

DISRUPTING HARM IN DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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 report, *Disrupting Harm in the Dominican Republic*, is the first nationally representative study of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the country. The report draws on a household survey with 1,005 internet-using children (aged 12-17 years) and 1,005 of their parents or guardians, as well as interviews with young people (16-24 years-old) subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse before the age of 18 and law enforcement. The findings reveal a stark reality: this abuse is widespread, mostly hidden, and deeply embedded in children's everyday lives and relationships.

By documenting these realities, the report provides crucial evidence to strengthen prevention, improve reporting and justice processes, hold technology platforms accountable, and expand access to survivor-centred services. It underscores the urgent need for coordinated action across government, civil society, tech companies, and families in the Dominican Republic to better protect children and uphold their rights in the digital age.

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 initiative has

already generated critical insights in 13 countries. By the end of 2026, it will have delivered national-level data in 25 countries across six regions.

In the Dominican Republic, data was collected between 2024 and 2025, mapping how technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse occurs, identifying risk and protection factors, and providing an evidence-based roadmap for governments and partners to act. The findings are already shaping stronger laws in other countries where the study was undertaken, prevention campaigns, and child protection systems in other countries where the research has been carried out.

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

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse describes any form of child sexual exploitation and abuse where technology is used – including in contacting children, grooming, coercion, image-sharing, livestreaming, or blackmail. It can occur entirely online or shift between online and in-person interactions. In some cases, abuse occurs entirely in-person but is recorded and shared digitally.

The survey looked at the following examples:

- Receiving unwanted sexual comments, images or videos
- Being pressured to talk about sex

- Requests for sexual content
- Fake sexual images created through AI
- Sharing of sexual images of the child without their permission or threats thereof
- Offers of money or gifts for sexual content or meetings
- Threats or blackmail to force sexual activity

4. How widespread is this issue in the Dominican Republic?

According to the household survey nearly a quarter of children (23%) aged 12–17 who use the internet in the Dominican Republic, had been subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in just one year. This number is further likely to be an underestimate, given the stigma surrounding sexual violence (documented both by this study and many other studies on sexual abuse) and children's reluctance to disclose.

5. Who are children abused by?

Contrary to common assumptions, the study revealed that nearly 7 in 10 cases (68%) involved someone the child already knew – adult friends or acquaintances (16%) or peers / other children (14%), and family members (14%). Only 14% of cases involved strangers. In some instances (17%), children did not want to identify the perpetrator(s).

6. Where and how does this abuse typically happen?

Children are exposed on the platforms they use every day. Half of all instances of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse involved social media. Over 1 in 10 instances (11%) took place via online games. The top apps where children in the Dominican Republic were subjected to technology-facilitated sexual

exploitation and abuse were WhatsApp (60%), Facebook (35%), Instagram (30%), Snapchat (12%), TikTok (11%), YouTube (5%), followed by X (formerly Twitter) (2%) and OnlyFans (2%).

The findings show how perpetrators may deliberately take advantage of children's perceptions of these platforms as new places of play and discovery, using the trust and familiarity associated with these environments to request sexual content. Interviews also showed that perpetrators may exploit children's financial needs or their search for autonomy and independence, by offering money or gifts in exchange for sexual images or videos of themselves.

The findings show that while digital platforms allow perpetrators to have easier access to children, technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse most often occur within relationships marked by familiarity, trust and/or everyday contact – whether with peers, intimate partners, acquaintances or family members. Perpetrators also exploit norms and attitudes that normalise violence, and digital tools to achieve compliance, silence or continued communication with children. Interviews with professionals and young people subjected to this exploitation and abuse as children reveal how this abuse can follow a continuum, from grooming and coercion to in-person abuse. In 7% of cases, children were subjected to abuse both online and in person. When sexual content is recorded or shared, the harm can continue long after the initial incident, with children re-exposed and harmed every time their images are reshared or used to threaten them.

7. Who is most affected?

The survey found that children were subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse at similar rates across age groups, gender, whether they lived in urban or rural parts of the country, their digital skills, or their parents' level of education.

Yet, the findings also reveal that gender does play a role, when it comes to the ways in which children may be targeted differently and have very different experiences of abuse and exploitation. For example, boys were significantly more likely than girls to be exposed to sexual content, with 19% of boys affected compared with 11% of girls. Meanwhile, girls were significantly more likely to be asked to share an image or video of their private parts when they did not want to (9%) in comparison to boys (4%).

8. What is the impact on children's lives?

Children subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were 2.5x more likely to self-harm and 3.4x more likely to have suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts compared with children not subjected to this kind of violence. They also suffered 1.5x higher rates of anxiety than children who were not abused.

Children and young people voiced how confused, uncomfortable and distressed they felt when they were subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. They described how receiving sexual content unexpectedly contributed to a sense of loss of control. Not understanding that technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is a form of violence may leave children feeling confused. They may not understand why the experience feels uncomfortable or wrong, or know how they are expected to respond. Young people described feeling shocked, trapped, guilty, blaming themselves and fearing judgment by others when their sexual content was shared non-consensually across online platforms.

In addition to their mental health, technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse impacted different aspects of children's lives including their education, where they live and feel safe to go, and even the way they dress.

Some children may be impacted for years as people around them continue to misplace the responsibility for the abuse on them. This long-lasting impact is particularly exacerbated in cases where sexual content is circulated online and can resurface years later. These findings underline the need for timely, trauma-informed and sustained mental health and psychosocial support.

9. Do children report or tell anyone about this abuse?

According to the survey findings, around half of children (55%) who were subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse or exploitation in the previous year told someone about it. This is higher than in many other countries where this research has been carried out.

Yet, a third (33%) of children did not tell anyone about the technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse they were subjected to. Professionals and young people described how not knowing where to go or who to tell (22%), followed by feelings of embarrassment (17%) and worries about getting into trouble (14%) stopped them from telling anyone about the abuse.

In interviews, young people also shared concerns that their parents might react with judgement, anger or violence, or worries that they would not be believed if they disclosed. Children also avoid disclosing to their parents to mitigate further negative impacts on their lives like having to change schools or losing online access.

Children most often told friends (19%), their mothers/female caregivers (12%), or siblings (11%). Fewer than 1% (0.4%) of children in the survey reported technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to the police. Reporting via other official channels including helplines (2%) was uncommon, as was disclosure to teachers and religious leaders. The most common barriers to formal disclosure (police, helpline or social worker) were "not

knowing you could report these things” (20%) and “not knowing how to make a report” (18%). The obligation to request the presence of parents or guardians to make a formal report, may be an additional barrier which can undermine the child’s agency and their right to be heard. These findings also suggest a broader lack of trust that formal reporting mechanisms will respond effectively, protect children’s confidentiality and lead to meaningful accountability and support.

10. What happens when children and young people seek justice?

The Dominican Republic has important protections for children who seek justice following sexual exploitation and abuse, including privacy safeguards, access to legal aid and measures intended to prevent children from having to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences. However, some of these child-friendly safeguards are not guaranteed in legislation, and important barriers remain.

Statutes of limitations of between 3 and 10 years can prevent access to justice when people only feel able to disclose abuse or exploitation that happened in childhood, years later. NGOs provide important psychosocial, legal and educational support, but children and young people interviewed for the study described these services as sometimes intermittent or irregular, and there is no structured system for long-term recovery and reintegration.

There are also gaps in the law that can make it harder to hold perpetrators accountable for some forms of technology-facilitated abuse. Online grooming and sexual extortion of children are not explicitly criminalized, and legislation does not explicitly cover digitally generated or AI-manipulated child sexual abuse material. While the 2025 Criminal Code represents important progress,

further legal reform and stronger, sustained support services are needed to ensure children can access justice and care.

11. What needs to change?

Educating children about online safety is important, but it is not enough on its own. Responses that focus on children’s behaviour risk shifting responsibility onto children and overlooking the wider social, institutional, legal factors, and technological conditions that enable abuse to occur. Protecting children requires coordinated action across families, schools, communities, social protection services, law enforcement, the justice system, government, and technology companies.

Some of the report’s key recommendations include:

1. Strengthen prevention through education and awareness

Children need age-appropriate education on healthy relationships, consent, personal boundaries and digital safety that reflects their everyday lives and experiences. Parents and caregivers should also be supported to have open conversations with children about relationships, sexuality, online experiences and where to seek help. The report also calls for sustained public awareness campaigns to challenge harmful social norms that normalize abuse and exploitation, to reduce shame, stigma and victim-blaming, and help children recognize abuse and seek support.

2. Support tech companies and hold them accountable for making their tools and platforms safer

Technology companies have a responsibility to make online services safer for children. The report recommends strengthening legislation and regulation to require

platforms to introduce safety-by-design measures, accessible child-friendly reporting tools, stronger safeguards against unwanted contact, and timely detection, reporting and removal of child sexual abuse material. It also calls for closer collaboration between government, regulators, law enforcement and technology companies to address emerging online risks, including those related to artificial intelligence.

3. Make it easier for children and families to seek help

Children need trusted adults they can turn to at home, in schools and in their communities. The report recommends expanding child-friendly reporting pathways, raising awareness of available support services, and ensuring children know where to seek help and that they are able to do so without parental involvement. It also recommends supporting parents and caregivers to respond to disclosures in protective, non-judgmental ways and making reporting services more visible, accessible and responsive to children's needs.

4. Invest in better support and recovery services

Children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse should have prompt access to legal representation, medical care, psychological support, and recovery and rehabilitation programmes. The report also highlights the importance of strengthening social protection and family support services to address the economic vulnerabilities that can increase children's risk of exploitation.

5. Strengthen justice and accountability

The report recommends closing legal gaps so that all forms of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be

effectively investigated and prosecuted. It also calls for stronger legal safeguards for children, including extending statutes of limitations, ensuring access to child-friendly justice procedures and legal representation, and strengthening measures to protect children throughout the justice process.

See the full report for the complete set of recommendations for the Dominican Republic.

12. What can parents and caregivers do?

One of the most important things parents and caregivers can do is to create an environment where children feel safe talking about their experiences, relationships and any concerns, without fear of blame, judgment or punishment.

Informed and well-supported parents can play a key role in helping children understand healthy relationships, consent, personal boundaries and online safety. Open, calm and non-judgmental conversations about sexuality, on-line experiences and exploitation can help children recognize harmful behaviour, understand their rights and know where to seek help. The research also highlights the importance of challenging shame, stigma and victim-blaming attitudes, which can prevent children from disclosing or reporting abuse.

At the same time, protecting children cannot be the responsibility of parents alone. The research is clear that preventing this abuse requires a coordinated effort by families, schools, social workers, law enforcement, technology companies and governments. Parents should be supported with practical guidance on online safety, reporting channels and support services, and how to respond if a child discloses abuse.

13. How can the media help?

Media professionals are key allies in protecting children.

- **Use survivor-centred, non-blaming language, including through the use of appropriate terminology, and protect children's identities.** Reporting should never imply that a child is responsible for the abuse/exploitation they were subjected to. Avoid names, images, locations or other details that could reveal their identity, directly or indirectly.
- **Focus on systemic issues and protection gaps, not on the child's actions.** 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 child victims of crime and avoid publishing information that could interfere with investigation or court proceedings.
- **Share information about support services.** Where possible, include information about helplines and reporting channels and available services so children and families know where to seek help.

Media Contacts

UNICEF Dominican Republic:

Solangel Diaz sdiaz@unicef.org

Disrupting Harm global team:

Daniel Kardefelt Winther dkardefeltwinther@unicef.org

Stephanie Curran scurran@unicef.org