

DISRUPTING HARM IN COLOMBIA

Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

Frequently asked questions (FAQ)

1. What is this report about and what is its significance?

This is Colombia's first comprehensive study on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Drawing on a household survey with children and caregivers, interviews with young people who were subjected to abuse in childhood, justice professionals, frontline workers and law enforcement, the report reveals a stark reality: this form of abuse is widespread, mostly hidden, and deeply embedded in children's everyday lives and relationships.

Technology is increasingly being used to facilitate the sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Colombia – often in ways that are normalized, minimized or misunderstood. The findings make clear that this is not a marginal issue, but a large-scale child protection concern that requires urgent, coordinated action across sectors.

2. What is Disrupting Harm?

Disrupting Harm is a pioneering global initiative launched in 2019 to uncover how digital technologies are used to exploit and abuse children – and to equip countries with the evidence needed to stop this violence. Funded by Safe Online and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL, and UNICEF Innocenti, the project has already generated critical insights in 13 countries. By 2026, it will have delivered national-level data in **25 countries** across six regions.

In Colombia, the research was carried out between 2023 and 2025, mapping how technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse happens, identifies risk and protection factors, and provides an evidence-based roadmap for governments and partners to act. The findings are already shaping stronger laws, prevention campaigns, and child protection systems around the world.

3. What is technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse refers to any form of child sexual exploitation and abuse **where digital technology plays a role** – such as grooming, image-sharing, sexual extortion, livestreaming, or blackmail. It can happen entirely online or shift between online and in-person interactions. In some cases, the abuse happens in person, but technology is used to record it, store it, or distribute it online, extending the harm over time. This is not a completely new form of violence, but rather sexual exploitation and abuse that is amplified and enabled by technology.

The Disrupting Harm survey looked at the following:

- Receiving unwanted sexual comments, images or videos
- Being pressured to talk about sex
- Requests for sexual content
- Use of fake, AI-generated sexual images
- Sharing or threats to share sexual images

- Offers of money or gifts for sexual content or meetings
- Threats or blackmail to force sexual activity
- Livestreamed sexual abuse or exploitation

4. How widespread is this issue in Colombia?

According to the household survey, **more than 1 in 5 children (21%) aged 12–17 in Colombia had been subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in just one year.** Scaled up to the overall population of 12-17-year-old internet-using children in Colombia, **this represents around 860,000 children.** More than a third of children who were subjected to abuse were subjected to more than one form, showing that many children are not facing isolated incidents but multiple overlapping harms. The **most common form of abuse** or exploitation reported by **1 in 7 (15%) children in the study was receiving unwanted sexual images.** Taken together, these findings show that this abuse is both widespread and diverse, ranging from unwanted exposure to coercion and exploitation.

5. How does Colombia compare to other countries (regionally, globally) on this issue?

The proportions of children being subjected to these types of exploitation and abuse in Colombia are similar to those found in the other countries of the region, involved in the study.

6. Which groups of children are most at risk?

Girls were more likely than boys to report technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, with 1 in 4 girls (25%) affected compared with 1 in 6 boys (17%). The findings highlighted how girls in Colombia are often sexualized and treated

as older than they are, while victim-blaming attitudes can frame them as responsible for the abuse they were subjected to.

Children experiencing **loneliness, neglect, violence at home or lack of trusted support may be especially vulnerable to manipulation.** The report also shows that children who witnessed domestic violence were twice as likely to be subjected to technology-facilitated abuse, and those subjected to in-person sexual violence were three times more likely. Economic hardship can also increase risks, as children may be offered money and resources in exchange for sexual content or acts – this is also tied to false job offers and organized exploitation linked to webcam studios and tourism. **Children in rural areas (29%) also faced higher exposure than children in urban areas (17%).** Age matters as well: older adolescents were more likely to report abuse, with 21% of 17-year-olds affected compared with 7% of 12-year-olds.

At the same time, the report cautions against assuming that some children are untouched by this violence. **Boys are also affected, but their victimization is often hidden by harmful gender norms and rigid ideas of masculinities that make disclosure more difficult.** The findings suggest that some children are more visible in the data than others, and that stigma can shape who is recognized as a victim and who is not.

7. Where and how does this abuse and exploitation happen?

Children are often targeted on the platforms they use every day. The study found that in Colombia, 83% of children use social media weekly and 64% play online games weekly. **Around half of reported cases occurred on social media platforms,** most frequently Facebook (80%), followed by WhatsApp (30%) and Instagram (17%). Around 14% of cases happened on gaming platforms.

Perpetrators use these platforms to identify and contact children, build trust and escalate abuse over time. Social media gives perpetrators easy access to large numbers of children, while weak identity verification and limited safeguards make it easier for them to pose as peers and create fake accounts. Abuse often begins with unsolicited messages or sexual content and can escalate into coercion, blackmail or sexual extortion. In some cases, children are offered money or opportunities, including through fake job offers or recruitment into webcam-based exploitation.

Emerging technologies are already creating new risks. 2% of children surveyed said someone had used artificial intelligence (AI) to create fake sexual images or videos of them. This means that a child can be depicted in sexually explicit ways without ever having shared a real image. **These harms are real. AI-generated images can expose children to stigma, shame, blackmail and social punishment if the content circulates.** Even where digitally generated material depicts non-existent children, it can still normalize exploitative representations and contribute to demand for child sexual abuse material involving real children.

Yet, **another of the report's key findings is that technology-facilitated abuse is not confined to digital spaces.** In **70% of cases, children first met the perpetrator in person**, while 30% first met them online. This shows that the line between online and offline abuse is often blurred. Abuse may begin in person and continue online, or begin online and later escalate into in-person contact, blackmail or exploitation. Protecting children requires action across all the environments where they live, learn and interact – not just online spaces.

8. Who carries out this abuse? Are strangers the main threat?

Contrary to common belief, **in half of all instances children were exploited and/or abused by someone they already knew.** One fifth

involved strangers. This shows the importance of prevention and education – not just fear of strangers online.

The report includes accounts from young people and professionals showing that perpetrators can be family members, neighbours, classmates, romantic partners, teachers and other trusted figures. **This proximity and trust can make abuse more difficult for children to recognize the abuse or seek help.** It also allows perpetrators to use digital tools to extend manipulation, pressure and control over children in ways that are harder to detect from the outside.

In nearly 1 in 5 cases, (17%), the perpetrator was another child. These situations can involve sharing sexual images without consent, pressuring peers to send sexual content, or acting as intermediaries for adult perpetrators. In some cases, children who have themselves been exploited are drawn into recruiting others, particularly in contexts linked to economic incentives such as webcam studios.

9. What are the impacts of abuse and exploitation facilitated by technology on children?

The effects of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are **serious, long-lasting, and deeply harmful.** Children subjected to these forms of abuse experienced **fear, shame, anxiety, disgust and self-blame.** Many live with ongoing distress, especially when sexual images continue to circulate online, fearing others will see these images.

The survey data reveals **higher levels of anxiety, self-harm and suicidal thoughts among children who have been subjected to tech-facilitated abuse.**

Beyond mental health, this abuse can affect schooling, relationships and social life. Some

children withdraw from friends, avoid online spaces, struggle with trust and intimacy, or are even forced to leave school or move cities due to bullying and stigma.

Children frequently blame themselves – particularly in cases involving self-generated images – especially when harmful social attitudes suggest that they are somehow responsible for the abuse. **This self-blame can be reinforced by victim-blaming responses from adults and communities, making recovery more difficult and discouraging children from seeking help.**

Together, these findings show that **technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is not “online-only” or temporary harm.** It can profoundly affect children’s mental health, wellbeing, education, and sense of safety long after the abuse has ended.

10. Why don’t children disclose or report the abuse?

Disclosure remains low. While **just over half of children told someone** about the abuse, **more than a third did not tell anyone.**

Children face multiple barriers, including **shame, fear of punishment or restrictions on internet use, and uncertainty about where to seek help.** Harmful beliefs around women’s bodies and sexuality often extend to girls, shaping how they are perceived and targeted by perpetrators of abuse. For example, social norms that frame women as either seeking out the abuse or as a source of ‘temptation’ to men promote victim-blaming attitudes towards girls and young women. Boys are also subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, yet pervasive beliefs about masculinity prevent boys from being recognized as victims and can keep their abuse hidden. Some children do not recognize the seriousness of the abuse or believe it is “normal.” This points to the **normalization and minimization of this form of abuse.** Others **fear being blamed or not believed,**

or worry about retaliation by perpetrators, especially if they have access to sexual images of them or are linked to criminal networks.

The report reveals that **when children do disclose, they are more likely to turn to friends, mothers or female caregivers, and siblings,** highlighting the importance of trusted relationships and supportive responses.

When it comes to formal reporting, **none of the children surveyed reported the abuse to police, helplines or social workers** – despite the existence of reporting mechanisms in Colombia. Additional to the barriers above, young people mentioned thinking nothing would be done, discouragement from friends, not knowing that they could report or how to report. These findings show that it is not enough for services to exist on paper; children must know about them, trust them and feel safe using them.

11. Are systems in place in Colombia to respond to this abuse? What needs to change?

Colombia has important legal safeguards, including confidentiality protections and closed hearings, **but there is a serious gap between law and practice.** The report also identifies **legal gaps** including: grooming and exposure to sexual content, AI-generated child sexual abuse material, sexual extortion, intentional access to child sexual abuse material, and livestreamed abuse not being explicitly addressed or criminalized. These gaps can lead to abuse being minimized and can limit the ability of investigators and prosecutors to effectively intervene.

Similarly, Colombia has a unified service provision pathway for victims of sexual violence, but there are **no specific standard protocols for technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.** This makes it more difficult to identify digital elements of abuse, respond to image circulation and extortion, and coordinate effectively

across child protection, police, justice and social services. This can discourage them from seeking help or continuing with legal cases.

Even when services are available, families may struggle to access them or stay engaged, especially if they feel judged or blamed, or if **services are fragmented and difficult to navigate**. The report makes clear that systems need to become more specialized, coordinated, and both **child-centred and trauma-informed**.

12. What needs to happen now?

Stronger, coordinated action is urgently needed across systems to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. **Prevention must go beyond monitoring children's activity online and address the environments that enable abuse** – including harmful social norms, economic vulnerability, gaps in protection systems and risks in digital spaces.

There are clear opportunities to act earlier and prevent harm online and offline, before it escalates, by:

- **Addressing the drivers of abuse**, by tackling gender inequality, violence-supportive norms and victim-blaming attitudes and behaviours; and by strengthening coordinated, multilevel prevention that addresses structural and economic conditions enabling tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse by supporting families and reducing the economic vulnerabilities that push children and families towards exploitative situations.
- **Making it easier and safer for children to seek help** by improving awareness, accessibility and trust in reporting and support systems, and ensuring these are child-centred, accessible and confidential.
- **Investing in and strengthening social services** to strengthen their capacity to provide specialized, coordinated and trauma-informed support for children and their families. Provide a

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

- **Improve the legislative framework to enable more effective and standardized prosecution of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia**, including by explicitly criminalizing grooming, sexual extortion, livestreaming and AI-generated content – and ensuring justice processes are consistently child-centred and trauma-informed.
- **Improving coordination across systems** including child protection, justice, education and law enforcement, to prevent gaps, delays and fragmentation in the support children receive.
- **Expanding school-based prevention programmes** that equip children with comprehensive, age-appropriate education on sexuality, gender equality, power dynamics, respect and consent. Teaching children and adolescents how to build positive and healthy relationships and set personal boundaries can help address violence by peers and the normalization of sexual violence that shifts blame onto victims.
- **Supporting parents and caregivers** through programmes that promote safe, open communication with children and encourage supportive, non-judgmental responses to disclosures of abuse or exploitation.
- **Enhance regulation and accountability of online platforms** by enforcing stronger legal obligations, requiring safety-by-design measures, stronger safeguards including default privacy settings, more proactive detection and faster removal of abusive content, and reporting tools that are accessible and child-centred.

13. What can parents, caregivers and the wider community do?

Parents, caregivers and communities are essential to both prevention and response.

Children are more likely to disclose abuse and seek help when they have trusted adults who listen calmly, respond without judgment and do not punish them for what happened. The report emphasizes the **importance of open, non-judgmental communication with children about consent, sexuality, abuse and online experiences.**

Communities also have a role in challenging harmful norms that normalize abuse, sexualize girls, blame victims or dismiss online abuse as less serious. Schools, civil society, survivor advocates, youth groups, media and community leaders can all help reshape public understanding of abuse as a societal failure rather than an individual shame.

Communities can also help by **sharing clear information about available services and supporting families to access care without judgement.**

14. How can the media help?

Media professionals are key allies in protecting children.

- **Avoid victim-blaming and protect children's identities.** Ensure that reporting does not inadvertently place any responsibility on a child for the abuse/exploitation they were subjected to. Avoid details that could reveal their identity.

- **Focus on systemic issues, not the child.**
Reporting should highlight perpetrators, harms, and gaps in protection rather than framing the story around "shame."
- **Avoid sensationalism and graphic detail.**
Excessive details about abuse can further harm children and risk revealing their identity. Trauma-informed language that does not minimize or normalize abuse is key.
- **Respect legal safeguards and investigations.**
Follow laws and ethical standards within media protecting children victims of crime and avoid publishing information that could interfere with cases.
- **Share information about support services.**
Where possible, include helplines and reporting channels so children and families know where to seek help.

Helpful resources for children and families

- **#141:** the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF) 24/7 helpline
- **[Te Protejo Colombia](#),** online reporting portal
- The national online reporting system) [A Denunciar](#) (operated by the Public Prosecutor's Office and the National Police)
- **#123: the Police**
- **The Prosecutor's Office**

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