coordinated, multilevel prevention that addresses structural and economic conditions enabling tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse by supporting families and reducing the economic vulnerabilities that push children and families towards exploitative situations. This includes:

2.1 Strengthening parent and caregiver awareness and skills through community-based parenting programmes focused on safe and supportive communication, empathy and non-violent discipline; helping parents understand the consequences of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including that images and videos of their children can be permanently stored and shared online. While such programmes already exist in Colombia, improvements could be made in terms of the specific content that is taught, as well as efforts to reach parents and caregivers in all parts of the country, including remote areas. This relates to Recommendation 1.2, reflecting the need for campaigns and education to reach all areas of the country, leveraging community radio, local media and other localized approaches. These efforts to localize outreach need to be supported by financial investments.

2.2 Expanding social protection and family support services to reduce economic pressures that push families towards harmful behaviours; scaling up economic empowerment programmes for adolescents (skills training, youth employment initiatives and safe entrepreneurship opportunities). As before, these need to reach families and adolescents living in all parts of the country, which requires significant financial investment. Without financial investment reaching families, addressing economic vulnerabilities that push children and families towards exploitative situations may not be viable.

2.3 Implementing community awareness campaigns highlighting that exchanging sexual acts for money or gifts (even online) is exploitative and constitutes an illegal act by the perpetrator. This could be done by local youth campaigns or community social change programmes, as part of Recommendation 1.2.

2.4 Regulating and monitoring high-risk industries, including webcam studios, to prevent the recruitment and exploitation of minors; ensuring legal safeguards are strong enough to allow prosecution for this crime.

2.5 Increasing cross-border collaboration to dismantle international networks profiting from child sexual exploitation and strengthening coordination with anti-trafficking efforts, law enforcement and community-level prevention to address sexual exploitation spanning both online and offline environments.

2.6 Strengthening the capacity of law enforcement and the judicial system to conduct victim-and child-centred investigations of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This should include specialized protocols and methodologies developed by relevant government entities to manage large volumes of digital evidence, ensure effective case prioritization and avoid the revictimization of children throughout investigative and judicial processes. These efforts should be guided, among others, by existing INTERPOL resolutions on combating child sexual exploitation in the online environments and promoting victim-centred management of child sexual abuse material.[125]

125. Interpol General Assembly resolutions AG-2011-RES-05, AG-2011-RES-08 and GA-2022-90-RES-05.

INSIGHT 3

Findings highlight a critical gap in children's access to trusted support systems and information about available help. When children do not know who they can safely turn to, it not only delays intervention but also increases the risk of prolonged harm and emotional distress.

Relevant for: Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF); National Family Welfare System (SNBF); Ombudsman's Office; Ministry of Health; civil society.

Recommendation: Expand and strengthen child-centred, accessible reporting and support systems by increasing awareness and capacities of available services and providing clear, age-appropriate information that empowers children to recognize (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse and confidently seek help. In parallel, strengthen the capacity of social services and law enforcement to handle disclosures and reports of abuse across all age groups.

This can be done by:

3.1 Addressing the normalization of violence in the social services, law enforcement and justice sectors that sometimes lead to cases being minimized or dismissed; developing targeted training and updated protocols; and pushing for a child-centred approach that supports professionals to respond non-judgmentally to disclosures, while promoting survivor-centred messaging that validates children's feelings and encourages help-seeking. This is particularly important to enable disclosures by older adolescents.

3.2 Launching national and localized awareness campaigns teaching children how and where to report tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and ensuring that these reporting services exist, are well-resourced, properly staffed, child-centred and accessible through multiple channels (online/mobile, school-based and community-based), including anonymous and confidential options for children who fear repercussions at home. This could be implemented jointly with Recommendation 1.2 and information needs to be shared through community and local media and reach all parts of the country, with information appropriately tailored for each region.

3.3 Updating and harmonizing healthcare, justice and child protection protocols to include clear, practical indicators that enable professionals to identify physical, psychological and behavioural signs of abuse and promptly activate reporting and protection mechanisms. This should be complemented by a coordinated, nationwide dissemination strategy to ensure that reporting pathways are widely known, clearly understood and consistently applied, addressing the current lack of accessible, mass-level information on how and where to report suspected abuse, including tech-facilitated abuse.

3.4 Exploring partnerships with technology companies to strengthen and simplify online reporting pathways for children, making them more visible, intuitive, and child-centred; ensuring that clear, age-appropriate help-seeking information on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is accessible on the digital platforms children use. Where partnership approaches face challenges, consider appropriate policy or regulatory options to encourage the availability of effective and user-friendly reporting mechanisms.

3.5 Integrating digital safety and reporting guidance into school curricula through practical, scenario-based learning, supported by age-appropriate materials (such as videos, posters), while ensuring that reporting information is visible in schools and communities and that school-based peer support programmes equip children to respond safely and refer peers for help. Ensure teachers and school councillors themselves are actively engaged in these efforts and provide listening spaces for early prevention.

3.6 Supporting caregivers, particularly mothers and female caregivers, through community-based programmes that build confidence in responding to disclosures, provide positive parenting and communication skills, and raise awareness of digital risks, grooming tactics and how to build trust with children.

3.7 Implementing stigma-reduction campaigns emphasizing that responsibility lies with the perpetrator and not the child, and ensuring that caregivers, teachers and peers are trained to respond non-judgmentally to disclosures while promoting survivor-centred messaging that validates children's feelings and encourages help-seeking.

INSIGHT 4

The design of social media and other platforms, where safeguards are limited and identity verification is weak, makes it easier for perpetrators to identify, contact, groom and exploit children. As a result, perpetrators and criminal networks have recognized social media as a powerful tool for recruiting children into situations of commercial exploitation. Gaps in legislation, or in its enforcement, make it difficult to hold social media platforms accountable for enabling child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Relevant for: Technology industry, social media platforms; Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies (MinTIC); the Communications Regulation Commission; Superintendency of Industry and Commerce (SIC); Attorney General's Office; National Police of Colombia.

Recommendation: Enhance regulation and accountability of online platforms by enforcing stronger legal obligations, improving detection and reporting mechanisms, and ensuring that companies take proactive responsibility for safeguarding children online. While this is a global problem and many platforms fall under foreign jurisdictions, a starting point for Colombia could be to:

4.1 Amend national legislation to mandate notice-and-takedown mechanisms, child-friendly reporting channels, timely removal of harmful content and transparent disclosure of moderation efforts, while introducing serious penalties for non-compliance with child protection standards and requiring platforms to provide clear, child-friendly safety guidance on blocking, reporting and privacy settings. If effectively adopted and implemented, the framework envisioned by the draft implementing decree of the Law establishing

provisions for the development of healthy and safe digital environments for children and adolescents nationwide, could significantly strengthen the capacity of Colombia to operationalize platform accountability and shift from reactive safeguards to systemic child protection online.

4.2 Hold online platforms fully accountable for protecting child users by requiring them to strengthen safeguards where risky interactions occur, enhance content moderation, enforce stronger privacy controls, and proactively detect and remove harmful content, while ensuring these measures form part of a broader system of interventions that makes offending more difficult and reduces structural failures across the digital ecosystem. This could be achieved by moving forward with a draft resolution currently coordinated by MinTIC and the Communications Regulation Commission seeking regulatory powers to oblige platforms to address harmful online content and the risks it poses to children, as well as the draft implementing decree of the Law establishing provisions for the development of healthy and safe digital environments for children and adolescents nationwide.

4.3 Implement platform-integrated child protection safeguards within product design, such as human and algorithmic moderation, detection tools and default privacy settings for children. Require regular child-rights impact assessments, transparency reporting and independent audits of child protection practices to ensure continuous improvement and accountability.

4.4 Require companies to establish dedicated 24/7 child safety teams able to respond rapidly to reports, coordinate with law enforcement and disrupt offender networks, while simultaneously supporting efforts that help children and parents understand digital risks, recognize signs of abusive interactions and navigate online platforms safely.

INSIGHT 5

Children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse experience severe and lasting harm that requires specialized, child-centred care. Shame, self-blame and victim-blaming attitudes exacerbate trauma and contribute to serious mental health risks, including anxiety, self-harm and suicide, as well as long-term relational difficulties. Yet gaps in service provision persist, as front-line workers may overlook physical and psychological impacts and the ongoing harm caused by the circulation of abusive material, while stigma and misconceptions risk revictimizing children and disengaging caregivers. Financial resources are scarce, which undermines efforts to strengthen care and support for children in Colombia.

Relevant for: Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF); Ministry of National Education (MEN); Ministry of Finance and Public Credit; National Superintendency of Health; National Police of Colombia; National Family Welfare System; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Justice and Law.

Recommendation: Provide a child-centred, trauma-informed response with standardized protocols, integrated services and trained professionals to ensure effective care for tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse by:

5.1 Increasing and ring-fencing financial investment for specialized, child-centred care and support services for children affected by all forms of abuse; allocating dedicated funding to integrate trauma-informed psychosocial support into all child protection services; ensuring specific provisions for responding

to disclosures; and treating impacts of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, while offering counselling services and peer support groups that address self-blame, shame, social withdrawal and other common trauma responses. Adequate and predictable financing is essential to ensure comprehensive, continuous and high-quality care, prevent revictimization and mitigate severe mental health risks, including self-harm and suicide.

5.2 Engaging caregivers in supportive, non-judgmental ways through guidance and training that helps them recognize warning signs, respond constructively to disclosures, be aware of reporting pathways, stay involved in the child's recovery and avoid minimizing tech-facilitated abuse, reinforcing stigma, shame or blame.

5.3 Conducting national capacity-building programmes for all child protection actors – including police, social workers and health professionals – on the risks, dynamics and impacts of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, supported by institutional investment in personnel, resourcing and targeted training so that cases involving children are handled promptly and aligned with child protection standards. This links to Recommendation 1.2, 2.1 and 3.3.

5.4 Developing and implementing procedures tailored to the specificities of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse across unified service provision pathways; ensuring all service providers receive standardized training for consistent case management; integrating monitoring and evaluation systems to assess service effectiveness; and coordinating multisectoral responses so that legal, medical and psychosocial needs are addressed comprehensively.

INSIGHT 6

Responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are often weakened by the minimization of certain crimes, limited understanding among caregivers and justice professionals, and legal ambiguities, resulting in cases being de-prioritized or inadequately addressed. Power imbalances, economic vulnerability and the involvement of organized criminal networks further discourage reporting, as children, families and professionals face risks of intimidation, retaliation or coercion to withdraw complaints. Within the justice process itself, exposure to perpetrators, procedural barriers, poor coordination and a shortage of trained personnel can revictimize children, delay justice, erode trust in institutions and allow perpetrators to operate with impunity.

Relevant for: Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF); Legal Commission for Children and Adolescents at the Congress of the Republic of Colombia; Inter-Institutional Committee for the Protection of Children and Adolescents; Attorney General's Office; Ombudsman's Office.

Recommendation: Establish a child-centred system that combines clear legal frameworks, trauma-informed justice, victim protection and strengthened capacity to prevent, investigate and prosecute tech-facilitated sexual abuse. Implementation should prioritize historically underserved and/or high-risk territories, including border regions and the Amazon, and follow a 'do no harm' principle, adapting protection and justice strategies to the specific dynamics and needs of each community. Specific measures include:

6.1 Strengthening the capacity of the justice sector to address all forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This includes developing standardized case-prioritization guidelines so that these offences are treated as seriously as in-person abuse, and conducting awareness and capacity-building programmes for law enforcement and justice personnel on the seriousness, dynamics and impacts of these crimes.

6.2 Enhancing protection measures and multisectoral coordination to safeguard children, families and professionals by implementing measures such as safe housing, witness protection and confidential reporting mechanisms; developing economic support programmes to reduce vulnerability to extortion or financial inducements; strengthening law enforcement collaboration to monitor risks posed by criminal networks; and training professionals to recognize intimidation and coercion tactics.

6.3 Establishing child-centred and trauma-informed justice pathways that ensure safety, dignity and non-retraumatization. This includes:

a) Coordination across justice, social services, health and law enforcement to minimize repeated exposure for children to potentially re victimizing processes and ensure consistent adherence to child protection standards. This could be achieved by establishing a national Barnahus model to provide a single, child-centred and trauma-informed space for the protection, assessment and judicial processing of children subjected to sexual exploitation and/or abuse, including when facilitated by technology. This effort could be led by the Specialized Unit for Children and Adolescents of the Attorney General's Office, in coordination with the ICBF.

b) Ensuring the implementation of safeguards to avoid contact between children and perpetrators, and integrating trauma-informed practices across interviews, investigations and courtroom procedures.

c) Justice personnel receiving training to recognize their own biases, including harmful gender norms and victim-blaming attitudes.

d) Mandatory risk assessments, protective protocols, clear procedures, and systematic monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure child and family safety throughout proceedings.

e) Adopting differential and intercultural approaches, guaranteeing that children and adolescents from Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities can access justice in ways that respect their cultural and territorial contexts.

6.4 Strengthening institutional capacity, staffing and accountability across the child protection and justice sectors, through increased investment in specialized child protection units within the police, judiciary and social services; recruiting and training personnel with expertise in tech-facilitated abuse, digital investigations and child-centred practices; streamlining case-management systems to reduce delays and improve efficiency; and introducing performance monitoring to ensure timely, effective responses. Psychosocial support for professionals should be provided to prevent burnout and to maintain high-quality service delivery.

INSIGHT 7

The Colombian legal framework has some important gaps in addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, with key forms such as online grooming and sexual extortion inadequately criminalized. Outdated terminology, along with misinterpretations of the relevance of the age of sexual consent weaken protections, as abuse may not be recognized as exploitation and harm that cannot be legitimized by consent, enabling perpetrator manipulation and limiting children's access to justice. In addition, the Colombian legal framework is not sufficiently future-proofed to keep pace with rapid technological developments. This including emerging forms of abuse, such as child sexual abuse material that is generated using artificial intelligence, which are excluded from existing legislation. To ensure more effective, standardized and forward-looking prosecution of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia, legislative reform should establish periodic review mechanisms, allowing the law to remain adaptable to new technologies, evolving abuse modalities and emerging digital environments.

Relevant for: Congress of the Republic of Colombia; Ministry of Justice and Law.

Recommendation: Improve the legislative framework to enable more effective and standardized prosecution of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia. A package of legislative reforms to align with international standards could include:

7.1 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 also apply when the abuse is livestreamed online and materials are not downloaded or stored. Ensure that the offence covers both the use of children for such purposes and access to livestreamed abuse.

7.2 Adopting legal provisions for the explicit criminalization of tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children with a definition that reflects its unique dynamics, including the coercive use of self-generated sexual material to extort money or sexual acts from a child.

7.3 Adopting legislation criminalizing online grooming behaviours, including early-stage manipulation and contact with children for sexual exploitation and abuse online and/or in person, in line with international standards. This would close existing legal gaps that currently allow impunity for harmful pre-offence grooming activities.

7.4 Amending the Criminal Code's definition of child sexual abuse material to explicitly include digitally generated content, including material that is generated using artificial intelligence. The revised definition should make clear that any material that appears to depict children qualifies as child sexual abuse material.

7.5 Amending legislation to criminalize intentional access to or viewing of child sexual abuse material, even when it is not downloaded or stored. This would close existing loopholes that enable individuals to intentionally seek out such material without consequences, thereby strengthening accountability and reducing demand.

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11. ANNEX: DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

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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.[126]

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.[127]

Child sexual abuse material, including child sexual abuse material generated using artificial intelligence: 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.[128]

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.[129]

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.[130]

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.[131]

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.[132]

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.[133]

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

126. 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), pp. 31–34. Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Second-Edition-Terminology-Guidelines-final.pdf.
127. Ibid., pp. 39–44.
128. Ibid., p. 63.
129. Ibid., p. 86.
130. Ibid., p. 95.
131. Ibid., pp. 97–98.
132. Ibid., pp. 36–38.
133. Ibid., p. 160.