

DISRUPTING HARM IN SERBIA

Evidence on technology-facilitated
child sexual exploitation and abuse



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Content warning:

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

This unique partnership uses a multidisciplinary approach to enhance our collective understanding of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and the national response to these forms of violence against children. A combined investment of 15 million USD has 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 Serbia, from 2023 onwards.

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

What is technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

The Disrupting Harm project uses the term 'technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse' to refer to situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point during the sexual exploitation or abuse of a child.¹ This type of violence is sometimes referred to as 'online' child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the term 'technology-facilitated' is now preferred² to convey that this violence against children does not only occur in online spaces; it can occur fully online, or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between perpetrators and children.

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

Key findings

Technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Serbia

- According to Disrupting Harm survey data, 1 in 10 internet-using children in Serbia aged 12–17 was subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to the survey.
- Over 35 per cent of the children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were subjected to more than one form.
- Survey findings indicate that the most common forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that children aged 12–17 were subjected to, were unwanted exposure to sexual images, followed by abusive, exploitative or non-consensual acts involving children's sexual content. Six per cent of children reported receiving unwanted sexual content and 4 per cent responded that they were asked to share an image or video of their private parts when they did not want to, in the year prior to being surveyed.
- Survey data further show that over 75 per cent of reported instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse took place, at least in part, through social media (N=112). The most common platforms where tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse took place were Instagram, followed by Viber, WhatsApp, Snapchat and Facebook.

Perpetrators of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- According to survey findings from children aged 12–17, over 50 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse involved someone the child knew (N=78).
- In 30 per cent of instances, the perpetrator was a friend or acquaintance, and in 21 per cent, a current or former romantic partner or crush.

¹ The report uses the terms 'technology-facilitated' and 'tech-facilitated' interchangeably.

² Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse: Second Edition](#), ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2025.

- Interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood and front-line workers offered additional insight, describing abuse within existing peer relationships (romantic and/or friendships), often marked by pressure, bullying, manipulation or control.
- In 37 per cent of instances captured by the survey, the perpetrator was someone under the age of 18 (N=55), and in 11 per cent of cases, the perpetrator was an adult (N=93).

Intersectionality and abuse

- Thirteen per cent of girls (N=58) and 7 per cent of boys (N=32) aged 12–17 reported being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse in the year prior to the survey. Interviews further revealed how gender norms shape the context and consequences of abuse as well as patterns of disclosure and reporting.
- Victim-blaming attitudes were frequently described by professionals and young people, particularly in relation to girls, reflecting harmful beliefs that women and girls are responsible for sexualized attention or abuse.
- Interviews also suggested that boys may face distinct barriers to speaking about abuse due to shame linked to norms around masculinity. Stigma related to sexuality and restrictive gender norms can create additional obstacles to disclosure.
- Fifty per cent of 12–17-year-olds surveyed reported receiving no sexuality education,³ formal or informal (N=451). While education alone cannot prevent tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, it can play a critical role in helping children understand consent, recognize abusive behaviours and feel empowered to set boundaries.
- The children surveyed most commonly reported first meeting the perpetrator at school (one out of three instances among the 90 children), illustrating how digital interactions are embedded within children's everyday social worlds rather than occurring in isolation.

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

- Forty-three per cent of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse reported by children aged 12–17 in the year prior to being surveyed were not disclosed to anyone (N=60).
- Fewer than 5 per cent of disclosures in the survey were made through formal channels – a social worker, helpline or the police (N=8) – according to the survey.
- The most common reason for non-disclosure reported by children in the survey was that they did not think the abuse was serious enough to disclose (33 per cent, N=31). This was followed by not wanting anyone to know about what had happened (18 per cent, N=17) and feeling embarrassed (14 per cent, N=13).
- Interviews further highlighted how the normalization of certain forms of abusive behaviours, alongside shame, stigma and self-blame, can discourage disclosure.
- Young people described not wanting their parents to find out, fearing reactions of shame, punishment or judgment. They also expressed concern about how peers might respond, including fears of being blamed, bullied, socially rejected or perceived differently.
- Among children who did disclose, the most common recipient was a friend (30 per cent, N=55), followed by the child's mother or another female caregiver (13 per cent, N=24).
- In Serbia, a child under the age of 18 generally gives a statement to the police in the presence of a parent or legal guardian. Exceptions may apply based on internal regulations where the parent or guardian is suspected of committing the offence or where their presence could hinder the interview. Given the stigma and fear surrounding sexual abuse identified in both the survey and interview findings, despite these exceptions, this legal requirement may represent a direct barrier to reporting, particularly in cases where children fear parental involvement or where abuse occurs within the family.

³ This term is used as it mirrors the language used in the survey.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Consultations with law enforcement pointed to the need to improve access to specialized training for personnel across the country, invest in decentralized infrastructure and inter-agency coordination, and provide structured mental health support for officers.

Criminalization of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- The Serbian legal framework on child sexual exploitation and abuse provides a solid basis for protection and offers opportunities for further developments in response to evolving online risks.
- Serbian law criminalizes a range of criminal conduct related to child sexual abuse material, including possession without intent to distribute. Accessing such material through information technologies with no intent to further distribute is also criminalized, although it carries only light custodial penalties or a fine.
- The Criminal Code currently defines child sexual abuse material primarily in terms of visual representations, which leaves scope for expanding protection to include non-visual materials, such as audio-only content.
- Serbian law still uses the term “*child pornography*” to refer to child sexual abuse material. This outdated terminology can imply that such images or recordings are a form of pornography, thereby failing to reflect their abusive nature.
- As the age of criminal responsibility is set at 14, children aged 14–17 could potentially face prosecution for voluntarily creating or sharing their own sexual content despite such acts arising from sexual exploration.
- The law does not explicitly criminalize the livestreaming of child sexual abuse, nor does it clarify whether the offence of recruiting, causing or coercing a child to participate in “*pornographic performances*” extends to such conduct.
- While Serbian law criminalizes online grooming of children for sexual purposes, the offence is contingent on the occurrence of a physical meeting, thereby excluding conduct that results in exploitation and/or abuse occurring exclusively online.
- Despite the data suggesting that older adolescents may be particularly exposed to certain forms of abuse, penalties for online grooming and exposure to pornographic content are lower when the child is aged 14–17, resulting in uneven legal protection for older children.
- Sexual extortion of children is not explicitly criminalized and existing provisions on coercion, stalking, extortion, blackmail or abuse of trust fail to specifically cover offences committed through information and communication technologies or targeting children.

Help- and support-seeking by children, and service provision

- Interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse as children indicate that places where children can seek help or services may be perceived as inaccessible, unavailable or even invisible.
- In interviews with young people, schools often emerged as a central institution for seeking help outside their social network. Yet findings indicate that not all school staff have the capacity, understanding or confidence to identify and respond effectively to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Although the Law on Social Protection lists children subjected to abuse, neglect and exploitation as entitled to social care, it provides no indication of specialized or targeted services for children who have been subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Front-line workers from both the public sector and civil society identified a lack of specialized psychosocial support services for children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly outside of the capital.

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

- The child-centred justice framework in Serbia includes closed hearings and robust privacy safeguards, specialized justice professionals for cases involving child victims of crime and access to free legal aid, as well as limited and recorded forensic interviews conducted by qualified experts to prevent revictimization.
- Child victims of crime cannot undertake procedural actions without a legal guardian. While a temporary guardian may be appointed where parental involvement is contrary to the child's best interests, in practice interviews with front-line workers indicate that this measure is applied mainly in cases where the child is without parental care or where a parent is the suspected perpetrator.
- Serbian law imposes no obligation on prosecutors and courts to communicate victims' rights in a child-sensitive manner. Interviews suggested that children's access to information on their rights and procedural developments is not consistent in practice.

- Prolonged proceedings can result in the replacement of judges during trial, leading to repeated questioning of child victims of crime despite safeguards intended to limit multiple interviews.
- Interviews indicated that recording of forensic interviews is inconsistently implemented due to limited resources and equipment, particularly the lack of suitably equipped rooms for audiovisual testimony outside major cities, as well as a preference among some professionals for direct questioning of the child.
- Prohibiting confrontation between child victims of crime and alleged perpetrators is left to judicial discretion, raising concerns about inconsistent application.

This report ends with a set of data-driven recommendations based on its key findings. They include action to be taken by key actors across government, law enforcement, justice and social services sectors, by communities, schools and families, and by digital platforms and service providers. These are too detailed to be recounted in the executive summary, but can be found on [page 84](#) 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 Serbia. The quantitative data provide an understanding of the scope of this issue among children in Serbia. 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. They also offer important context to understand the sexual exploitation and abuse that children face and how families and communities react to it.

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

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

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

Legal and policy analysis

The analysis of national legal and policy frameworks was aimed at identifying legal gaps, assessing compliance with international obligations, and highlighting strengths and weaknesses in national responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The legal and policy analysis was developed using a detailed checklist consisting of over 140 items, ensuring consistency across countries analysed. The tool, based on international legal standards and best practices, evaluates areas such as legal definitions, criminalization, jurisdiction, child-centred justice, private sector responsibilities and child protection policies.

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

The draft analysis underwent internal and external expert reviews, including review by the ECPAT network's national coalition of civil society partners 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/guardians

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

were defined as those who had used the internet in the three months prior to the survey, in line with the threshold set by the International Telecommunications Union.⁴

To achieve a nationally representative random sample of 12–17-year-old internet users, the survey used random probability sampling with national coverage. In Serbia, the fieldwork coverage was 99 per cent. Remote parts of the country that were not easily accessible for field teams were excluded, accounting for 0.6 per cent of the population. ‘Coverage’ is defined as the proportion of the total population that had a chance of being included in the survey sample – meaning that the fieldwork would cover the area where they live if sampled. Data collection took place from April to July 2024.

The sampling followed a three-stage random probability clustered sample design. The response rate in Serbia was 49 per cent, and the sample achieved included 1,000 children and 1,000 of their parents/guardians.

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

Age and gender distribution of child sample

12–14 years	52%
15–17 years	45%
Girls	51%
Boys	49%

Age and gender distribution of parent/guardian sample

Under 40 years	30%
Over 40 years	70%
Women	83%
Men	17%
Other	0%

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

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

This research activity aimed to include the voices of children and young people (16–24 years) who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse during childhood.⁵ Children and young people who were engaged in ongoing justice proceedings were not included in the study. Trauma-informed research protocols were designed and adapted in consultation with research and implementation partners in Serbia. Two main engagement strategies were developed to connect children and young people with clinical researchers to participate in an interview:

1. Professional networks: Service providers were contacted and asked to share information about the opportunity to participate in the study with young people (aged 16–24) within their networks. In Serbia this included child protection institutions (Centres for Social Work and other institutions working in child and social protection), health institutions (community health centres and institutions providing psychiatric care) and the education system, as well as civil society organizations providing services. Four participants were recruited this way.
2. Digital networks: Social media posts providing information about the study and the opportunity for young people (aged 18–24) to participate in an interview were published via the Facebook and Instagram accounts of Psychological Innovation Network (PIN), the Serbian research partner. Individuals and organizations working with children and young people were also requested to share the social media posts within their networks, and posters were developed and distributed to schools and youth organizations. Five participants were recruited through these methods.

⁴ International Telecommunications Union (ITU), *Manual for Measuring ICT Access and Use by Households and Individuals, 2020 edition* (ITU, Geneva, 2020). Available at: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/manual/ITUMannualHouseholds2020_E.pdf.

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

METHODS

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

Trauma-informed interviews were conducted with nine young people. The interviews were conducted by two clinical researchers with training in trauma-informed interviewing between May and August 2024. The nine participants were aged between 18 and 24, seven were female and two were male.

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

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

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

Interviews with front-line workers

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

The population of interest for the study was front-line workers in Serbia who provide support or essential services directly to individuals who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Front-line workers were included in the study if their case or patient load over the last 12 months included at least one child or young person who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse while under the age of 18. Front-line workers were only invited to participate if they were able to talk to the researchers about a de-identified case.

Trained researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 front-line workers. The sample included social workers and case managers at the Centres for Social Work and in civil society organizations, psychologists and psychotherapists from the health care sector and victim support workers from statutory services. The sample further included professionals in different roles (primarily case managers and coordinators) from civil society organizations working in areas intersecting with (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse and providing direct services to children and families.

Interviews were conducted between May and August 2024. Of the 15 front-line workers interviewed, 13 were women and two were men. Participants were primarily based in Belgrade, with a few participants from locations in the north of Serbia.

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

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

Interviews with justice professionals

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

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

Trained researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 professionals from the justice system, independent legal practices and civil society organizations. Professionals worked as judges, prosecutors, lawyers, advocates and criminal investigators, as well as in roles as coordinators or managers.

Interviews were conducted between May and August 2024. Of the 14 justice professionals interviewed, 12 were women and two were men. Participants were primarily based in Belgrade.

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

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

Interviews with national law enforcement

INTERPOL's Crimes Against Children Unit conducts field-based assessments in collaboration with each member country's National Central Bureau. INTERPOL's team engaged directly with national law enforcement agencies in Belgrade, as well as child protection units, and trusted civil society partners and non-governmental organizations. The aim was to understand the operational realities of investigating and responding to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. These engagements focused on identifying practical challenges: gaps in resources, limitations in investigative capacity and barriers to international cooperation. The findings inform the targeted support INTERPOL provides, which could include access to specialized training, analytical tools and coordinated operational assistance. While this report includes INTERPOL's aggregated, non-sensitive findings, the full scope of its observations and conclusions (including detailed operational recommendations and tailored capacity-building measures) are shared exclusively with national authorities, ensuring the integrity of ongoing investigations.

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

Limitations and understanding the data

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

The **household survey** was conducted in private households with 12–17-year-old internet users. The survey was designed to be nationally representative of this group of children only, as opposed to all children in Serbia. The survey is cross-sectional, not longitudinal, meaning that the data capture a single moment in time in the lives of the 1,000 children surveyed. While the Disrupting Harm data highlight relationships between sexual abuse and other factors in children's lives, it is not possible to determine cause and effect based on these survey data alone.

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

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

METHODS

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

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

While convenience, purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit professionals, the aim was to have a balanced representation across key statutory institutions. It should be noted that insights on the work of the Centre for Social Work are more limited due to delays in obtaining the approvals required.

Ethical approval

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

In Serbia, while several ethics review boards exist, no appropriate board was identified to review this particular study. UNICEF Innocenti therefore sought a review by subject matter experts. Despite identifying multiple experts, feedback was only received from one expert. A technical committee consisting of officials from the Government and non-governmental organizations was also established to oversee and provide guidance for the research implementation.

National consultation

A national consultation was held in November 2025 with representatives from relevant line ministries, the judiciary and civil society in Serbia in order to receive input on the Disrupting Harm findings and recommendations, to enhance their relevance for the Serbian context. Additional feedback on draft recommendations was also received in writing from civil society organizations.

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

Perpetrators may use digital platforms to manipulate or threaten children they already know, or to contact children not previously known to them. Technology facilitates sexual exploitation and abuse in different ways: in some cases, it remains confined to the digital realm; in others, it extends abuse that is already taking place in person. And in other instances, abuse begins online and later progresses into physical contact.

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

Being aware of these nuances is important when reading this report. Without considering the context in which violence occurs, there is a risk of oversimplifying the issue. Looking at individual cases or statistics alone can risk overlooking the societal forces that enable sexual exploitation and abuse, or allow it to continue undisclosed and unreported. What children share in surveys and interviews represents what they felt comfortable with disclosing at that point in time, meaning 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 Serbia. It adds much-needed nuance and understanding to this issue, grounded in the experiences of children and young people, and the professionals working to support them.

INTERNET USE IN SERBIA

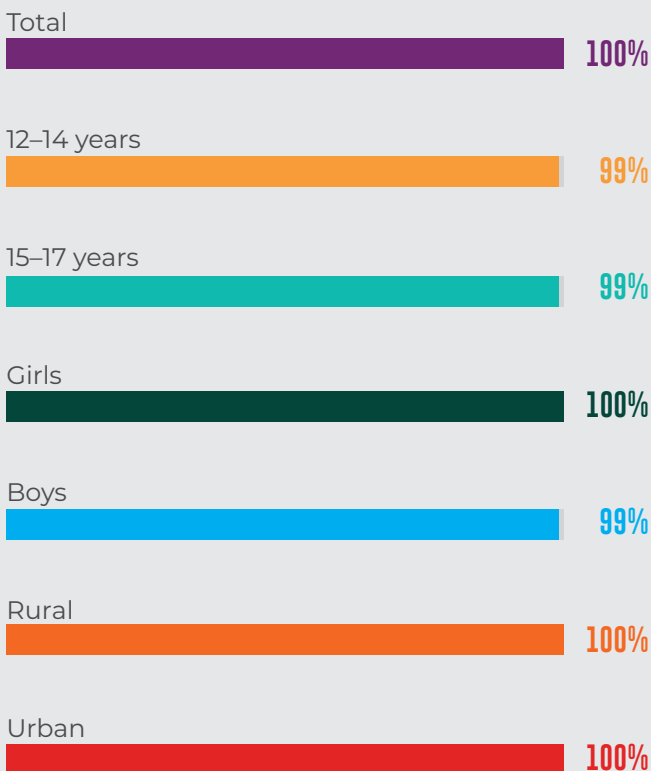
The Disrupting Harm project collected key indicators on children's internet use via the household survey. This was intended to complement available studies and provide up-to-date data.

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

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

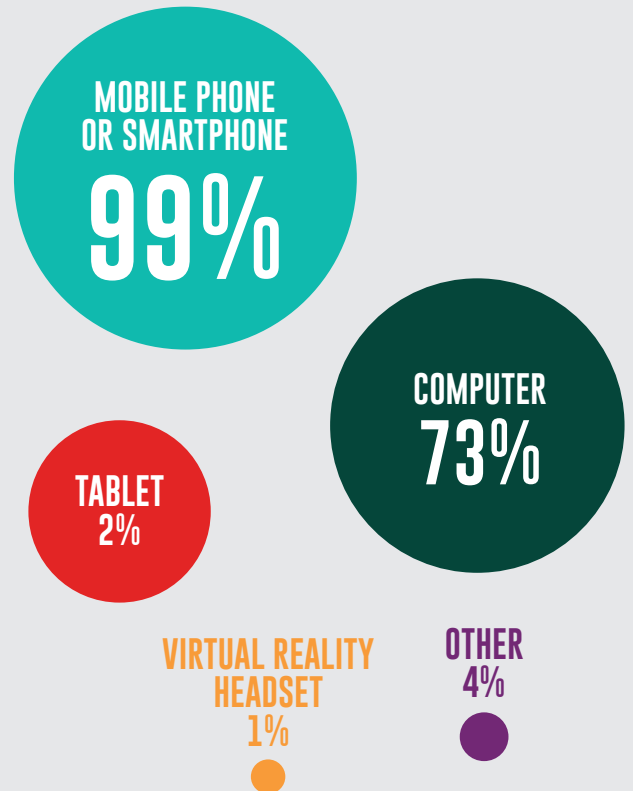
Any effort at prevention must therefore look beyond what children are (or ought to be) doing online; not doing so often results in victim-blaming or treating children as complicit in the exploitation and abuse they have been subjected to, as evidenced in this report. Instead, prevention requires a multi-pronged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



Base: 1,089 households.

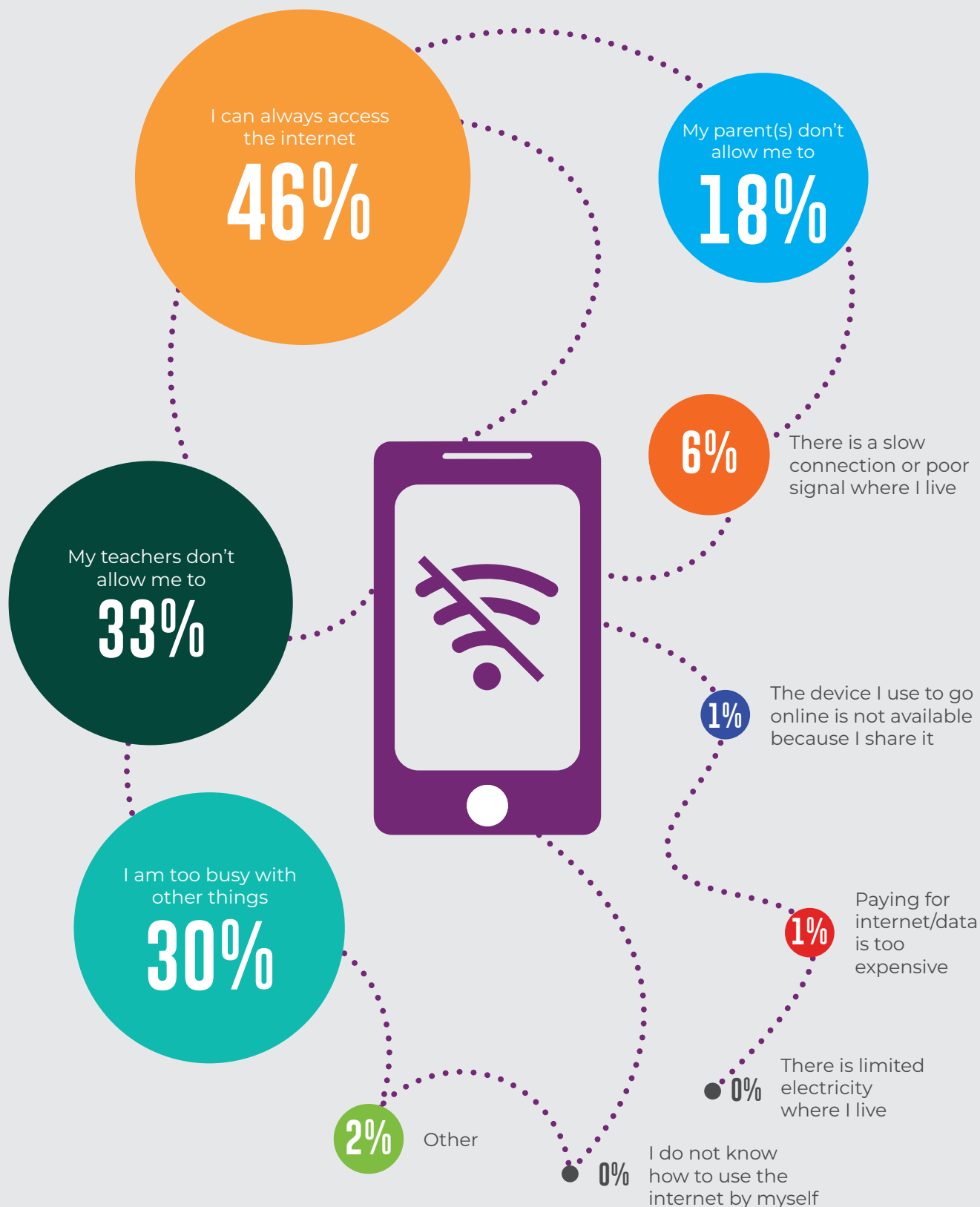
MOST POPULAR DEVICES TO ACCESS THE INTERNET AMONG 12–17-YEAR-OLDS



Base: 1,000 internet-using children.

INTERNET USE IN SERBIA

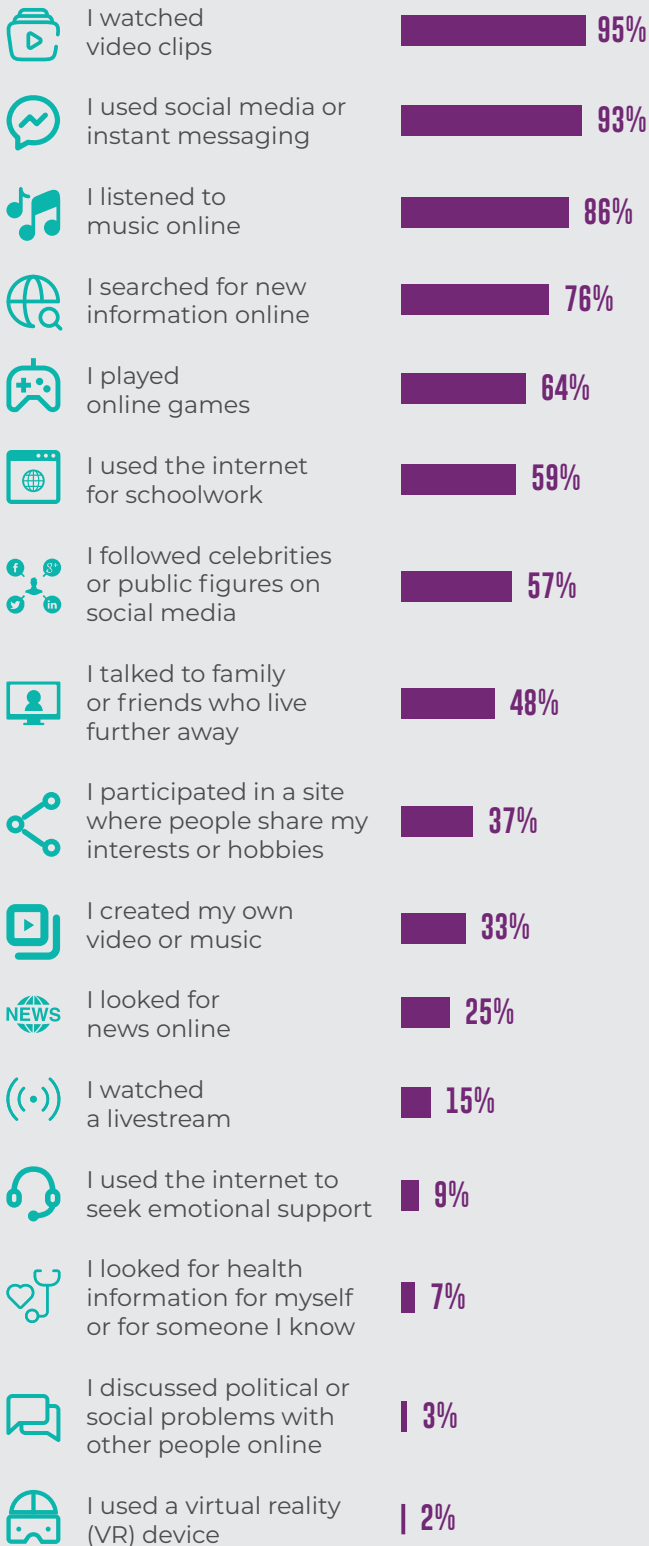
BARRIERS TO INTERNET ACCESS AMONG INTERNET-USING 12-17-YEAR-OLDS



Base: 1,000 internet-using children.

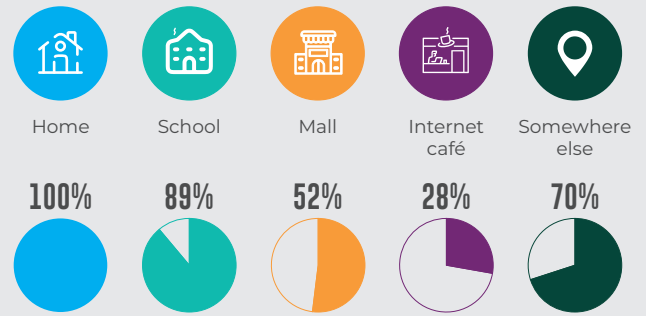
INTERNET USE IN SERBIA

ACTIVITIES CHILDREN ENGAGE IN ONLINE AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK



Base: 1,000 internet-using children.

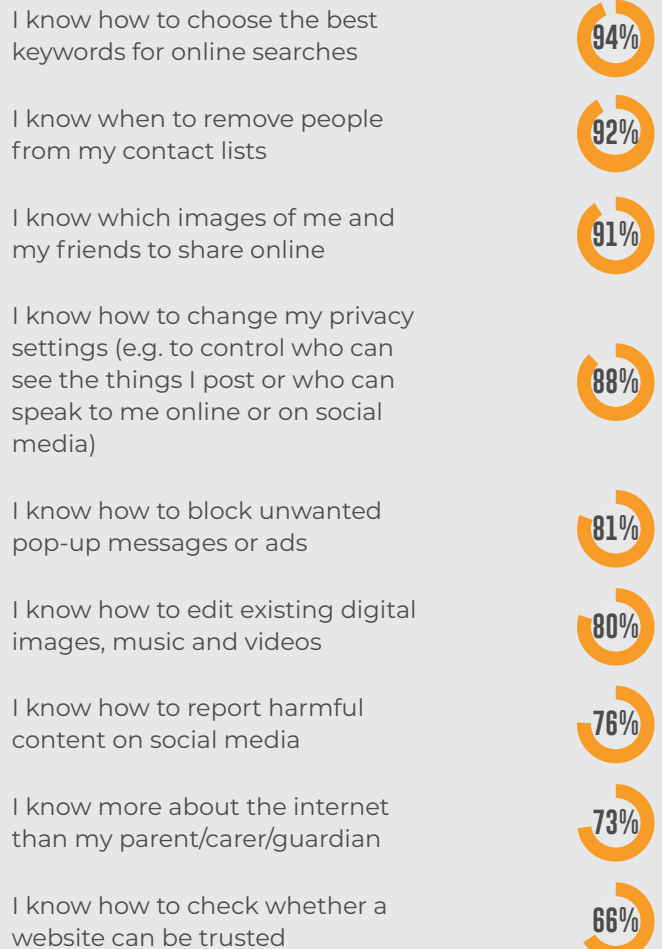
MOST POPULAR PLACES TO GO ONLINE AMONG INTERNET-USING CHILDREN AGED 12–17*



Base: 1,000 internet-using children.

*Multiple-choice question.

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

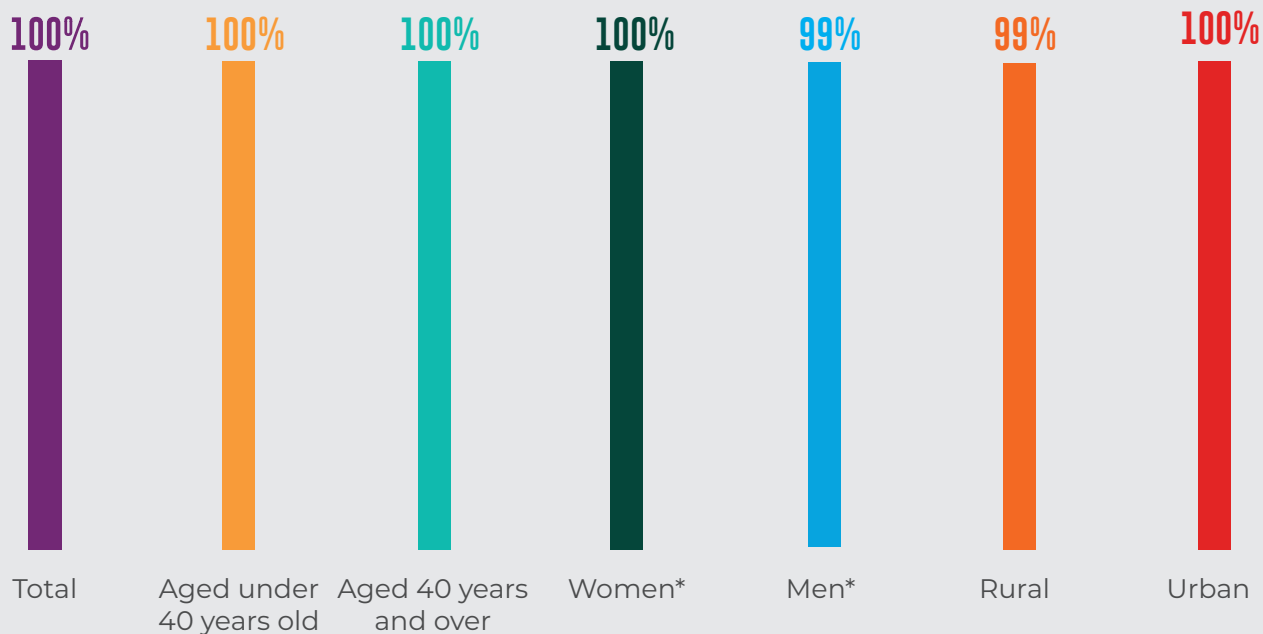


Base: 1,000 internet-using children.

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

INTERNET USE IN SERBIA

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



Base: 1,000 parents of internet-using 12–17-year-old children.

* The parents' sample has a low proportion of men (17 per cent). These results should be interpreted with caution.

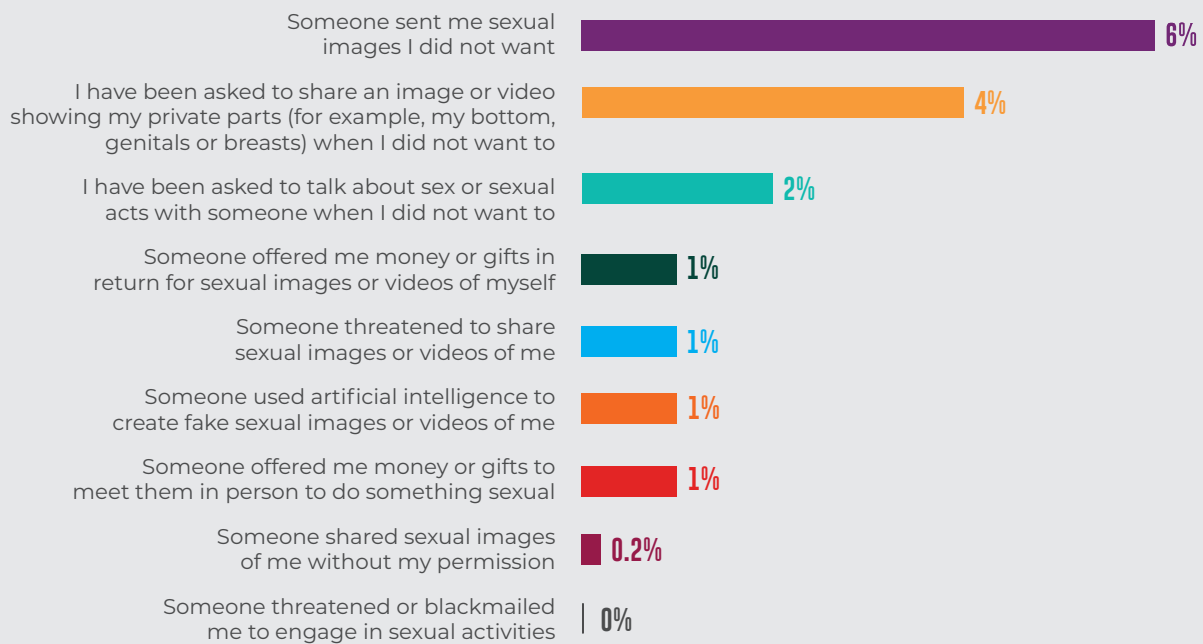
1. TECHNOLOGY- FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN SERBIA



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

Based on the household survey, 10 per cent of internet-using children surveyed in Serbia 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 Serbia, this represents an estimated 36,000 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: 1,000 internet-using children aged 12–17 in Serbia.

This section presents findings from the household survey with 1,000 children aged 12–17 and 1,000 parents or guardians, as well as from interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children, front-line workers and justice professionals. It explores the nature and scope of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, detailing the different forms it can take, the proportion of those affected and the circumstances in which they occur.

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

social stigma around sexual abuse. In such an environment, many children may not feel safe or supported enough to disclose or report the abuse they were subjected to.

The Disrupting Harm household survey measured children's exposure to nine different forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (see *table above*). The survey data reveal that nearly 1 in 10 children aged 12–17 (10 per cent) was subjected to at least one measured form of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed (N=90).

Over 35 per cent of the 90 children aged 12–17 who reported being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year were subjected to more than one form of abuse (N=32). In total, the survey captured 148 instances of abuse among 90 children, forming the foundation for many of the statistics presented in this report.

1.1 RECEIVING UNWANTED SEXUAL CONTENT

The most frequently reported form of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse among children in Serbia was being sent sexual images when they did not want them. According to the survey, 6 per cent of children aged 12–17 in Serbia were subjected to this in the past year alone (N=57).

While this form of abuse may often be associated with strangers online, findings from the survey challenge this assumption. In nearly 40 per cent of the instances reported by the children surveyed aged 12–17, the sexual images were sent by someone the child already knew: a friend or acquaintance under the age of 18 (N=22). In 25 per cent of instances, the sexual images were sent by a stranger (N=14).

Irrespective of whether the sender is known to the child or not, such conduct amounts to a criminal offence under the Serbian Criminal Code, which prohibits showing, distributing, or otherwise making available “*pornographic content*” – including images, texts or performances – to a child.⁶ The applicable penalty depends on the child’s age; if the child is under 14, the offence carries a prison sentence of six months to three years;⁷ if the child is aged 14 or older, the offence is punishable by a fine or imprisonment of up to six months.⁸

In interviews, young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood described receiving unwanted sexual content both from peers and people unknown to them. A young woman shared how, as a child, she was repeatedly sent sexual images without warning – sometimes by people she knew and sometimes by strangers. Over time, she became desensitized to this kind of contact. She explained:

“

A boy actually, whom I knew for a long time, really, really long time, (...) we were talking [chatting online] normally as friends and then he just said, ‘Since you have a boyfriend and you don’t want to be my girlfriend’ (...) ‘I would love to be your slave’, and... then he started to send me some pictures and videos from porn sites. (YP)

”

Describing other instances when she received unwanted sexual images from strangers, she said:

“

I don’t know, as a joke, I went on dating sites with friends (...), and it happened that we met someone who might be okay, who seems... maybe not to meet that person...but like enough to give our Instagram or some other close contact besides the dating site. And then we make some kind of contact and that’s all, and then it just happens that this person either asks for a picture or sends a picture suddenly, without our consent, just sends a picture, like ‘Open the picture’. (YP)

”

Similar situations were shared by other young people participating in interviews. These incidents often lacked the grooming behaviours seen in other forms of abuse: there was no false identity, no attempts to build a relationship and no expressed interest in further contact. While the motivation of the perpetrators cannot be fully understood from the data, it appears that the goal was unsolicited distribution of sexual content, rather than manipulation or further abuse.

⁶ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), art. 185(1).

⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 185(3).

⁸ *Ibid.*, art. 185(1).

These incidents may, in theory, qualify as sexual harassment, defined under the Serbian Criminal Code as any verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour that violates a person's dignity in the context of their sexual life, causing fear or creating a hostile, degrading or offensive environment.⁹ Perpetrators face prison sentences of three months to three years when the conduct targets children under 18.¹⁰ However, this provision is not tailored to offences committed through information and communication technologies. In addition, prosecution can only be initiated following a motion by the injured party to a public prosecutor,¹¹ which places an unnecessary burden on victims of the crime and could hinder prosecution if children and their families are unaware of this procedural requirement.

While some incidents captured by the data involved unwanted sexual images sent with little or no prior contact, others were part of more deliberate and sustained patterns of behaviour. The following section explores how some perpetrators groom children over time before engaging in sexual exploitation or abuse.

⁹ Ibid., art. 182a(3).

¹⁰ Ibid., art. 182a(2).

¹¹ Ibid., art. 182a(4); Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2006), art. 53.

1.2 GROOMING OF CHILDREN FOR SEXUAL PURPOSES

Survey and interview data show evidence of 'grooming', a process where perpetrators intentionally attempt to build relationships with children for the purpose of sexual exploitation or abuse.

Several of the young people and professionals participating in interviews described how this often began with the perpetrator misrepresenting their identity. This included pretending to be younger or using a fake profile to appear more relatable or 'peer-like'. This tactic was commonly used to lower the child's guard and make the interaction feel safe and more comfortable.

Once contact was established, perpetrators would then 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 special or understood. Over time, these conversations progressively shifted tone, becoming increasingly personal or sexual. This often involved sending inappropriately sexual messages or making explicit requests.

A young woman described a situation in which a perpetrator used these tactics, illustrating how the grooming process may unfold:

“

I really didn't know that person. I mean, in pictures, you could see [that] it was some handsome boy, (...) but I think that behind that picture it was some completely random guy, that it wasn't him at all. He simply used me; he got what he wanted [sexual content]. And when he got all of it, he stopped writing to me. He literally had written to me day and night, (...), he asked me how I'm doing, what I'm doing, then he told me, like, about him and I becoming a family, all sorts of lies (...). (YP)

”

A front-line worker described a case she had supported that followed a similar pattern:

“

A 16-year-old girl...she met a boy online, through her friend in some [chat] group, who introduced himself as [a] 17-year-old. (...) The conversations were about school, music, ordinary things... In the end he sent his picture, which was not his picture, which depicted a young person. They started texting, conversations, they said they liked each other (...) They started, in a way, to talk occasionally on the phone and to text through those networks. (...) Then he asked her to take a naked picture, [said] that he likes her. She sent that picture. (FW)

”

Despite clearly constituting grooming behaviour, the conduct described in the quote above would not necessarily be covered by the offence of online grooming under Serbian law. The Criminal Code criminalizes the use of electronic communication with intent to commit sexual offences against a child,¹² but only when such communication is used to arrange a meeting with the child and when the perpetrator appears at the agreed location.¹³ If the child is under the age of 14, the penalty is one to eight years in prison;¹⁴ if 14 or older, the penalty is six months to five years.¹⁵

Importantly, the Criminal Code recognizes that grooming may serve not only to facilitate in-person sexual abuse but also to exploit a child to produce child sexual abuse material.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the offence remains contingent on the occurrence of a physical meeting, meaning that grooming that results exclusively in exploitation and/or abuse and that occurs entirely online (for example, coercing a child to produce and share online sexual content) falls outside the scope of the provision. This legislative gap weakens the protective framework and overlooks the significant harm caused by both the preparatory stages of grooming and abuse that take place online in the absence of physical contact.

¹² More precisely, the offences listed in arts. 178(4), 179(3), 180(1-2), 181(2-3), 182(1), 183(2), 184(3), 185(2) and 185a of the Serbian [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024).

¹³ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), art. 185b(1).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 185b(2).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 185b(1).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, art. 185b(1).

The gradual, deceptive nature of grooming can make it especially difficult for children to recognize that they are being exploited or abused, particularly when the perpetrator presents the relationship as one of care, trust or affection. Combined with gaps in legal safeguards, this leaves children even more exposed to other forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

Beyond grooming, another key concern is how children's sexual content is treated – particularly when it is shared without their consent. The following section examines abusive, exploitative or non-consensual acts involving children's sexual content, and how such acts compound harm and raise further questions around accountability and protection.



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

Creating and sharing sexual content online is a complicated topic, both legally and socially. For many young people, it has become a part of exploring relationships and intimacy. In Serbia, 3 per cent of children surveyed aged 12–17 reported sharing sexual images or videos with someone online in the past year (N=32). The children surveyed responded that they most often did this because they were flirting or having fun, because they were in love, because they trusted the person, or because they did not think there was anything wrong with sharing the images or videos.¹⁷

However, 4 per cent of children aged 12–17 responded that they had been asked to share an image or video showing their private parts when they did not want to (N=39) – highlighting how image-sharing can sometimes involve pressure and coercion. For some children, sharing images may be a way of expressing affection, trust or curiosity; for others, it may feel uncomfortable, unwanted or pressured. The line between consensual and non-consensual image-sharing can be unclear, especially in relationships marked by unequal power, emotional dependence or limited understanding of privacy and consent.

Regardless of context, these acts could be considered offenses under Serbian criminal law. Children from the age of criminal responsibility, which is at 14,¹⁸ could face prosecution for creating, possessing, or sharing their own sexual content – even if they did so voluntarily.¹⁹ The Criminal Code does not exempt self-generated sexual material from criminal responsibility, even when it is created or shared voluntarily by children. This leaves children at risk of prosecution for non-malicious behaviours arising from sexual exploration, trust or peer interaction. In 2023, this legal shortcoming led the Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote

Convention to request that Serbia ensure that its legal framework protects children from prosecution for possessing self-generated sexual images or videos of themselves or peers – provided there is informed consent between those involved or the material was received passively without solicitation – and for voluntarily sharing their own, self-generated material with peers for private use.²⁰



Spotlight: Child sexual abuse material in Serbian legislation: definition, gaps and terminology

The Serbian Criminal Code defines child sexual abuse material as any visual representation of a child engaged in real or simulated sexually explicit conduct, or of the child's genitals for sexual purposes.²¹ Concerningly, this definition excludes non-visual materials such as audio-only content, and is therefore not fully aligned with that of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography,²² which covers “*any representation, by whatever means.*”

Further, the Criminal Code criminalizes procuring, possessing, selling, showing, publicly exhibiting, or electronically or otherwise making available such material, with prison penalties ranging from three months to three years.²³ Deliberate access through information technologies carries prison penalties of up to six months or a fine – a relatively light sanction given the seriousness of the offence.²⁴

¹⁷ Children were asked if they had shared sexual images or videos online with someone in the past year. When asked why, they were able to select multiple options.

¹⁸ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), art. 4(3).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, art. 185(5).

²⁰ Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention, “Lanzarote Committee Implementation Report on ‘The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos (CSGSIV)’ – Factsheet – Serbia”, p.5 (2023, updated March 2025). Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-serbia-the-protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploitation/1680acdef1>.

²¹ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#), (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), art. 185(6).

²² A/RES/54/263, art. 2(c).

²³ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), art. 185(4).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 185(5).

In addition, the Serbian 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.

Non-consensual sharing of children's sexual content

In the survey, 1 per cent of children aged 12–17 reported that someone had threatened to share their sexual images or videos (N=8) and 0.2 per cent reported that someone had shared their sexual images or videos without their permission (N=2). While these percentages may appear small, when scaled to the national population of children aged 12–17 in Serbia, this corresponds to an estimated 3,400 children whose sexual images or videos were threatened to be shared without their consent in the year prior to the survey.

Non-consensual sharing of sexual content is not explicitly criminalized as a separate offence in Serbian legislation, though criminal provisions such as those covering violations of privacy and unauthorized recordings could apply.²⁵ However, when the material depicts children, this conduct would be covered under provisions prohibiting the distribution of child sexual abuse material, which carry penalties of three months' to three years' imprisonment.²⁶

Interviews suggest that the relatively small number of disclosures captured in the survey may reflect underreporting, likely driven by social

norms surrounding sex and sexuality. Many incidents discussed in interviews began with children voluntarily creating and/or sharing their sexual content, within a context of trust. When that trust was later violated, young people frequently described intense feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame.

One young woman reflected on her feelings after a partner shared sexual images of her without her consent:

“

Honestly, I was embarrassed, because I thought like I sent those photos and it's my fault that I thought I could trust him enough, that I could do something like that with him, and if I had thought a little more, I wouldn't have done something like that. (YP)

”

Another young woman, whose sexual images were shared online by someone she met online, described similar emotions:

“

(...) when I think for example [about it] today, what I have done, you know, I literally can't, can't believe it... I feel a bit ashamed to talk about it, to tell you the truth. (YP)

”

These reflections illustrate how societal norms can shape children's interpretation of exploitation and abuse – not as a violation of their rights, but as something they believe they brought upon themselves through their actions. As discussed further in [Chapter 3](#), internalized shame can act as a significant barrier to disclosure and help-seeking.

Interviews with young people and professionals also highlight that the creation and sharing of sexual content occurs across a range of

²⁵ Relevant provisions include the following offences under the Serbian [Criminal Code](#): Violation of Privacy of Letter and Other Mail (art. 142); Unauthorized Wiretapping and Recording (art. 143); Unauthorized Photographing (art. 144); Unauthorized Publication and Presentation of Another Person's Texts, Portraits and Recordings (art. 145); and Unauthorized Collection of Personal Data (art. 146).

²⁶ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), art. 185(4).

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

circumstances. While some children initially shared content voluntarily, others experienced varying degrees of pressure, from perceived peer expectations to explicit requests backed by threats.

A young woman described sharing images within what she believed to be a trusting relationship, after being assured the photos would be deleted. However, several months later, following an argument, she explained:

“ *After our first fight (...) I received some threat with those photos, and I remember that it was my first big shock, because, firstly, why weren't they deleted as agreed (...).* (YP)

She further described how the person she was in a relationship with used the photos to blackmail her into sharing further photos:

“ *So, he probably saw later that with those photos he could get new photos. So, there was a period when I sent photos under threat.* (YP)

This account highlights that not all content is shared under the same conditions and that understanding the social and relational context is essential to avoid oversimplified or harmful assumptions. Recognizing this complexity, without ever placing blame on the child, is critical for accurately understanding this form of abuse.

Young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as professionals, described the threat of non-consensual sharing of sexual content as causing anxiety, fear and immense stress. Some young people struggled to describe their emotions, instead expressing a sense of complete overwhelm.

One young woman recalled her reaction when a partner threatened to share sexual content depicting her online:

“ *So, now that I'm talking about this, I just remember how I felt at that moment. It was like, I wouldn't say panic attack, but that was a shaking of the whole body and weakness, I think that's the worst.* (YP)

Another young woman explained how becoming aware that her private sexual content had been shared online made her feel like *“the ceiling had collapsed on me”*. (YP)

Young people described feeling powerless in the face of a situation beyond their control, with constant fear about who might see the content and how others might react. A young woman said

“ *(...) literally every day when I came home [I] had that sort of a fear that, for example, if my dad or my mom saw it (...) Then poor me, sat and just thought, ‘Oh God’, you know, ‘God don't let someone see it’.* (YP)

These feelings often extended beyond the immediate incident, reflecting longer-term stress about the permanence of online material and the fact that it may never be fully removed.

A psychologist described a case where abuse was filmed:

“ *[the girl] was scared that those photos of her will at some point, (...), come to light in that new school and that someone will see those photos at some point. (...) she then told me: ‘And what if I get married one day and my husband sees those recordings?’* (FW)

This illustrates how the loss of control over sexual content can produce persistent fear and constrain children's lives well beyond the initial incident.

Manipulation, control and extortion for sexual purposes

Findings further illustrated how individuals used children's sexual content to manipulate, control or extort them.

Interviews revealed multiple patterns to sexual extortion. In some cases, perpetrators groomed children by misrepresenting their age or presenting themselves as peers. In others, abuse occurred within the context of a relationship. Once sexual material was obtained, it was used as leverage to demand additional content, continued contact or sometimes money.

Despite the serious harm it causes, sexual extortion of children is not explicitly criminalized under the Serbian Criminal Code. Existing provisions on coercion, stalking, extortion, blackmail, or abuse of trust do not specifically address this form of abuse – nor do they adequately cover offences committed through information and communication technologies or targeting children.²⁷ 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.

Recognizing this issue, in 2023, the Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention invited Serbia to introduce a specific criminal offence to address situations in which sexual images and/or videos generated by a child are “used to force, coerce or threaten the child to give additional self-generated sexual images and/or videos, other sexual favours, a financial gain or other gain to the offenders”. Alternatively, it recommended that the Serbian authorities ensure prosecution of both the possession of these materials by the perpetrator, presumably under provisions related to child sexual abuse material, and the subsequent act of extortion.²⁸

Young people and professionals described how sexual content was frequently used to exert control within romantic relationships.

A young woman explained how her boyfriend used intimate photos of her to isolate and control her, threatening to share them if she did not comply with his demands. On one occasion, while she was out with friends, he messaged her and told her that she had 20 minutes to return home and send him photographic proof. Only then would he remove an explicit photo of her that he had posted on his WhatsApp profile.

Other young women described enduring prolonged abuse when attempting to end relationships, facing repeated threats and blackmail that made leaving feel impossible.

A young woman recalled how at age 17, her boyfriend threatened her after she told him that she wanted to break up. He sent her an explicit photo of herself that she was unaware had been taken, accompanied by an ultimatum that it would be shared online if she ended the relationship.

Another young woman shared how she was subjected to both tech-facilitated and in-person abuse when she tried to end the relationship with her boyfriend, recalling:

“

He manipulated, cried and then he lied that his mother died. (...) I went to see him after he lied, I went to his place and that was the first time I experienced telling someone in a relationship ‘No, I don’t want to have sex with you’ and he continued on. (...) And then, I came home and after that I realized, I can’t, it can’t be like this anymore. And I finally sent a message, and I said like ‘Listen, I really don’t want to be with you anymore’ and I think that’s when the blackmailing started. Like, ‘I will post your photos on Facebook, everyone will see them’. (YP)

”

²⁷ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), arts. 135, 138a, 214-216.

²⁸ Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention, “Lanzarote Committee Implementation Report on ‘The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos (CSGSIV)’ – Factsheet – Serbia”, p.6 (2023, updated March 2025). Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-serbia-the-protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploitation/1680acdef1>.

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

In some instances, perpetrators extended their threats beyond the child, targeting friends and/or family members to increase pressure and exert greater control. As discussed further in [Chapter 3](#) on disclosure, children often feared parents or peers seeing sexual content or learning about the abuse they had been subjected to. Some perpetrators exploited these fears by threatening to share sexual material within the child's social networks and, in some cases, by directly contacting friends or family members to intensify the coercion.

A front-line worker described a case in which a girl was asked to share sexual content by a person she met online. When the girl initially responded that she did not want to, he said he would pay for it:

“

Then she said, 'Well, okay, maybe.' And he sent her a screenshot, a short video, where you can see that he pays her a certain amount of money. (...) And she sent him that video. However, that was not the end (...), he began to blackmail her further to send him money. If she doesn't send it, then he will share that video with her friends, etc. And then he started contacting her friends, etc., etc. (FW)

”

These tactics not only cause harm but also isolate young people from key sources of support. When perpetrators weaponize these fears, they cut children off from the very people they might otherwise turn to for help – deepening the harm and reducing the chances of protection and reporting.

Artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse materials and livestreamed abuse

Emerging technologies have introduced new risks. The rise of powerful artificial intelligence image-generation tools has introduced new and urgent challenges in addressing tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Increasingly embedded in apps and online platforms, these tools can be used to generate fake sexual images or videos by superimposing a person's face onto explicit content, without their consent or knowledge.

These fabrications carry emotional and social consequences. Children may suffer from stigma, shame or moral judgment, especially when such content circulates online. Even when this content portrays non-existent children, child sexual abuse material generated through artificial intelligence can normalize exploitative representations and contribute to increased demand for child sexual abuse material involving real children. Although this form of abuse is still emerging, evidence shows it is already occurring in Serbia.

Survey data indicate that 1 per cent of children aged 12–17 said that someone had used artificial intelligence to create fake sexual images or videos of them in the past year (N=6). A psychologist described a case involving a 16-year-old girl who, after attempting to cut off communication with a perpetrator, was threatened with an artificial intelligence-generated sexual image:

“

He [then] edited her face on some masturbating, self-pleasuring girl, and said that he would send it to her parents, if she did not come to his city. (FW)

”

In another case described by a front-line worker, two 11-year-old girls used Photoshop to impose a photo of the face of a peer on a naked body and posted it on a porn site. She said:

“

The girl was called by terrible paedophiles with terrible content, (...) the child experienced trauma. (...) you can't go and explain 'It's not me'... These are terrible things, that you have no control over the photo when it goes on the internet. (FW)

”

Police officers in Serbia consulted as part of Disrupting Harm corroborated this emerging trend and noted another application of artificial intelligence in tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse involving the use of chatbots to communicate with children and solicit child sexual abuse.

Further, consultations with law enforcement showed how – despite access to a range of investigative tools, including darknet-monitoring capabilities, open-source intelligence platforms and direct access to INTERPOL systems – the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence-enabled offending remains a significant challenge for investigators in Serbia. Investigators reported increasing encounters with artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material, deepfakes and chatbot-mediated solicitation, along with sexual extortion.

Concerningly, the Serbian Criminal Code's provisions on child sexual abuse material do not cover artificial intelligence-generated material,²⁹ as the current legal definition does not explicitly include digitally generated material, including realistic images of non-existent children.

A similar issue exists in relation to livestreaming of child sexual abuse, which is also not explicitly criminalized. While recruiting, causing, or coercing a child aged 14 or older to participate in “*pornographic performances*” is punishable by up to five years' imprisonment, or up to eight years if the child is under the age of 14,³⁰ current legislation does not specify whether this applies to performances that are livestreamed. Moreover, existing provisions on child sexual abuse material do not fill this gap. Indeed, criminalized acts – including access and dissemination via communication technologies, public exhibition, and similar offences – require the material to exist in the form of ‘items’,³¹ thereby excluding instances where abuse is livestreamed but not downloaded or stored as a file.

As these technologies become more accessible and widely used, there is growing concern that such forms of abuse will become increasingly common, raising urgent questions about how existing legislation and child protection frameworks can effectively prevent, detect and respond to these rapidly evolving forms of abuse. Without explicit legal provisions addressing these newer forms of abuse, perpetrators can operate

with little fear of consequence. Strengthening the legal framework to clearly define and criminalize artificial intelligence-generated sexual abuse material and livestreamed abuse is therefore essential.

The online/in-person continuum

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

According to the survey results, more than 75 per cent of the 148 instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse against children aged 12–17 took place, at least in part, through social media (N=112), with 2 per cent on gaming platforms (N=3). The most common platform where instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse occurred was Instagram (N=52), followed by Viber (N=21), WhatsApp (N=17), Snapchat (N=15) and Facebook (N=10).

A young woman described how sexual content depicting her was shared by peers without her consent across multiple social media platforms:

“

I found out that, in that sharing [of images involving sexual content on WhatsApp] (...) there was also the creation of (...) an Instagram page that created a group and sent [the sexual content] to a couple of people, so that's how it started. Besides him [the person she had been in a relationship with], my two girlfriends from the class also participated. (YP)

”

This case is not isolated. Across the findings, social media played a significant role in facilitating and amplifying child sexual exploitation and abuse. The ease with which images and content

²⁹ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), art. 185(6).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, art. 185(2).

³¹ *Ibid.*, art. 185(4), 185(5).

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

can be shared across platforms, combined with inadequate or delayed takedown mechanisms, means that harm can continue long after the initial incident.

Social media and other digital technologies were also used to facilitate in-person sexual abuse. A front-line worker shared:

“ (...) he [an adult man] met the girl through Facebook. He pretended to be 17 years old, and after gaining [her] trust, he arranged a meeting with her (...). However, he appears in front of the school and introduces himself as Philip's father [i.e. the father of the boy he pretended to be] and says that 'Philip injured his leg' and (...) 'Asked me to come pick you up, to take you to him'. She got in the car, (...), he raped her, [she was] 13. (FW)

”
In another case, a front-line worker described how a man used multiple profiles on an online gaming platform to groom and manipulate a boy into thinking he was in a relationship with a fictitious girl and to meet in person:

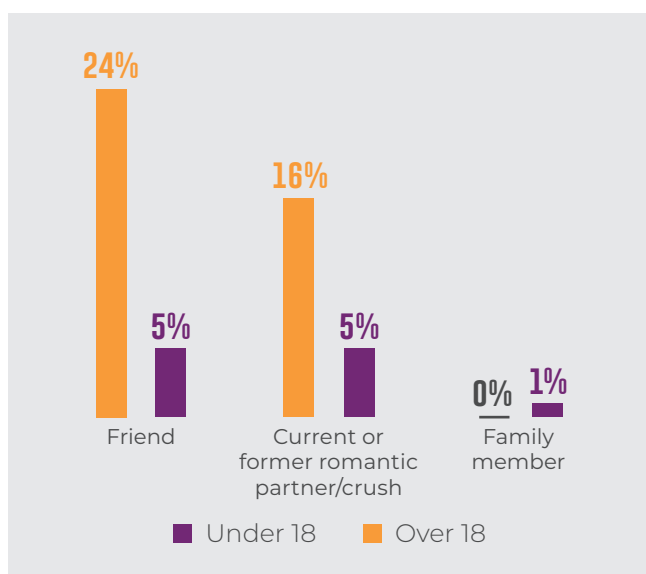
“ (...) then they agreed that all three would actually see each other. The man and the boy came to the meeting, where it was said [by the man] that the girl had some obligation and would come later. (...) they ended up at his weekend house where the boy was under [the influence], drinking alcohol and probably using some drugs. And there was intercourse. Even taking photos. This was also used to blackmail the young person and, in the end, it actually ended with the man posting all those photos on social media and all of the boy's friends could see them. (FW)

”
Survey data further indicate that 1 per cent of children aged 12–17 reported being approached online and offered money or gifts to meet in person to do something sexual in the past year (N=9). Together, these findings demonstrate how tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is deeply intertwined with other forms of violence. While perpetrators may use digital tools to initiate or sustain abuse, the resulting harm frequently extends into in-person settings, underscoring the need for comprehensive child protection efforts that address both online and real-world environments.

1.4 PERPETRATORS OF TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

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

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



According to survey findings from children aged 12–17, over half of the 148 reported instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse involved someone that the child knew (N=78), while in 25 per cent of instances it was attributed to a stranger. In almost one third of cases, the perpetrator was a friend or acquaintance (N=43), and in over one in five cases, a current or former romantic partner or crush (N=32).

In 37 per cent of instances, tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was perpetrated by someone under the age of 18 (N=55), and in 11 per cent of instances it was perpetrated by an adult, 18 and over (N=93).

Interviews offered additional insight with young people and professionals describing situations where abuse had occurred in the context of existing peer relationships (romantic and/ or friendships) marked by pressure, bullying, manipulation or control. In these situations, tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was often just one part of a broader dynamic of coercion.

This raises important questions about how such cases are addressed within the legal system in Serbia, which prioritizes rehabilitation over punishment for children who have committed criminal offences. The age of criminal responsibility is 14³² and only educational measures such as warnings, guidance, intensified supervision or placement in rehabilitation institutions can be imposed on children aged 14–15.³³ For children aged 16–17, educational measures also remain the preferred response³⁴ and placement in a juvenile prison is permitted only in “*exceptional cases*” where the offence carries a minimum sentence of five years and if an educational measure would be deemed inadequate due to the seriousness of the offence or the high degree of guilt.³⁵ Judges have a broad margin of discretion to impose alternative sanctions, such as requiring apologies to injured parties, ordering compensation, assigning community service, mandating vocational training or referring the child to individual or group therapy.³⁶ Special protections are also in place to safeguard the best interests of children in conflict with the law during legal proceedings, including mandatory legal representation from the first questioning,³⁷ prohibition on trials without the presence of the defendant³⁸ and closed hearings as the default rule.³⁹

However, perpetrator identity is only part of the picture. Equally important are the broader social, cultural and institutional factors that shape how tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is understood, recognized and responded to.

32 Republic of Serbia, [Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles](#) (2005), art. 3.

33 Ibid., arts. 3, 9.

34 Ibid., arts. 3, 9.

35 Ibid., art. 28.

36 Ibid., art. 14.

37 Ibid., art. 49.

38 Ibid., art. 48.

39 Ibid., art. 75.

2. INTERSECTIONALITY AND ABUSE



2. INTERSECTIONALITY AND ABUSE

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

Interviews highlighted how shame rooted in gendered social norms – emphasizing the sexual purity of women – may lead girls to feel personally responsible for the abuse they endured... Boys, meanwhile, were subjected to different but equally harmful gendered expectations.

2.1 HOW GENDER, SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL NORMS SHAPE TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

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

According to the survey, 13 per cent of girls aged 12–17 (N=58) reported having been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse compared with 7 per cent of boys aged 12–17 (N=32), a significant difference. Interviews further reveal how gender shapes both the context and consequences of abuse. Societal expectations around gender influence how perpetrators target children, how children perceive exploitation and abuse and the reactions they receive from peers, families and institutions. These norms also influence whether children are believed, supported or blamed, and can profoundly affect their willingness to disclose and seek help.

An interview participant reflected on how girls are particularly impacted by a lack of supportive structures and silence around sex. A young woman said:

“ *And I think that's the biggest problem... In general, about everything that is happening to girls. Because they don't have someone who'll be there for them, like a pillar. (YP)* **”**

A front-line worker from a civil society organization expressed how a lack of education and conversation about sexual violence in society can contribute to harmful norms:

“ *It is certainly omnipresent and quite difficult... online violence, sexual violence for girls primarily (...) it is not talked about, they have nowhere to learn about it. They don't talk about it at school. (FW)* **”**

Young people subjected to abuse discussed how their schooling lacked education about sexual health, relationships and abuse. A young man said:

“ *We talked about cigarettes, peer violence, drug addiction, we talked about the harmful effects of energy drinks, and that's what I remember. But we didn't talk about sexual violence. (YP)* **”**

Similarly, a young woman described how workshops in school did not properly engage with the issue of sexual violence, further indicating how discussions around sex seem to be avoided:

“ *They don't specifically say 'Well, this is sexual violence', but 'You already know' or they say 'Rape' and that's it, they immediately move on to another [topic], it's still a taboo topic and that's a problem. (YP)* **”**

A lack of open conversations about sex can impact how a child responds after abuse, as evidenced by the reflections of a young woman:

“ *Sort of, my mom did talk to me, when I was younger, for example about sex and all that, but also, she had only mentioned condoms and it was the same... when I was a teenager, I was embarrassed to talk about it. We didn't even talk, say, in my memory, too much about it. That was like some taboo topic (...). That's why, probably, I couldn't tell her all [the details about the abuse]. (YP)* **”**

A lack of education and open conversations with adults about sex, relationships and violence affects both boys and girls negatively. While education alone cannot prevent tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, it can play a critical role in helping children recognize abusive behaviours, understand consent, identify unhealthy relationships and feel empowered to set boundaries. Without it, harmful norms are left unchallenged, reinforcing stigma and silence. Norms around gender and sexuality also shape how children perceive the abuse they were subjected to, the reaction of others to their disclosures and the level of stigma they face if the abuse becomes known.

Young women described being taught – directly or indirectly – to tolerate certain behaviours. One young woman, who was subjected to abuse by a romantic partner, explained:

“

I think I needed time to realize what was happening. What made it more difficult is that I was used to my partners not treating me properly. (...) my friends, they also had some weird stories about relationships, where boys used to act weird, where they did this and that and so on. And then I think that the way my society was, (...) officially, no one will say that they accept it, but when they let some things like that go, tiny, small, it actually seems like you accept it. And then, somehow, you indirectly get a message from others that some things are okay, that some things should be tolerated. (YP)

”

Victim-blaming attitudes were frequently described by both professionals and young people, particularly in instances where sexual content of girls was shared without their consent. Interviews highlighted how shame rooted in gendered social

norms – emphasizing the sexual purity of women – may lead girls to feel personally responsible for the abuse they endured. One young woman described the reactions of peers when sexual content of a girl from her school was shared online by her boyfriend:

“

(...) they commented non-stop ‘Ugh how she is’ (...) ‘What a whore she is’ (...), ‘Why is she sending pictures?’ and all that. (YP)

”

These accounts were not isolated incidents but reflected deeply ingrained beliefs that blame women and girls for sexualized attention and abuse, reinforcing a culture of shame and social punishment. Such attitudes can exacerbate trauma, discourage disclosure and leave children unsupported within their families and communities.

Boys, meanwhile, were subjected to different but equally harmful gendered expectations. Interviews with young people and front-line workers revealed that boys struggled to speak about exploitation or abuse due to shame tied to notions of masculinity. Some questioned their own strength or identity, believing that being abused or disclosing it made them less of a ‘real man’ or undermined their masculinity. A psychologist affirmed these observations:

“

I think they [boys] are less willing to talk about it because they feel ashamed. When a male has to admit he was abused in some way, it diminishes his power or masculinity, or whatever it is. They tend to try and resolve things on their own. (FW)

”

2.1 HOW GENDER, SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL NORMS SHAPE TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

For some boys, stigma related to sexuality and restrictive gender norms created additional barriers to disclosure, particularly in cases involving same-gender perpetrators. One young man described how this prevented him from seeking support:

“

And now, simply, and because they have a guard against it [homosexuality], you feel uncomfortable to say, ‘This and that happened to me.’ And maybe if I were a girl, you understand, maybe I would say. But since I’m a boy and since I got a proposal from a man for...I was ashamed to say. (YP)

”

This account illustrates how restrictive norms around masculinity, heteronormativity and sexual identity can deter disclosure. The impact may also extend beyond LGBTQI+ youth, whereby also those who do not identify as LGBTQI+ may fear that the abuse they endured will be misinterpreted or stigmatized. In this context, sexuality operates not just as a personal identity but as a social lens that shapes abuse.

Children whose identities challenge prevailing norms around gender or sexuality may face heightened disbelief, stigma and marginalization. These intersecting pressures can shape how abuse is perceived, interpreted or even disclosed.

2.2 DOES AGE PLAY A ROLE?

Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can also vary by age, shaping how such abuse unfolds and is understood. Among the 12-to-17-year-olds surveyed, older children reported higher rates of exploitation and abuse. For example, while one in five 17-year-olds surveyed had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, this was the case for only one in 100 12-year-olds surveyed.

Importantly, this does not imply that younger children are not affected. Rather, older children may be more likely to recognize abusive situations and feel confident enough to disclose them in the survey. Analysis of the survey data indicates that although older children spend more time in digital spaces, this does not correspond to a higher likelihood of being subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse or other forms of online harm. While this may sound counter-intuitive, it is a consistent finding across 20 other countries included in the Disrupting Harm study that time spent online does not seem to be a primary driver of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.⁴⁰ Older children may have increased exposure because they engage more with other people online and in person, exercise greater freedom and autonomy, and begin exploring romantic relationships. Additionally, they may simply be more likely to report exploitation and abuse in surveys, either due to greater awareness of what constitutes abuse or increased confidence in disclosing it.

Despite the data suggesting that older adolescents may be particularly exposed to certain forms of abuse, Serbian criminal law does not afford them the same level of protection as younger children. Penalties for offences of online grooming⁴¹ and showing pornographic content to children aged 14 and over⁴² are lower compared with those applicable when younger children are involved. This disparity reflects a disconnect between the legal framework and actual patterns of risk, leaving older adolescents less protected by the law, despite increased exposure.

This issue also points to a broader legislative gap: the absence of a unified statutory definition of the term “child” in Serbian law, a concern previously raised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2017.⁴³ The discrepancy in penalties stems from how the Criminal Code defines children: those under 14 are defined as “children”, those aged 14 and above are classified as “juveniles,” while the term “minor” refers to all individuals under 18.⁴⁴ Eliminating distinctions in the severity of penalties and closing gaps in protection so that (tech-facilitated) sexual offences carry the same legal consequences for perpetrators, regardless of the age of the child targeted, is therefore essential to ensure that no age group is left less protected.

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

41 Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last updated in 2024), art. 185b.

42 Ibid., art. 185.

43 CRC/C/SRB/CO/2-3. Paragraphs 20, 21.

44 Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last updated in 2024), art. 112(8-10).

2.3 A CHILD'S SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

A child's social environment can also influence tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse, highlighting the importance of an intersectional lens. Survey data show that more than half of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse among children aged 12–17 were perpetrated by someone known to the child (N=78). Children most commonly reported first meeting the perpetrator at school (every one out of three instances among the 90 children), illustrating how digital interactions are embedded within children's everyday social worlds rather than occurring in isolation.

This overlap between online and in-person environments reflects how tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are often rooted in existing relationships, social hierarchies and power dynamics. When abuse is perpetrated by peers, family members or others within a child's immediate environment, it can unfold across multiple settings simultaneously, through messaging apps, social media, schools, homes and community spaces. These dynamics are shaped by age, gender norms, social expectations and relational power, and can further limit children's ability to disclose.

Further analysis reinforces the interconnected nature of different forms of violence and harm across children's lives. The children surveyed aged 12–17 who were subjected to in-person sexual violence at home, in school or in their community in the past year were more likely to also be subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse. Similarly, the children surveyed who had witnessed violence at home, or whose parents were subjected to physical violence during their childhood, also showed a higher likelihood of being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse themselves.⁴⁵ These patterns suggest that exposure to violence across different contexts can compound exposure to harm, rather than occurring as separate or unrelated instances.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be understood solely through children's online interactions. Instead, it must be situated within a wider intersectional framework that considers how social relationships, gendered norms, exposure to violence and structural inequalities intersect across digital and physical environments. Addressing these harms therefore requires responses that move beyond platform-level or individualized approaches and engage with these broader factors that enable abuse to persist across settings.

⁴⁵ Findings should be interpreted with caution. The estimates are based on small sample sizes, resulting in wide confidence intervals that limit the strength and precision of the observed associations.

3. DISCLOSURE



3. DISCLOSURE

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

This chapter of the report explores key factors identified by the data that influence whether and how children in Serbia disclose tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. It examines the forms of exploitation and abuse children are more or less likely to disclose, the individuals or services they are most likely to disclose to, and the barriers and enablers that affect this process. It also provides insight into how families, peers and professionals can be better equipped to recognize and respond to signs of exploitation and abuse and disclosures.

Understanding *when, how and to whom* children disclose can help inform more effective strategies for supporting them before, during and after disclosure. Importantly, the study does not assume that children disclose abuse primarily to access formal mechanisms. Disclosure is often personal and complex and may not lead to formal reporting. Formal reporting of a suspected or confirmed case of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is covered in the next section.

The data on disclosure came from children aged 12–17 who reported having been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse through the survey, as well as interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children, and with front-line workers. Justice professionals offered more limited insight on this topic, likely because their involvement generally begins when exploitation and abuse has been disclosed and formally reported.

Of the 148 instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse reported among children aged 12–17 in Serbia in the year prior to being surveyed, 43 per cent were not disclosed to anyone (N=60).⁴⁶ In other words, in more than two out of five instances, children did not tell a parent, friend, teacher, or any other trusted person about the exploitation or abuse. Although prevailing assumptions suggest that children are likely to disclose abuse to trusted adults or individuals within their close social circle, the results demonstrate that such disclosure often does not take place in practice.

⁴⁶ Percentage reflects the distribution of disclosures among instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse (N=184 total disclosure responses).

3.1 WHO DO CHILDREN DISCLOSE TO AND WHY?

Survey data shows that when disclosing abuse, the most common group that children would disclose the exploitation and/or abuse they had been subjected to, was their friends (30 per cent of the 184 disclosures). This was followed by the child's mother, step/foster mother, or female caregiver or guardian (every one in six disclosure).

While data from the survey showed that children were most likely to disclose to peers, interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse in childhood, and with front-line workers, also highlighted that when disclosure remained within the peer group, it might not lead to further intervention or reporting to authorities. This was particularly true when the abuse was normalized or considered less serious, such as receiving unwanted sexual content.

The survey further found that girls were more likely to disclose than boys. Among the 148 instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, 62 per cent of girls aged 12–17 disclosed versus 45 per cent of boys in the same age group. This mirrors the perceptions of young people and professionals interviewed, who noted that it may be more difficult for boys to talk openly about the abuse they were subjected to.

This disparity can also be seen in relation to the young people who came forward to participate in interviews: seven young women, but only two young men. Across all countries included in the second round of the Disrupting Harm study, 11 young men came forward to participate in interviews compared with 88 young women, indicating that boys may find it more difficult to disclose or speak openly about the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to, and that this is not an issue specific to Serbia.

A young man interviewed, identifying as gay, described how societal perceptions and prejudices in relation to gender and sexual identity can act as a barrier to disclosure:

“

(...) you are 15 years old, you have not come out, you live in a small town, in a homophobic environment, extremely homophobic. (...) Many times, I heard some derogatory words about 'perverted people' from teachers (...). (YP)

”

On the other hand, young people and front-line workers described how having at least one person they trust in their life can enable disclosure by children. Building trust can take time, which can delay disclosure. Front-line workers and young people highlighted the need for children to have space to open up where they feel comfortable to and not pressured or rushed into disclosing abuse. The same young man explained:

“

Later, a couple of years after that, I shared it with my sister first. (...) I shared it only when we got closer, in a way, when I came out to her, when we got into some more honest and deeper conversations, so I wanted to tell her what was happening, so I showed her screenshots, text messages. (YP)

”

These patterns highlight how much disclosure depends not only on who children choose to confide in, but also on when and why they feel able to speak out. The next section explores these dynamics more closely, examining the barriers and enablers to disclosure.

3.2 BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO DISCLOSURE

Awareness and perceived seriousness

The most common barrier to disclosure reported by children aged 12–17 subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the survey was that they did not think the abuse was serious enough to disclose (33 per cent, N=31).⁴⁷

A young woman who received unwanted sexual material from strangers reflected on this, explaining how she did not consider it serious and did not believe reporting it would make a difference:

“

Well, I think an adult would take it much more seriously than I do. (...) it wouldn't just end with, well, me blocking that person, but maybe they'd report it to the police or something, which I don't think...well, okay, I think it should [be done], but then again if someone like that, 'grandpa from the Netherlands' for example, I don't think we can reach him at all, so there's no need to report it to the police at all if it's not that bad. I just block him and that's it. (YP)

”

Several young people in interviews described how they had come to accept and even normalize some types of harmful online behaviour, particularly the sharing of unwanted sexual content.

One young woman described how unwanted exposure to sexual content by strangers, when taking place exclusively online, was uncomfortable but not particularly worrying or threatening to her:

“

Well, I think now, since I'm sharing with my peers, it somehow became... a joke, I don't know, I mean... I don't consider it anymore as if it's so terrible, but more like 'Phew, do you know what happened', and then we laugh about it. (YP)

”

Her disclosure came from a place of humour, bonding with friends, rather than to seek help.

Across interviews, young people repeatedly expressed a lack of awareness about what constitutes child sexual exploitation and abuse, including forms facilitated by technology. Together with data from interviews with professionals, findings show how many children may not have clear understandings of the boundaries of consent, coercion and manipulation.

A young woman subjected to abuse by a romantic partner explained how it was only after speaking to her mother that she began to understand what she had been subjected to as rape:

“

(...) because I didn't realize, until I told my mom, what had happened. I didn't understand the gravity of the situation. Where she told me 'Okay, well you were raped' and this and that happened. I...only then, when she had told me that, while we were sitting down, I realized what had actually happened. To me it was, 'let's go, I'll forget it and nothing had happened'. (YP)

”

Before the start of one of the interviews, a young man reflected on his understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse:

“

(...) when we spoke...sexual violence on the internet. First, I thought for a long time, as to what falls under that, and I think that sometimes we don't even know how to recognize it ourselves, even if it happens. (YP)

”

Interviews also highlighted young people's uncertainty about how to respond when they or someone else is subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. The young woman quoted above described conversations she had with friends at the time:

⁴⁷ Percentages reflect the distribution of barriers among children who indicated experiencing any barrier to disclosure (N=94 total barrier responses).

“

Well, none of those friends and everyone who heard that story and got it (...) none of them were aware that it was a very big problem. Everyone thought it was, well, between us, 'generational'. It wasn't even talked about in schools. (YP)

”

These findings point to gaps in knowledge and understanding among children about the nature of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Without being able to recognize what they or others are subjected to as exploitation or abuse, children may not see a reason to disclose or seek support.

This emphasizes the need for comprehensive sexuality and relationships education to help children understand the different forms that abuse can take. Education should focus on building skills around healthy relationships, communication, boundary setting and recognizing harmful behaviours. While these competences are essential tools to help children better navigate online and in-person relationships, and to feel confident in seeking help when needed, responsibility for protection must not be unintentionally shifted onto children themselves. Preventing and responding to abuse remains a duty of adults and institutions, with education serving as a protective measure to equip children with needed skills rather than a substitute for effective safeguards and accountability.

Shame and guilt

According to the survey, not wanting anyone to know about what had happened (18 per cent, N=17) and feeling embarrassed about it (14 per cent, N=13) were among the most commonly reported reasons why children aged 12–17 did not disclose tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.⁴⁸

These findings are echoed in the qualitative data, where shame and guilt emerged as central themes shaping non-disclosure. Young people frequently

linked these feelings to fears about how family members, peers and others in their community might react if the exploitation or abuse became known. Concerns about being judged, blamed or misunderstood often outweighed seeking support.

Two young people reflected on this in different ways in interviews. One of the young men, identifying as gay, explained why he chose not to tell anyone about receiving unwanted sexual content, particularly from older men:

“

(...) I didn't share that with anyone. I felt uncomfortable to share it, I was ashamed to share it. Now I'm not, now I can talk about it. But I think when you're 15, and you're still so insecure, shame, you are ashamed, like, if I say that, what will people think of me, what will happen... (YP)

”

A young woman also described how shame prevented her from disclosing abuse until after explicit images of her were circulated without her consent:

“

(...) so the main feeling of shame and embarrassment was stopping me and my brain just...it just couldn't even imagine if someone knew that, another person, let alone more of them. It was unimaginable to me too. (...). So probably, shame and embarrassment. (YP)

”

It is important to emphasize that children are never responsible, in any way, for the exploitation and abuse they are subjected to. Yet, many of the young people interviewed internalized blame, often focusing on what they believed they had 'done wrong' in the lead-up to the abuse. For some, this included initially sharing sexual content consensually, which later contributed to

⁴⁸ Percentage reflects the distribution of barriers among children who indicated experiencing any barrier to disclosure (N=94 total barrier responses).

3.2 BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO DISCLOSURE

feelings of responsibility when that material was shared without their consent. Others expressed beliefs that they 'should have known better' or should have anticipated the abuse. Some young people described shame related to being subjected to abuse over a longer period of time and being unable to manage or escape the relationship or situation.

Internalized self-blame was reflected in the language young people used to describe instances of exploitation and abuse further compounded by the silence and lack of discussion around issues as sex, sexuality, consent and harmful social norms.

In one interview, a young woman said: 'it is my fault in some way' and when asked what she meant, she responded:

“

Well, my fault is that I have, for example, done something like that, you know. So, he asked me for those pictures and I, I just sent them to him. It was so, like...easy...and when I think for example today...what I have done, you know, I literally can't, can't believe it...I feel a bit ashamed to talk about it, to tell you the truth. (YP)

”

Notably these feelings persisted for years after the incident, as the young woman reflected on events that had occurred three to four years earlier.

A young woman reflected on how around five years later and after gaining more understanding of abuse in relationships, she still held feelings of responsibility and self-blame:

“

Well I think that now, in my speech it could be heard what amount of blame I took from that whole situation (...) how much I blame myself for that relationship, no matter how much I, after that, educated, read [about the topic of violence] (...) a feeling from that period [remained], so I see that I slowly got into justifying why and how [the violence occurred]. (YP)

”

Even among those who did disclose, feelings of shame and guilt often shaped what or how much they felt able to share. Some of the young people described withholding details, particularly about the sexual nature of the abuse, due to embarrassment or fear of judgment. One young woman explained why she did not fully disclose the extent of abuse to her mother:

“

(...) I didn't tell my mom absolutely everything, (...) she knows about a lot of things that happened, but [not] for example, about his bullying and she assumed there was some story about photos, but I didn't tell her. I also didn't tell her about sex, because I didn't want to, honestly, I was embarrassed to tell her about that. (...). (YP)

”

Front-line workers also observed how shame may limit disclosure, especially in instances where children perceive themselves as having been somehow complicit:

“

I think (...) that they'd rather share it with a peer, than share it with an adult. I assume the main reason is shame. Especially if it was anything to which they had, at least partially, consented to. I say, 'at least partially', (...) they didn't consent at all, but they didn't fight it, which they perceive like they had given some sort of consent. (FW)

”

Taken together, these findings show how shame and self-blame operate as powerful barriers to disclosure, shaping not only whether children seek help, but also how they narrate and understand abuse. These internalized feelings are closely linked to broader social attitudes around sexuality, responsibility and morality – attitudes that often translate into fear of judgment from others.

Fear of judgment

Similarly, some young people described fearing that their parents would not be able to understand what they were going through, would react with shame or judgment, or might punish them if they disclosed the abuse. For some, these anticipated reactions made disclosure feel risky or even unsafe.

One young woman reflected on how she was ultimately able to disclose to her mother, but recognized how this may not be an option for other children:

“

I don't even know now how it would go, if it didn't go through the parents, because not everyone has a great relationship with their parents, like me, who was lucky with my mom, but I think that's the biggest problem, for someone to admit, actually, because of their parents and what they will say. (YP)

”

Beyond the family, young people also expressed concern about how others in their social sphere – particularly peers – might react if the exploitation or abuse became known. They feared being perceived differently, blamed for what happened, or subjected to judgment, bullying or social rejection. For many, the potential social consequences of disclosure outweighed the benefits of support.

Both young people and professionals discussed how social dynamics that prioritize family reputation and social standing over individual well-being can further discourage disclosure. In these contexts, protecting the family's reputation may take precedence over addressing harm, leading children and families to remain silent. While this dynamic was evident in Serbia, it is not unique to this context and can be observed in many communities globally.

A front-line worker described how these pressures can be actively exploited by perpetrators:

“

Serbia is still a country that is very patriarchal, very traditional...Especially [in] smaller places, where certain cultural and moral norms have been raised to very high levels. Then, when someone starts blackmailing or threatening with pictures, that person will then, very often, agree to everything, just so that it doesn't come out, just so that the community doesn't find out, that the parents don't find out, that friends at school don't find out. (FW)

”

Fear of judgment from parent, peers and the wider community can silence children and constrain their choices. When disclosure is perceived as carrying serious social, emotional or reputational consequences, children may delay seeking help or avoid it altogether. In this context, disclosure often occurs only when other options have been exhausted.

Disclosure as a last resort

In other cases, young people described disclosure as something they turned to only when they felt that they could no longer cope or saw no other way to deal with the situation. Disclosure often occurred after the abuse had escalated – such as when demands for sexual content intensified or when online abuse transitioned into in-person violence. Rather than being a planned or proactive step, disclosure was framed as an act of necessity.

One young woman explained how disclosing to her mother felt like a last resort:

“

(...) when I turned to her, I think it was something like a last resort. Either I would continue to put up with it or I would do something. (...). I was like I had to tell someone, because I felt I would probably burst if I didn't tell anyone. (YP)

”

3.2 BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO DISCLOSURE

Similarly, a young woman who had been in a controlling and abusive relationship described how feelings of shame and embarrassment prevented her from telling anyone for a long time. As the situation worsened, she eventually confided in a friend. It was only after the person she had been in a relationship with publicly shared sexual content of her that she decided to disclose the abuse to her family. She recalled:

“
(...) I was completely cornered there, that was the moment when I had to tell my family (...). (YP)

While she received emotional support from her family after her disclosure she described:

“
That was all, let it go, no action was taken, whatever, nothing happened, neither by my parents nor by anyone. (YP)

As a result, she sought help from a teacher and a school psychologist. She described the moment she realized the photos had been shared as the “last straw”:

“
A turning point at which the need to act outweighed her fear and shame. As she put it: ‘I went for it... at any cost to do it’. (YP)

In her account, disclosure was not a deliberate choice but something she was compelled to do when the abuse had escalated and all other options had been exhausted.

Importantly, these accounts also highlight that disclosure is rarely a single, isolated event. Instead, it often unfolds as a gradual and relational process. Several of the young people who had been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse described disclosing to different people at different moments, depending on trust, opportunity and perceived safety. One young woman reflected on the importance of the support she received from a friend and how this helped her eventually disclose to her mother, particularly as her partner had exploited tensions in her relationship with her mother to maintain control:

“
My friend helped me very, very much at that moment to gather courage, to respond a little and say something. And then I forced myself to say something to my mom, because, actually, the problem in that relationship and that relation, was that, he also used it, that my mom and I had a problematic relationship when I was a teenager. (YP)

These narratives show that disclosure often occurs only after prolonged distress, escalation of abuse or the exhaustion of other coping strategies. Rather than being an immediate pathway to support, disclosure frequently emerges as a response to crisis. This underscores the importance of understanding not only whether children disclose, but when, how and under what conditions they feel able – or forced – to do so.

4. REPORTING



4. REPORTING

This chapter examines reporting and the subsequent role of institutions and tech providers in supporting children to navigate tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

Disrupting Harm defines formal reporting as disclosures made to law enforcement, social workers or a helpline. Survey findings show that fewer than 5 per cent of disclosures made by children aged 12–17 were made through these channels (N=8).⁴⁹

As discussed in previous chapters, children may not always recognize what that were subjected to as exploitation or abuse, nor do they necessarily understand that it was illegal or something they could report to the police or other authorities. In fact, survey results show that the most common reason children did not report through formal channels was that they did not perceive the abuse as serious enough to report (63 per cent, N=31).⁵⁰ Many of the barriers discussed in relation to disclosure are also equally likely to apply to reporting.

In this context, the legal framework plays an important role in mitigating the impact of delayed reporting. In 2013, Serbia abolished statutes of limitations for sexual offences against children.⁵¹ This ensures that even when barriers cause significant delays in reporting, children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation or abuse can still pursue justice whenever they are ready to come forward, without the risk of their case being dismissed due to time limits.

Stigma, shame and guilt can make it difficult for a child to disclose to parents in the first place, which indirectly prevents them from making a formal report.

⁴⁹ Percentage reflects the distribution of disclosures among instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse (N=184 total disclosure responses).

⁵⁰ Percentage reflects the distribution of barriers among children who indicated that they did not formally report being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to a social worker, helpline or law enforcement (N=49).

⁵¹ Republic of Serbia, [Law on Special Measures for the Prevention of Crimes against Sexual Freedoms Involving Minors](#) (2013), art. 5.

4.1 REPORTING MECHANISMS IN SERBIA

In Serbia, children have access to several avenues for formally reporting offences committed against them. For instance, the SOS Children's Village hotline promotes both self-reporting and peer-reporting.⁵² The National Child Helpline NADEL (116 111) also provides children with a safe and confidential way to report situations where their rights have been threatened and to receive counselling and support;⁵³ while the government's online platform 'Čuvam te' ('I'm Keeping You Safe') enables users to report any form of violence against children, including tech-facilitated forms of abuse.⁵⁴ In addition, the non-governmental organization 'Net Patrol', a member of the INHOPE network,⁵⁵ operates a hotline for reporting crimes related to child sexual abuse material and hate speech.⁵⁶

Further, in 2016, the government adopted the Regulation on the Safety and Protection of Children when Using Information and Communication Technologies.⁵⁷ As part of this initiative, the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications established the National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet in 2017 to support the prevention of and response to harm against children in the digital environment.⁵⁸ Children and concerned citizens can contact the Centre via a hotline or through the online platform 'Smart and Safe' to report harmful content or potential violations of children's rights on the internet.⁵⁹

From its establishment and until October 2025, the Centre had responded to 47,701 incoming communications via phone, email and social media. These resulted in the creation of 8,847 cases, of which 599 were forwarded to the relevant authorities. The police were the final recipient in 333 of these cases, while 137 were referred to the Prosecutor.

⁵² SOS Children's Village of Serbia.

⁵³ Child Helpline International. (accessed on 7 September 2025). [Serbia: NADEL – Nacionalna Decija Linija Srbije](#).

⁵⁴ Republic of Serbia, Office for Information Technologies and eGovernment. (accessed on 7 September 2025). [Čuvam te: National platform for the prevention of violence involving children](#).

⁵⁵ Association of Internet Hotline Providers working against child sexual abuse materials online.

⁵⁶ IPROCEEDS, "Advisory mission to Serbia on online fraud and other cybercrime reporting mechanisms" (2016), p. 4. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/3156-iproceeds-report-reporting-mechanism-serbia/16807be385>.

⁵⁷ Republic of Serbia, [Regulation on the Safety and Protection of Children when Using Information and Communication Technologies](#) (2020) [in Serbian].

⁵⁸ Ibid., art. 3; National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet. (accessed on 3 February 2026). [Find more about us](#) [in Serbian].

⁵⁹ Republic of Serbia, [Comments of the Republic of Serbia on the proposal of the concept of General comment on the Rights of children in relation to the digital environment](#), p.1 (accessed on 9 February 2026).

4.1 REPORTING MECHANISMS IN SERBIA



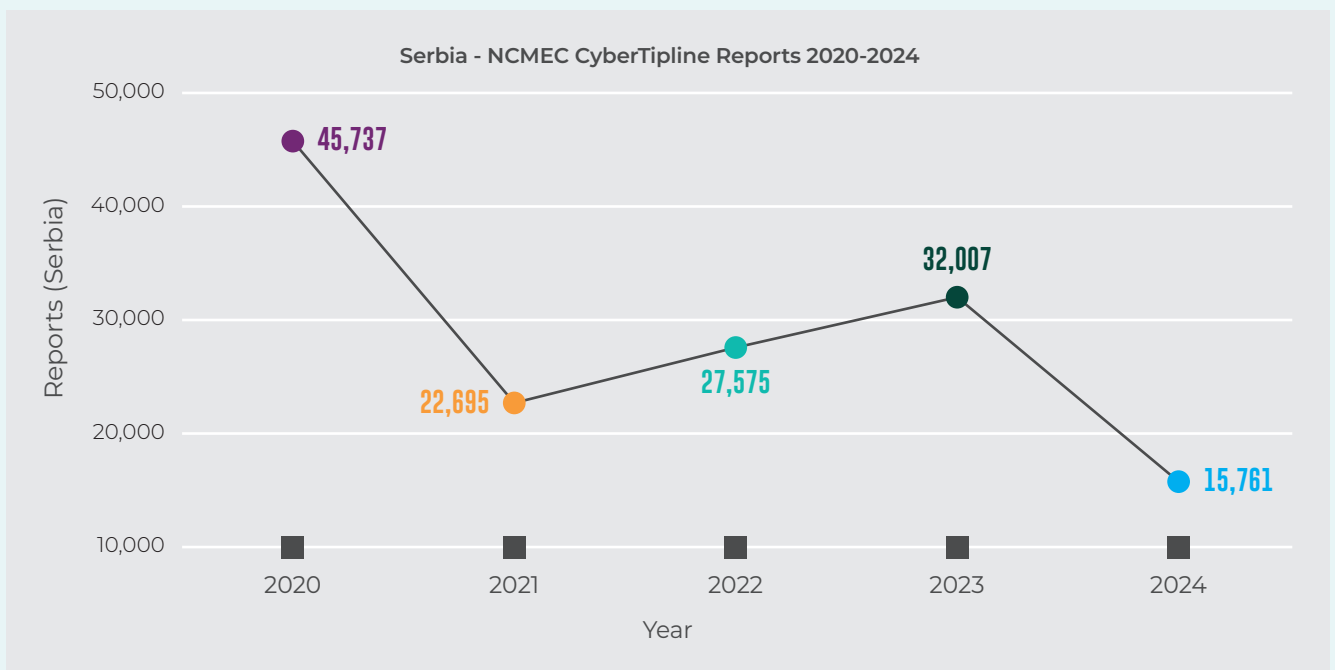
Spotlight: International detections and referrals of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children CyberTipline Reports

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

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

Over the five-year period 2020–2024, NCMEC’s CyberTipline data paint a complex but revealing picture of Serbia within the global flow of suspected child sexual exploitation material online.



2020 stands out sharply, with Serbia accounting for 45,737 reports, more than double than in the years immediately after. The spike in numbers is difficult to interpret in isolation. It could reflect platform-specific detection improvements, routing peculiarities at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic or concentrated activity linked to particular services hosted or accessed through Serbian infrastructure. What the data do not show is whether exploitation in Serbia itself surged, as it tracks upload locations and server routing, rather than the physical location of offenders or children subjected to exploitation or abuse.

In 2021, reports fell to 22,695, an almost 50 per cent drop from the year prior. This fall is consistent with patterns in several countries where specific platforms either adjusted their detection methods or shifted where uploads were processed. An increase in numbers is then seen during 2022 and 2023. These increases could either indicate more content being routed through Serbian-based infrastructure or that reporting systems were attributing uploads to Serbia with greater consistency. As upload location is influenced by virtual private network use, content delivery networks, regional hosting decisions and the technical footprint of major platforms, the data should not be interpreted as an increase of perpetrators in Serbia. Rather, what should be considered is the trend whereby Serbia became a more frequent node in the global routing of flagged material between 2021 and 2023.

While figures from 2024 appear to show a reversal in the upward trend, this must be understood in light of changes in the NCMEC reporting system, whereby instead of counting each platform submission as a separate report, many platforms began bundling related reports into incident packages, impacting report numbers globally. The important takeaway from the figures for Serbia in 2024 is the composition of the figure where around 87 per cent of Serbia-linked reports were formal referrals to law enforcement, indicating their higher seriousness. This ratio is higher than in many countries with far greater volumes.

Across the five years, Serbia accounts for around 0.07 to 0.21 per cent of the global CyberTip reports. However, tens of thousands of uploads over several years represent a steady signal and the rising trend between 2020 and 2023 followed by the high referral ratio in 2024 indicates that Serbia continues to appear as a meaningful node within the broader global network of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The main emerging concern arises from the broader global context, whereby as major platforms move towards end-to-end encryption, and as generative artificial intelligence dramatically increases the volume and variability of illicit material, the reliability of upload-location data will continue to be eroded.

4.2 REPORTING TO AND INTERACTIONS WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

The Section for Combating Child Abuse and Sexual Harassment Online under the Service for High-Tech Crime consists of four inspectors and one head of unit. The unit has full-cycle responsibility for case intake, risk assessment, triage, operational investigation, search-warrant preparation and case-file development in relation to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases. Case files are handed to the Special Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime and consultations under Disrupting Harm show that approximately 80 to 90 per cent of cases referred to the Special Prosecutor's Office contain sufficient evidence to initiate official investigations.

In terms of official reporting, the unit has established operating protocols with national reporting platforms, such as 'Čuvam te' (I'm Keeping You Safe) and the National Contact Centre for Child Safety, whereby there is a regular and tracked transmission of cases suspected to contain tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The unit maintains an email address where a smaller volume of reports from the public are received. Further, it has a working-level relationship with national non-governmental organizations who share relevant information and cases encountered as part of their work.

A substantial portion of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse intelligence is generated through international data streams. The unit has access to information from NCMEC, the child protection system and INTERPOL via the National Central Bureau in Belgrade.

However, survey findings show that only 1 out of the 90 children aged 12–17 subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the survey reported to the police.

Young people who participated in interviews explained how they thought the police might be inaccessible or insensitive. Some young people reflected on what they thought may happen if they reported tech-facilitated sexual abuse or exploitation to the police. Picturing what might happen if he reported to the police, one of the young men said:

“

I don't know, I think the reaction would be something like 'Come on, kid, what...' I think they wouldn't be interested in something like that. I think that I might get some criticism from them, bad words, or who knows what, but help and understanding – certainly not. (YP)

”

Similarly, a young woman who was abused by the person she was in a relationship with said:

“

(...) I believe that, in other countries, if I call the police in that situation, they'll come and react. Here... they would laugh at me probably, if I had called them. (YP)

”

Young people also referred to situations they had heard about or observed where the police had acted in a way that they thought was unhelpful or inappropriate, and how this impacted their view of the police. While this reflects the perception of a few young people only, it indicates that children may have concerns around how law enforcement would react to and handle reports, which could impact their decisions in relation to reporting.

In Serbia, a child under the age of 18 cannot give a statement to the police without a parent or legal guardian. In cases where the parent or guardian is suspected of the offence or their presence may hinder law enforcement duties, police can allow a representative of the guardianship authority to attend instead.⁶⁰ Under the Criminal Procedure Code, when the victim of a criminal offence is a child, their legal representative is authorized to make all statements and undertake all procedural actions on their behalf, meaning the child cannot act independently in such matters. Alternatively, the legal representative may appoint an attorney.⁶¹ However, it should be noted that this rule does not apply to testimonies, interviews and other forms of questioning.

⁶⁰ Republic of Serbia, [Rulebook on the manner and conditions of application of police powers towards minor persons](#) (2019), Form 1.

⁶¹ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2006), art. 56.

As discussed previously, stigma, shame and self-blame can make it difficult for a child to disclose to parents in the first place, which indirectly prevents them from making a formal report. The legal requirement of having a parent or legal guardian present at the police station may therefore act as a very direct barrier for children when it comes to reporting. For some children, these barriers may be even greater, for example, if they are being abused by a family member or if they fear information being shared with parents for other reasons.

This was exemplified by the account of one of the young men, who suffered bullying, including threats and verbal abuse related to his sexuality. He explained his hesitations before calling the police when he was threatened with physical violence by peers:

“ *I was afraid. Will my father and mother find out that I'm gay. And secondly, maybe if my father and the others find out, I will be kicked out of the house. (...) But I said: 'I don't have a father or a mother', and they said, 'Okay'. (YP)*

Two of the young women subjected to abuse by former romantic partners attempted to report the abuse to the police. Their narratives point to a need to strengthen trauma-informed and child-centred practices to ensure that children in such vulnerable situations feel supported, believed and heard.

One of the young women described how after eventually disclosing the abuse, her mother supported her to go to the police:

“ *(...) the next day we went to the police. And that was a very unpleasant experience (...) When I was at the police station, I felt like it was my fault. Everything that happened is my fault, everything that happened and for putting up with it, which is the most stupid question ever, 'Why did I put up with it?' and 'Why didn't we come earlier?' But we came the next day, so... (YP)*

Not being treated with understanding and support can deepen distrust in the system and discourage children from reporting to the police in the future.

When asked how the system could better support children subjected to exploitation or abuse, the same young woman responded:

“ *More women, especially if people come to report domestic violence. In that moment when I came, actually, I think, there were only men. (...) Better training...and some psychological, pedagogical approach, [this] is something they absolutely lack. (YP)*

According to survey data, 72 per cent of the 1,000 parents or guardians responded that they would report to the police if their child was subjected to sexual harassment, abuse or exploitation.

However, one professional explained how there are also situations when parents decide to address abuse outside of the justice system, saying:

“ *(...) it happens, they leave it to be solved on an individual level, they talk to the abuser or parents, they initiate and ask for something to get deleted, removed. And they don't want to start any additional procedures, they don't want anything to be prosecuted further. (FW)*

Asked about the reasons for this, she responded:

“ *(...) sometimes lack of trust in the system, sometimes the idea that those procedures will last for an infinitely long time, that these procedures will be something that actually causes harm to the child, sometimes even more than the act that is reported (...). (FW)*

4.2 REPORTING TO AND INTERACTIONS WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

Children lacking trust in the police and perceiving the police as unhelpful is a concern, as it may prevent children from accessing protection, justice and support. Further, although parents may have more trust, it is the duty of institutions and the professionals working within them to create an accessible, safe and judgment-free environment where children, first and foremost, feel respected and protected.



4.3 LAW ENFORCEMENT CAPACITY AND RESPONSE

Data from the Child Safety Unit show high and increasing operational pressures. In 2024, individual inspectors managed caseloads approaching 200 cases per person (excluding NCMEC referrals). Despite extreme and chronic exposure to traumatic material, there is currently no structured mental health support system in place for these officers. The absence of psychological safeguards not only undermines their well-being but also risks long-term trauma, burnout and attrition, compromising both human capital and institutional effectiveness. Providing mental health resources for these officers is a critical operational necessity. Officers who are emotionally unsupported are less resilient, less effective and more vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress, directly impacting the quality, consistency and sustainability of their work.

Currently, law enforcement resources in relation to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are overwhelmingly concentrated in the capital. This centralization creates serious gaps in coverage, delays responses to emerging threats and limits access to critical support for victims of crime in rural and underserved areas. As digital crimes transcend geographic boundaries and perpetrators increasingly operate outside urban centres, the current model fails to meet the national scale of the issue.

Consultations under the Disrupting Harm project indicated that the provision of training on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse remains fragmented, uneven and heavily reliant on internal knowledge transfer rather than structured professional development. Within the Service for High-Tech Crime, staff assigned to the Section for Combating Child Abuse and Sexual Harassment Online is said to pass on technical know-how to new joiners after they officially become part of the team. Law enforcement professionals consulted, shared that for prosecutors, formal 'specialization' options are limited. Save the Children is the one instance where judges and prosecutors have received joint basic and advanced training on high-tech crime and child online safety. However, there is no state-imposed specialization track for judges on cybercrime or tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse specifically.

Law enforcement officers working with minors are subject to mandatory certification requirements. The long-term goal is to ensure that every police station in Serbia has at least one certified officer trained to work with children.

The institutional framework in Serbia demonstrates structured development, operational experience, and growing international integration. However, capability gaps remain, particularly around legislative alignment with emerging forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, structured training curricula, mental health support for staff exposed to child sexual abuse material and proportional geographical allocation of law enforcement.



Spotlight: Cross-border cooperation and jurisdictional framework

Serbian law enforcement authorities have developed operational cooperation mechanisms to address cross-border tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse through established international partnerships. Consultations with law enforcement conducted in the context of Disrupting Harm found that operational cooperation is well established with INTERPOL, EUROPOL and overseas national-level partners, with INTERPOL producing the highest volume of actionable leads. Serbian engagement in multinational operations – MOSAIC (West Balkans regional operational initiative targeting tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse), Operation STREAM (EUROPOL), and the Serbian Operation Armageddon – reflects established integration with regional and international cybercrime cooperation frameworks. Operation Armageddon, active since 2010, has until 2025 resulted in the discovery of more than 873 criminal acts and the identification of 599 suspects.

4.3 LAW ENFORCEMENT CAPACITY AND RESPONSE

Effective operational cooperation in such cases must be matched by a legal framework that enables the prosecution of offenders across national boundaries. Serbian courts have jurisdiction over offences committed abroad when the victim or the suspect is Serbian, provided that the accused is found in or extradited/returned to Serbia.⁶² Extradition is also possible for offences punishable by at least one year in prison.⁶³

However, the exercise of extraterritorial jurisdiction and extradition is conditional on the offence being criminalized both in Serbia and in the State where it was committed.⁶⁴ This double criminality requirement risks limiting their application where legal definitions differ between jurisdictions and may contribute to the creation of safe havens for offenders, encouraging them to seek out countries with weaker laws.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

Serbian law also allows jurisdiction over crimes committed abroad by foreigners against foreign victims, provided the offence is punishable by at least five years’ imprisonment in the country of commission, and the offender is present in Serbia and not extradited.⁶⁷ No double criminality requirement applies in such cases. While only partially aligned with the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s call for universal jurisdiction over offences related to child sexual exploitation,⁶⁸ it is nonetheless a significant step forward – especially in a time when technology enables borderless exploitation or abuse and demands bold, cross-border legal action.

62 Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), arts. 8(1), 9(1), 10.

63 Republic of Serbia, [Law on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters](#) (2017), art. 13.

64 Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), arts. 8(1), 9(1), 10; Republic of Serbia, [Law on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters](#) (2017), art. 13.

65 ECPAT International, “Extraterritorial Jurisdiction and Extradition Legislation as Tools to Fight the Sexual Exploitation of Children,” Bangkok: ECPAT International (2022), p.7. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/story/extraterritorial-jurisdiction-and-extradition-legislation/>.

66 CRC/C/156, para. 84.

67 Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Code](#) (adopted in 2005, last amended in 2024), art. 9(2).

68 CRC/C/156, para. 87.

4.4 REPORTING TO SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

It should be recalled that a majority (76 per cent) of the 148 instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse reported by children aged 12–17 in the survey took place on social media platforms. On many platforms, the user has an option to report abusive content to the tech provider. In Serbia, one third of children who were subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse via social media made such a report (N=27).⁶⁹ The most common platforms where children directly reported the abuse were Instagram (N=21), TikTok (N=14) and to a lesser extent, WhatsApp (N=4). This is likely because Instagram was the most common platform where tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse occurred but could also suggest that their reporting function is perceived as accessible and viable by children.

However, children in the survey reported that in their view, social media platforms only took meaningful action in around half of the reported cases. For example, out of the 21 reports to Instagram by children aged 12–17 reported in the survey, only 10 children received what they perceived to be a helpful response.

Similar views were expressed by young people in interviews. A young woman who received unwanted sexual content via Instagram was asked by the researcher if she ever reported it to the tech provider. She responded:

“

Well, it happened two, three times, but nothing happened, the profile stays on and that's it. (YP)

”

The limited responsiveness described from platforms points to a potential gap between the availability of reporting tools and their actual effectiveness, raising concerns about platform accountability and the broader legal responsibilities of online service providers in protecting children from harm. These challenges are compounded by the fact that Serbian law places minimal proactive obligations on internet service providers and online platforms to prevent tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and curb the dissemination of child sexual abuse material.

The Law on Electronic Commerce states that “*information society services*” (a term that encompasses both internet service providers and online platforms) must report suspected unlawful user conduct to authorities or face fines. However, they are not obliged to monitor the data they have stored, transmitted, or made available, nor to investigate circumstances that may indicate such conduct.⁷⁰ This approach severely limits early detection of child sexual abuse material, potentially allowing it to circulate unchecked until someone reports it.

In addition, the Law on Electronic Commerce provides for the exclusion of intermediary liability for third-party content.⁷¹ One exception is that information society services must remove unlawful content within two working days upon request from a competent authority. If a third party requests removal, the provider must act within the same time frame or refer the matter to the relevant authority for determination.⁷² Failure to meet these obligations can result in fines.⁷³ However, the Law does not expressly require service providers to establish clear, accessible and user-friendly mechanisms for reporting

⁶⁹ Percentage reflects distribution of children who were subjected to any form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation on social media (N=82 total number of children).

⁷⁰ Republic of Serbia, [Law on Electronic Commerce](#) (2009), arts. 20, 22.

⁷¹ Freedom House. (2024). [Freedom on the Net 2024: Serbia](#).

⁷² Republic of Serbia, [Law on Electronic Commerce](#) (2009), art. 20.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, art. 20.

4.4 REPORTING TO SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

illegal content. As a result, the availability of such mechanisms depends entirely on the policies and design choices of each individual platform, which may leave ordinary users, including children, with no straightforward path to trigger content removal.

Against this backdrop, the 2023 Law on Electronic Media represents a potential breakthrough, as it explicitly classifies video-sharing platforms as information society services, thereby subjecting them to the obligations set forth in the Law on Electronic Commerce.⁷⁴ The Law on Electronic Media also requires these platforms to take appropriate measures to protect children from video content – whether program-based or user-generated – that could harm “*their physical, mental or moral development*”, and to protect the public from child sexual abuse material.⁷⁵

In 2024, the Serbian Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media adopted a Rulebook outlining these measures, labelled as mandatory. It requires video-sharing platforms to establish and implement user-friendly and transparent reporting mechanisms for content that may harm the physical, mental or “*moral development of children*”, including child sexual abuse material. These platforms must also implement a robust system for age verification to restrict access to harmful content based on a user’s age, enable users to categorize content that could be harmful

to children and offer parental control systems to help safeguard children from exposure to inappropriate material.⁷⁶

However, it should be noted that the Law on Electronic Media only applies to companies or subsidiaries headquartered in Serbia,⁷⁷ thereby excluding major international platforms from its scope.⁷⁸ In addition, its restriction to video-sharing platforms – excluding other widely used online services and internet service providers – significantly limits the Law’s effectiveness in addressing the full range of online environments where children may be at risk. Nonetheless, it sets an important regulatory precedent and offers a framework that should be expanded to cover a wider array of digital services to ensure consistent and effective child protection in the digital space.

Taken together, these legal instruments reflect some progress towards stronger online child protection. However, their limited scope, fragmented application and reliance on reactive mechanisms highlight the need for a more comprehensive and proactive framework to ensure children’s safety across all digital environments. In addition, broader concerns regarding the independence, transparency and accountability of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media highlight the need to strengthen institutional credibility.⁷⁹

74 Republic of Serbia, [Law on Electronic Media](#) (2023), art. 4(31).

75 Ibid., art. 115.

76 Republic of Serbia, [Rulebook on Mandatory Measures for Video Sharing Platform Service Providers](#) (2024), art. 2.

77 Republic of Serbia, [Law on Electronic Media](#) (2023), art. 117.

78 Petrovic, M, and Nikitovic, D. “Extended Scope of the Law on Electronic Media”, CEE Legal Matters, 14 December 2023. Available at: <https://ceelegalmatters.com/serbia/25115-extended-scope-of-the-law-on-electronic-media>.

79 See, for instance, European Commission, *2025 Rule of Law Report: Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Serbia* (2025), pp. 10, 11. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/298f86d5-723b-4d3e-90b4-98ea24d9c885_en?filename=2025%20Rule%20of%20Law%20Report%20-%20Country%20Chapter%20Serbia_0.pdf; European Federation of Journalists, “Serbia: Election of REM Council undermines democratic principles”, 20 November 2025. Available at: <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2025/11/20/serbia-election-of-rem-council-undermines-democratic-principles/>; N1 Info, “IPI says REM Council election process not transparent”, 19 June 2025. Available at: <https://n1info.rs/english/news/ipi-says-rem-council-election-process-not-transparent/>.

5. HELP- AND SUPPORT-SEEKING BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



5. HELP- AND SUPPORT-SEEKING BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Data from the survey show that none of the children (aged 12–17) disclosed the abuse they had been subjected to, to a social worker, and only seven instances were disclosed to a helpline.

Several of the young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children recounted feeling alone, without any institutions, trusted adults or professionals to turn to. As outlined in the chapter on disclosure, they identified a range of barriers. When discussing options for seeking support outside their social network, some young people explained that such options did not appear to be readily available.

A young woman who was in an abusive relationship explained how, to her, there appeared to be a lack of places where young people can seek support or services:

“
I'm sorry that there is no, for example, an institution (...), where I can come and say that I have a problem (...). And it's really a shame that we don't have [anyone] to turn to. (YP)
”

Other young people explained how they were not aware of or had not received information about the services available. When given a list of service providers from the clinical researcher after the interview, one of the young men said:

“
(...) we never received something like this, neither in elementary school nor in high school. (...) maybe it would mean something to someone at school to receive just this one piece of paper, to know that they can... (YP)
”

Similarly, a young woman commented:

“
(...) I simply didn't know that there are some of those phone lines in Serbia to which I can turn to and if, for example, I was experiencing sexual violence or any sort of violence, now, I would probably turn to those phone lines and use them. (YP)
”

These accounts indicate how places where children can seek help or services may be perceived as unavailable or even invisible by young people.

5.1 SCHOOLS

In interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children, schools often emerged as the first, and sometimes only, option for seeking help outside their social network.

Schools can play a crucial role in helping children navigate abuse through identification, intervention and support. This is especially important considering that in one third of the instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse reported in the survey, children first met the person who subjected them to abuse at school (N=22).⁸⁰

As previously discussed, several young people mentioned a lack of awareness and education about tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. One young woman noted:

“
It wasn't even talked about in schools. (YP)
”

Schools have the potential to provide children with comprehensive education that includes discussions of sexual and other types of violence, personal boundaries, consent and healthy relationships. Providing children with information on these topics can help them recognize potential abuse and to disclose or make a formal report.

In Serbia, the preventive and protective role of schools is reinforced by a clear legal framework defining their responsibilities in cases of exploitation and abuse, including when facilitated through technology. School staff are legally required to immediately report any suspected or confirmed case of violence or abuse against a child. Once a case is identified, the school must then take appropriate measures, depending on the severity of the offence, to secure the child's safety. In the most severe cases, the school has to promptly notify the Centre for Social Work or the police. Schools are also required to provide or facilitate access to psychosocial support, protection and referral to other services, while ensuring that the privacy and dignity of the child

are always upheld. Each school must also establish an internal team for protection against violence, which is responsible for coordinating responses, monitoring cases, and implementing preventive and intervention measures.⁸¹

Young people participating in interviews expressed various expectations about schools and their staff, including raising awareness about (tech-facilitated) exploitation and abuse, recognizing signs of distress in young people and taking action, being a place where young people can speak to a trusted adult, and providing guidance on available support services and formal reporting.

While some young people referred to positive experiences of receiving support or assistance through school, others discussed negative experiences and areas for improvement. A young woman who was subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse and raped by the young man she was in a relationship with reflected on how she would have likely opened up about the abuse if someone had given her the space to. She also believed there were clear signs in her behaviour at school indicating that she was distressed. She said:

“
(...) nobody at school noticed, and there were situations, to notice that something was wrong with me. So, no one is doing their job. (YP)
”

It is important that school staff have the capacity to identify signs of distress and abuse, offer support to children, and feel confident in and know how to intervene appropriately when necessary. These and other incidents identified by young people and professionals indicate a need to strengthen this capacity in schools in Serbia.

In the survey, 97 per cent of children aged 12–17 responded that there was at least one teacher they could go to if they had a problem (N=896). This shows the potential for schools as an avenue for disclosure and reporting that could be further leveraged.

⁸⁰ Children had the option to respond to this survey question with a total of 67 valid responses.

⁸¹ Republic of Serbia, [Rulebook on the Protocol of Conduct of Educational Institutions in Response to Violence, Abuse and Neglect](#) (2024).

5.1 SCHOOLS

One of the young men recounted the support he received from the school psychologist in primary school when he suffered severe bullying and tech-facilitated sexual abuse. He explained how the school psychologist worked with other school staff to address a particular incident and continued to be a source of support. However, other young people discussed instances that made them distrust school staff.

The other young man recalled hearing school staff use derogatory language about people identifying as LGBTQI+. He explained how this made him hesitant to seek their support should he need to. A young woman expressed her disappointment when attempting to seek support through the school psychologist:

“ ***And that woman, the psychologist at school, whatever... it's really a disaster, for you to see that a child has a problem, and you don't show up twice. And I still came during school time to ask, like, 'When will you be there?', 'You weren't there'. She's like, 'Come on, come tomorrow'. I come tomorrow, she's not there. There I give up (...). (YP)*** ”

Lack of intervention and the absence of adequate responses, support or services from school staff can lead to distrust in adults and impede both disclosure and reporting in the future. It could also exacerbate the impact of abuse, if a child is not supported and is unable to report the abuse.

Interviews with professionals and young people point to a need for capacity-building among school staff in relation to their responsibilities for both addressing and referring situations of violence and abuse. Despite the clear legal framework described above, several young people and professionals interviewed raised concerns around how schools handle reports of tech-facilitated sexual abuse, as well as violence more broadly. Participants recounted situations in which schools had either not acted or had taken inappropriate action.

A young woman described how, after ending an abusive relationship, the person she had been in the relationship with shared her sexual content online. After initially disclosing to her parents, but her parents not taking any action, she sought help through school. She explained how the school arranged a meeting between her and two classmates involved in sharing her sexual content online:

“ ***I had a conversation with the class teacher, with the psychologist, I had a conversation where those two girls were present, that conversation wasn't pleasant at all. (YP)*** ”

About a week later she was told by the class teacher that nothing could be done as she had initially shared the photos herself.

While limited details are provided in this case, the approach taken by the school described raises questions. While it is not clear what happened next, it seems that no referral was made and no further discussion was held with the young woman to provide support or services or that could have revealed the wider extent of the abuse that she was subjected to.

In another interview, a lawyer recounted a case where a girl took a photo with explicit content of a peer in the school toilet and then shared the photo in a Snapchat group. The photo then spread further and this was reported to the school. When asked how the school responded, the lawyer said:

“ ***(...) their role was that of a mute observer (...). Later, during the process, we questioned the pedagogue, the psychologist, the principal and the teacher... Their defence was that it all happened on the internet, that the picture was taken at school, but that everything else happened outside the school, so as such, the school is not responsible, because the school cannot take care of what the children do at home. (JP)*** ”

In this instance, digital technology was used on school premises by a student to create child sexual abuse material of another student. The fact that the abuse material was uploaded at home has no bearing on school staff's responsibilities to address violence or abuse involving children that they become aware of. These, as well as other examples from the research, highlight a need for capacity-building and support for staff to be able to fulfil their responsibilities.

In contrast, a judge shared an example where a school's response was highly effective in mitigating some of the harm of tech-facilitated child sexual abuse. This showcases the value in empowering schools and school staff to respond to these issues:

“

Unfortunately, that image partly spread, but due to the timely activity of that team within the school, it was stopped, and it hasn't [spread further]. (JP)

”

Given that young people spend a substantial portion of their time in school, schools have the potential to play a significant role across identification and referral of abuse as well as the provision of support and linking children to further services. Strengthening the role of schools as informative, safe and supportive spaces, and ensuring that they understand and fulfil their responsibilities, could make a significant difference for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

5.2 PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

The Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence establishes Groups for Coordination and Cooperation, bringing together representatives from the Prosecutor's Office, police and social welfare centres at the local level.⁸² In cases involving children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse,⁸³ these groups are required to prepare an individual plan of protection and support. Wherever possible, the child should be involved in the process. The plan should include measures to ensure the child's safety; provide psychological, psychosocial and other assistance to promote the child's recovery, empowerment and independence; assign clear responsibilities to officials; establish time limits; and include a process for monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of the actions taken.⁸⁴

The obligation to prepare an individual plan applies to all sexual crimes. However, online grooming of children for sexual purposes – when intended as a stand-alone offence – as well as blackmail and extortion, are not subject to the measures provided in the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the Law does not clearly specify whether it applies to sexual offences committed by perpetrators who are not in a family relationship, kinship or partnership with the person subjected to violence, which creates gaps in their protection.

Although the Law on Social Protection lists children subjected to abuse, neglect and exploitation as entitled to social care,⁸⁶ it provides no indication of specialized or targeted services for children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse. In addition, interviews revealed gaps in the availability, accessibility and quality of support services, particularly in cases of tech-facilitated child exploitation or abuse.

An important issue raised by participants in interviews is that when children do seek support through formal services, these services are not always properly equipped to assist them. When asked about the barriers they face in their work, front-line workers mentioned a range of general and systemic issues, such as heavy workloads, lack of resources and a shortage of specialized services.

A professional with insight into the work of the Centres for Social Work commented on the heavy workloads of the Centres and how this may affect the ability to provide quality services for and engage in more in-depth work with children, young people and their families. The professional described how heavy caseloads may force difficult decisions about when support can be provided and what types of services are offered, referring to how a case involving tech-facilitated abuse, with no in-person component, would likely be treated as a lower priority, as the consequences for the child would be less concrete.

Front-line workers within statutory services and civil society identified a lack of specialized services for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, especially outside of the capital. This introduces logistical and financial challenges for children and families from other parts of the country in accessing these services. As stated by a professional from a non-governmental organization:

“

Here, when there is direct work, especially with minors, I say again, the absence of services. We do not have enough child psychiatrists, nor psychotherapists, nor enough, we don't have specialized institutions that will deal with children who have suffered sexual violence, not to mention [in] the online sphere. (FW)

”

82 Republic of Serbia, [Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence](#), (2017), arts. 25, 26.

83 Ibid., art. 4.

84 Ibid., art. 31.

85 Ibid., art. 4.

86 Republic of Serbia, [Law on Social Protection](#) (2011), art. 40.

Children who have been subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse require access to institutions that offer psychosocial support. The absence of adequate mental health services risks leaving children without the necessary resources for support and recovery. Three of the young women who participated in interviews had been subjected to online and in-person abuse by a person they were in a relationship with while under the age of 18. This included abuse over multiple months, isolation from their friends, controlling behaviour, blackmail, and verbal and physical abuse. Two of the young women were raped by their partner.

Two of these young women reported the abuse to the police, while one sought help via school when her sexual content was shared online. They all described not being offered or referred to psychosocial support.

One of the young women described how she saw a psychologist for a forensic assessment in relation to the judicial process but was not offered any further support afterwards:

“ *(...) I was in that one meeting, but we didn't get anything. We only got a recommendation for some pills. I mean... so yes, that was it (...).* (YP)

These young women explained how the abuse was still affecting them, many years after it occurred. One of the young women described how every now and then she sees the person who abused her as they live in the same area, and that this causes her to shake uncontrollably. She also has frequent flashbacks of the abuse.

In their interviews, they raised the importance of the provision of psychosocial services. One of the young women said:

“ *(...) I think it would be extremely necessary that someone who comes to report violence, of any kind, (...) go to a talk with the psychologist, which is free and provided by that institution. (...) And someone who will do their job in a quality way, not just listen and like 'Okay, go home, treat yourself', give pills and treat yourself. I think with meds... that you don't heal anything. (...). So, there, I would change that.* (YP)

When asked about any support received after the abuse, the young women expressed how they felt left on their own. One of them said:

“ *(...) even if I reported it and if I did something, I still felt like I was left on my own. And then, over time, I realized that every woman here, in this country, is left on her own. And like, that, we don't have an adequate support system for women who are going through much worse things than what I went through.* (YP)

When asked about what had been most useful to her, one of the young women responded:

“ *Nothing. Nothing. Institutions - nothing, a minus, literally. And from the police to the school, to... everyone, truly a zero.* (YP)

6. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES



6. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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

Initiatives dedicated to educating children about online harms are important, but a focus on individual awareness risks overlooking the root causes of sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as the mechanisms that enable its continuation, such as harmful gender norms, social stigma, weak community-level accountability and the ability of individuals to abuse their power over children with limited consequences.

6.1 POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

Serbia has implemented several regulatory and policy measures aimed at preventing violence against children in the digital environment. In July 2016, it adopted the Regulation on the Safety and Protection of Children when Using Information and Communication Technologies, which was subsequently updated in 2020.⁸⁷ The Regulation requires the Ministry “responsible for information security affairs” to undertake preventive measures to ensure the safety and protection of children in the digital world, including through education and awareness-raising activities aimed at children, parents, legal guardians and teachers regarding the benefits and risks of internet use, as well as safe online practices.⁸⁸ It also mandates the establishment of a single entity for providing advice on and receiving reports related to child online safety,⁸⁹ pursuant to which the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications established the National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet in 2017.⁹⁰ The Centre’s website provides educational resources for parents, children and teachers on topics such as online grooming, safe digital practices, cyberflashing, artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material, and parental control tools.⁹¹ In addition, Centre experts deliver awareness-raising presentations in schools and other settings.⁹²

The now-expired Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2020–2023 in Serbia addressed violence occurring both in person and in the digital environment, including online harassment and the exploitation of children to produce child sexual abuse material. The Strategy placed strong emphasis on prevention, setting out dedicated activities to strengthen children’s

capacity for violence prevention through training delivered in educational institutions as part of regular and extracurricular preschool and school programmes, peer workshops and other initiatives. It also provided for education and training activities targeting relevant professionals, as well as parents, guardians and caregivers, together with broader public awareness-raising measures, including campaigns promoting the beneficial, creative and safe use of information technologies.⁹³

The Strategy was complemented by an Action Plan for 2020–2021, which set out progress indicators.⁹⁴ However, no comparable action plan was adopted for 2022–2023,⁹⁵ making it difficult to assess the extent to which the Strategy’s preventive measures were systematically implemented and monitored beyond 2021. In 2023, the Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention noted that it was unclear whether all children benefit from information on sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, including risks related to child self-generated sexual content, and stressed that such activities should not depend on the discretion of individual schools or teachers.⁹⁶

As the Strategy expired in 2023, the prompt adoption of a new iteration and accompanying action plan is important to ensure continuity of response efforts and introduce specific actions to prevent tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, taking into account emerging risks, such as the use of artificial intelligence to generate child sexual abuse material. As of March 2026, a new Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence was being developed under the leadership of the Ministry for Family Care and Demography, with support from UNICEF.⁹⁷

87 Republic of Serbia, [Regulation on the safety and protection of children when using information and communication technologies](#) (2020) [in Serbian].

88 Ibid., arts. 3, 4.

89 Ibid., art. 3.

90 National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet (accessed on 3 February 2026). [Find more about us](#) [in Serbian].

91 National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet (accessed on 3 February 2026). [Educational material: Useful texts and tips](#) [in Serbian].

92 National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet (accessed on 4 February 2026). [Report on the work of the National Contact Center for the Safety of Children on the Internet for 2024](#) [in Serbian].

93 Republic of Serbia, [Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2020-2023](#) (2020), pp. 27–28.

94 Republic of Serbia [Action Plan 2020-2021 for the Implementation of the Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence 2020-2023](#) (2020) [in Serbian].

95 UNICEF Serbia, personal communication, March 2026.

96 Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention, “Lanzarote Committee Implementation Report on ‘The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos (CSGSIV)’ – Factsheet – Serbia”, p.28 (2023, updated March 2025). Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-serbia-the-protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploitation/1680acdef>.

97 RTV [Odbor za prava deteta: Država opredeljena da unapredi sistem zaštite dece od nasilja](#) (2026).

6.2 THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IN PREVENTION

Despite existing initiatives, professionals described prevention efforts as uneven and largely centred on awareness-raising, rather than as a part of coordinated, long-term approach to preventing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Prevention activities were often described as sporadic and dependent on individual organizations or projects, rather than embedded within a broader systemic response.

As in other countries participating in the Disrupting Harm study, schools emerged as the primary entry point for prevention activities. A front-line worker described extensive outreach activities in relation to children's safety online, including presentations and workshops delivered to both students and parents across schools in Serbia. These activities were described to typically involve one-off sessions and were often constrained by time and resources. While such initiatives have reached large numbers of children and parents, professionals emphasized that their impact is difficult to assess and sustain.

Professionals highlighted that while children may have developed digital skills, these do not necessarily translate into safety skills, or the critical awareness needed to navigate harms online. A front-line worker asserted:

“

(...) children are digitally savvy, but not digitally literate. (...) they are skilled, they know everything about those technical things (...) but when it comes to protection measures and recognizing some manipulation or some risks, it's very weak. (FW)

”

However, survey data do not show a significant association between children's digital skills and their exposure to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse. The safety-related skills measured in the survey do not appear to prevent tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse.⁹⁸ This may reflect limitations in the particular skills captured in the survey, or the possibility that digital skills alone can only offer partial protection.

For example, while skills such as managing privacy settings or blocking contacts are often promoted as protective, the data do not allow conclusions about whether or under what conditions these measures are effective in preventing abuse. Moreover, an overemphasis on children's digital skills risks placing responsibility for prevention on children themselves, rather than on adults, institutions and the systems responsible for their protection. Initiatives dedicated to educating children about online harms are important, but a focus on individual awareness risks overlooking the root causes of sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as the mechanisms that enable its continuation, such as harmful gender norms, social stigma, weak community-level accountability and the ability of individuals to abuse their power over children with limited consequences. As a young man reflected:

“

If we want to work on it, the system has to change, the state has to change, parents have to be educated about these things, teachers... I would say that we have to talk. Full stop. That's it. (YP)

”

⁹⁸ The safety skills measured in the survey include:

- I know how to change my privacy settings (e.g. to control who can see the things I post or who can speak to me online or on social media)
- I know how to check whether a website can be trusted
- I know how to choose the best keywords for online searches
- I know which images of me and my friends to share online
- I know when to remove people from my contact lists
- I know how to report harmful content on social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, [insert locally relevant examples])
- I know how to edit existing digital images, music and videos
- I know how to block unwanted pop-up messages or ads

6.2 THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IN PREVENTION

Apart from schools, prevention activities were also described as taking place through youth organizations, civil society initiatives and social services. However, these efforts were often characterized as short-term and dependent on external funding, limiting their sustainability and reach. Law enforcement was occasionally mentioned as being involved in prevention, though its role was not clearly articulated, pointing to gaps in coordination across sectors.

Survey data underscore that parents play a crucial role in children's online safety but may not be well equipped to support them. Almost 45 per cent of the 1,000 parents/caregivers surveyed said that they received no information about how to help

and support their child's internet use and how to keep them safe. If parents did receive this support, it was mostly from family and friends (36 per cent), followed by a child's school (24 per cent).

Taken together with the qualitative data, these findings suggest that while existing prevention efforts are valued, they remain insufficient in addressing the social norms, institutional gaps and structural conditions that allow tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to persist. More comprehensive and coordinated approaches are therefore needed – ones that shift responsibility away from children and towards the systems and adults responsible for safeguarding them across both digital and in-person environments.

7. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES



7. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

Going through the justice system can be distressing for children, having to recount the abuse they were subjected to while finding themselves in an unfamiliar and likely intimidating setting. To protect children from secondary victimization, it is essential that child-centred procedures that respond to their needs and rights, protect them from further harm and promote their well-being are used.

Several justice professionals from public institutions and the civil society sector discussed how ensuring the child's well-being and providing adequate preparation for the justice process is important not only for the child but is also more likely to ensure a quality justice process and outcome. As explained by a judge:

“

There is no such thing as ideal, but I also see the difference when it is done with quality, both by the police and by the prosecutor. You can see the difference in the main trial, and then, of course, it is much easier in court. (JP)

”

Reflecting on the difference in cases where such procedures are not well implemented, he said:

“

(...) [victims] have resistance, they won't testify before the court anymore, or the testimony changes (...) or simply, they won't respond to the calls, (...) Or, in the extreme, you see that you have in front of you a complete victim who has really been exposed, and continues to be exposed to secondary victimization. (JP)

”

This chapter examines the response by the justice system to cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including both the existing legal framework and its implementation in practice by institutions and professionals. It highlights good practices but also areas where findings indicate that implementation may need to be strengthened to reduce the risk of further trauma and ensure that justice proceedings fully uphold children's rights.

7.1 LEGAL SAFEGUARDS

Serbian legislation provides several measures to protect the rights of child victims of crime involved in legal proceedings, with particular attention to their privacy. While criminal hearings are normally open to the public,⁹⁹ courts can close all or part of the proceedings, either on their own initiative or at the request of a party or defence counsel, to safeguard the best interests of child.¹⁰⁰ Judicial authorities can also impose confidentiality on anyone involved in gathering, presenting and assessing evidence,¹⁰¹ thereby helping to prevent the disclosure of the child's personal information.

The Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles mandates that adults suspected of a wide range of offences against children, including extortion, sexual violence and some offences related to child sexual abuse material, be tried by a bench presided over by a judge with special expertise in the field of children's rights.¹⁰² The police officers and investigating judges involved must also possess comparable expertise.¹⁰³ While this rule does not extend to cases of online grooming for sexual purposes – intended as an offence in itself – these can still be initiated by a prosecutor with special expertise in children's rights and the protection of children in criminal proceedings, if deemed necessary for the purpose of protecting the child's personality.¹⁰⁴ Further, judges, investigative judges and prosecutors must treat children with care, considering their age, character, education, and living circumstances, and strive towards avoiding possible prejudicial consequences of the proceedings.¹⁰⁵

The Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles also guarantees mandatory legal representation for child victims of crime from the first questioning of the defendant, with the court responsible for appointing and covering the cost of a specialized lawyer if needed.¹⁰⁶ The Law on Free Legal Assistance further stipulates that children involved in court proceedings are entitled to free legal aid, regardless of their citizenship status.¹⁰⁷

The 2023 Law on the Organization of Courts establishes dedicated services within Higher Courts and other courts designated by the High Judicial Council to support and assist victims and witnesses of crime.¹⁰⁸ The Law also provides for the designation of contact points in Basic Courts and other designated courts to facilitate the provision of information to victims and witnesses,¹⁰⁹ such as informing them about and referring them to available support and assistance services.¹¹⁰ However, these mechanisms are not specific to children and do not guarantee that information and support are provided in a child-centred manner.

A number of additional child-centred safeguards and procedures are discussed throughout this chapter. Many of these were referred to by professionals interviewed for this study, who provided examples of how they are applied in practice. However, interviewees also indicated that implementation is not always consistent, with variations in how and to what extent existing protections are applied in individual cases.

99 Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2006), art. 362.

100 Ibid., art. 363.

101 Ibid., art. 304.

102 Republic of Serbia, [Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles](#) (2005), art. 150.

103 Ibid., art. 151.

104 Ibid., art. 150.

105 Ibid., art. 152(1).

106 Ibid. art. 154.

107 Republic of Serbia, [Law on Free Legal Assistance](#) (2019), art. 4.

108 Republic of Serbia, [Law on the Organization of Courts](#) (2023), art. 52. For a full list of Higher Courts where such services have been established, see the [Interactive map of services and institutions providing assistance and support to victims of criminal offences in Serbia](#). (accessed on 19 March 2026).

109 Republic of Serbia, [Law on the Organization of Courts](#) (2023), art. 52.

110 Ibid., art. 52.

7.2 THE RIGHT TO BE INFORMED

In Serbia, prosecutors and courts are required to inform victims of criminal offences of their rights, including the right to submit and examine evidence, to be represented by a lawyer and to participate.¹¹¹ However, the law does not explicitly require this information to be provided to children in an age-appropriate or child-sensitive manner. Services to inform victims of crime about their rights under the Criminal Procedure Code, how to exercise them, their obligations, the status of their case and available support services are provided within the country's main Public Prosecutor's Offices, including the Public Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime.¹¹²

In practice, some of the professionals interviewed described the work they do to keep children informed and explain the justice process. A psychologist working in the justice system explained how the work includes preparing children for their appearance in court by facilitating children's visits to the court and going through what will happen there. A professional from the Centre for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking explained how they would explain the steps of the justice process to the child and the potential outcomes of judicial procedures. Further, they explained how they would provide information about available services and set expectations about what the child can anticipate, to increase the sense of predictability.

However, interviews with young people and professionals indicated that there is still room to strengthen practice to ensure that children receive information during the different stages in which they may interact with the justice system or other institutions.

A young woman explained the limited and delayed information she received in relation to the progress of her case. The outcome of the case was very important to her and the limited information she received indicated a lack of care and understanding to her. Thinking back, she recalled:

“

My mom's calling me (...) She tells me that we won the trial, the trial was three weeks ago and like, the lawyer...I called the lawyer, he says – 'Aha', like, 'That ended'. And that moment when those people don't care all that much, and to me it was so important that he truly gets the punishment. (YP)

”

The same young woman described the lack of information she received in relation to the evidence she provided to the police; in terms of what evidence was collected, what evidence was used and what happened to it when the case was closed. Considering the personal nature of such evidence and the distress that children may feel about their sexual material being available outside of their control, wanting this information is understandable.

Professionals also discussed the lack of information provided to children or their parents or caregivers and how this may directly limit access to support and services. A front-line worker from a non-governmental organization discussed this in a case where she had supported a young girl:

“

She can get the status of a 'particularly vulnerable' witness, in the sense that she doesn't have to testify more than once, but someone needs to tell her that she can get that. (...) some information was not forwarded to the child's mother... and the girl was not treated in such a way (...). (FW)

”

¹¹¹ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2006), art. 50.

¹¹² UNICEF Serbia, personal communication, March 2026. For a full list of Public Prosecutor's Offices where such services have been established, see the [Interactive map of services and institutions providing assistance and support to victims of criminal offences in Serbia](#). (accessed on 19 March 2026).

Under the Criminal Procedure Code, the authority conducting the proceedings – typically prosecutors or judges – may grant the status of a ‘particularly vulnerable’ witness either on its own initiative or upon the request of the parties or the witness themselves.¹¹³ This status can also be proposed by the newly established services for support to victims and witnesses of crime (established in all higher Public Prosecutor’s Offices in the Republic of Serbia, the Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime, the Prosecutor’s Office for War Crimes and all higher courts in Serbia).¹¹⁴ This status, though not child-specific, ensures the application of special protective measures aimed at safeguarding the witness’s well-being and preventing retraumatization and intimidation during the proceedings. Regardless of whether this status is granted, children remain entitled to all protections afforded under the Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles. In the case above, however, the authority failed to act on its own initiative, and neither the child nor

her mother was informed of their right to request this status. This points to a double failure: first, the system’s inability to proactively safeguard the child, despite having the legal tools to do so; second, a failure to provide the family and the child with the information they needed to exercise their rights.

Overall, these accounts indicate that whether children are informed of their rights or procedural developments can depend on individual discretion rather than consistent practice. To ensure that legal protections and safeguards, such as the status of a ‘particularly vulnerable’ witness, are truly accessible, the law should expressly require justice professionals to inform child victims of crimes and their guardians, in an age-appropriate manner, of all their rights at every stage of the process. This obligation should include clear information about available support services and safeguards and be reinforced by training to equip professionals to communicate them effectively to children.

¹¹³ Republic of Serbia, *Criminal Procedure Code* (2006), art. 103.

¹¹⁴ <https://www.podrskazrtvama.rs/lat/pomoc-i-podraska/ko-pruza-podrsku.php#tuzilastvo>

7.3 REPEATED QUESTIONING

Under the *Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles*, child victims of crime may be questioned no more than twice, with additional questioning permitted only in exceptional cases where it is necessary to obtain crucial information.¹¹⁵ In addition, questioning must be conducted with the involvement of a psychologist, social worker or other qualified expert.¹¹⁶ These safeguards aim to prevent secondary victimization by reducing the risk of repeated or insensitive questioning, thereby minimizing the potential psychological harm to the child.

While professionals from both the child protection and justice systems emphasized the negative impact on children having to provide repeated testimonies about the abuse they were subjected to, interviews indicate that limiting questioning to an absolute minimum may not be consistently adhered to, with additional hearings deemed necessary for different reasons. A lawyer discussing this stated:

“

(...) the rule is actually the exception, and the exception is the rule, and minor victims are heard much more than they should be. (JP)

”

When asked about the reason for this, she commented that the situation of the person subjected to the abuse is generally not given sufficient weight. She further explained how the lengthy duration of trials – spanning years – may be a main reason, as this causes judges to be replaced mid-trial, if the initial judge transfers to another court or is promoted. When a new judge takes on the case, they may then insist on hearing the child's testimony again.

A prosecutor explained how she had experienced judges arguing for hearing the child again:

“

Usually, the psychologists we collaborate with insist that it's unnecessary to call the child again, and this now becomes a struggle. The court, or rather the judge, insists on seeing and hearing the child, which is complete nonsense to me, because all the participants in the proceedings except the judge have seen, heard, and recorded everything. (...) and then someone insists that the child should come, sometimes even the accused insists (...) Whether it's for their judgments, decisions, to maintain that judgment, whether it's because of those appeals in the Appeal Court, I don't know for what reasons, (...) ... sometimes we manage to convince them that it's unnecessary (...). (JP)

”

In light of these challenges, the status of particularly vulnerable witnesses under the Criminal Procedure Code can serve as a key safeguard against further trauma. Indeed, victims of criminal offences, including children, who are granted this status may be questioned only by the authority conducting the proceedings.¹¹⁷ A judge explained this provision being implemented in cases he had presided over:

“

I never saw the child in any case. Because they had the status of 'particularly vulnerable' witnesses, they were questioned by the prosecution, and then no one insisted on their direct questioning at the main trial. (JP)

”

¹¹⁵ Republic of Serbia, [Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles](#) (2005), art. 152(2).

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, art. 152(1).

¹¹⁷ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2006), arts. 103, 104.

Taken together, these findings indicate that, despite the existence of legal safeguards aimed at limiting repeated questioning, gaps remain in their implementation. Measures should therefore be taken to ensure that proceedings are conducted without undue delay, as prolonged or fragmented proceedings increase the likelihood that children will be required to testify multiple times. In addition, capacity-building efforts are required to ensure that justice professionals fully understand the risks of secondary victimization and the importance of limiting repeated questioning of child victims of crime, especially in (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse cases, including through the appropriate use of recorded testimonies.



7.4 RECORDING AND REMOTE TESTIMONIES

The Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles requires that a recording of the child's questioning be played at the main hearing, or that their testimony be read aloud.¹¹⁸ This allows the child's statement to be used in court as evidence without requiring the child to testify again, thereby minimizing the risk of further trauma. However, the law does not impose a mandatory obligation to record the child's interview, as written minutes are considered sufficient.

While recording interviews may support the judicial process, this practice has not yet been tested from a trauma-informed perspective for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse facilitated through technologies, who may have heightened sensitivity to being recorded or to the use of cameras by an adult. For some, the presence of a camera may trigger feelings of vulnerability, embarrassment or fear of further exposure. However, this may not be the case for any or all children.

In addition, the law allows child victims and witnesses of crime to be questioned in their home, other suitable premises, or at an authorized institution or organization that is professionally qualified to conduct interviews with children.¹¹⁹ However, a participant reported that in their experience, questioning children from remote locations (e.g., their homes) or recording their statements remains rare.

One of the young women reflected on why her interview was not recorded, saying:

“

Because, why, for example, doesn't it get recorded, so they can rewind it, let the lawyer have it, let everyone have it, not that I, who went through it, talk 10 times there about what had happened to me. Especially not a minor. (YP)

”

This highlights a disconnect between the intent of the legal framework and its implementation in practice. Where interviews are not recorded, whether audiovisually or in a written form, the protective purpose of allowing their use as evidence at later stages of the proceedings is undermined, increasing the likelihood of repeated questioning and secondary victimization. The Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles provides for an additional safeguard that allows the judge, if deemed necessary due to the nature of the offence or the child's circumstances, to order that the child be questioned via video and audio link, with no other parties present, and all questions communicated through the judge or a qualified expert.¹²⁰ However, in interviews some participants highlighted a lack of resources and equipment as a barrier to this, in particular the availability of separate rooms equipped to allow the child to give evidence via video and audio link. They explained how this is only available in a few courts and primarily in larger cities, meaning that not all child victims of crime are afforded this right.

Further, even in courts where the required equipment exists, professionals indicated that it may not always be used. A prosecutor explained how in their view, using this provision was not considered efficient:

“

(...) we rarely use that special sound isolation room and technique (...) We tend to directly interview the child, because from our experience, the contact we establish with the child in this way is much better and we get much more out of it than when the child is in another room. (JP)

”

¹¹⁸ Republic of Serbia, [Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles](#) (2005), art. 152(5).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152(4).

¹²⁰ Republic of Serbia, [Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles](#) (2005), art. 152(3).

While professional judgment plays an important role, this account suggests that such decisions may be driven more by perceived efficiency or evidentiary preferences than by an assessment of the individual needs of the child. Children should be meaningfully consulted and given the choice of how they wish to give testimony, including the option to use video or audio link and to audio- or video-record the interview. Judicial discretion should support the child's right to participate in a way that feels safe and appropriate to them.



7.5 PROTECTING THE CHILD FROM CONFRONTATION WITH THE ALLEGED PERPETRATOR

The Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles provides several measures to protect children from those suspected to having abused them. For example, the court must ensure that suspect identification procedures are conducted in a way that completely prevents the alleged perpetrator from seeing the child.¹²¹ In addition, if a child is deemed particularly vulnerable or in a particularly difficult mental state due to the nature or consequences of the offence, confrontation with the defendant is prohibited.¹²² It should be noted that this second safeguard is subject to the court's discretion and its assessment of the child's circumstances, raising concerns that it may not be systematically applied, including in cases of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Despite this legal framework, an account by a service provider from a non-governmental organization suggests that some professionals may not fully understand the potentially traumatic impact of exposing a child to an alleged perpetrator during judicial proceedings or take adequate steps to proactively prevent such exposure in practice. She said:

“

I recently accompanied a 15-year-old girl who has the status of a 'particularly vulnerable' victim. They brought the perpetrator into the same hallway where she was. I approached the police officer and said, 'Could you just move him?' (...) He responded, 'No, no, they won't be together in the courtroom.' (...) there was really no basic understanding of what that means exactly, how much his presence... He was there the whole time, entering with handcuffs with two police officers, while she is 15 years old. I can't believe it didn't occur to anyone how terrifying that was for her. (FW)

”

To ensure that children subjected to exploitation and abuse are adequately protected from the risk of further victimization, consideration should be given to strengthening existing legal safeguards by unequivocally and systematically prohibiting any contact with the alleged perpetrator at all stages of the proceedings, including outside the courtroom. In addition, clear protocols, appropriate logistical arrangements and targeted training for judges, law enforcement and other relevant professionals are essential to ensure that this safeguard is properly understood and embedded in professional practice.

¹²¹ Ibid., art. 155.

¹²² Ibid., art. 153.

7.6 APPOINTMENT OF A TEMPORARY GUARDIAN

As discussed previously, a child victim of crime cannot provide a statement or undertake a procedural action without the presence of a legal guardian,¹²³ typically a parent. While intended as a protective measure, this requirement may in practice constitute a significant source of stress for the child. As seen in interviews, young people reported fearing their parents finding out what had happened to them and how they might react. Professionals also highlighted that having to recount the abuse in front of parents or caregivers can discourage children from speaking openly or lead them to withhold information altogether.

A lawyer reflected on this from the child's perspective:

“

And now you should say that someone asked you for your photos, (...) that you sent him a bare butt or bare breasts or something like that... Or that you sent a video, and what did you do on that video. (...) These are all difficult topics (...) so these children very often back away and will not testify. They say they don't remember, (...) Because, if you are a minor, a parent, legal representative, and psychologist must be there with you. So, those are already three people. And then, maybe they would say something [speak out], but they are embarrassed in front of mom or dad. (JP)

”

Positively, the Family Law provides for potential ways to address such situations by allowing the guardianship authority, i.e. the social services,¹²⁴ to appoint a temporary guardian to a child under parental care if necessary for the protection of their personality, rights or interests.¹²⁵ This broad clause can be interpreted to include situations where it is assessed that a parent's participation in criminal proceedings would be contrary to the best interests of the child. However, in interviews, front-line workers explained how, in practice, this measure is applied primarily in cases where the child is without

parental care or where the parent is the suspected perpetrator. In the latter case, the Centre for Social Work must indeed appoint a temporary guardian, referred to as a collision/conflict guardian in the Serbian legislation, to prevent conflicts of interest.¹²⁶

A front-line worker described a case in which no temporary guardian was assigned despite the child not wanting their only parent to be present during the testimony, suggesting how its implementation may not be standard practice:

“

We are getting into a situation where it is necessary to go to the prosecutor's office, to give a statement (...) [the child] says, 'I don't want to go with my father, I don't want my father to listen to this. 'Totally legit, I wouldn't either'. The Centre for Social Work will not assign a temporary guardian for that (...). It is literally on a war footing, persuasion, why the Centre for Social Work must assign a temporary guardian, (...), that it can assign it for that procedure, so that she would not be additionally exposed to inconveniences, so that the father would not be exposed. (FW)

”

Providing a temporary guardian in such circumstances could help reduce the child's fear of judgment, ensure that they feel safe and supported and possibly also provide better conditions for a more detailed and reliable testimony, supporting the justice process while taking account of the child's well-being. That this option is not systematically applied when a child explicitly objects to parental involvement points to the need for capacity-building efforts to ensure that the value of appointing a temporary guardian in cases of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse is better understood by all professionals involved in justice proceedings. Clearer operating procedures and improved coordination between social services and justice professionals could also ensure that this safeguard is applied more consistently in practice.

¹²³ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2006), art. 56.

¹²⁴ Republic of Serbia, [Family Law](#) (2005), art. 14.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 135(1).

¹²⁶ Republic of Serbia, [Family Law](#) (2005), art. 265(1).

7.7 COMPENSATION

Access to compensation is an essential element of the right to justice for child victims of crime, providing both recognition of and material redress for the harm they have suffered. Serbian law allows victims of crimes to seek compensation for the damage caused by a crime within the criminal proceedings, provided it does not delay the process significantly. The claim must be submitted before the main hearing ends in the court of first instance.¹²⁷ Victims of crime can also withdraw the claim at any time before this stage and pursue it through civil proceedings instead.¹²⁸

The authority handling the criminal case is required to collect the evidence needed to decide on compensation, even before a formal claim is submitted.¹²⁹ If the court finds the defendant guilty, it must award the compensation claim in full or in part. If only part of the claim is awarded, the victim is referred to civil proceedings for the remaining amount. If there is insufficient evidence to reach a decision on compensation, the court must direct the victim to pursue the entire claim through civil proceedings.¹³⁰

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



Spotlight: Protecting the privacy and anonymity of children subjected to abuse or exploitation – media reporting

Protecting the privacy of children is closely linked to the role of the media. The 2023 Law on Electronic Media forbids media service providers from disclosing the identity of children who were subjected to violence or criminal offences.¹³¹ This legal safeguard is intended to prevent further harm and protect children from public exposure.

In interviews, several professionals brought up the role of public media in cases of sexual exploitation and abuse. An issue discussed by professionals was the immediate and longer-term impacts for children subjected to abuse if identifying details are shared by the media.

Professionals explained how information shared by the media, even if anonymized, may still include details making children and their families identifiable, especially in smaller and close-knit communities. A professional from law enforcement described a case in which identifying information about a young girl subjected to abuse was published by media outlets and the serious impact on the girl:

¹²⁷ Republic of Serbia, [Criminal Procedure Code](#) (2006), arts. 252, 254, 252, 254.

¹²⁸ Ibid., arts. 255, 255.

¹²⁹ Ibid., arts. 256, 256.

¹³⁰ Ibid., art. 258

¹³¹ Republic of Serbia, [Law on Electronic Media](#) (2023), art. 67.

“

The Ministry of Interior decided not to (...) give any information and not to mention the case anywhere. The information somehow got leaked. Within 12 hours, all the news online published everything, along with photos of them together, (...) Afterwards, they also wrote their names, which, in my opinion, is unacceptable (...) That child, at the end, when she came for an interview here, to the prosecutor, the child said that she wanted to kill herself (...) because her photos are out. (JP)

”

Professionals also raised the use of sensationalism by the media, and in particular certain types of media outlets, in relation to cases of sexual exploitation and abuse. This included, for example, the language used in describing cases, those subjected to abuse or perpetrators or focusing on particular details of cases. This kind of media reporting was also seen to take focus away from the impact on the child subjected to exploitation or abuse and instead contribute to stereotyping and victim-blaming.

An advocate discussed how a case of sexual exploitation had been described in media:

“

[A tabloid] (...) posted a title like ‘Horrible, girls sell their bodies for 35 euros on Telegram’. (...) they blamed women who are obviously in some prostitution chain where someone procures them, and they absolutely put all judgment on those women and wrote that huge article about them. (JP)

”

The findings described above point to a gap between the legal protections in place and media practices in reality. They underline the need to strengthen both regulatory and self-regulatory frameworks for media reporting. At the same time, professionals noted that the media can play a positive role by raising awareness about tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and by challenging harmful social norms and attitudes when reporting is responsible and child-centred.

8. CONCLUSION



8. CONCLUSION

In the year prior to being surveyed, approximately 1 in 10 children aged 12–17 in Serbia were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse. While enabled through digital technologies, this violence often transcends children's online lives and their everyday social environments. As the findings show, abuse frequently unfolds across both online and in-person settings, and is often perpetrated by individuals already known to the child, including peers and others within school or community contexts. Many children experience multiple and overlapping forms of abuse, underscoring the fact that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is rarely an isolated incident, but part of broader patterns of coercion, manipulation and control.

Despite its prevalence, findings show how much of this abuse remains hidden. Over 40 per cent of instances reported by 12–17-year-olds in the survey were not disclosed to anyone, and only a small number reached formal reporting channels (police, social workers or helplines). Survey data and interviews consistently point to a normalization of abuse, shame, self-blame, fear of being judged and concerns about family and social repercussions as key barriers to disclosure and reporting. Professionals also highlighted that stigma surrounding sexuality and persistent gender norms continue to shape how children interpret exploitation and abuse and whether they feel able to seek help.

Interviews with front-line workers and justice professionals identified challenges in relation to implementation, uneven protections by age, limited resources and gaps in institutional responses when it comes to the legal and institutional frameworks intended to protect children in Serbia from tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Prevention efforts were often described by professionals as fragmented and centred on one-off awareness activities, rather than sustained, systemic, multi-level prevention strategies. Several stakeholders emphasized how meaningful prevention must not rely solely on children's ability to protect themselves, but must also involve parents, schools and the broader systems responsible for safeguarding children.

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

9. RECOMMENDATIONS



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. The following detailed recommendations for action in Serbia are clustered under eight key insights from the Disrupting Harm data and are signposted for different stakeholder groups. However, all these recommended actions are interlinked and are most effective if implemented in coordination.

INSIGHT 1

Findings highlight how silence around sex and sexuality and rigid gender norms, can enable tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Many children grow up without open discussions about sex, relationships and consent, leaving them less prepared to identify exploitation and abuse and to seek help.

Qualitative data indicates that prevention efforts remain fragmented and often focus on children’s online behaviour rather than addressing the broader social, relational and structural factors that facilitate exploitation and abuse.

This requires approaches that hold perpetrators and systems accountable, while equipping children with the knowledge and support to recognize harm and seek help. Education can empower children to understand healthy versus exploitative dynamics without placing responsibility on them to prevent exploitation and abuse.

Relevant for: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs.

1.1 Review and strengthen comprehensive sexuality and relationship education curricula

Adopt a rights-based, gender-transformative approach that challenges harmful norms, stereotypes and power dynamics across both in-person and online contexts.

- a) Integrate evidence-based and age-appropriate education on healthy relationships, consent, bodily autonomy and boundaries.
- b) Address issues as unwanted sexual exposure, non-consensual creation and sharing of sexual content, sexualized bullying and abuse within romantic relationships.
- c) Promote positive masculinity and equality-focused initiatives that encourage empathy, respect and accountability.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

1.2 Support effective implementation in schools

Ensure that prevention efforts are meaningfully implemented in practice.

- a) Equip teachers to facilitate open, age-appropriate discussions on sexuality, relationships and online interactions in an empathetic and non-judgmental way.
- b) Allocate dedicated time and resources within schools for sustained prevention programming, rather than one-off or ad hoc activities.
- c) Recognize that not all children are reached through formal education systems; collaborate with community organizations, youth clubs, religious institutions and online platforms to deliver programming in informal settings.

1.3 Strengthen parenting and community engagement

Address silence and stigma within families and communities.

- a) Develop universal and targeted parenting programmes that foster open communication, build trust between children and parents and build respect for children's autonomy and boundaries.
- b) Provide parents and caregivers with practical guidance on discussing sexuality, consent, online interactions and abuse in non-judgmental and supportive ways.
- c) Support parents to recognize signs of distress and respond empathetically, rather than through surveillance and/or restrictions.

1.4 Develop sustained public campaigns and social norm change initiatives

Move beyond one-off campaigns to address the underlying norms that enable abuse.

- a) Implement sustainable, multisectoral public awareness efforts that challenge stigma, victim-blaming and harmful gender norms.
- b) Promote messaging that frames (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse as a violation of children's rights, not a source of shame.
- c) Engage communities in dialogue-based approaches to shift attitudes and behaviours.
- d) Ensure that campaigns focus on the accountability of perpetrators and the responsibility of institutions and systems to protect children.

INSIGHT 2

Findings show that tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse in Serbia more often involve friends, acquaintances and romantic partners than people unknown to the child.

These dynamics can blur the boundaries between relationships, consent and abuse, particularly in adolescence, where exploration of intimacy and identity is evolving.

Data indicate that certain harmful behaviours, such as non-consensual sharing of sexual content, pressuring peers to send sexual images or sending unwanted sexual content are frequently normalized or minimized. These behaviours often reflect broader social norms that minimize harm, reinforce gendered double standards and excuse abusive conduct. As a result, children may not be able to assess the severity of harm or recognize their own experiences within a framework of exploitation and abuse.

Relevant for: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs and Ministry of Tourism and Youth.

2.1 Strengthen comprehensive sexuality and relationship education

Build on [Insight 1.1](#) within the context of peer and romantic relationships.

- a) Integrate age-appropriate content on consent, boundaries and respect, including in digital contexts.
- b) Include real-life scenarios that reflect children's experiences, such as peer pressure to share images, reputational harm and non-consensual dissemination of sexual material.
- c) Challenge gender norms and gendered double standards that normalize dominance, shame, entitlement and victim-blaming.

-
- d) Support children to recognize both victimization and harmful behaviours, fostering accountability alongside empathy.

2.2 Equip educators and youth-facing professionals

Ensure that teachers, school counsellors and youth workers are equipped to address peer-based abuse.

- a) Provide training on facilitating open, non-judgmental discussions around sexuality, relationships, pressure and consent.
- b) Equip staff to identify early signs of peer-based exploitation and abuse, and respond in ways that are supportive, trauma-informed and do not inadvertently reinforce shame or blame.
- c) Ensure clear guidance and protocols for responding to incidents involving peers, including safeguarding measures and referral pathways to appropriate services.

2.3 Strengthen parent and caregiver engagement

Support parents to better understand children's relationships and digital experiences.

- a) Foster equitable parent-child relationships including open, trust-based communication about sexuality, relationships, gender expectations and online interactions.
- b) Provide guidance on recognizing subtle forms of coercion and pressure within peer and romantic relationships.

2.4 Promote peer-led and youth-centred approaches

Recognize the central role of peer dynamics.

- a) Support structured peer-led initiatives that encourage critical reflection on power, social norms including gender norms, consent and respectful relationships.
- b) Co-develop programmes and materials with children to ensure they reflect their realities.
- c) Create safe spaces in schools and communities where children can discuss relationships and online experiences without fear of judgment.

2.5 Shift public narratives and awareness

Move beyond discussions of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse by strangers to reflect its sometimes peer-based nature.

- a) Develop sustained public awareness campaigns that highlight abuse within peer and romantic relationships, including abuse facilitated by technology.
- b) Challenge social norms that minimize harm, excuse coercive behaviour and place blame on children subjected to exploitation or abuse.
- c) Promote messaging centred on empathy, mutual respect and shared responsibility while reinforcing accountability for harmful behaviours.

INSIGHT 3

Findings show how disclosure and reporting of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse remain limited in Serbia. In over 40 per cent of instances captured by the survey, children did not tell anyone, and fewer than 5 per cent of cases were reported to formal channels including police, helplines or social services.

Children described limited awareness of what constitutes (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse, alongside fear of judgment, blame, and family or social repercussions if the exploitation or abuse becomes known. These barriers, combined with the normalization of certain abusive behaviours, contribute to widespread silence.

Children are less likely to disclose when they do not feel safe, supported or confident that institutions will respond in their best interests. Strengthening disclosure and reporting therefore requires building trusted, accessible and child-centred systems that prioritize support, confidentiality and protection.

Relevant for: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Interior – Police Directorate, Ministry for Family Care and Demography, Judicial Academy and the Protector of Citizens (Ombudsman) of Serbia.

3.1 Strengthen trusted-adult pathways for disclosure

Ensure that children have access to trained, supportive adults across settings:

- a) Equip professionals with practical skills to recognize signs of abuse, respond empathetically, validate children's experiences and ensure immediate safety, while linking children to appropriate services.

- b) Extend training and support mechanisms beyond major urban centres, ensuring that children in rural and underserved areas have access to equally qualified and responsive professionals.

3.2 Expand confidential and child-centred disclosure channels

Ensure children can seek help safely and without fear.

- a) Increase the visibility and accessibility of existing helplines, reporting mechanisms and support services through schools, digital platforms and community spaces. Use clear, age-appropriate language, visuals and trusted intermediaries (such as teachers and youth workers) to ensure children understand where and how to seek help.
- b) Establish confidential, child-friendly and gender-sensitive spaces – both online and in schools or community centres – where children can disclose without fear or obligation to report formally.
- c) Ensure that these services are designed to prioritize listening, emotional support and referral, rather than solely formal reporting.

3.3 Strengthen trust in law enforcement and justice responses

Position law enforcement as a trusted and protective actor.

- a) Mandate specialized, pre- and in-service training for police and justice professionals on child rights, child development, and trauma-informed and gender-transformative approaches to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.
- b) Establish child protection liaison officers within police services to safely receive disclosures, minimize retraumatization and coordinate referrals to psychosocial support.
- c) Integrate law enforcement in prevention and awareness efforts, to signal that these forms of abuse are taken seriously and are acted upon.

INSIGHT 4

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

Relevant for: Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry for Family Care and Demography, High Judicial Council and High Prosecution Council.

4.1 Amend legislation to ensure that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be prosecuted effectively.

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

- a) Amending provisions on online grooming to encompass abuse that occurs entirely online, without requiring a proposal for or arrangement of an in-person meeting.
- b) Amending legislation to explicitly criminalize livestreaming of child sexual abuse, either through a stand-alone provision or by directly indicating that existing provisions on child sexual abuse material and/or engaging children in “pornographic performances” also apply when the abuse is livestreamed 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.
- c) 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.
- d) Amending the Criminal Code’s definition of child sexual abuse material to explicitly include non-visual and digitally generated content, including artificial intelligence-generated material. The revised definition should make clear that any material that appears to depict children qualifies as child sexual abuse material.
- e) Amending criminal legislation to ensure that penalties for offences such as online grooming and exposure to pornographic content are not lower when the child is older than 14 years of age. Ensuring that all children receive equal protection under the law, with penalties that reflect the severity of the offence rather than the child’s age.
- f) In line with the 2023 Lanzarote Committee recommendation, amend criminal legislation to ensure that children are not prosecuted for creating, possessing or voluntarily sharing self-generated sexual content with peers, where there are informed consent and no evidence of coercion, exploitation, or malicious intent. The legal framework should clearly distinguish consensual peer activity from exploitative or abusive conduct.

INSIGHT 5

Findings show that social media platforms are central to how tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse occur in Serbia. More than 75 per cent of instances reported in the survey involved social media, highlighting that prevention and response cannot rely only on children, parents or front-line services and law enforcement. Platforms and internet service providers are key stakeholders in shaping children's online environments, including the design of safety features, reporting tools, and the rapid detection and removal of harmful material.

At present, there is a gap between platforms' stated commitments to child safety and the realities of child users. Current legal frameworks place minimal obligations on internet service providers and platforms to proactively detect and respond to child sexual exploitation and abuse. This contributes to a wider sense that children are expected to manage online abuse, despite major power imbalances between children and perpetrators, and between users and platforms.

Relevant for: Ministry of Information, Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications and Postal Services, Telecommunications, and Online Platforms.

5.1 Establish structured collaboration with platforms as partners in child protection

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

- a) Formal mechanisms for regular dialogue and collaboration between government, regulators, law enforcement and major online platforms operating in Serbia.
- b) Regular information-sharing on patterns of exploitation and abuse, emerging risks and trends.
- c) Joint development of response protocols for urgent cases involving child sexual abuse material.

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

Serbia should require enforceable and universal design safeguards including:

- a) Privacy-by-default settings for all child users, limiting public visibility and unwanted contact.
- b) Restrictions on unsolicited messaging from unknown accounts to children.
- c) Stronger controls on content recommendation systems to reduce exposure to sexualized or exploitative material.
- d) Clear safeguards addressing artificial intelligence-enabled risks, including synthetic sexual content or automated grooming behaviours.

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

Current gaps in early detection and blocking emphasize the need for clearer obligations on providers, including to:

- a) Detect, flag, and remove child sexual abuse material, in line with international standards. Ensure removal is timely and transparent, recognizing the severe and lasting harm caused by continued circulation of abusive material.
- b) Establish a clear intermediary liability framework requiring providers to detect and block child sexual abuse material proactively.
- c) Ensure that only data that are strictly necessary for verified investigations are retained, with strong privacy safeguards and independent oversight of data access.
- d) Ensure that removal procedures are timely and transparent, recognizing the severe and lasting harm caused by continued circulation of abusive material.

5.4 Embed meaningful child participation in platform safety development

To ensure that safety measures are age-appropriate, accessible and reflect children's realities, Serbia should:

- a) Consult and collaborate with children when developing reporting systems and safety tools.
- b) Test platform safeguards with diverse groups of children, to ensure accessibility to reporting and safety tools for children with different needs, including children speaking non-official languages and children with disabilities.

INSIGHT 6

Findings indicate significant gaps in the availability, accessibility and quality of psychosocial support services for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in Serbia. While legal entitlements to care exist, many children face barriers in accessing support in practice. Some are unaware of available services, while others encounter systems that are under-resourced, fragmented or not adequately equipped to provide trauma-informed and child-centred care. Front-line workers highlighted the limited availability of specialized psychosocial support, particularly outside the capital, alongside broader shortages in trained personnel. Services are often unevenly distributed, with rural or underserved areas facing additional logistical and financial barriers.

Given the long-term psychological and social impacts of (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, ensuring access to sustained trauma-informed and rights-based care is essential – not only for recovery, but also to enable disclosure, reduce stigma and prevent further harm.

Relevant for: Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry for Family Care and Demography, Republic Institute for Social Protection and Judicial Academy and Local self-governments.

6.1 Strengthen trauma-informed care across professional training.

Build sustained national capacity to respond to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse.

- a) Integrate trauma-informed, gender-transformative and child rights-based approaches into pre-service education for social workers, psychologists and other mental health professionals.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- b) Establish accredited certification and continuous professional development programmes, including mandatory in-service training.
- c) Establish and monitor clear standards for confidentiality, dignity and non-stigmatizing communication across all child-facing services.
- d) Provide structured supervision and support to professionals to prevent burnout and secondary trauma.

6.2 Expand and institutionalize psychosocial services across regions

Ensure equitable access to specialized, child-centred psychosocial support.

- a) Increase the numbers of trained child psychologists and counsellors within public health and social protection systems.
- b) Expand services beyond major urban centres through targeted investment in underserved municipalities. Embed services within national budgets and systems, rather than relying on short-term or project-based funding.

6.3 Develop coordinated, child-friendly referral systems

Reduce fragmentation and improve access to care by:

- a) Establishing standardized national referral protocols linking the health, education, social protection and justice sectors.
- b) Designating child protection focal points within key institutions to guide referrals and case coordination.
- c) Ensuring rapid, coordinated responses when children disclose abuse, with clear roles and responsibilities across agencies.

6.4 Strengthen long-term recovery and follow-up care

Recognize recovery as an ongoing process by:

- a) Establishing structured follow-up protocols after initial service contact or disclosure.
- b) Ensuring access to long-term counselling, peer support and reintegration services.
- c) Integrating mental health care into broader child protection case management systems.
- d) Providing psychosocial support not only to children, but also to caregivers and families.

INSIGHT 7

Findings indicate that schools are a central place where children seek help, yet not all school staff have the capacity, understanding or confidence to identify and respond effectively to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

The data highlight the need for training and capacity-building for school staff, clearer referral processes and more systematic efforts to address harmful gender norms and societal attitudes that reinforce stigma in schools.

Relevant for: Ministry of Education, Institute for Improvement of Education, Institute for Evaluation of Quality of Education and across Ministries and Local self-government units.

7.1 Strengthen school-based safeguarding systems and response capacity

Institutionalize mandatory safeguarding training for all school staff.

- a) Develop standardized national training modules on tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, including peer-based abuse.
- b) Ensure that training is gender-transformative, trauma-informed, and child rights-based, explicitly addressing stigma, harmful norms and victim-blaming attitudes.
- c) Embed training into both pre-service education and continuous professional development for teachers, counsellors and all personnel.

7.2 Strengthen and operationalize school safeguarding protocols

Ensure that safeguarding frameworks are not only updated, but consistently applied in practice by:

- a) Ensuring that national school safeguarding guidelines explicitly cover tech-facilitated forms of exploitation and abuse, including by peers and in relationships.

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- b) Establishing clear, step-by-step procedures covering identification, disclosure, reporting, documentation, referral and follow-up, ensuring protocols and practical implementation are clear to all school staff.
 - c) Designating trained safeguarding focal points within each school responsible for coordinating responses and supporting staff.
 - d) Establishing independent oversight to regularly assess how schools implement these frameworks and use the findings to strengthen guidance and support.

7.3 Strengthen cross-sector coordination and referral systems

Reduce fragmentation and delays in response by:

- a) Developing formal referral protocols linking schools with social services, health and mental health professionals, and law enforcement.
- b) Clarifying roles and responsibilities across sectors to ensure timely and coordinated responses when abuse is identified or disclosed.
- c) Establishing local-level coordination mechanisms (e.g. multidisciplinary teams or focal points) to support case management and follow-up.

INSIGHT 8

Whether children report and seek help depends on whether they believe adults will listen, understand and protect them. Findings show that very few children turn to the police after being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, with interviews indicating that children may perceive the police to be inaccessible, insensitive or unhelpful.

Despite existing legal provisions for child-centred justice, data suggest that these principles are not consistently applied in practice. Uneven implementation with gaps in specialized training means that law enforcement and the justice system may not always respond in trauma-informed, age-appropriate and empathetic ways. Without these capacities, systems risk failing to respond effectively or unintentionally retraumatizing children.

Relevant for: Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs and the Judicial Academy.

8.1 Institutionalize mandatory, specialized training across law enforcement and justice systems. Ensure that all professionals interacting with children are equipped to respond appropriately.

- a) Develop standardized national training modules on tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, including online investigation techniques and digital evidence handling.
- b) Embed trauma-informed, child-centred and gender-transformative approaches, with a focus on minimizing retraumatization and ensuring respectful engagement.
- c) Require regular refresher training, supervision and competency assessments to ensure consistent application in practice.

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8.2 Operationalize child-centred justice procedures in practice

Move from legal provisions to consistent implementation by:

- a) Developing and enforcing clear procedural guidelines for police, judges, prosecutors and lawyers on handling cases involving children, including tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse.
- b) Establishing specialized child protection units or focal points within law enforcement to handle such cases.
- c) Ensuring child-friendly environments for reporting and interviewing.

8.3 Build trust through community engagement and accessible policing.

Address perceptions of inaccessibility and strengthen relationships with children and communities by:

- a) Expanding community policing and outreach initiatives, including school visits and youth engagement programmes.

- b) Creating designated child-friendly contact points within police services where children can safely seek help.
- c) Providing clear, accessible information to children and families about what happens when a report is made, to reduce fear and uncertainty.
- d) Addressing victim-blaming attitudes and harmful biases through ongoing training, supervision and institutional accountability.

8.4 Strengthen data, research, and accountability mechanisms

Improve evidence-based responses by:

- a) Establishing monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the quality of child-centred justice responses and identify gaps.
- b) Systematically collecting disaggregated data on cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse across sectors.
- c) Integrating these issues into national research agendas, including, where appropriate, child participation in research design.

11. ANNEX: DEFINITIONS 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.¹³²

Child sexual exploitation: Involves the same abusive actions mentioned above. However, an additional element of a threat or of exchange for something (e.g. money, shelter, material goods, or non-material components such as protection, a relationship, or even the mere promise of such) from a third party and/or the perpetrator must also be present.¹³³

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

Livestreaming of child sexual abuse: Child sexual abuse that is perpetrated and viewed simultaneously in real-time via communication tools, video conferencing tools and/or chat applications. In most cases, the perpetrator

requesting the abuse in exchange for payment or other material benefits, is physically in a different location from the child(ren) and the facilitators of the abuse.¹³⁵

Online grooming of children for sexual purposes/ solicitation of children for sexual purposes: Building a relationship with a child via technology with the intent of sexually abusing or exploiting the child.¹³⁶

Sexual extortion of children: The blackmailing of a person with the help of self-generated images of that person in order to extort sexual favours, money or other benefits, under the threat of sharing the material beyond the consent of the depicted person (e.g. posting images on social media). Often, the influence and manipulation, typical of perpetrators of grooming over longer periods of time (sometimes several months), turns into a rapid escalation of threats, intimidation and coercion once the person has been persuaded to send the first sexual images of themselves.¹³⁷

Sexual harassment: “Any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment,” as defined by the Istanbul Convention (art. 40), the only international legal definition of the term.¹³⁸

Children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour: This term refers to sexual behaviour or developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people which is harmful or abusive.¹³⁹

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

¹³² Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse: Second Edition](#), ECPAT, Bangkok, 2025, pp. 31–34.

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 39–44.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 63.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 97–98.

¹³⁸ Ibid., pp. 36–38.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁴⁰ Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse: Second Edition](#), ECPAT, Bangkok, 2025.

