

# DISRUPTING HARM IN DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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

**Suggested citation:**

ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2026). Disrupting Harm in Dominican Republic: Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Safe Online.

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# CONTENTS

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|                                                                                                      |           |                                                |           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Message from the Ministry of Justice                                                                 | 2         | <b>4. Service utilization</b>                  | <b>47</b> |
| Executive summary                                                                                    | 3         |                                                |           |
| Methods                                                                                              | 7         | <b>5. Access to justice and legal remedies</b> | <b>51</b> |
| Introduction                                                                                         | 11        |                                                |           |
| Internet use in the Dominican Republic                                                               | 12        | <b>6. Prevention efforts and opportunities</b> | <b>56</b> |
|                                                                                                      |           |                                                |           |
| <b>1. Technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children in the Dominican Republic</b> | <b>16</b> | <b>7. Conclusion</b>                           | <b>59</b> |
|                                                                                                      |           |                                                |           |
| 1.1 What types of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are children subjected to?    | 18        | <b>8. Recommendations</b>                      | <b>61</b> |
| 1.2 Who perpetrates technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse?                            | 28        |                                                |           |
| 1.3 Where are children subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse?            | 31        | <b>9. Acknowledgements</b>                     | <b>68</b> |
|                                                                                                      |           |                                                |           |
| <b>2. The impact on children</b>                                                                     | <b>34</b> | <b>10. Annex: Definition of key terms</b>      | <b>69</b> |
|                                                                                                      |           |                                                |           |
| <b>3. Disclosure and reporting</b>                                                                   | <b>39</b> |                                                |           |
|                                                                                                      |           |                                                |           |
| 3.1 Do children disclose and report exploitation and abuse?                                          | 40        |                                                |           |

# MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

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The Dominican justice system has a responsibility to ensure that no child or adolescent is left vulnerable to the new forms of violence emerging from the digital environment. This is both a national priority and a mandate that directly concerns the institutions responsible for designing, coordinating and implementing justice policy. It requires technical expertise, a willingness to act and a readiness to reform the institutional framework when circumstances so require.

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are among the most serious manifestations of the new reality we face. The very nature of these acts means they transcend the traditional boundaries between the virtual and real worlds. This tests the ability of our institutions to identify, investigate, punish and provide redress with the same assuredness with which we tackle other forms of violence against children. Understanding this issue in all its complexity is essential if the justice system is to fulfil its protection function.

As one of the justice system's key players, the Ministry of Justice's role goes beyond that of coordination within the Executive Branch: it is our duty to advocate strongly to ensure that the right of children to be protected from digital violence is given the priority it deserves on the institutional agenda, to consider the implications of this violence in each regulatory reform and system strengthening process and to promote a response commensurate with the gravity of the issue. The justice system is committed to inter-agency coordination as a means to fulfil its duty to protect children's rights.

The Ministry of Justice's involvement in the Disrupting Harm project is a concrete expression of this commitment. The findings of this report detail the scale and characteristics of this form of digital violence in the Dominican Republic. They serve as a valuable resource that will enable us, through our advocacy and public policy coordination efforts, to work with other institutions in the system to drive forward the regulatory reforms, institutional changes and types of decisions that this situation demands.

At the Ministry of Justice, we reaffirm our commitment to leading – together with the institutions within the system – a coordinated, timely and evidence-based response that ensures safe environments for all children and adolescents and their effective access to justice.

**Antoliano Peralta Romero**

Minister of Justice of the Dominican Republic



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Funded by Safe Online, 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 the Dominican Republic, from 2023 onwards.

Between 2023 and 2024, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti conducted research in the Dominican Republic to understand tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse from multiple viewpoints. The data in the Dominican Republic were collected through a national household survey with 12–17-year-olds, interviews with young people who were subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse before the age of 18, and law enforcement, and an analysis of national legislation and policy.

## What is technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

The Disrupting Harm project uses the term technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to refer to situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point during the continuum of sexual exploitation or abuse of a child. This type of violence is sometimes referred to as ‘online’ child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the term ‘technology-facilitated’ is now preferred<sup>1</sup> 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 the Dominican Republic

- According to Disrupting Harm survey data, 23 per cent of 12-17-year-old internet-using children in the Dominican Republic were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in only a one-year period. Scaled up to the overall population of 12–17-year-old internet-using children, this represents an estimated 262,000 children in the Dominican Republic who have been subjected to any of these harms in the span of a single year.
- Overall, a higher proportion of children aged 17 (40 per cent) were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse compared with the youngest children surveyed, aged 12 (15 per cent). In addition, children subjected to sexual violence in person had higher odds (9.8 times higher) of also being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse compared with children who were not sexually abused in person.
- Exposure to unwanted sexual content was the most common form of abuse reported by children surveyed in the Dominican Republic (15 per cent). Boys were significantly more likely than girls to be exposed to sexual content, with 19 per cent of boys affected compared with 11 per cent of girls.
- The children and young people interviewed described being exposed to sexual images suddenly and without warning, which left them feeling uncomfortable and confused. The sudden nature of this abuse seems to amplify the emotional impact, and perpetrators may deliberately use unexpected exposure to assert power and control over the child.
- Based on the interviews, threats to share children's sexual content are used by perpetrators as a lever for further abuse or exploitation, including obtaining more material, pressuring children into online or in-person sexual abuse, maintaining control within a relationship or extorting money.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Child sexual exploitation and abuse on social media, online games and other online platforms

- According to data from the household survey, half of incidents (50 per cent) of sexual exploitation and abuse were facilitated by social media.
- Among these, the survey data show that WhatsApp was the most common platform where exploitation and abuse occurred, accounting for 60 per cent of cases. Facebook and Instagram followed, linked to 35 per cent and 30 per cent of cases respectively.
- In 7 per cent of cases, children were subjected to abuse both online and in person; children and young people also described how tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse intersected with or developed into in-person sexual abuse.
- Interviews 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.
- Despite the number of cases facilitated by social media, Dominican legislation does not require online platforms to provide accessible mechanisms for reporting illegal content or violations of children's rights on their services. It also does not impose safety-by-design obligations, nor does it require platforms to regularly assess and mitigate the risks their services may pose to children.
- Corporate criminal liability for tech-facilitated offences is narrowly defined, applying only where legal representatives knowingly allow, facilitate, participate in or conceal illegal conduct. This high threshold means that online platforms have little incentive to take proactive steps to detect or block child sexual abuse material.

### Perpetrator profiles and common tactics

- In 68 per cent of cases, the perpetrator was someone the child already knew. They were most often adult friends or acquaintances (16 per cent), peers who were also children (14 per cent) and family members over 18 (14 per cent).

- Ten per cent of instances were attributed to romantic partners aged 18 or over, and 6 per cent to romantic partners younger than 18.
- 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.
- Similarly, perpetrators can exploit children's curiosity about sexuality as part of the grooming process.

### Criminalization of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- The Dominican Republic has taken important steps to strengthen the criminalization of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly through the adoption of the 2025 Criminal Code. Existing legal provisions on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse provide a solid basis for protection, including offences related to unwanted exposure to sexual content and the commission of sexual assault using information systems. The 2025 Criminal Code further strengthens this framework by addressing several previously unregulated forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and introducing significantly stronger penalties. However, the legislation could be further strengthened to better address evolving online risks.
- While existing provisions on blackmail and extortion may apply to cases in which money or material gain is sought by the perpetrator, Dominican law does not explicitly criminalize tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children where children are coerced into producing additional sexual material or engaging in sexual acts.
- Online grooming of children for sexual purposes is not expressly criminalized. While a bill to introduce such an offence was tabled in 2021, it lapsed without being enacted.
- Dominican law criminalizes a range of conduct related to child sexual abuse material, including production, dissemination and possession without intent to distribute, although penalties are relatively low. Mere access with no intention to further distribute or use is not criminalized, allowing individuals to intentionally seek out and view such content without legal consequences.

- The definition of child sexual abuse material does not explicitly cover digitally generated representations, including material created or manipulated through artificial intelligence or other technologies to simulate a child involved in sexual activity.
- Dominican 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 13 years and no exemptions exist, children aged 13–17 years could potentially face prosecution for voluntarily creating or sharing their own sexual content, despite such acts arising from sexual exploration.

### **Disclosure and reporting of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse**

- Based on the household survey, 33 per cent of children did not tell anyone about being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Among those children who did not speak to anyone about exploitation and abuse, the main barriers were not knowing where to go or who to tell (22 per cent), followed by feelings of embarrassment (17 per cent) and worries about getting into trouble (14 per cent).
- Reporting exploitation and abuse via official channels, either the police (0.4 per cent) or helplines (2 per cent), was uncommon, as was disclosure to teachers and religious leaders.
- According to the children and young people interviewed, children attempt to stop or mitigate the impact of abuse or exploitation by blocking perpetrators on the platforms that facilitate it; however, this strategy sometimes proves ineffective, as perpetrators create new profiles to continue subjecting children to exploitation or abuse.

- As described by children and young people during interviews, fear of blame, restrictions, anger or violence lead some children to avoid telling their parents, a fear that perpetrators may exploit to further coerce and blackmail them. Parents’ negative reactions towards children can affect their relationship, reducing trust and making children less likely to communicate openly about sensitive issues such as sexuality and relationships.
- Although survey data suggest that children most often turn to friends when disclosing tech-facilitated exploitation or abuse, data from qualitative interviews with children and young people highlight that peers often lack the skills or resources to support them or to help stop the exploitation and/or abuse.

### **Social and mental health impacts of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse**

- Children who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were 3.4 times more likely to report suicidal thoughts or behaviors, and 2.5 times more likely to report self-harm<sup>2</sup> in the past year, compared with children not subjected to such abuse<sup>3</sup>.
- Children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation experience anxiety at 1.5 times the rate of those who have not been subjected to it.
- In the interviews, children and young people voiced how confused, uncomfortable and distressed they felt when they were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children. Receiving sexual content unexpectedly contributed to a sense of loss of control.
- Not understanding that tech-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.

<sup>2</sup> For this analysis, the relative risks for self-harm are reported for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year, and those not subjected to abuse during this period.

<sup>3</sup> For this analysis, the relative risks for suicidal ideation and behaviours are reported for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year, and those not subjected to abuse during this period.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- Young people described feeling shocked, 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, tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse impacted different aspects of their lives including their education, where they live and feel safe to go, and even the way they dress.

### Children's experiences with social services

- The legal and policy analysis showed that the State has a clear mandate to protect children from all forms of exploitation and abuse, including those facilitated by technology, and to restore their rights they are violated. It also identified the existence of a dedicated protocol on online sexual exploitation. However, despite these legal provisions, the legal framework does not provide for structured, long-term recovery and reintegration programmes.
- According to interviews with children and young people, non-governmental organizations are key service providers, delivering psychosocial, legal and educational support, but these services are sometimes intermittent or irregular.
- A draft Law on the Protection of Victims, Witnesses and Persons at Risk proposes significant strengthening of government victim support services, including guaranteed access to free medical and psychological care and the creation of a dedicated coordinating body; however, it remained pending as of June 2026.

### Access to child-centred justice and legal remedies

- Statutes of limitations for criminal offences ranging from three to 10 years in the Dominican Republic risk undermining access to justice in cases of (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, as individuals subjected to abuse during childhood may only feel ready to disclose after the legal time limit for prosecution has expired.
- The child-centred justice framework in the Dominican Republic contains a range of safeguards, including closed hearings, privacy protections and the right of children to express their views in judicial proceedings, considering their evolving capacities. Mechanisms are also in place to ensure access to legal aid.
- The Judiciary Council mandates that forensic interviews of children be conducted only once by trained professionals and be audio-visually recorded. However, these safeguards are not enshrined in legislation.
- Civil society organizations can play an important role in supporting child victims of crime during judicial proceedings. Dominican legislation allows victims to delegate participation in proceedings and claims for compensation to non-governmental organizations.

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 61](#) of this report.



# METHODS

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The Disrupting Harm methodology combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a better understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the Dominican Republic. The quantitative data provide an understanding of the scope of this issue among children in the Dominican Republic. 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 best suit the country context. The research was designed and implemented following strict safeguarding and ethics protocols. Four 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, justice sector, service providers, government, educators) protect, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
6. How do existing policy and legislation protect, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

The four research activities conducted in the Dominican Republic were: (1) a legal and policy analysis; (2) a household survey of 12–17-year-olds and their caregivers; (3) interviews with children and young people who had been subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and

abuse while under the age of 18; and (4) interviews with national law enforcement officials. A summary of the methods used for each of the four research activities is presented below.

## Legal and policy analysis

The analysis of national legal and policy frameworks was aimed at identifying legal gaps, assessing compliance with international obligations, and highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in national responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The legal and policy analysis was developed using a detailed checklist consisting of over 140 items, ensuring consistency across countries analysed. This 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 they reflected current legal frameworks. These were analysed using the checklist to identify legal gaps and enforcement challenges, supported by case law and reports on prosecution where available.

The draft analysis underwent internal and external expert reviews, including review from a legal expert from the Dominican Republic, to ensure accuracy and real-world relevance. The analysis, originally drafted in 2023, was subsequently updated to reflect the relevant provisions of the 2025 Criminal Code, which is set to enter into force in August 2026.

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 personal questions, including around sexual violence, respondents input their answers directly in the tablet to ensure that their

## METHODS

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 Telecommunication Union.<sup>4</sup>

To achieve a nationally representative random sample of 12–17-year-old internet users, the survey used random probability sampling with national coverage. In the Dominican Republic, the fieldwork coverage was 97 per cent. ‘Coverage’ is defined as the proportion of the total population that had a chance of being included in the survey sample – meaning that the fieldwork would cover the area where they live if sampled. Data were collected in Región Metropolitana, Región Cibao Norte, Región Cibao Sur, Región Cibao Nordeste, Región Cibao Noroeste, Región Valdesia, Región Enriquillo, Región del Valle, Región Yuma and Región Higuamo. High-crime areas could not be covered in fieldwork due to safety reasons. Data collection took place from May to June 2024.

The sampling followed a three-stage random probability clustered sample design. The response rate was 75 per cent, and the sample achieved included 1,002 children and 1,002 of their parents/guardians.

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

### Age and gender distribution of child sample:

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| <b>12–14 years</b> | 62% |
| <b>15–17 years</b> | 38% |
| <b>Girls</b>       | 51% |
| <b>Boys</b>        | 49% |

### Age and gender distribution of parent/guardian sample:

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| <b>Under 40 years</b> | 43% |
| <b>Over 40 years</b>  | 57% |
| <b>Women</b>          | 85% |
| <b>Men</b>            | 15% |
| <b>Other</b>          | 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 included the voices of children and young people (16–24 years) who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood.<sup>5</sup> 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 the Dominican Republic. Three main engagement strategies were developed to connect children and young people with clinical researchers to participate in an interview:

1. **Survivors’ network:** Information about the study was distributed via an established survivors’ network WhatsApp group by a professional linked to the group.
2. **Organizations and universities:** Information about the study was shared in person with students at an organization providing vocational training in Santo Domingo and through posters placed on its premises. Additional posters were also placed at major universities in Santo Domingo to increase visibility about the study.

<sup>4</sup> International Telecommunication Union, *Manual for Measuring ICT Access and Use by Households and Individuals*, 2020 edition, ITU, Geneva, 2020. [https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/manual/ITUManualHouseholds2020\\_E.pdf](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/manual/ITUManualHouseholds2020_E.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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3. Digital networks: Information about the study was shared with young people aged 18–24 in the Dominican Republic through the UNICEF UReport platform, a social messaging tool designed to share information, conduct polls and consult young people on issues that matter to them.

Trauma-informed interviews were conducted with 13 children and young people. The interviews were conducted by two trained clinical researchers and were first piloted between August and September 2024, with the main wave of data collection taking place between February and May 2025. Three participants were between 16 and 17-years old and 10 were aged between 18 and 24. Among them, 10 were women or girls and 3 were men.

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

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

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

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

### 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 the Dominican Republic.

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 the Dominican Republic. The survey is cross-sectional, not longitudinal, meaning that the data capture a single moment in time in the lives of the 1,002 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 the survey data alone.

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

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

Interviews were initially planned with justice professionals and front-line workers who support children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. However, these activities were not carried out due to challenges with identifying an interviewer with the required skills and experience and established networks

## METHODS

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with relevant professionals. Consequently, the evidence presented below does not capture how certain procedures and practices are experienced and implemented from the perspective of these professionals.

### **Ethical approval**

UNICEF Innocenti obtained ethical approval for the Disrupting Harm project from the Health Media Lab, a global institutional review board. To ensure protocols were appropriate for the national context, the research was reviewed by the Etikos Foundation, which required additional ethics certification for team members, updates on procedural changes and a closure report at project completion.

### **National consultation**

In a national consultation in May 2026, representatives across sectors including government and civil society in the Dominican Republic were asked to provide input on the Disrupting Harm findings and recommendations to enhance their relevance for the national context.



# INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

Perpetrators may use digital platforms to manipulate or threaten children they already know, or to seek out 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 overlook the societal forces that enable sexual exploitation and abuse, or allow it to continue undisclosed and unreported. What children share in surveys and interviews represents what they felt comfortable with disclosing at that point in time. This means that the full extent of the problem is likely to be greater than captured in this report.

Nonetheless, the findings presented in this report go a long way towards unpacking tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the Dominican Republic. It adds much-needed nuance and understanding to this issue, grounded in the experiences of children and young people.

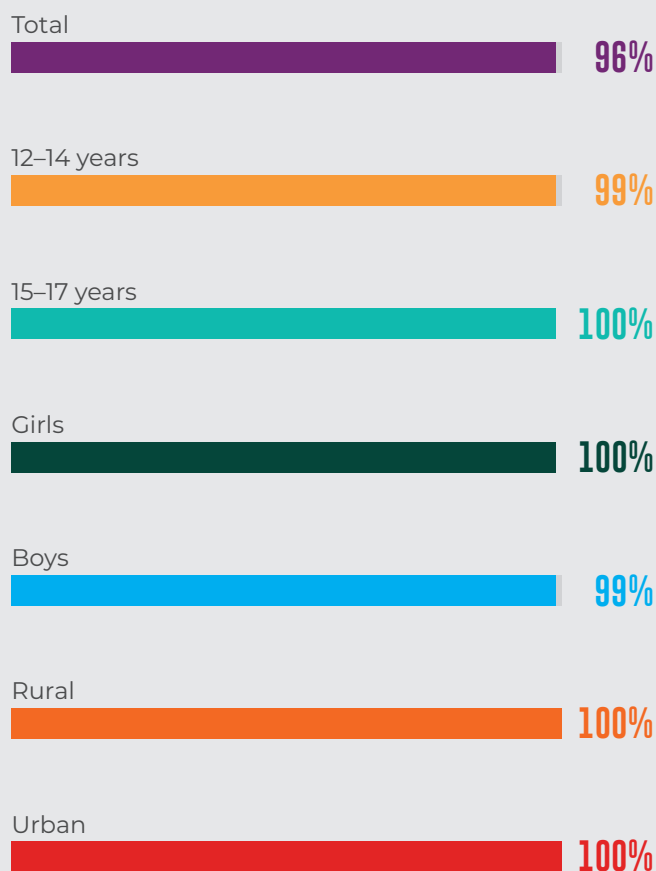
# INTERNET USE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Understanding how children access the internet, whether they go online regularly or not, what they do online, and how parents engage with their internet use, may provide insights into how to create a digital environment that is safer and more enjoyable for children. However, prevention of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse is not primarily about what children are doing online and reinforces the need for research projects that examine how tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse fit into children's wider life contexts. Disrupting Harm data across countries, including the Dominican Republic,<sup>6</sup> 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.

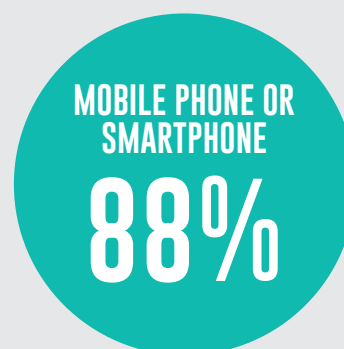
Any effort at prevention must therefore look beyond what children are (or ought to be) doing online; not doing so often results in victim-blaming or treating children as complicit in the exploitation and abuse they have been subjected to. Instead, prevention requires a multi-pronged approach that focuses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



Base: 1,275 households.

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

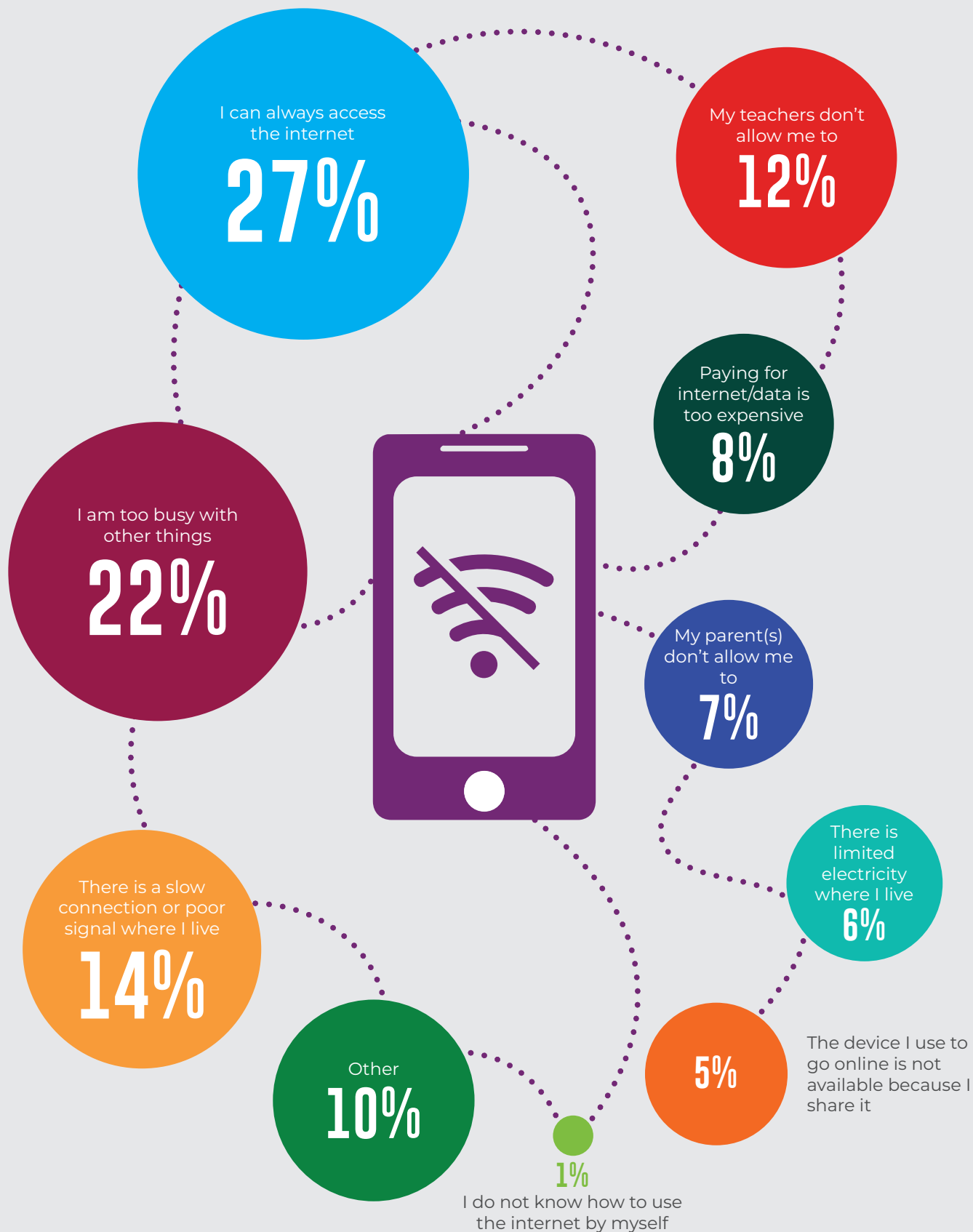


Base: 1,002 internet-using children.

6 For more Disrupting Harm reports, see <https://safeonline.global/disrupting-harm-2/>.

## INTERNET USE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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

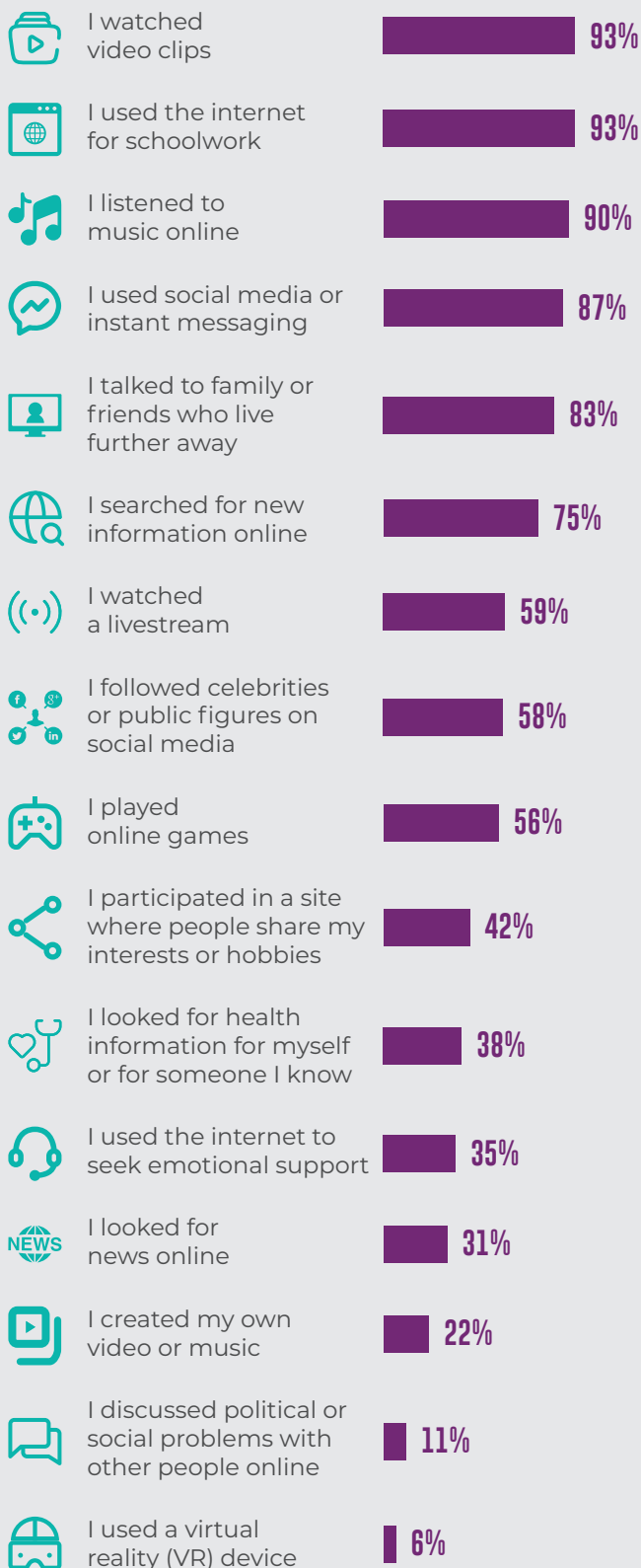


Base: 1,002 internet-using children.



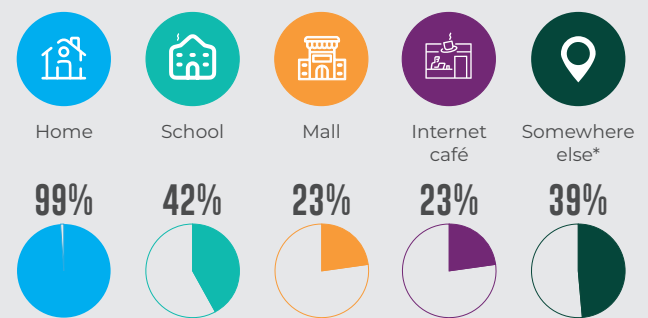
## INTERNET USE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

### ACTIVITIES CHILDREN ENGAGE IN ONLINE AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK



Base: 1,002 internet-using children.

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



Base: 1,002 internet-using children.

\* Multiple-choice question.

### DIGITAL SKILLS AMONG 12–17-YEAR-OLD INTERNET USERS IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

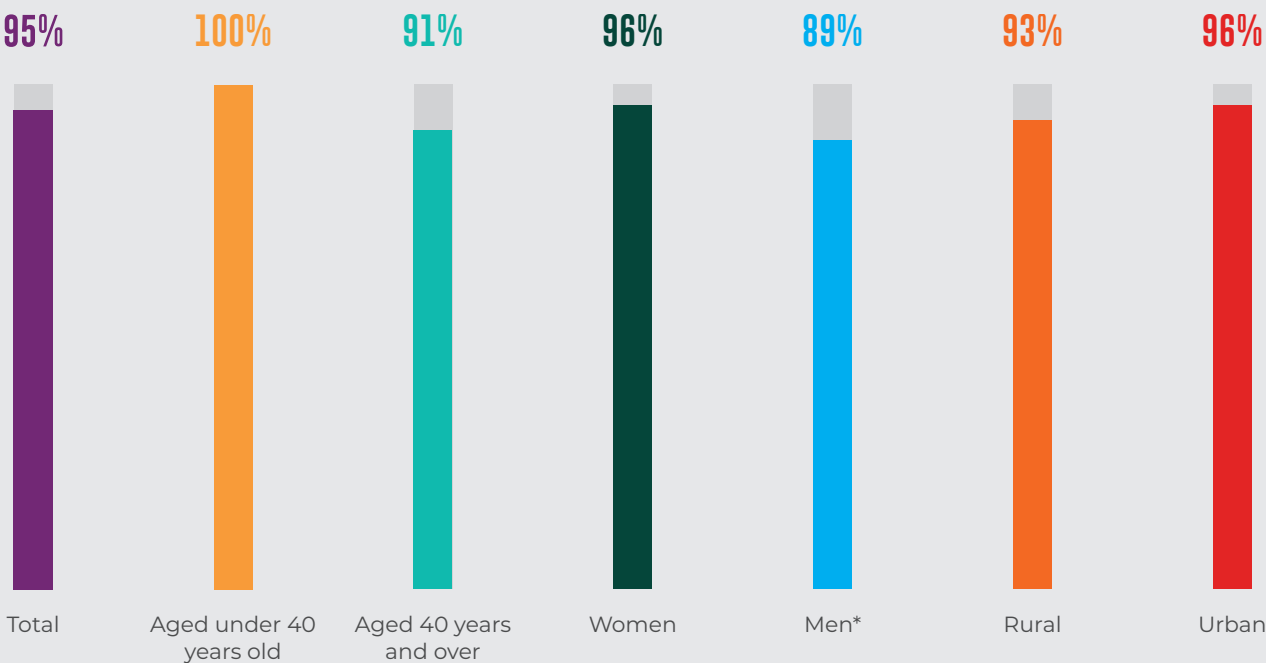


Base: 1,002 internet-using children.

\*Percentage of children who say it is 'mostly' or 'very' true.

# INTERNET USE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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



**Base:** 1,002 parents of internet-using 12–17-year-old children.  
\*The parent sample has a low proportion of men (15 per cent). These results should be interpreted with caution.

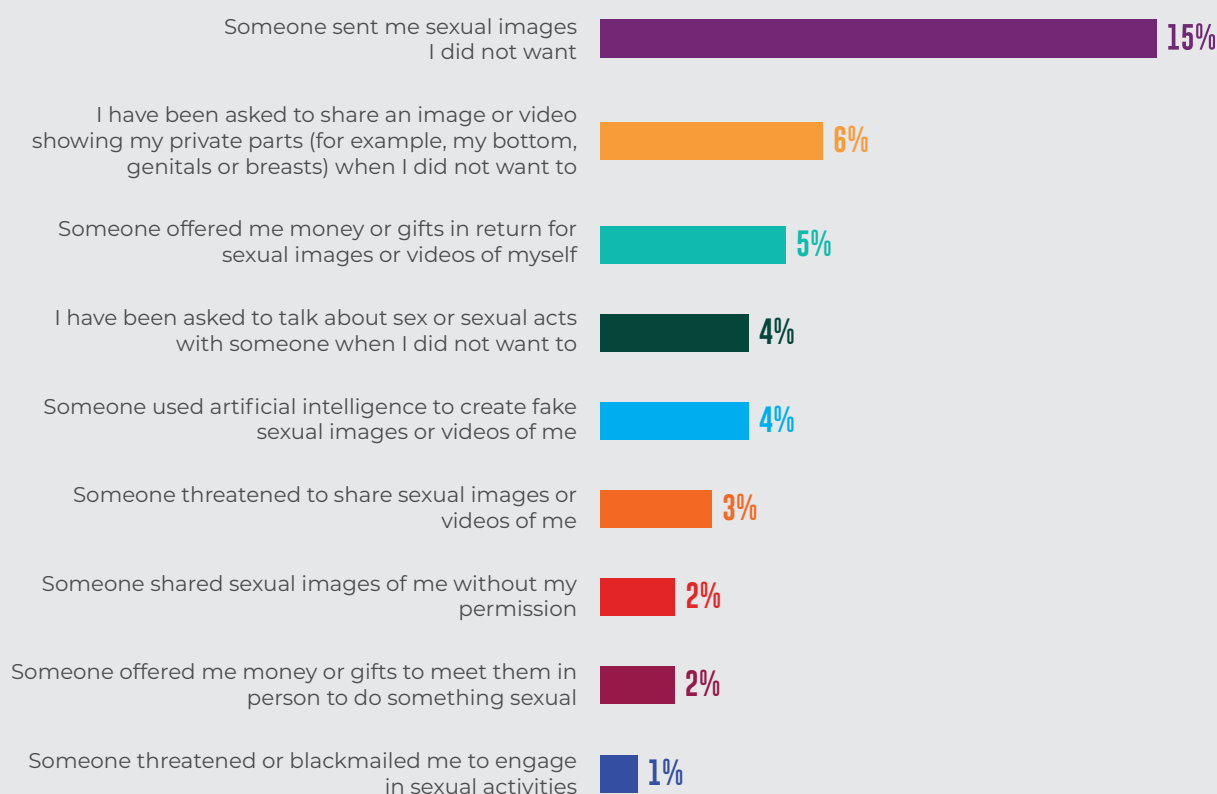
# 1. TECHNOLOGY- FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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# 1. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Based on the household survey, **23 per cent** of internet-using children surveyed in the Dominican Republic 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, this represents an estimated 262,000 children in the Dominican Republic 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: 1,002 internet-using children aged 12–17 in the Dominican Republic.

## Understanding the data

Twenty-three per cent of children said they were subjected to at least one of the forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured in the survey. This represents 220 children from the sample. Eight per cent of children in the sample were also subjected to more than one of the forms of exploitation and abuse above in the past year. This means that, taken together, those **220 children were subjected to a total 426 incidents of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse** measured in the survey. These 426 instances of exploitation and abuse serve as the basis for much of the survey analysis in this report.

Survey data are presented in charts throughout this report, along with the number of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that have been included in the analysis. In some cases, survey questions were multiple choice and the percentages shown therefore exceed 100 per cent.

# 1.1 WHAT TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ARE CHILDREN SUBJECTED TO?

Twenty-three per cent of 12–17-year-old internet-using children in the Dominican Republic said that they were subjected to at least one of the instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured in the survey in the previous year. Incidents of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were more common among older children compared with younger ones: up to 40 per cent for 17-year-olds versus 17 per cent for 12-year-olds).<sup>7</sup> However, there were no statistically significant differences in the proportions of children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured in the survey by the child's gender, area of residence (urban versus rural), schooling (in school versus out of school) or their parent's level of education (low/medium/high). Importantly, the lack of differences by gender in this aggregate does not erase the gendered aspects of exploitation and abuse, since children may be targeted differently and have vastly different experiences because of their gender. However, this finding also challenges perceptions that (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse only affect certain groups of children, highlighting the need for inclusive yet tailored approaches that recognize and respond to the different experiences and needs of all children.

As presented on page 17, the forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that were most common in the Disrupting Harm survey data in the Dominican Republic included: exposure to sexual content, unwanted requests for sexual content and being offered money or gifts in return for sexual videos or images. Further analysis of how children were subjected to these and other forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, how they overlap and whether the legal framework adequately criminalizes them is presented below.

## Exposure to unwanted sexual content

**Exposing children to unwanted sexual content was particularly prevalent in the Dominican Republic and was the most common abusive behaviour that the children surveyed were subjected to (15 per cent).** This conduct is criminalized under the 2025 Criminal Code, which punishes providing “real or simulated pornography” to children or allowing them to witness acts of a sexual nature, with penalties ranging from 10 to 20 years of imprisonment.<sup>8</sup> Boys were significantly more likely to be exposed to unwanted sexual content (19 per cent) compared with girls (11 per cent). During the interviews, children and young people also described being subjected to this form of tech-facilitated abuse sometimes multiple times by the same or different perpetrators. A young person recalled two situations where she received sexual images on Facebook. The first was when she was 13 years old and received images from a man in his 20s whom she met on her way to school, and the other from her friend's brother when she was 16. As she described each incident, she reflected on how sudden and unexpected they were:

“

*He [the perpetrator] approached us, it was already the third time [he approached them] and asked for my number. I didn't have a phone number because I was only 13 and didn't have a phone. So, I gave him my Facebook, and, I don't know why, out of nowhere, the guy sent me a photo of his penis. It was just like that, as if [it was] something normal. We were talking and suddenly... Then [it happened] again with a friend's brother. I accepted his friend request on Facebook. I didn't really know him, but I did know he was her brother because they had the same last name and looked very similar. So, he sent me a picture of his penis out of nowhere. (YP)*

”

<sup>7</sup> p-value = 0.002.

<sup>8</sup> Dominican Republic (2025). [Law No. 74-25 Establishing the Criminal Code of the Dominican Republic](#), Arts. 179, 180-6.

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Like the young person quoted above, the children and young people interviewed described how exposure to sexual images typically occurred without warning and led them to feel uncomfortable, confused and disgusted. The sudden nature of this abuse seems to amplify the emotional impact and perpetrators may deliberately use unexpected exposure to assert power and control over the child.

In the case described above, the child's response was to block both perpetrators on Facebook and to avoid coming across them in person. During the interview, she explained how she felt she needed to act quickly because she did not want to receive any more images and because she was using a shared family computer and did not want others to see that content. Blocking the sender was a common immediate response among young people who received unwanted sexual content. They described how this not only served to avoid receiving additional content but also to regain a sense of control.

In another case, a young person was forced by her mother and stepfather to watch pornography at age 13 before being sexually abused in person:

“

*When I was 13, my mum prostituted me. She would take me to hotels and make me watch pornography to motivate me. I didn't know them [the people who abused her in person], my mum took me there and they started touching me and watching pornography and forced me to watch it. (YP)*

”

The law treats cases like this as particularly serious, with the 2025 Criminal Code providing for aggravated penalties of 20 to 30 years' imprisonment when sexual exploitation of children is committed by their parents or legal guardians.<sup>9</sup> This applies to both the organization of exploitation in prostitution and the exposure to pornography, regardless of whether these conducts are facilitated by technology.<sup>10</sup> As this case demonstrates, sexual exploitation and abuse can also involve situations in which children are threatened or coerced, as examined in more detail in the following section.

In addition, the case described above gave way to other forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that continued even after her mother and stepfather were in prison. As she explained:

“

*She [mother] gave my number to two people, and [those people] started sending me videos [with sexual content] and harassing me and telling me that if I didn't go where they were, they would kill me. (YP)*

”

### Unwanted requests for sexual content

Data from the household survey show that **6 per cent of children reported being asked to share an image or video of their private parts** (such as their bottom, genitals or breasts) when they did not want to, an act that is not explicitly criminalized under the law of the Dominican Republic. Most children said no to the request, while others avoided the perpetrator in some way either by blocking them, deleting their messages or ignoring the request, as shown in the chart below. Girls were significantly more likely to receive these requests (9 per cent) in comparison to boys (4 per cent).

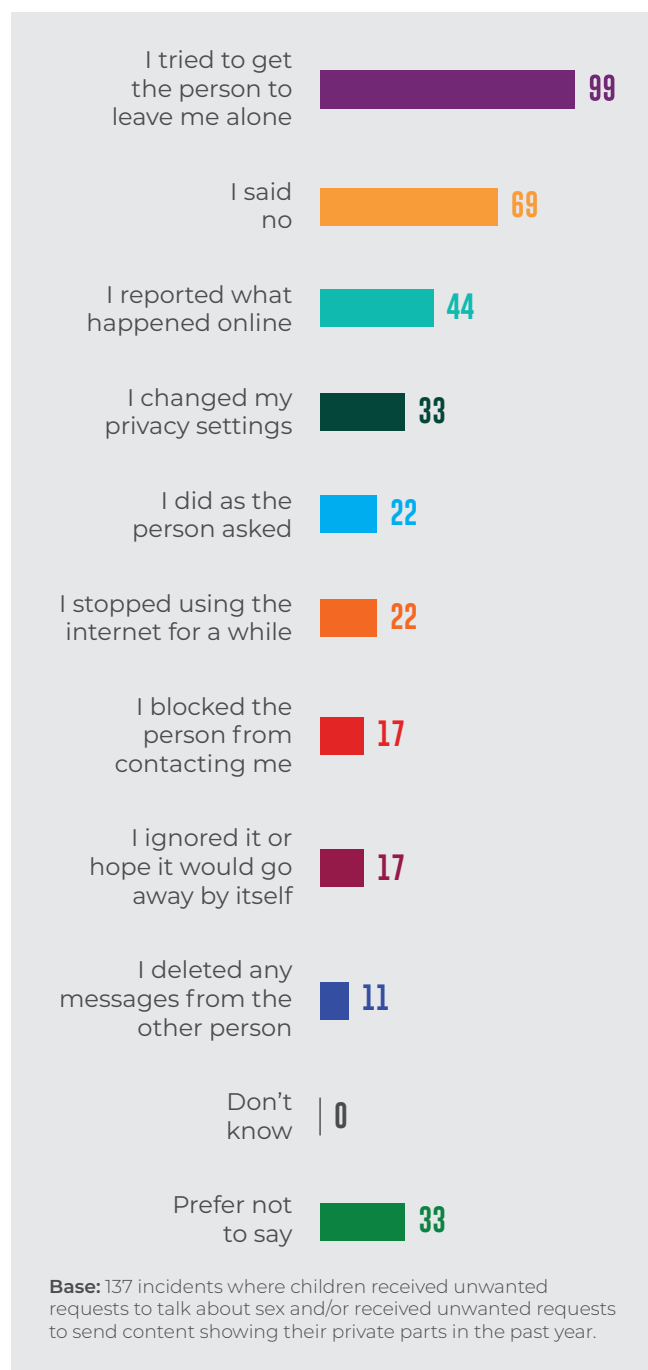
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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Art. 181-1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Arts. 180-1, 180-6.

## 1.1 WHAT TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ARE CHILDREN SUBJECTED TO?

Chart 1: Children's responses to being asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone and/or asked to share an image or video of their private parts when they did not want to



Interviews with children and young people indicate that this form of exploitation and abuse often overlaps with receiving unwanted sexual images. Unwanted sexual requests and exposure to sexual content may precede one another or may happen

simultaneously. This was the case for one young person who, at the age of 14, was asked by an unknown perpetrator on *Free Fire* (a multiplayer mobile battle game) to send sexual photos, which she did. After this, multiple players started contacting her and asking her to send them sexual content too.

“

*Over time, more people started writing to me and stuff. And there were times when, I don't know if they were men, I don't know if they were women, they started asking me for photos, just like that, and I was like, 'What?'. And one day they said, 'Turn on the camera'. And I turned it on. After that, I continued talking to that person through the camera, and I didn't know that these people had other intentions. One day they told me to take a full-body photo, and I was like, 'Why?' I was confused, I never asked, but I was confused. And I took a photo. (YP)*

”

Her account illustrates how perpetrators can desensitize children to certain interactions and then request or share sexual content, creating confusion about what is normal online and using this uncertainty to abuse or exploit them. Interviews further suggest that such exposure to, and requests for, sexual content often form part of broader grooming processes – as discussed later in this chapter – which may escalate into other forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including being offered money or gifts, or being threatened or coerced into sharing additional sexual material or meeting in person.

### Offers of money or gifts in exchange for sexual content

Five per cent of the children surveyed said they were offered money or gifts in exchange for sexual images or videos of themselves, a pattern also described in interviews with children and young people. For one young person, this kind of exploitation and the sudden online offers came from unknown perpetrators. She described a situation where this happened during a call where an adult exposed her to sexual content:



“

*Since I was 13, there were adults sending me naked photos or creating fake social media accounts: pretending to be a woman, and when you answered the call, it was, you know, an old man masturbating. (YP)*

”

For another young person, the offer also came from unknown perpetrators and she considered accepting it, showing how perpetrators may exploit children and young people's search for autonomy and independence:

“

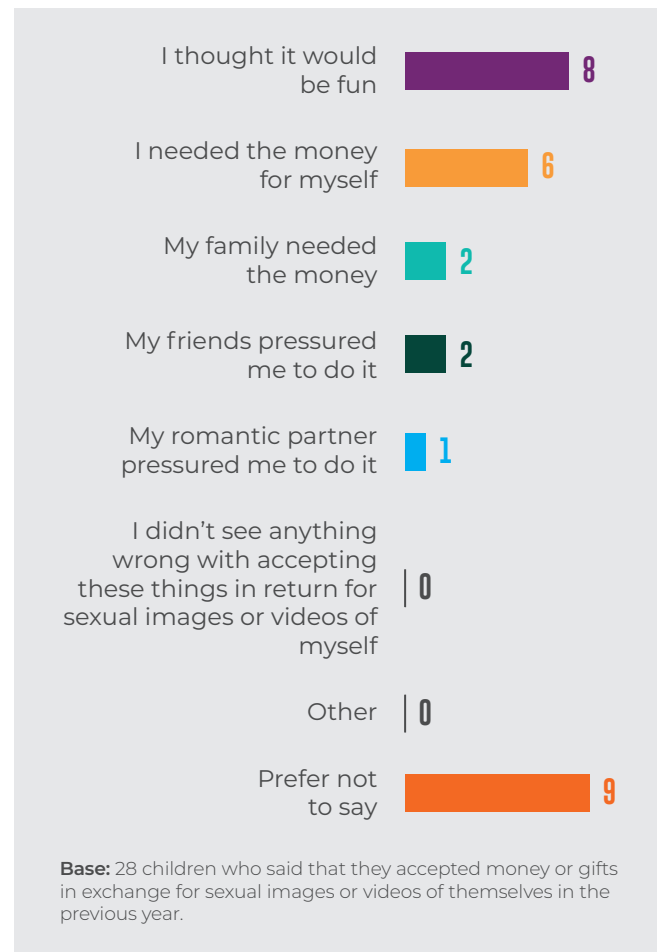
*When I was, like 15 or 16, they would write to me, like, 'Oh, I'm going to send you so much money to do such and such'. And there I was kind of tempted because well, as a teenager I wanted to go out and my dad didn't always give me the money I needed to go out and I responded to messages, but then it intensified and intensified. So, I decided to block them because then I started reading that it could be scams. (YP)*

”

The situation described above falls under the 2025 Criminal Code's comprehensive provisions on the sexual exploitation of children. The law makes it illegal, among other things, to pay or promise money or any other benefit to a child in exchange for sexual acts or sexual relations. Penalties range from 10 to 20 years in prison.<sup>11</sup>

Based on the household survey, when asked why they accepted money or gifts in exchange for sexual images or videos, many said they thought it would be fun but most reported feeling pressured in some way to do it; either because they needed the money, their families needed the money, or because friends or romantic partners pressured them to do so, as shown in the chart below.

Chart 2: Number of children who accepted money or gifts in exchange for sexual images or videos for the following reasons



### Sexual extortion

**Three per cent of the children surveyed were also coerced (threatened or blackmailed) to share sexual content of themselves.** However, Dominican legislation does not explicitly address this conduct, commonly referred to as technology-facilitated sexual extortion. Some cases may nonetheless fall under existing provisions, depending on the perpetrator's goal. The Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences criminalizes blackmail carried out through electronic systems when aimed at obtaining funds or valuables,<sup>12</sup> while the 2025 Criminal Code's general provisions on extortion and blackmail adopt a similar

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Arts. 179, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Dominican Republic (2007). [Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art. 16.

## 1.1 WHAT TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ARE CHILDREN SUBJECTED TO?

approach.<sup>13</sup> As a result, it may be possible to prosecute situations of financial sexual extortion in which the perpetrator seeks to obtain money or material gain under the current framework. By contrast, cases in which the perpetrator coerces a child into providing additional sexual material or engaging in sexual acts fall outside the scope of these provisions.

While this shows that the current framework may enable prosecution in some cases, establishing sexual extortion as a distinct criminal offence would be beneficial to fully capture the specific harm and methods involved, namely the coercive use of self-generated sexual material to extort money, as well as sexual acts or material from a child. Without such a dedicated framework, this form of child sexual exploitation and abuse risks being absorbed into broader categories, hindering the collection of accurate data on recorded cases and how this issue manifests, which are essential for the development of effective responses and prevention strategies.

Interviews with children and young people also show the interconnected nature of exposure and requests for sexual content and sexual extortion. At 14 years old, one of the young people interviewed was contacted on WhatsApp by an 18-year-old neighbour posing as a stranger. After sending her sexual images, he began harassing and pressuring her to share sexual content of herself, even threatening to expose TikTok videos of her dancing, which her parents disapproved of.

“

*Well, at first everything was normal. I added that person [on WhatsApp] and then he started writing to me saying that he liked me, and sometimes he would send me videos of his private parts and stuff like that. And at school, sometimes I would talk to someone, and he would find out, as if he were stalking me, and he would tell me that he had seen me talking to someone else, that I couldn't talk to anyone other than him. (YP)*

”

The young person also spoke about how her dancing and her body were sexualized by the perpetrator. What had felt like a form of expression to her was transformed once she shared it, as others projected intentions onto it and corrupted what it meant to her. Later, she also found out that the perpetrator was paying a classmate to obtain information and use it to continue intimidating and threatening her into sending him additional sexual content.

“

*As I connected the dots, I kind of knew who [the classmate] was who was giving him my information and telling him things about me: everything I said, everything I did, he told him everything. And that was what he [the perpetrator] used to threaten me, to keep sending me those videos and to get me to send something too. But I never agreed, no matter how scared I was. (YP)*

”

Threats following exchanges of sexual content were also described in the context of romantic relationships. At age 13, a girl shared a sexual image with her boyfriend (an 18-year-old), whom she met on Facebook. Shortly afterwards, he threatened to publish the image unless she agreed to have sex. When she refused, he posted and shared the image on WhatsApp and Facebook. Although the relationship initially seemed positive to the child, the perpetrator later became aggressive and demanding.

“

*He would threaten me by saying that if I didn't have [sex] with him, he would post it [sexual content] online. He would always harass me with that. At first, men seem good, but then they start to show their claws, and it gets bad. Yes, he always threatened me and things like that because I didn't want to be with him. (YP)*

”

<sup>13</sup> Dominican Republic (2025). [Law No. 74-25 Establishing the Criminal Code of the Dominican Republic](#), Arts. 232, 233.

In addition to the considerations above in relation to sexual extortion, the conduct described in the two accounts from the young people interviewed may fall under the 2025 Criminal Code's provisions on sexual harassment. This offence covers watching, pursuing, harassing or stalking a person to carry out acts of a sexual nature, with aggravated penalties of two to three years' imprisonment where the conduct is carried out through electronic means, social media or digital platforms.<sup>14</sup>

In 31 cases in the household survey where children were threatened that their sexual images or videos would be shared, the perpetrators asked for money or requested that children engage in sexual activities online or in person. However, in multiple cases, children reported that they did not know what the perpetrator wanted. These findings are presented in the chart below.

**Chart 3: Perpetrators' demands (this is the number of children, not %)**



For another young person interviewed and who was sexually extorted as a child, sharing sexual content was initially presented as proof of love in the context of a romantic relationship. Years later, she was threatened by someone online with the distribution of the photos concerned unless she provided additional sexual content.

**“** *Time passed, the relationship ended, and two years later, someone wrote to me. He just told me that if I didn't send him a current nude photo of myself, he was going to send that photo he had of me to everyone: my parents, everyone around me.* (YP)

**”**

These testimonies show how threats to share children's sexual content often serve as a lever for further exploitation: whether to obtain additional material, coerce children into in-person or online abuse, pressure them to remain in a relationship or extort money. However, in some cases, sexual content may be distributed without the use of threats, as discussed in the next section.

### Non-consensual sharing of sexual content

Any depiction, by any means, of children engaged in real or simulated sexual activities, or showing their sexual parts for primarily sexual purposes is considered child sexual abuse material under the Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences.<sup>15</sup> Once such material is obtained or created, whether through abuse or otherwise, it can be further circulated online and reshared multiple times. This always amounts to a criminal offence in the Dominican Republic, as the law punishes the production, dissemination, sale and any form of commercialization of child sexual abuse material, albeit with relatively low prison penalties ranging from two to four years.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Art. 145.

<sup>15</sup> Dominican Republic (2007). [Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., Art. 24.

## 1.1 WHAT TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ARE CHILDREN SUBJECTED TO?

In a period of only one year, **2 per cent of children surveyed said that their sexual images or videos were shared without their permission.** Such non-consensual sharing of a child's sexual images also features in the testimonies of the children and young people who were interviewed. Their interviews suggest that sexual content can be shared or produced within romantic relationships without threats or coercion after the relationship ends and by the peers who receive them.

For instance, a young person described how at age 14, a young man recorded and took photos without her consent of them having sex. After she ended the relationship, he shared the images with friends, one of whom reshared them further:

*I trusted a guy so we could get to know each other, talk more, and it wasn't anything serious, just something for a while. Well, at that time he took photos and videos. When he took the videos and photos, I realized and told him no, to stop and delete them Well, about two or two and a half months went by, more or less, and he decided to share [the images] with people very close to me. He spoke to a girl who is still very close to me, he shared them with her, and she started sending them from phone to phone. (YP)*

At 13 years old, a young person entered her first romantic relationship, which started in person but primarily developed online. During the relationship, sexual images were shared at the boyfriend's request. He later shared these images with one of his friends. Unlike in the case above, one of those friends informed the girl about it:

*And I started supposedly my first 'romantic' relationship. I really liked the guy; to tell you the truth, he was my first love. Until a time came when we were supposed to be more comfortable with each other, and he started asking me for images. He would say to me, 'No, you should make a video of yourself dancing, like this, in your underwear,' and things like that. And I would think about it a lot, a lot, a lot, but in the end, I did it. I realized that he wasn't just looking at those pictures and videos on his own, but with a friend of his. And at one point, I don't know if he [the boyfriend's friend] felt sorry for me or what happened. He wrote to me and said, 'Look, you should leave him'. And I said, 'But why? Everything is fine'. He sent me one of the photos of me. And, well, I felt like the most used, the dirtiest, the worst person. (YP)*

This finding is confirmed by the household survey, where most children (n=20) who shared naked images or videos of themselves did so with someone they had a crush on or a current or former romantic partner, for example, a girlfriend or boyfriend. It should be noted that children who engage in this behaviour could potentially face prosecution. The Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences does not exempt the voluntary creation or sharing of self-generated sexual material from provisions on child sexual abuse material.<sup>17</sup> This leaves children who have reached the age of criminal responsibility (13 or above)<sup>18</sup> at risk of being prosecuted for non-malicious behaviour arising from sexual exploration, trust or peer interaction.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Art. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Dominican Republic (2003). [Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents](#), Art. 223.



### Spotlight: Child sexual abuse material in Dominican legislation: terminology, gaps and overlaps

The Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences 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.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of the conduct that is criminalized, the law cited above punishes the obtaining and possession of child sexual abuse material through or within an information system, with prison penalties ranging from three months to one year.<sup>20</sup> However, simply accessing this content – with no intention to distribute it further – is not explicitly criminalized. This creates a loophole that allows individuals to intentionally seek out and view such content online without legal consequences, ultimately fuelling its continued circulation and undermining efforts to reduce demand.

The 2025 Criminal Code introduced new provisions addressing the sexual exploitation and abuse of children through images depicting them engaged in real or simulated sexual or erotic activities, whether explicit or not. In addition to conduct already covered by the Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences, the Code prohibits financing, reproducing, publishing, distributing, importing, exporting, displaying or offering such material. It also criminalizes the use of the voice of a child to carry out or simulate such activities, either directly or through electronic means. Perpetrators face penalties ranging from 10 to 20 years’ imprisonment.<sup>21</sup> However, it is not clear how these provisions interact with those in the Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences. Where the same conduct could fall under both laws, there is a risk that courts might rely on the latter, which carries much lower penalties, particularly in cases involving technology. Clarifying how the two legal frameworks should apply and aligning the penalties would help ensure more consistent outcomes in practice.

The 2025 Criminal Code also introduces important protections by criminalizing the use of children in acts of exhibitionism or in public or private performances for sexual purposes,<sup>22</sup> as well as attending such performances.<sup>23</sup> It further criminalizes forcing a child to take part in “pornographic acts” through electronic or digital means.<sup>24</sup> While these provisions do not specifically mention the livestreaming of child sexual abuse, they appear broad enough to cover this form of tech-facilitated exploitation, including the actions of those who organize, facilitate or watch such activities.

<sup>19</sup> See Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2025). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). Second Edition. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

<sup>20</sup> Dominican Republic (2007). [Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art. 24. - Paragraph.

<sup>21</sup> Dominican Republic (2025). [Law No. 74-25 Establishing the Criminal Code of the Dominican Republic](#), Art. 179, 180-4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., Art. 180-5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Art. 182.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Art. 180-7.

## 1.1 WHAT TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ARE CHILDREN SUBJECTED TO?

### Artificial intelligence to create fake sexual images or videos

According to data from the household survey, **4 per cent of children in the Dominican Republic said that someone used artificial intelligence** to create fake sexual images or videos of them in the year prior to being surveyed. The emergence of easily accessibly generative artificial intelligence tools has made it easier than ever for perpetrators to create fake (and increasingly realistic) sexual images and videos of children.

While discussions about non-consensual sharing of children's sexual images have often centred on self-generated content, this argument is now compounded by the fact that anyone can now create realistic but fake sexual imagery of children. These developments call for platforms, including artificial intelligence services, to directly prevent the creation and dissemination of this content and enforce stricter detection and takedown policies and mechanisms. Legal frameworks also need to adequately and urgently criminalize the creation and dissemination of such material.

However, the Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences' definition of child sexual abuse material does not explicitly include digitally generated content, including material created or manipulated through artificial intelligence or other technologies to simulate a child involved in sexual activity.<sup>25</sup> Although the wording "any depiction, by any means" may be broad enough to cover such content, the lack of explicit reference can create legal uncertainty in how this law is interpreted and applied. Amending the definition to expressly cover digitally generated or manipulated material would therefore provide a clear legal basis to prosecute its production, dissemination and possession. The definition should also be modified to extend to content depicting non-existent children, as this can normalize exploitative representations and contribute to increased demand for child sexual abuse material involving real children.

### Grooming for sexual purposes

Grooming is the process of establishing or building a relationship with a child either in person or using digital technologies to facilitate sexual contact with that person.<sup>26</sup> This process is complex, often difficult to detect and may occur over an extended period through both online and in-person interactions. Measuring and understanding grooming is challenging because it requires knowing the perpetrator's intent and motivations.

Dominican legislation does not expressly address online grooming of children for sexual purposes. The Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences broadly prohibits committing a sexual assault against a child through the use of an information system or any of its components, with prison penalties ranging from 3 to 10 years. However, because the offence is triggered only upon the commission of a sexual assault – a term the law does not define – it fails to cover the preparatory stages of the grooming process through which a child is manipulated into engaging in sexual acts.

A bill to criminalize grooming was introduced in the Senate in 2021, but it ultimately lapsed after failing to be adopted within two ordinary legislatures. The bill defined grooming as deliberate actions by an adult to contact a child using communication technologies for sexual purposes, including the establishment of trust or emotional ties, as well as the use of manipulative tactics. However, it also required that the perpetrator conceal their status as an adult to constitute the offence.<sup>27</sup> This approach is not aligned with the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, adopted in December 2024, which defines grooming as "the act of intentionally communicating, soliciting, grooming, or making any arrangement through an information and communications technology system for the purpose of committing a sexual offence against a child." As this broader understanding of grooming emerges as the new international standard, it offers important guidance for aligning the Dominican legal framework with evolving international best practices.

25 Dominican Republic (2007). [Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art. 4.

26 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.

27 See Dominican Republic, Senate (2021). [Draft Law against Grooming](#).



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The testimonies collected during interviews indicate that grooming behaviours do occur in practice, highlighting the importance of recognizing their criminal nature. For example, a young person shared during interviews that when he was 13, a neighbour reached out to him on Instagram and sent him pornographic content. The perpetrator offered gifts, such as headphones, and later invited him and other children from the neighbourhood to watch pornography at his home, where some children were sexually abused by the same perpetrator:

“

*No, when I met him, I had heard about him already. And all the kids [knew him] because of the porn he had. Because he used to send porn and that's what the kids liked. At least in my neighbourhood, everyone wanted to have it, you know what I mean? When he contacted me, I immediately responded with 'Send me some porn right now'. And he did, it's not like now, where you open a phone, a tablet, whatever has internet, and you go and see it. Before, it was very difficult. So, by making it easy for kids, many kids fell into that trap: the whole neighbourhood, I'm telling you. (YP)*

”

Another young person who first received requests for sexual content from unknown perpetrators via *Free Fire* was later also contacted by her aunt's boyfriend, who had seen her sexual content. He used love bombing and money to groom her into sending him additional sexual content:

“

*He wrote to me: 'I love you very much' and things like that. And for me, it was always repulsive and disgusting because he was like my aunt's boyfriend. There was even a moment when he offered me money and all that stuff. (YP)*

”

The situations described above demonstrate how perpetrators can exploit children's curiosity about sexuality as part of the grooming process. They may also use money, gifts and expressions of affection to build trust, create dependency and get children to comply with their requests. While the examples above primarily refer to material gifts, these tactics can take many forms, with perpetrators of grooming also offering promises of opportunities, protection, better grades and various other incentives. The following section analyses the data to identify patterns and outline the key characteristics of perpetrators.

# 1.2 WHO PERPETRATES TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

According to the survey, in 14 per cent of cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, children did not know who the perpetrator was. Interview data suggest that when children abruptly received sexual content, were asked for sexual material or were offered money in exchange for it, the perpetrator was usually someone unknown to the. However, **in 68 per cent of cases, the perpetrator was someone the child already knew**. In most cases, children first met the perpetrator at school or online, as shown in the table below.

Chart 4: Proportion of children who met their perpetrator, by location

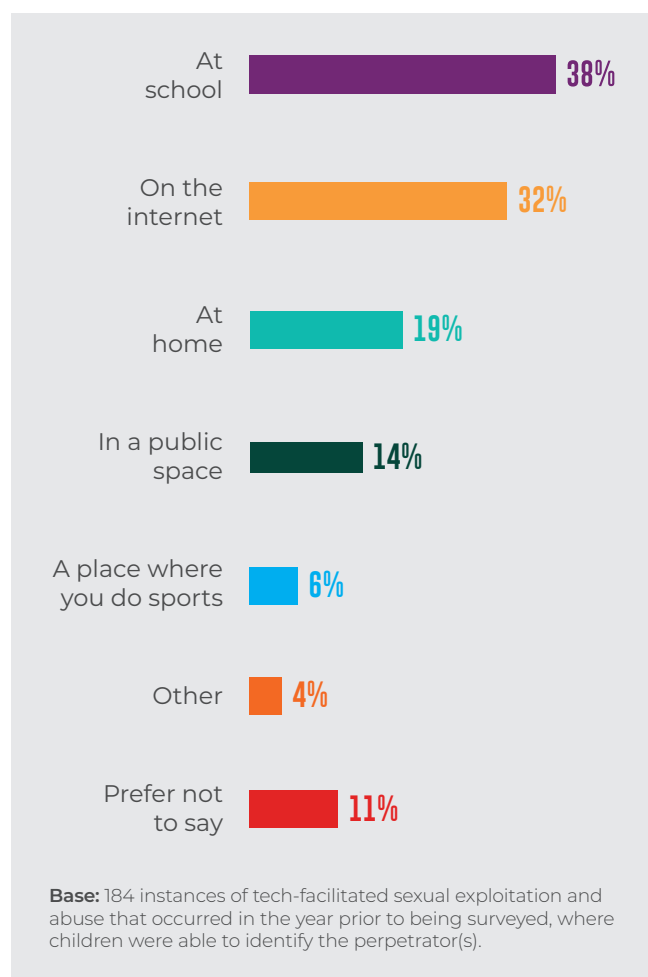
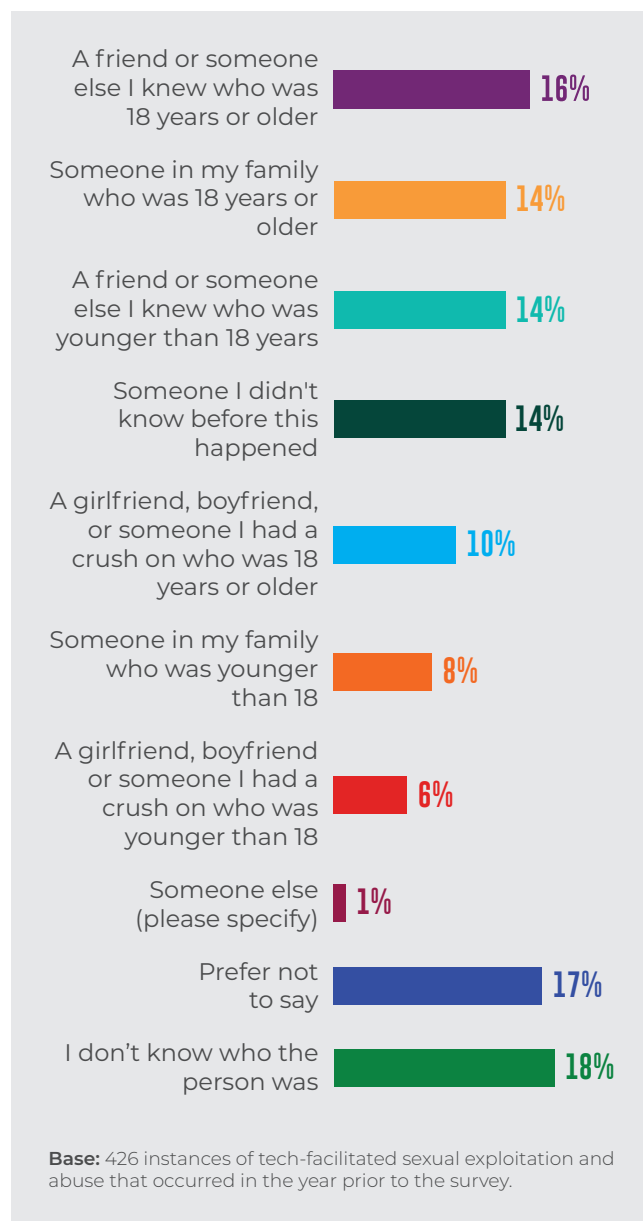


Chart 5 shows that perpetrators were most often adult friends or acquaintances (16 per cent) or peers who were also children (14 per cent). Seventeen per cent of children preferred not to disclose the perpetrator's identity.

Chart 5: Perpetrators of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse



Family members over 18 were also mentioned as perpetrators (14 per cent). However, the survey's reliance on parental consent and data collection within the home may limit access to children in households where abuse is occurring, suggesting that these findings may underestimate the prevalence of harm in close familial contexts. Two young people interviewed described being abused or exploited by family members: one by her aunt's boyfriend at age 15, and another by her mother and stepfather at age 13. Within family



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settings, perpetrators may occupy positions of authority and control, and children may be emotionally and financially dependent on them. These dynamics can significantly hinder disclosure and help-seeking. In the latter case, reporting was only facilitated by an external individual whom the caregivers had brought in to abuse the child. Ten per cent of instances were attributed to romantic partners aged 18 or over, and 6 per cent to romantic partners younger than 18. The young people interviewed spoke about being exploited and abused by romantic partners or ex-partners when they were children. This included being blackmailed or threatened with dissemination of their sexual images, or having their sexual images distributed online without their permission. Young people described first sharing the images as a result of pressure or to connect emotionally with their romantic partners, as described by a young person in the quote below:

“

***So, we started talking, and we became boyfriend and girlfriend. It was my first relationship, and it was a telephone relationship because we never saw each other in person. When you are in a relationship, as a teenager, your hormones are all over the place, and unfortunately, you listen to everything people tell you, and unfortunately, you fall for the so-called 'test of love'. The person asked me for photos. First, he made me build that bond of trust with him, and then he asked me for intimate photos of myself. (YP)***

”

In cases of non-consensual sharing of a child's sexual content, third parties can play a critical role. Third parties can also unknowingly become involved in criminal conduct related to the distribution of child sexual abuse material to seek help, as in the case of parents sharing a child's

sexual content among people in the community to seek advice. Peers who receive sexual content from perpetrators may stop its dissemination and warn the child, or further perpetuate the abuse by encouraging the perpetrator to share or by resharing the content themselves. The involvement of peers and other third parties in these situations highlights the need for guidance to support children in understanding their rights and the rights of others, navigating relationships, setting boundaries and recognizing harmful, exploitation and abusive behaviours, whether online or in person.

With a number of cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by peers, it is relevant to note that the Dominican Republic sets the age of criminal responsibility at 13.<sup>28</sup> Dominican law provides that judicial proceedings involving children under 18 suspected of criminal offences must be conducted by specialized bodies<sup>29</sup> and mandates the establishment of at least one Tribunal for Children and Adolescents in each province.<sup>30</sup> Legal safeguards are also in place to protect their rights throughout the process, including the provision of free legal representation by counsel with experience in juvenile justice from the outset of the investigation.<sup>31</sup> Information relating to the alleged offence is also confidential and the publication of any material that could lead to the identification of the adolescent is prohibited.<sup>32</sup>

The Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents states that the purpose of criminal sanctions imposed on adolescents is their education, rehabilitation and social reintegration,<sup>33</sup> reflecting the largely non-punitive approach to juvenile justice in the Dominican Republic. Judges may impose a range of socioeducational measures, including warnings, reprimands, community service and damage reparation, as well as orientation and supervision orders, such as the obligation to attend professional or educational

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28 Dominican Republic (2003). [Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents](#), Art. 223.

29 Ibid., Art. 228.

30 Ibid., Art. 209.

31 Ibid., Art. 253.

32 Ibid., Art. 231.

33 Ibid., Art. 326.

## 1.2 WHO PERPETRATES TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

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training.<sup>34</sup> Deprivation of liberty is legally considered an exceptional measure and can only be imposed pursuant to a reasoned justification when no other sanction is suitable.<sup>35</sup> According to the law, full-time placement in custody must take place in a specialized detention centre.<sup>36</sup> This provision is limited to cases of sexual violence or crimes punishable by more than five years' imprisonment,<sup>37</sup> with a maximum duration of three years for adolescents aged 13–15 and five years for those aged 16–17.<sup>38</sup>

Lastly, although the evidence above reflects the general demographic characteristics of perpetrators, interview data suggest that some children may be abused or exploited by more than one person. For instance, a young person recalls receiving multiple requests for sex from her classmates after her sexual content was shared:

“

*After that, lots of people started writing to me, lots of people who were in my class at school, sending me videos of themselves saying things like, 'if you gave it to so-and-so, you could give it to me too'. (YP)*

”

Another young person described being subjected to abuse by multiple perpetrators she did not know (via Free Fire) and then also being subjected to tech-facilitated abuse by someone in her family (via WhatsApp) who knew she had shared sexual content on Free Fire. This case will be further described in the next section, which explores patterns on platforms that facilitate child sexual exploitation and abuse in the Dominican Republic.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., Art. 327.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Art. 336.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., Art. 234.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Art. 339.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Art. 340.

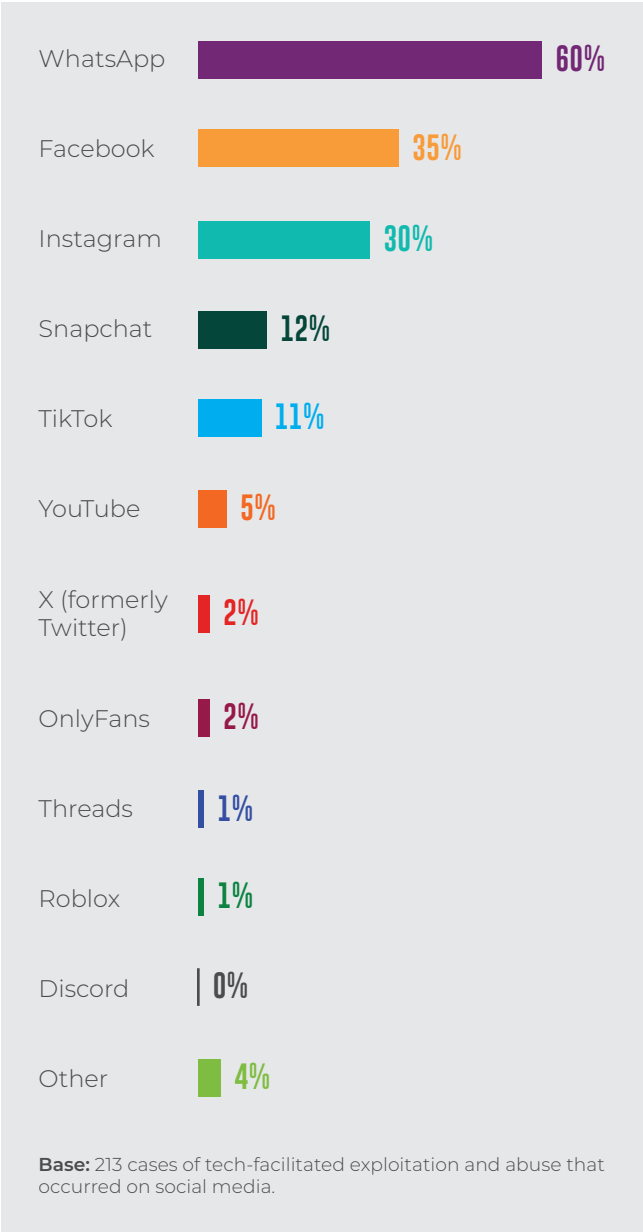
# 1.3 WHERE ARE CHILDREN SUBJECTED TO TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

The Disrupting Harm data demonstrate that online platforms such as social media, instant messaging and gaming apps enable perpetrators in the Dominican Republic to contact children. Among these, the survey data show that WhatsApp was the most common platform where exploitation and abuse occurred, accounting for 60 per cent of cases. Facebook and Instagram followed, linked to 35 per cent and 30 per cent of cases respectively while other platforms were less commonly cited (see chart 6).

Interviews with young people indicate that social media and messaging platforms were used by perpetrators to send sexual content that children did not want to receive. Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram were used by peers who were in a romantic relationship with children or by adults who were in an abusive but perceived as romantic relationship with children. In cases involving threats to share sexual content, perpetrators also threatened to disseminate children’s sexual content across these platforms.

To a lesser extent, online games were mentioned as places where children are subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. In 11 per cent of instances captured in the survey, children said they were targeted in an online game. Interview data also point to the use of gaming platforms such as Free Fire to abuse and exploit children. **One such case points to the possibility of perpetrators deliberately taking advantage of children’s perceptions of these platforms as new places of play and discovery to obtain sexual content.**

Chart 6: Platforms where children who were exploited and abused on social media were targeted



## 1.3 WHERE ARE CHILDREN SUBJECTED TO TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

### Gaps in platform regulations

The prominence of online platforms in the survey data indicates that these services are not only key environments in which tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse occurs, but also critical actors in its prevention and response. However, the legal framework in the Dominican Republic imposes few child protection obligations on online platforms. Indeed, the Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences mostly focuses on requirements for service providers to retain user data for at least 90 days and up to two years for investigative purposes,<sup>39</sup> and to maintain confidentiality when cooperating with law enforcement.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond these provisions, Dominican legislation does not require online platforms to provide accessible, clear and child-friendly mechanisms for reporting illegal content or violations of children's rights on their services. It also does not impose safety-by-design obligations – such as limiting interactions between children and adult users or enhanced privacy settings by default – nor does it require platforms to regularly assess and mitigate the risks their services may pose to children. Service providers are, however, broadly required to cooperate with investigative authorities to help minimize the extent to which their services are used for criminal activity.<sup>41</sup>

Online platforms are under no obligation to scan for child sexual abuse material on their services but must block internet pages containing such content when notified by the Public Prosecutor's Office.<sup>42</sup> Corporate criminal liability for tech-facilitated offences is also narrowly defined, applying only where legal representatives knowingly allow, facilitate, participate in or conceal illegal conduct, despite having the authority to prevent it.<sup>43</sup> While failure to comply with an official order to block access to child sexual abuse material could therefore result in liability under these provisions, the high threshold means that platforms are primarily required to act only once authorities intervene, giving them little incentive to take proactive steps to detect or block such material.

Without stronger legal obligations, responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are therefore likely to remain largely dependent on voluntary measures by individual companies, with limited avenues for accountability. This highlights the need for clearer standards and stronger regulatory oversight.

In 7 per cent of cases, children were subjected to abuse both online and in person, and three of the young people interviewed described how tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse intersected with or developed into in-person sexual abuse.

In one such case, abuse that started online later facilitated in-person sexual abuse. A young person described how a perpetrator first sent him pornography online, how he followed the perpetrator to his house and there witnessed his brother and others being sexually abused:

39 Dominican Republic (2007). [Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art. 56; Dominican Republic (2011). [Resolution No. 086-11 of 1 September 2011 approving the Regulation for the Collection and Preservation of Data and Information by Service Providers, pursuant to the provisions of Law No. 53-07 on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art. 6.

40 Dominican Republic (2007). [Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art. 59.

41 Dominican Republic (2011). [Resolution No. 086-11 of 1 September 2011 approving the Regulation for the Collection and Preservation of Data and Information by Service Providers, pursuant to the provisions of Law No. 53-07 on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art. 8(a).

42 Dominican Republic (2011). [Resolution No. 086-11 of 1 September 2011 approving the Regulation for the Collection and Preservation of Data and Information by Service Providers, pursuant to the provisions of Law No. 53-07 on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art. 18.

43 Dominican Republic (2007). [Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences](#), Art 60.

“

*So, I followed him. It was nighttime, around eight o'clock, between nine and ten past eight, right? He [the perpetrator] offered [child's brother] money and headphones for his mobile phones, for his devices, so he could listen to music. Then he [the perpetrator] took out his thing, his private parts, and the group of friends showed their private parts. And that wasn't right, because that's not something men do. I mean, for my brother, who was 15 or 16 [years old] at the time, he was younger, so he made him touch his private parts, fornicating there. (YP)*

”

In another case, online and in-person exploitation and abuse were mutually reinforced, with each form facilitating the other. At age 13, a young person was sexually exploited by her mother and stepfather, who coerced her into engaging in

sexual acts in exchange for money. The girl was repeatedly exposed to pornography online prior to being sexually exploited by her parents. After the perpetrators were arrested and imprisoned, the abuse continued in a different form: she began receiving threatening messages and calls from her mother's contacts, some of whom sent her pornographic material to pressure her into continued exploitation.

This section has shown that while online platforms are a key tool for perpetrators, the manipulation, coercion and abuse that occur in person should not be overlooked. Rather than considering tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as a new form of violence that requires completely new interventions, it is useful to consider digital technologies as tools used by perpetrators to harm children online and/or to facilitate in-person sexual exploitation and abuse or extend it into the digital space. The next chapter outlines the ways this affects children's daily lives, their sense of safety and their mental health.

# 2. THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

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## 2. THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

During the interviews, **young people voiced how confused, uncomfortable and distressed they felt when they were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children.**

These feelings were often described by those who received unwanted requests for sexual content or who were exposed to sexual content they did not want. Because these interactions were in many instances unsolicited and unexpected, they struggled to understand what was happening or why, leading to distress and discomfort:

“

*[I felt] bad, because I didn't ask him for photos, I didn't want any of that. (YP)*

”

**Receiving sexual content unexpectedly also contributed to a sense of loss of control.** This is illustrated by a young person who, at age 14, began receiving repeated sexual content from a neighbour who was a young adult. She recalls feeling caught off guard and unable to control the situation. **She also described feeling trapped in the exchange because even though she tried to distance herself, the messages continued.** As she put it:

“

*He always sent his videos which I had to see because I was already in the chat, and I always kind of deleted them because I was disgusted. (YP)*

”

For another young person, the feelings of disgust also came from the fact that the person grooming her was a relative:

“

*For me, it was always repulsive and disgusting because he was my aunt's boyfriend. (YP)*

”

For some young people, exposure to sexual content can be difficult to process and receiving this content may impact their ability to seek information about sex on their own terms and when they choose to. As one young person explained:

“

*I already knew a little, but when I came across that [sexual content], something clicked and I thought 'OK, I understand', but it didn't feel comfortable, probably because I didn't want to receive that information in that way, you know? I wanted to discover it myself. (YP)*

”

This was echoed by another young person, who viewed the moment she was subjected to abuse as, in a way, the first time she learned about sexuality:

“

*At that time, I still didn't know what sexuality was, as such, because no one ever talked to me about it. I discovered it through those kinds of things. If they had talked to me about it, I don't know, maybe I would have reacted differently. (YP)*

”

A young woman described experiencing a profound emotional shock when she discovered her sexual content had been widely shared across social media and instant messaging platforms. The impact was so severe that it disrupted her daily life, leading her to avoid places she previously frequented:

“

*One of my friends says to me: 'And those photos of you that are out there?' And I say: 'What photo?' I got nervous, and at that moment, I didn't know how to react. It was like something hit me so hard. When I saw the photo, I felt a little in shock. Then, when I went to high school, I was heartbroken, because it was something so strong that I didn't know how to react. (YP)*

”



## 2. THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

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In situations such as this, young people describe feeling shocked, guilty and afraid of judgment by others. This may be accompanied by self-blame and feelings of injustice, as reflected in the words of a young woman whose romantic partner shared her sexual images without permission:

“

*I despised myself when it happened. I looked at myself in the mirror and said: ‘Why? Why me?’. (YP)*

”

Not recognizing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse as harmful, unacceptable or illegal may leave children feeling confused. They may struggle to understand why an interaction feels uncomfortable or wrong. A young person who received sexual content on WhatsApp first understood it as violence through a talk at an after-school course:

“

*That’s where I started learning about topics; I started studying things like sexuality. And the first time we touched on that topic, I was 13, almost 14. And there I thought that ‘Ah, but that’s what was happening, it is violence’. (YP)*

”

**Self-blame was a predominant feeling expressed by young people in the interviews.** Children may blame themselves for not listening to their parents when they said not to talk to strangers or for not foreseeing the perpetrator’s intentions. Alternatively, they may put responsibility on themselves, stating that they understood the risks:

“

*I went with a friend of mine, I didn’t like what I was seeing either. In the end, I was a child, but I knew what I was doing. (YP)*

”

In other cases, they may assume responsibility:

“

*I feel that I shouldn’t have had a mobile phone at that age, or at least not without supervision. I understand that my mum was trying to trust me to have a mobile phone and not misuse it. (YP)*

”

Young people may also fear that their families and those around them will judge them for the abuse or exploitation they were subjected to, especially if they feel responsible for sharing in the first place:

“

*I already knew that this person had these videos in their possession, and if they came to light, what would my mum and dad think of me? (YP)*

”

A young person described how she felt when she received messages from someone telling her that they had sexual images she had shared with a former boyfriend. She felt she would be judged not only for the situation itself, but because it would bring shame to her family:

“

*At that time, I felt so pressured [by the threat] because, to be honest, I have strict parents who are well-respected in society. (YP)*

”

Some may be impacted for years as people around them continue to misplace the responsibility for the abuse on them, as described by a young person:

“

*It will remain a mark on your life, your entire life, that even as the years go by, it will always be there, written in your history. Even as the years go by, people will see it differently and will not see it the same way as it truly happened. (YP)*

”

The impact may also continue years after children were subjected to abuse or exploitation, especially in cases where sexual content is being circulated online:

“

*There are times when, unfortunately, I do think that I've been in situations where I think that, maybe that's still spreading around and that, at the end of the day, even though six years have passed, the situation may arrive again and explode. (YP)*

”

The household survey also showed that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse have a significant impact on children's mental health.<sup>44</sup> Children who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were 3.4 times more likely to report suicidal thoughts or behaviors,<sup>45</sup> and 2.5 times more likely to report self-harm in the past year,<sup>46</sup> compared with children not subjected to such abuse.

Children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation also had elevated anxiety scores; on average, their anxiety scores were about 9 percentage points higher than those of children who were not subjected to tech-facilitated child

sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year,<sup>47</sup> a significant difference. In the interviews, young people described how this felt:

“

*I felt like I was suffocating, like I was under pressure, and they made me think a lot of negative things. (YP)*

”

And how it may also extend over time:

“

*That person lasted two days [asking for those pictures], and it caused me severe anxiety and stress, and since then I have suffered from anxiety-related issues. (YP)*

”

In addition to mental health, tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse may impact other aspects of children's lives. For instance, a young person received sexual content from a young man she met on the bus on her way to school; as a result, she started taking another bus and was frequently late to school:

“

*With the guy on the bus, I felt more pressured, because with him, apart from the fact that I had already blocked him, I had to see him in person. What I did was leave later, but that was detrimental to me because I was arriving late for school. (YP)*

”

<sup>44</sup> Mental health outcomes associated with tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse do not differ significantly between girls and boys.

<sup>45</sup> For this analysis, the relative risks for self-harm are reported for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year, and those not subjected to abuse during this period.

<sup>46</sup> For this analysis, the relative risks for suicidal ideation and behaviours are reported for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year, and those not subjected to abuse during this period.

<sup>47</sup> Estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals. Average differences are reported for anxiety. Anxiety scores range from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating more frequent or intense symptoms.

## 2. THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

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Another young person recalls having to move into her father's house for protection from her cousin's husband, who was sending her sexual content, while another remembers changing the way she dressed since her family blamed her by saying she was provoking men:

“

*Since they said [her family] I provoked all the men that come to the house and that I do not understand what the problem with me is dressing the way I want, I have not been able to go out in clothes I like. (YP)*

”

This demonstrates that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse – along with the responses children receive – can have both immediate and long-term consequences. It may cause psychological distress, confusion and discomfort. Over time, it can lead to stress and anxiety that persist as they get older and can impact different aspects of their lives, including their education and where they live, express themselves and feel safe to go.

# 3. DISCLOSURE AND REPORTING

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# 3.1 DO CHILDREN DISCLOSE AND REPORT EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

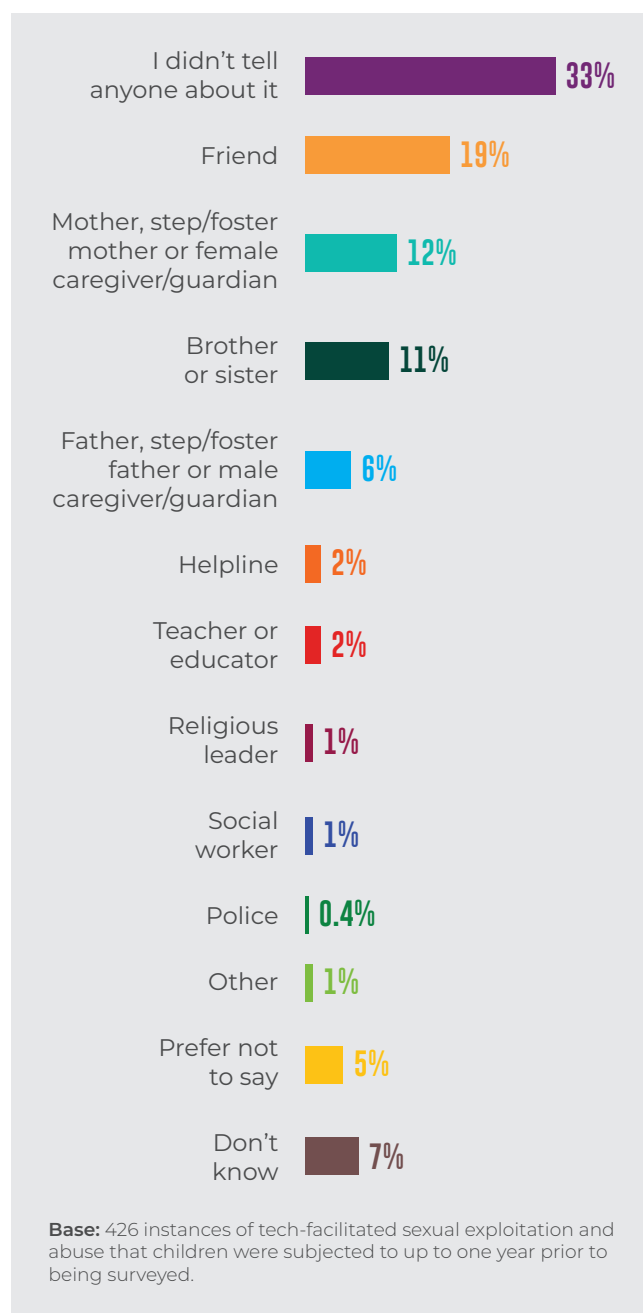
The Disrupting Harm project distinguishes between *disclosure* – the process by which a person conveys that they are or have been sexually exploited or abused in childhood – and *reporting*, which involves formally notifying authorities or designated individuals of suspected or confirmed cases.

According to the survey data, in approximately half of cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse (55 per cent), children told someone what happened. As shown in chart 7, reporting tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse via official channels, be it police (0.4 per cent), social workers (1 per cent) or helplines (2 per cent) was uncommon, as was disclosure to teachers (2 per cent) and religious leaders (1 per cent). In comparison, it was more common for children to disclose to friends (19 per cent) and in fewer cases, mothers and female caregivers (12 per cent).

Despite these patterns of disclosure, the data also indicate that **33 per cent of children did not tell anyone about what happened**. Among those children who did not speak to anyone about exploitation and abuse, the main barriers were not knowing where to go or who to tell (22 per cent), followed by feelings of embarrassment (17 per cent) and worries about getting into trouble (14 per cent). These challenges can also result in significant delays before children feel comfortable to disclose the abuse they were subjected to. Delayed disclosure may in turn significantly postpone formal reporting, with serious implications to accessing justice and legal remedies. In the Dominican Republic, statutes of limitations – the period after which legal action can no longer be initiated for a criminal offence – range from 3 to 10 years, depending on the maximum prison sentence prescribed.<sup>48</sup> The very existence of these deadlines risks shielding perpetrators from accountability. By the time a child feels ready to speak, the legal window for prosecution may already have closed. Removing statutes of limitations for all sexual offences against children would therefore help ensure that those who have been subjected to exploitation and /or abuse can pursue justice when they are ready to do so.

Looking at disclosure patterns, testimonies from the children and young people interviewed show that they talked about the exploitation or abuse with friends, parents, parents' friends, a sibling and in one case, a religious leader.

Chart 7: Who do children disclose or report to?



48 Dominican Republic (2007). [Penal Procedure Code](#), Art. 45.

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## Disclosing to friends

The household survey showed that children most often turn to friends to disclose tech-facilitated exploitation or abuse. Similarly, during the interviews, children and young people described telling friends about what they had been subjected to, either fully or partially, often without sharing all the details.

For some, confiding in friends felt like the most natural or safest option. As one young person explained:

“

*I never went to an adult. I trusted my friends more than any adult. (YP)*

”

The same participant described how friends responded differently:

“

*My friends are all very different from one another. There are some who think, ‘Wow, what an opportunity!’ But others say, ‘No way, because that cannot be true, right?’ (YP)*

”

These accounts highlight that while peers may be trusted sources of emotional support, they often have varying levels of understanding of tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse.

Several young people reflected on the challenges their friends faced when trying to help. One participant disclosed the abuse to a friend because the perpetrator was the friend’s brother and she hoped her friend could stop him from sending sexual content via Facebook. However, her friend was unable to intervene. Reflecting on this experience, the participant described how, without access to a trusted adult, children can feel isolated in responding to abuse:

“

*I mean, because you can tell your friend, but what is your friend going to do? Nothing, she is also a girl, just like you. I mean, at that age one mostly does not have a figure you can talk to about it, who is an adult, who understands you. (YP)*

”

Similarly, another young person disclosed abuse by a relative to her brother. Rather than seeking help, he encouraged her to remain silent because he feared losing permission to spend time with the relative. In another case, a child sought help from the perpetrator’s friends, hoping that concern about social consequences would stop the abuse:

“

*To get things to stop, I had to ask for help from someone from his circle, someone who knew him. I told someone who would make him think that others would find out what he was doing, and after that, I remember that things started to stop. (YP)*

”

These accounts illustrate that peers are often the people children trust most when they first disclose abuse. Friends can provide important emotional validation and reassurance, but they should not be expected to assess the situation, intervene directly or take responsibility for stopping the abuse. Responses from peers are shaped by their age, knowledge, relationships with those involved and their own capacity to respond safely.

The findings highlight the importance of ensuring that children and young people know how to respond if a friend discloses abuse in ways that are safe and appropriate. Rather than placing responsibility on peers, prevention and education efforts should focus on helping young people recognize when a friend may need support, respond with empathy, encourage them to seek help from a trusted adult and know how to access appropriate services if there is an immediate risk of harm. Equally important is ensuring that trusted adults

### 3.1 DO CHILDREN DISCLOSE AND REPORT EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

– including parents, caregivers, teachers and other professionals – are accessible, approachable and equipped to respond effectively when children seek help, either for themselves or on behalf of a friend.

#### Disclosing to caregivers

Throughout the interviews, young people described their experiences of disclosure, including whom they felt able to tell, the reasons some did not disclose to adults, the impact on their lives and the challenges they encountered when speaking to them about exploitation and abuse. Some described their fear of being judged by family members and caregivers, which led them not only to avoid telling them about the abuse but in some cases, to actively hide what they had been subjected to so that their parents would not find out. They also described concerns that their parents might react with anger or violence, or worries that they would not be believed if they disclosed.

For example, one young person, who had been previously blamed by her family for the abuse she was subjected to, did not tell her them when she later received requests for sexual talk and sexual content from her aunt's boyfriend:

“

*I assumed she [her aunt] was going to say the same, that it was my fault and all that. (YP)*

”

For another young person, fear of being judged for putting up videos of herself on TikTok prevented her from telling her parents about being subjected to abuse:

“

*My parents never found out because I decided it would be like that, not because I did not want their help but because they would judge [me] for not listening to them. (YP)*

”

Another young person recalled being unable to tell anyone that he was being abused due to fear of violence or of being labelled as homosexual:

“

*No, because I always, since I was a little boy, I wanted my father to be proud of me, so I could not tell [him] about this, about that ‘mariconería’<sup>49</sup> as he would call it, he would hit me. (YP)*

”

Children may avoid disclosing to their parents as a way to mitigate further negative impacts on their lives. This was described by a young person who was being sexually abused online and in person but did not tell her mother out of fear of consequences such as having to change schools or losing online access:

“

*I did not want my mum to be frightened by that and take me out of school or go hysterical or I do not know, I mean, it was something I did not want her to know because she would understand that a boy older than me was harassing me and she perhaps would have started taking me to school and that was not something that was possible because in the first place she and I would have had to spend more on fares and I wanted to feel free.*

*I did not want to tell my mum because I did not want her to take away my access to the computer or Facebook, because if I told my mum or my dad that they were sending me photos on Facebook, the first thing they would do would be: ‘No, now you cannot use Facebook so that you do not receive photos’. So, I was afraid that they would basically take away my internet access. (YP)*

”

<sup>49</sup> Mariconería is a derogatory Spanish term derived from ‘maricón’ (a homophobic slur) that refers to behaviours, actions or things pejoratively associated with gay men or perceived as effeminate, often used to demean or ridicule.



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Another young person recalls being blamed by her parents for following the perpetrators' instructions and taking a picture of herself and sending it. At the time, she struggled to understand why she was being blamed and punished for the abuse she was subjected to, but later she internalized it:

“  
*After a long time, I understood that what I did was wrong, the photo I took and all that. (YP)*  
”

Families may continue to blame children over time:

“  
*Literally years can go by and every time there is an argument, they bring up what happened. (YP)*  
”

Parents' negative reactions towards their children can have repercussions in their relationship for years later. Such reactions may compromise children's trust in their caregivers and make them less likely to communicate openly, especially about sensitive issues such as sexuality, relationships and other topics they are learning to navigate, as explained by a young person below.

“  
*Well, perhaps the only way I think it affected me was that since that moment I don't tell my mum anything related to sexuality or any like that. In a way I have always kept it to myself and when I want to talk about it, I always turn to a friend; I still do not talk about that, about any of that with my mum. (YP)*  
”

This may mean that children would be less likely to seek help if they were ever exploited and abused again, or if they faced challenging life experiences more generally. This limits children's access

to guidance, protection and support. Further, perpetrators may take advantage of the silence to continue the violence towards the child:

“  
*I feel that he took advantage of the fact that I never spoke, or of his threats, for him to carry on doing what he was doing. (YP)*  
”

Despite the challenges described above, some young people who were able to speak to someone about it reflected on how useful it was to have a trusted adult who supported them. For one young person, speaking to her mother's friend facilitated her attending a service for victims of exploitation. For another, it resulted in a restraining order against the perpetrator and for others, it resulted in their parents reporting the abuse to the police.

### Discovery by caregivers

Young people who were interviewed in the Dominican Republic discussed situations where their parents decided to address incidents of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse independently without reporting them to the police. In two instances, caregivers discovered the abuse and/or exploitation by going through their child's devices and confronted the perpetrators without reporting it:

“  
*What my mum told him was that if he published a photo like that again she would press charges, and he left it; he never bothered me again and left me in peace because my mother gave him a piece of her mind. (YP)*  
”

In another instance, a mother discovered another child's sexual content on her son's device and fearing legal repercussions for her son, decided to consult members of her religious congregation. In doing, she facilitated the dissemination of a child's sexual content among people in the congregation, some of whom went on to harass

### 3.1 DO CHILDREN DISCLOSE AND REPORT EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

the child who had been abused online as well. In addition, the parents of the child who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse also later conducted their own investigations within their community:

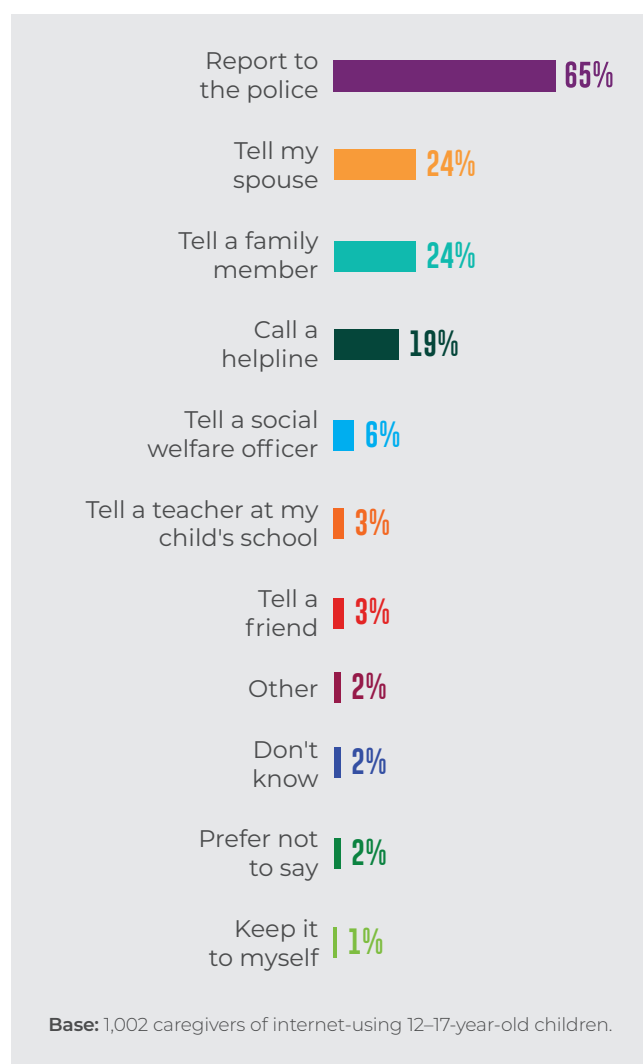
“

*My dad and my mum started a serious investigation, my house became a crime scene, a place where they were going to conduct interrogations, good cop, bad cop, it was terrible. (YP)*

”

As shown in these cases, although well intentioned at times, informal actions by parents and others within the child's community risk exacerbating the harm and revictimizing the child. These examples also reflect shortcomings of key institutions such as religious and church groups, to support community members and to prevent and respond adequately to these crimes. In some instances, they may also expose those involved to criminal liability, as the dissemination of a child's sexual content constitutes an offence. These kinds of responses may also limit their access to formal health and social services, exposing parents to legal consequences, spreading information about abuse within the child's community and even exposing children to additional abuse. Hesitation to turn to formal services could be caused by several factors and requires further research. One such factor is a fear of or lack of trust in formal services. For example, only 19 per cent of caregivers surveyed said they would call a helpline if their child was sexually harassed. An even smaller proportion – 6 per cent – of caregivers would tell a social welfare officer. This may point to issues of trust in how social services would respond to cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Chart 8: Parents' attitudes towards reporting: What actions do you think you would take if your child experienced sexual harassment, abuse or exploitation? (*multiple responses allowed*)



#### Formal reporting

##### Reporting mechanisms

Under Dominican law, offences related to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse can be prosecuted even if no formal complaint is filed.<sup>50</sup> Anyone can report such offences to a public prosecutor, the police or other authorities involved in the investigations,<sup>51</sup> either verbally or in writing.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Dominican Republic (2007). [Penal Procedure Code](#), Art. 262.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., Art. 263.

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When a report is made by a child, the official receiving the complaint must request the presence of the child's parents, guardians or a trusted adult and begin the necessary proceedings, while also taking steps to prevent the reported act from leading to further consequences.<sup>53</sup>

Public prosecutors are required to investigate all offences that fall under their remit once they become aware of them, provided there are sufficient indications that the offence may have occurred.<sup>54</sup> The Public Prosecutor's Office has a dedicated Office for High Technology Crimes and Offences, which receive reports of cybercrime through the hotline 809-533-3522.<sup>55</sup> The Office also operates a National Directorate against Gender-Based Violence, which manages the Línea Vida (809-200-1202), a 24-hour nationwide hotline for reporting cases of sexual and gender-based violence. The service is connected to the national emergency number 911, which refers cases involving sexual offences to Línea Vida for follow-up. Línea Vida also coordinates directly with police units in emergency situations where the safety and integrity of women, girls or boys may be at risk.<sup>56</sup> In addition, in April 2023, the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of the Presidency, through the National Cybersecurity Centre, launched a national online reporting portal, which was developed in collaboration with UNICEF and the Internet Watch Foundation to enable the public to report child sexual abuse material and support its removal and investigation.<sup>57</sup>

## Barriers to formal reporting

**Despite the existence of these reporting mechanisms, fewer than one per cent (0.4 per cent) of children in the survey reported tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to the police.** The most common barriers to formal

disclosure (police, helpline or social worker) were "I did not know you could report these things" (20 per cent) and "I did not know how to make a report" (18 per cent). Young people's reflections throughout the interviews may point to additional barriers to formal reporting.

According to the young people interviewed, it was their parents, not them, who were asked to recount the exploitation and abuse to the police. This may suggest that the obligation to request the presence of parents or guardians can, in practice, result in adults speaking on behalf of the child, potentially undermining the child's agency and their right to be heard. One young person, whose mother and stepfather were facilitating her sexual exploitation by adult men in exchange for payment, was taken to her grandparents by one of the perpetrators. Her grandparents subsequently filed a complaint:

“

*She, my mum, sold me to a man who in reality did not want to be with me, so he took me and took me to my grandfather's, over there in [location removed]; then he spoke with my grandmother and they took me to the forensic doctor, an investigation was opened and afterwards we came here to Santo Domingo to the Public Prosecutor's Office. (YP)*

”

In another case, the reporting process was taken forward by multiple parents within a community where children were being groomed with pornography and subsequently sexually abused in person:

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Art. 262.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Art. 30.

<sup>55</sup> Dominican Republic, Public Prosecutor's Office. (accessed on 11 March 2026). X (formerly Twitter) post dated 5 May 2023; Dominican Republic, Public Prosecutor's Office. (2024). [PEDATEC actively worked to protect children and adolescents in 2024](#).

<sup>56</sup> Dominican Republic, Public Prosecutor's Office (2017). [Public Prosecutor's Office relaunches the national Línea Vida telephone system to combat gender-based violence and femicides](#).

<sup>57</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, 'Lanzan portal de denuncias de imágenes y videos de abuso sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes', Press release, UNICEF Dominican Republic, 23 April 2023, [www.unicef.org/dominicanrepublic/comunicados-prensa/lanzan-portal-de-denuncias-de-im%C3%A1genes-y-videos-de-abuso-sexual-de-ni%C3%B1as-y-ni%C3%B1os-y-adolescentes](#).

### 3.1 DO CHILDREN DISCLOSE AND REPORT EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

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“

*My dad, you know, spoke with my mum, spoke with several people in the community, in the neighbourhood, who had children in the same situations and they lodged a complaint and the guy ended up in prison. (YP)*

”

Another young person, on the other hand, explained that she did not report the incident because she had been manipulated by the perpetrator, who led her to believe that, as a child himself, he would face no consequences:

“

*So I felt I couldn't report him because nothing would be done. (YP)*

”

As described by one young person, in a case involving three children and a religious leader who was abusing them online and in person, some mothers decided against reporting out of fear of their children being taken away from them by their fathers or that the fathers would become excessively restrictive:

“

*What happened is that as I was not the only one, the other two girls had, both had the same situation: their parents were separated; so, the mothers were from the church and the fathers were not. So, the mothers thought it best, except my mum, they thought the best thing that could happen was for nothing to be done. Because they were afraid either that their daughters would be taken away or that their fathers would lock them up to such a degree that they could not go anywhere except school, or that they themselves would be told, 'Okay, I left my daughter in your care even though we are no longer together and look at what you allow to happen to her'. (YP)*

”

The young person explained that concerns about preserving the community's reputation discouraged reporting. Instead, the response was handled internally: the perpetrator was removed from the church, and one of the girls was sent away to live elsewhere. This case illustrates how responses can shift the burden of abuse onto victims, who are made to bear the consequences of actions taken rather than being protected. At the same time, such measures enabled the perpetrator's impunity, as the absence of formal accountability mechanisms allows them to avoid prosecution and potentially continue offending.

Overall, when it comes to disclosure and reporting, the survey shows that children who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the Dominican Republic most often confide in peers or remain silent and rarely report to the police or to a helpline, despite these services being available. Children attempt to stop or mitigate the impact of the abuse or exploitation by blocking perpetrators on the platforms that facilitate it; however, this strategy often proves ineffective, as perpetrators create new profiles to continue the exploitation or abuse. Fears of blame, punishment, restrictions, anger and even violence discourage disclosure to parents, and these fears may be deliberately exploited by perpetrators to pursue the exploitation or abuse. While some children who disclose to a parent or trusted adult can access support services and pathways to justice, others' responses are less protective. In several instances, parents sought to manage the situation privately, attempting to investigate or resolve the abuse without involving the authorities, which in some cases resulted in further harm to the child and allowed perpetrators to evade accountability. 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.

# 4. SERVICE UTILIZATION

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## 4. SERVICE UTILIZATION

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The Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents states that the Dominican State has a responsibility to protect children from all forms of abuse and exploitation, including those facilitated by technology, and to restore their rights when a violation occurs.<sup>58</sup> To that end, the Code establishes Municipal Boards for the Protection and Restoration of Rights, which can issue protection and rights-restoration orders in cases of abuse or sexual exploitation, including with regard to access to physical, clinical or psychological treatment services where necessary.<sup>59</sup> While these provisions allow municipal authorities to facilitate access to certain support services, they form part of the broader child protection framework and do not establish dedicated recovery or reintegration programmes for children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse.

In 2019, the Public Prosecutor's Office adopted a Comprehensive Care Protocol for Children Victims of Online Sexual Exploitation, outlining actions aimed at protecting, restoring and guaranteeing the rights of survivors through coordinated action by public entities in the health, education, police, and judicial sectors, among others.<sup>60</sup> The protocol provides for the development of an individualized action and intervention plan for each child, to the extent possible.<sup>61</sup>

The Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents further includes the possibility for non-governmental organizations to develop specific programmes aimed at implementing protection and rights-restoration measures for children subjected to exploitation and abuse, including programmes providing physical, clinical and psychological treatment services.<sup>62</sup> The insights shared by the children and young people interviewed for this study suggest that such organizations can play an important role

in supporting survivors. Indeed, young people noted receiving support from non-governmental organizations after being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. This support came in the form of psychological support, legal assistance and courses (e.g., English language and vocational courses). A young person conveyed how meaningful it was for him to receive this form of support:

“

*I achieved all this thanks to [Organization name removed]. Also, because it was a foundation that helped me a lot, an NGO with the programme that took me in and never let me go. Those people paid for my university for a long time and they gave us support, they paid for a psychologist, they signed us up for a course. (YP)*

”

In other cases, support, although valued, was also intermittent, with young people receiving some material goods (e.g., hygiene and beauty products), talks about sexual exploitation or going on daytrips from both governmental and non-governmental organizations.

“

*They bought us stuff, in December. [Organization name removed] gave us money for Christmas. They supported us in any way, not all the time, but they always remembered us, I mean, it was not monthly or mandatory, but like every three or four months or whatever, I cannot tell the exact time, but they showed up and surprised us with something. (YP)*

”

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<sup>58</sup> Dominican Republic (2003). [Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents](#), Arts. 463, 464, 465.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> UNICEF Dominican Republic (2026). Personal communication.

<sup>61</sup> Dominican Republic (2019). Comprehensive Care Protocol for Children Victims of Online Sexual Exploitation, p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> Dominican Republic (2003). [Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents](#), Art. 482.

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Young people also noted how attending the services of non-governmental organizations also led to them to finding a community:

“  
*At the end that became a network, and we kept going because we wanted to be together, you know what I mean? We are friends. (YP)*

Eight young people made references to receiving some form of psychological support, and positive experiences and challenges linked to that type of support. Three young people received psychological care via a religious non-governmental organization after the Prosecutor's Office put them in touch with them. However, some talked about negative experiences with psychologists, either because they could not relate to them enough, or because there were no follow-up sessions or additional steps taken to report or support them. As the study did not include the perspectives of professionals, the analysis is limited in its capacity to examine how services operate, identify existing gaps and challenges, and consider potential avenues for improving service provision.

For one young person, the psychosocial support provided by teachers was crucial. After her boyfriend shared sexual images of her when she was 14, she stopped attending school out of embarrassment. Her teachers visited her at home to offer support and encourage her to return to school, helping ensure that the abuse did not disrupt her education. Importantly, this support continued over time: whenever there was a risk that the images might resurface, she could rely on her teachers, who understood both the nature of the abuse and its impact.

“  
*My teachers always supported me, and even today they still support me because they know it's something very hard and very difficult to overcome. Even though time passes, there's always that little drop that might make the glass spill.<sup>62</sup> (YP)*

Another young person recalls that receiving support from a friend and from a religious leader was fundamental:

“  
*The pastor also helped me, he was someone who was fundamental to me, he didn't let me fall, he wrote to me, he said, my daughter, how are you? Keep yourself up, and he was someone that supported me in those moments. (YP)*

It should be noted that, in December 2024, a Draft Law on Assistance, Legal Representation and Protection of Victims, Witnesses and Persons at Risk was submitted to the Senate to strengthen the provision of support services to victims of crime.<sup>64</sup> It proposes to recognize and guarantee their right to assistance and comprehensive reparation,<sup>65</sup> including rehabilitation measures proportionate to the gravity and impact of the offence.<sup>66</sup> The draft law also entitles victims of crime to receive free medical and psychological assistance,<sup>67</sup> and provides for the establishment of a Directorate for the Care of Victims, Witnesses and Persons at Risk within the Public Prosecutor's

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63 This expression refers to a popular saying “it was the drop that overflowed the glass” (*Fue la gota que rebasó el vaso*). This saying is used to describe a situation where one small additional action causes an overwhelming or tipping point as it follows a series of accumulated problems or burdens. It is akin to the English phrase “the straw that broke the camel's back”.

64 Dominican Republic, Presidency (2024). [President Abinader presents legislative initiatives to combat organized crime and protect victims and witnesses](#).

65 Dominican Republic (2024). [Draft Law on Assistance, Legal Representation and Protection of Victims, Witnesses and Persons at Risk](#), Art. 1.

66 Ibid., Arts. 3–7.

67 Ibid., Art. 5.



## 4. SERVICE UTILIZATION

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Office to develop, implement and oversee policies to ensure the provision of support services.<sup>68</sup> The Directorate would include dedicated units for psychology, social work, medical care and case follow-up,<sup>69</sup> and its Director would be responsible for ensuring that support is delivered in a timely, efficient and individualized manner.<sup>70</sup> The bill had yet to be adopted as of May 2026.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., Art. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., Art. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Art. 10(b).



# 5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

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## 5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

This section draws on the experiences of three young people interviewed who were involved in formal justice proceedings, alongside the analysis of the legal framework. It focuses on how these young people experienced the justice process and assesses the extent to which the legal framework provides for child-centred procedures and safeguards.

However, the accounts of the young people did not provide detailed insight into the justice process. The findings below therefore reflect relevant elements from the legal and policy analysis undertaken as part of Disrupting Harm. As such, the conclusions of this chapter should be interpreted with due consideration of the limited availability of young people's perspectives on these issues and that justice professionals were not interviewed for this research.

### Legal safeguards

Dominican law provides a wide range of robust safeguards for child victims of crime within the formal justice process. Children have the right to express their views and to be heard in judicial proceedings affecting their rights and interests, with due regard to their evolving capacities.<sup>71</sup> The Penal Procedure Code grants victims of crime the right to be treated with dignity and respect, to have their privacy protected, to be informed of the outcome of proceedings, to be heard before any decision that may lead to the suspension or termination of the criminal action and to appeal such decisions.<sup>72</sup> Courts may also order closed hearings, either on their own initiative or at the request of a party, where proceedings may affect the “modesty” or privacy of participants,<sup>73</sup> or when children are due to testify.<sup>74</sup>

Mechanisms are also in place to ensure access to legal aid, enabling child victims of crime to exercise their rights effectively and navigate

complex justice procedures. While the Dominican legal aid framework focuses on defendants,<sup>75</sup> the Public Prosecutor's Office has run a National Service for Legal Representation of Victims' Rights since 2008, to offer free legal assistance to victims who cannot afford counsel. As of March 2026, the service operates through 37 offices, six regional coordination units and 146 lawyers covering all jurisdictions across the country. It provides legal orientation and representation before the courts at all stages of criminal proceedings, including requests for coercive measures, appeals and compensation claims. The service also offers specialized assistance to children, and coordinates access to psychological and social support services. From 2020 to 2025 it handled 2,539 cases, participated in 22,972 hearings and secured 1,182 court judgments (including but not limited to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases), suggesting that it is functional.<sup>76</sup>

The 2024 Draft Law on Assistance, Legal Representation and Protection of Victims, Witnesses and Persons at Risk seeks to strengthen existing procedural safeguards by providing for the prompt investigation of cases, the right of victims to be informed of their rights and of the progress of proceedings, and access to free psychological assistance. It also aims to formally guarantee the right to free legal representation for those unable to afford it.<sup>77</sup> While not child-specific, its provisions could significantly benefit children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, reflecting the broader commitment of the Dominican Republic to strengthening respect for victims' rights within its justice system.<sup>78</sup>

### Forensic interviews

In 2020, the Judiciary Council adopted a mandatory Protocol for Conducting Forensic Interviews with Witnesses and Victims in

71 Dominican Republic (2003). [Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents](#), Art. 16.

72 Dominican Republic (2007). [Penal Procedure Code](#), Art. 84.

73 Ibid., Art. 308.

74 Ibid., Art. 327.

75 Ibid., Art. 18, 95-5; Dominican Republic (2004). [Law No. 277-04 establishing the National Public Defence Service](#), Art. 2.

76 Dominican Republic, Public Prosecutor's Office (2026). [The Public Prosecutor's Office expands its legal assistance service for victims to all jurisdictions across the country](#).

77 Dominican Republic (2024). [Draft Law on Assistance, Legal Representation and Protection of Victims, Witnesses and Persons at Risk](#), Art. 5.

78 Dominican Republic, Public Prosecutor's Office. (2026). [The Public Prosecutor's Office expands its legal assistance service for victims to all jurisdictions across the country](#).

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Situations of Vulnerability,<sup>79</sup> including children.<sup>80</sup> The protocol provides that forensic interviews must be conducted only once by specially trained professionals.<sup>81</sup> They begin with an explanation of the process and rapport-building to establish trust, followed by the child's account. Parties must observe in silence and channel any questions through the attending judge, who filters and transmits them to the interviewer.<sup>82</sup> Forensic interviews must be audio-visually recorded with appropriate editing to protect the child's identity<sup>83</sup> and take place in a two-room observation suite separated by a one-way mirror.<sup>84</sup> They may also be conducted remotely, provided the interviewer and the child remain in the same physical space.<sup>85</sup>

While the data collected do not allow for a comprehensive assessment of whether the Protocol is consistently implemented, or of potential challenges in its application, two of the young people involved in judicial proceedings noted that measures aimed at minimizing revictimization risks were in place during forensic interviews. They described speaking with psychologists on a limited number of occasions and being shielded from formal court proceedings, suggesting that their initial testimony was used in later procedural stages. One also highlighted access to a supportive, child-friendly environment throughout the process:

***“At the beginning, we said what happened, we had to speak with a psychologist from the Public Prosecutor's Office; she was writing down everything that happened. We did have to do that for the process. But afterwards, for example, when they had to go to a hearing, whatever it was, we would always stay playing, there was always an activity for us. (YP)***

**“**

***I never went to a trial because I was a minor and at that time, they did not accept me. When they wanted information, I always spoke with the psychologist and I went to the Public Prosecutor's Office just once, but I never went to a hearing. (YP)***

**”**

Overall, the Protocol establishes a comprehensive, trauma-informed framework for interviewing children subjected to crimes, including tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, with a clear emphasis on measures to prevent harm arising from repeated or insensitive questioning. Although these accounts suggest that efforts are being made to implement it, incorporating the Protocol into binding legislation should be considered to further strengthen its enforceability, and further research is needed to verify it is being systematically implemented.

As described above, forensic interviews must be audio-visually recorded with appropriate editing to protect the child's identity. It is important to note, however, that the practice of recording or livestreaming forensic interviews provided for by the Protocol has not yet been tested from a trauma-informed perspective for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. This is particularly relevant given that such children may have heightened sensitivity to being recorded or to the use of cameras by an adult. Although this may not be the case for any or all children, for some, the presence of a camera may trigger feelings of vulnerability, embarrassment or fear of further exposure. More research is needed to ensure that mandatory video recording aligns with trauma-informed principles, balancing the need for reliable evidence with the psychological needs of children who were subjected to these types of abuse on a case-by-case basis.

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79 Dominican Republic, Judiciary Council (2020). [Protocol for Conducting Forensic Interviews with Witnesses and Victims in Situations of Vulnerability](#), Art. 39.

80 Ibid., Art. 4(1).

81 Ibid., Art. 2, 7(t).

82 Ibid., Art. 34.

83 Ibid., Art. 35, 36.

84 Ibid., Art. 6(a).

85 Ibid., Art. 6(b), 6(c).

## 5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

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### Role of civil society organizations

All three young people involved in judicial proceedings received support from a non-governmental organization via a referral from the Prosecutor's Office. This support appears to have been critical in reducing the emotional and practical burden of navigating justice procedures, providing continuous guidance, stability and a sense of protection throughout the process. As described by one of them:

“

*That NGO took us on basically from the start. We hardly had to struggle; they always did everything, the solicitors were there, my mum, the other mothers. That NGO always had us entertained: always, 'Eat whatever you want, play, go and do this'. We did not go through hardship thanks to them; they always kept an eye on everything for us. Yes, it was important because they supported us from the beginning, because we had no one to turn to give that man his punishment. Yes, they supported us from the start, always. (YP)*

”

The ability of civil society organizations to provide such support is enshrined in the legal framework, which also establishes safeguards to ensure that children are protected. Indeed, the Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents enables such organizations to collaborate with child protection authorities in promoting, protecting and guaranteeing the rights of children.<sup>86</sup> Programmes established for this purpose must be registered with the municipal offices of the National Council for Children and Adolescents, specifying the care regime and to whom it applies.<sup>87</sup> Registered organizations are subject to several obligations, including safeguarding the identity of children, ensuring a respectful and dignified environment, and maintaining records of the cases they handle.<sup>88</sup>

Victims of crimes may also delegate their participation in proceedings, as well as the pursuit of civil compensation, to a non-governmental organization.<sup>89</sup> Considering the positive role such delegation can play in mitigating revictimization risks and facilitating access to legal representation, consideration should be given to ensuring children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse are aware of the availability of this support.

### Access to compensation

Access to compensation is an essential element of the right to justice for survivors, providing both recognition of and material redress for the harm they have suffered. Dominican law allows victims of crimes to bring a civil action for compensation against the perpetrator, either jointly with the criminal action or separately before the civil courts. In the latter case, however, the exercise of the civil action is suspended until the conclusion of the criminal proceedings.<sup>90</sup>

This system means that children who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse have to wait until the end of criminal proceedings before receiving any financial redress, which may ultimately hinder their recovery by limiting their ability to access the necessary support services promptly. Establishing a State-run compensation fund for victims of sexual violence, through which payments could be made quickly with the State subsequently seeking reimbursement from the perpetrator in court, could be a potential way forward to address this issue.

No direct questions were asked about compensation during the interviews and young people did not describe receiving – or pursuing – any financial compensation 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 seek such remedies. It should be noted, however, that the National Service for Legal Representation

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<sup>86</sup> Dominican Republic (2003). [Code for the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents](#), Art. 454.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Art. 456.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., Art. 458.

<sup>89</sup> Dominican Republic (2007). [Penal Procedure Code](#), Arts. 52, 86.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., Art. 50.

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of Victims' Rights secured nearly DOP 1.26 billion (USD 21.5 million as of June 2026) in compensation for victims of crime from 2020 to 2025.<sup>91</sup> Although these figures are not specific to cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, they suggest that avenues for pursuing compensation are being used in practice.

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91 Dominican Republic, Public Prosecutor's Office (2026). [The Public Prosecutor's Office expands its legal assistance service for victims to all jurisdictions across the country.](#)

# 6. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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## 6. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Protecting children from (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse requires not only responding to and addressing each incident but also understanding the broader societal and systemic factors that enable such violence in order to prevent it.

### Policy and institutional initiatives

In 2018, the Dominican Republic joined the Global WePROTECT Alliance and subsequently launched its National Response Against Online Child Sexual Exploitation. Within this framework, prevention efforts were coordinated by UNICEF and implemented by a coalition of national stakeholders, including the Ministry of the Presidency, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the judiciary, the National Council for Children and Adolescents, the Dominican Telecommunications Institute, the Coalition of NGOs for Children and Plan International.<sup>92</sup> These efforts reflect a coordinated prevention model that integrates caregiver and community engagement to promote safer behaviours, embeds prevention within the education system through teacher training and school-based interventions, and advances broader goals of behaviour change and institutional strengthening to prevent violence against children.

The National Response notably focused on strengthening children's digital resilience. It rolled out a pilot programme to integrate online safety into the national curriculum, supported by an online course and two digital platforms: [E-Pana](#), an interactive tool for children that uses videos and gamified content to help users recognize and avoid online risks such as grooming, sexual extortion and cyberbullying; and [E-Mentores](#), which provides audiovisual guidance on supporting children's safe internet use to parents, caregivers and educators. Both platforms have since been institutionalized and are now hosted on the Ministry of Education's website.<sup>93</sup> In parallel, caregivers, teachers and social workers received

targeted training on online safety in cooperation with local child protection bodies, while social media campaigns promoted digital safety and reporting mechanisms among young people nationwide. An evaluation in 2023 reported that the initiative had reached nearly 190,000 children and over 9,000 adults. It also concluded that it had established protocols and methodologies to support its sustainability.<sup>94</sup>

However, efforts to involve the information and communications technology sector in the National Response, including to promote the roll-out of protective protocols and public awareness campaigns, reportedly faced significant challenges, as many international companies operating in the country had limited authority to modify internal practices determined at the global level.<sup>95</sup>

### Shifting the focus on prevention from children to platforms and perpetrators

#### New account, same perpetrator

Young people are receiving sexual images or videos, or unwanted messages requesting sexual talk or sexual acts, from perpetrators. To stop the abuse and/or exploitation, children are blocking perpetrators online. Yet, **perpetrators can circumvent this by creating new accounts or using alternative numbers across different platforms:**

“

*So, I blocked him [on Facebook], but he kept messaging me on Instagram, over and over again. (YP)*

”

Another young woman describes feeling pressured by the constant invitations to reopen the communication channel, after blocking and deleting the profile of a friend's brother who had sent her unwanted images at the age of 16:

<sup>92</sup> UNICEF (2025). [Primary prevention of violence against children and adolescents in the Latin America and Caribbean region: Case studies in Brazil, Mexico, Honduras and the Dominican Republic](#), p. 28.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

## 6. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

“

*I already blocked you, why are you doing it again? But I didn't accept it again. (YP)*

”

Young people voiced frustration at having to block perpetrators repeatedly, turning the process into an exhausting cycle that can itself become a form of harassment and pressure.

Prevention efforts often focus on teaching children to block the perpetrator or report them to the platform. This approach is flawed for two key reasons. First, blocking the perpetrator comes after abuse has already occurred. Second, data show that perpetrators create new accounts, sometimes even in different platforms, to continue the abuse. Importantly, this raises the question of why the responsibility is placed on the child, rather than on creating obstacles to prevent perpetrators from contacting and recontacting children in the first place. This exposes a significant safety gap across social media, instant messaging and online gaming platforms, where perpetrators can re-offend with minimal accountability. The findings also reiterate the importance of stronger engagement by the private sector and regulatory frameworks that require platforms to implement effective safety-by-design measures. They further highlight the relevance of prevention strategies that address perpetrator behaviour, including measures to reduce opportunities for offending and reoffending.

### **Taking advantage of children's interests and curiosity**

In the interviews, young people reflected on their curiosity about forming new social relationships – seeking friendship, romance and affection, and a sense of belonging within online communities. This drive is both a normal and essential part of development; however, it is also something that perpetrators may deliberately or opportunistically take advantage of and exploit.

This pattern is evidenced in the interviews: for example, a young woman who struggled socially in other environments connected with players in online games and explained how, through

gaming, she started discovering new interests and connecting with people who had similar ones (e.g., anime). Feeling welcomed and accepted for the first time, she was persuaded to share sexual content:

“

*So, one day they told me to take a photo of my body, and I thought 'But why?' I felt lost, I never asked why, but I felt lost and I sent a photo. (YP)*

”

Another young person explained that during the COVID-19 lockdowns, she joined WhatsApp groups in her community to interact and connect with others. This led to contact with a perpetrator who groomed and harassed her. Perpetrators not only exploit children's curiosity, but also their pursuit of social acceptance from peers, as well as learned behaviours around obedience and compliance:

“

*They tend to manipulate children with the idea that if you are obedient or if you are brave, search this [sexual content]. So what does that child do? He creates that image and it gets shared. (YP)*

”

Prevention efforts often place the burden on children, focusing on teaching them to avoid interacting with strangers or restricting their online access. More effective approaches, by contrast, target the broader enablers of exploitation and abuse, including platform-level safeguards to limit adults' ability to access or interact within spaces intended for children. Measures such as robust age and identity verification, proactive detection of grooming behaviours, and social and behavioural interventions that explicitly challenge norms legitimizing transactional sexual exchanges with children, are critical to shifting responsibility away from children and towards the systems and actors that facilitate tech-enabled sexual exploitation and abuse. Specific recommendations to address these dynamics, as well as other gaps identified through this research, are presented following the conclusions.



# 7. CONCLUSION

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## 7. CONCLUSION

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This report draws on multiple perspectives, including those of children and young people, caregivers and an analysis of national legislation and policies, to offer a nuanced understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the Dominican Republic.

The findings reveal a concerning reality: a significant proportion of children in the Dominican Republic are subjected to various forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, often by people they already know. Perpetrators exploit trust, children's curiosity, fear of getting into trouble with their families and their financial needs or wants. While some children disclose their experiences – most often to peers – many remain silent. Those who do speak out are not consistently met with effective support, as peers frequently lack the capacity to intervene and adults' responses can be limited and, in some cases, harmful. Formal reporting remains rare, with most cases going unreported, thereby limiting access to protection, care services and justice.

The report also highlights the profound impact of these experiences on children's lives. Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is associated with heightened risks of anxiety, self-harm and suicidal behaviours, as well as longer-term effects on children's sense of safety, relationships and everyday activities. These harms are compounded by social norms that enable self-blame, stigma and misplaced responsibility on children, further discouraging disclosure and help-seeking.

Despite these challenges, the Dominican Republic has taken important steps to address tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including strengthening its legal framework through the 2025 Criminal Code. However, important gaps remain. These include the absence of explicit criminalization of certain forms of abuse, such as grooming and some forms of sexual extortion, limited regulation and accountability of digital platforms, barriers to reporting and insufficient access to sustained, survivor-centred support.

Building on both the progress achieved and the gaps identified, this report concludes with a set of data-driven and evidence-based recommendations. These are derived from the research findings and were adapted and refined in collaboration with government and civil society representatives in a National Consultation held in May 2026. However, to support the effectiveness of these recommendations, it is important to address the underlying stigma and shame, which very often overlook the fact that the children in question are victims of exploitation and abuse who have the right to support and understanding, rather than judgment.

# 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

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## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

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

While children are part of the solution, the harm caused by these forms of sexual violence obliges adults to act to protect them; care must be taken not to put the onus on children to protect themselves from harm without support. The following recommendations for action in the Dominican Republic are clustered under five 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

**Twenty-three per cent of internet-using children aged 12–17 in the Dominican Republic were subjected to at least one instance of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in a one-year period. Yet national legislation does not require online platforms to provide child-friendly reporting mechanisms, adopt safety-by-design measures or regularly assess and mitigate risks to children, highlighting the need for stronger platform accountability, regulation and cooperation with national authorities.**

**Relevant for: National Cybersecurity Centre and INDOTEL**

1. Establish a national certification scheme for child-safe online platforms as a formal system of public recognition for companies that demonstrably prioritize child protection. This mechanism should also serve a broader strategic function of elevating child online safety as a national priority and engaging the private sector as a driver of change by aligning certification with corporate social responsibility.

**Relevant for: National Congress**

2. Amend national legislation to mandate notice-and-takedown mechanisms, child-friendly reporting channels, timely removal of harmful content and transparent disclosure of moderation efforts. Legislation should also introduce serious penalties for non-compliance with child protection standards and requiring platforms to provide clear, child-friendly safety guidance on blocking, reporting and privacy settings. These safety settings and mechanisms should be accessible, visible and easy to use for children, regardless of digital literacy levels.

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**Relevant for: Cybersecurity Centre, INDOTEL, CONANI, Public Ministry, private sector companies and civil society**

3. Establish a formal and concrete mechanism for dialogue, cooperation and collaboration between government, regulators, law enforcement, and major platforms and service providers operating in the Dominican Republic. These mechanisms should go beyond case-based information-sharing to support joint prevention efforts and enable coordinated responses to emerging online risks affecting children. This mechanism should be institutionalized (e.g., national task force or intersectoral working group), with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for each actor, measurable outputs such as joint action plans or protocols and should prioritize dialogue over new online threats (e.g., child sexual abuse material generated by artificial intelligence) and have the capacity to coordinate and collaborate with similar mechanisms in other countries.

**Relevant for: INDOTEL and Public Ministry**

4. Hold online platforms fully accountable for protecting child users by requiring them to strengthen safeguards where potentially harmful interactions occur, enhance content moderation, enforce stronger privacy controls, and proactively detect and remove harmful content, while ensuring these measures form part of a broader system of interventions that makes offending more difficult and reduce structural failures across the digital ecosystem.

**Relevant for: National Congress, INDOTEL and National Cybersecurity Centre**

5. Mandate platforms that provide services in the Dominican Republic to prioritize safety-by-design that creates barriers for perpetrators and provides better protection to children. Any such features should be developed in consultation with children and should be evaluated. These could include:
  - Privacy-by-default settings for all child users, limiting public visibility and unwanted contact.
  - Restrictions on unsolicited messaging from unknown accounts to children.
  - Stronger controls on content recommendation systems to reduce exposure to sexualized and exploitative material.
  - Platform-integrated child protection safeguards within product design, such as human and algorithmic moderation, detection tools and default privacy settings for children.

**Relevant for: National Congress, INDOTEL and National Cybersecurity Centre**

6. Require regular child-rights impact assessments, transparency reporting and independent audits of child protection practices to ensure continuous improvement and accountability.

### INSIGHT 2

**The Dominican Republic has strengthened its legal framework against tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse through the adoption of the 2025 Criminal Code, but important gaps remain. The legal framework does not comprehensively address key forms of this form of violence, including online grooming, tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children, deliberate access to child sexual abuse material and digitally generated or artificial intelligence-manipulated material. It also lacks safeguards to ensure that children aged 13–17 are not criminalized for consensually creating or sharing self-generated sexual content with peers.**

#### **Relevant for: National Congress and Public Ministry**

Amend legislation to ensure tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be prosecuted effectively. This could also support prevention by strengthening deterrence and signalling that all forms of exploitation and abuse are serious crimes. A package of legislative reforms to align with international standards could include:

7. Amending existing provisions on child sexual abuse material in the Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences to:
  - Criminalize deliberate access, even when the material is neither purchased nor downloaded.
  - Increase penalties for criminalized conduct to ensure they adequately reflect the gravity and harmful nature of these crimes.
  - Expand the definition of child sexual abuse material to include digitally generated or manipulated material, including through the use of AI-powered tools. The revised definition should also make clear that any such material appearing to depict a child qualifies as child sexual abuse material, regardless of whether a real child was involved or abused in its production.
  - Replace the term “child pornography” with the term “child sexual abuse material”, to ensure the use of language that accurately reflects the abusive nature of such material, in alignment with the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.
8. Harmonizing the Law on High Technology Crimes and Offences with the 2025 Criminal Code by adopting consistent terminology, clearly defining the relationship between the two frameworks and ensuring that offences related to child sexual abuse material are subject to equivalent penalties, regardless of whether they are committed through digital means.
9. Adopting dedicated legal provisions to explicitly criminalize online grooming of children for sexual purposes, defined as intentionally communicating, soliciting, grooming or making any arrangement through an information and communications technology system for the purpose of committing a sexual offence against a child, either in person or entirely online, in accordance with the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime.
10. Adopting dedicated legal provisions to explicitly criminalize tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children, supported by a clear definition that captures its unique dynamics, including the coercive use of self-generated sexual material to extort money, more sexual material or sexual acts from a child.
11. Amending 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.

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## INSIGHT 3

**In 68 per cent of cases, the perpetrator was someone the child already knew. Interviews showed that perpetrators may exploit children's curiosity about sexuality, financial needs, and search for autonomy and independence, while some children did not understand that the abuse and exploitation they were subjected to constituted violence and described feeling guilty or blaming themselves. These findings highlight the need to address the norms and inequalities that enable abuse, strengthen education on consent and healthy relationships, and provide families with economic support.**

**Relevant for: Ministry of Women, CONANI, INDOTEL, National Cybersecurity Centre and civil society organizations**

12. Challenge beliefs that normalize abuse or exploitation of children through social and behavioural change strategies and community engagement approaches aimed at redefining masculinity, consent, power and responsibility. Formative social and behaviour change research should be conducted to identify the audience, platform and format of key messaging. These campaigns should:
- Explicitly challenge norms that frame transactional sexual exchanges with children as acceptable, blur the boundaries between peer interaction and exploitation in digital spaces, and normalize coercion, pressure or manipulation in relationships, particularly where there are power imbalances (e.g., age, familiarity or economic vulnerability).
  - Address harmful perceptions that abuse by known individuals (peers, acquaintances or family members) is less likely to occur.

- Ensure adults and children understand when and why certain acts are unacceptable or even illegal, for example by distinguishing a normal age-appropriate relationship from the beginning of abusive encounters such as grooming.

**Relevant for: Ministry of Education and CONANI**

13. Embed comprehensive, age-appropriate education on sexuality, gender equality, power dynamics, respect and consent into school curricula. Teaching children and adolescents how to build positive and healthy relationships and set personal boundaries can help challenge harmful norms that normalize sexual violence and shift blame onto victims. Such education should equip children and adolescents to recognize manipulation, resist coercion and seek help confidently. It should provide comprehensive coverage of topics such as sexuality, bodily autonomy and integrity, and consent. This education should also transfer core concepts of bodily autonomy and consent to online interactions and elaborate on what abuse might look like in digital and physical spaces. Curricula implemented in schools should also be adapted for implementation in community settings to ensure that young people not engaged in mainstream schooling are included.

**Relevant for: Social Development Directorate, CONANI, Ministry of the Presidency, INAIPI, National Health Services, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Health**

14. Expand social protection and family support services to address the economic drivers of child sexual exploitation. This should include strengthening inclusive social protection systems, providing direct economic assistance to families and scaling up evidence-based programmes that enhance families' economic resilience.

### INSIGHT 4

**One third of children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse did not tell anyone. Among those who did not disclose, the main barriers were not knowing where to go or whom to tell (22 per cent) and embarrassment (17 per cent). Some children avoided telling their parents because they feared blame, anger, restrictions or violence. Reporting through official channels was rare: less than 1 per cent reported to the police and 2 per cent to a helpline.**

**Relevant for: National Cybersecurity Centre, INDOTEL, Public Ministry**

15. Explore partnerships with technology companies to strengthen and simplify online reporting pathways for children, making them more visible, intuitive and child-centred, and ensuring that clear, age-appropriate, information on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is accessible on the digital platforms children use so that they can seek help. These mechanisms should include highly visible and easily accessible reporting interfaces (e.g., one-click reporting buttons), simplified reporting processes and options adapted to different literacy and age levels. Where partnership approaches face challenges, consider appropriate policy or regulatory options to encourage the availability of effective and user-friendly reporting mechanisms.

**Relevant for: National Cybersecurity Centre, CONANI, OSC, INAPI, Ministry of Education**

16. Support caregivers through community-based programmes that build their capacity and confidence to respond appropriately to disclosures of abuse, including through positive parenting and communication skills and strategies to foster trust with children. These programmes should include research with parents to understand their lived experience of parenting, their strengths and

their needs. Modules should emphasize that abuse is never the child's fault, address harmful stigma – including homophobia and gender-based discrimination – and equip caregivers to respond in a protective, non-judgmental manner. They should also raise awareness of formal reporting and referral mechanisms, discourage informal or punitive responses and ensure cases are managed through appropriate child protection and justice systems. Programmes should be delivered through sustained, repeated engagement rather than one-off interventions, including through schools, community networks and existing social services.

**Relevant for: National Cybersecurity Centre, CONANI and Ministry of Education**

17. Co-design and implement national stigma-reduction programmes to give visibility to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, emphasizing that responsibility lies with the perpetrator and not the child, and ensuring that caregivers, teachers and peers are trained to respond non-judgmentally to disclosures while promoting messaging that validates children's feelings and encourages help-seeking. Such programmes could include home and community visits.

**Relevant for: National Cybersecurity Centre, CONANI, Ministry of Education**

18. Co-design and implement national awareness programmes to teach children how and where to report tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, ensuring that these reporting services exist, are well-resourced, properly staffed, child-centred and accessible through multiple channels (online/mobile, school-based and community-based – to be identified via co-design/audience testing), including anonymous and confidential options for children who fear repercussions at home. The programme should involve the school system to make sure all schools have protocols to support reporting of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.



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## INSIGHT 5

**The legal framework provides several safeguards for children involved in justice proceedings, including closed hearings, privacy protections, legal aid and the right to express their views. However, the existence of statutes of limitations may prevent prosecution when disclosure is delayed, safeguards requiring forensic interviews to be conducted only once by trained professionals are not enshrined in legislation, and the framework does not provide for structured, long-term recovery and reintegration programmes.**

### Relevant for: National Congress

19. Ensure the effective operationalization of mechanisms to assess and respond effectively to risks of intimidation and retaliation against children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse. This could be done through the adoption of the 2024 Draft Law on Assistance, Legal Representation and Protection of Victims, Witnesses and Persons at Risk.
20. Facilitate prompt access for children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse to free legal representation, medical and psychological services, as well as recovery and rehabilitation programmes.
21. Abolish or extend statutes of limitations to ensure that delayed disclosure does not prevent prosecution, recognizing that children subjected to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse often come forward long after the abuse, including in adulthood.
22. Ensure that the presence of parents, guardians or other trusted adults during reporting and justice proceedings supports, rather than replaces, the child's participation. Children should be given the opportunity to report abuse directly, be heard throughout proceedings and exercise their right to participate in decisions affecting them, in line with their age, evolving capacities, preference and best interests.
23. Introduce legal provisions requiring mandatory closed hearings in cases of sexual violence against children.
24. Adopt binding legal provisions requiring child forensic interviews to be conducted only once, by trained professionals, in child-friendly settings, and audio-visually recorded where consistent with the needs, situation and preferences of each child. These safeguards should be supported by adequate funding, specialized training and monitoring to ensure consistent, trauma-informed and child-sensitive practices.
25. Establish a dedicated State-funded compensation mechanism for children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual violence, including when facilitated through technology, which guarantees access to prompt and adequate financial redress when it is not possible to seek this from the perpetrator and without requiring the completion of criminal or civil proceedings.

## 9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Disrupting Harm in the Dominican Republic report was written by Camila Perera Aladro, Tiago Afonso, Andrea Varrella and Gabriela Chamorro Concha.

ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti have appreciated the unique opportunity to work together to gather evidence around tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This report is the result of a three-year collaborative effort to gather and generate this evidence.

This research would not have been successful without the engagement of many individuals and partners, especially those in the Dominican Republic. Our thanks and appreciation go to our colleagues in the Dominican Republic, in particular UNICEF Dominican Republic. The project partners also wish to thank the Ministry of Justice for its support for this research.

**The authors would like to thank our research partners in the Dominican Republic for their expertise and collaboration:**

- **Ipsos Dominican Republic, Ipsos Colombia and Valientes Colombia:** Interviews with children and young people, and qualitative analysis
- **Ipsos International Social Research and Ipsos Dominican Republic:** Implementation of the household survey
- **Línea Familiar Contigo and Angelina Sosa Lovera:** Safeguarding focal point

**The authors would like to thank the following peer reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions:** Angela Davis, Ansel Sierra Ferreira, Daniel Kardefelt Winther, Fabiana Gorenstein, Felipe Díaz, Geny Lozada Nuñez, Guillaume Landry, Marium Hussein, Lina Beltrán, Hyejoung Yang, Solángel Díaz, Gavino Severino, Lilien Quiroga, Francisco Sequeira.

Finally, the findings and insights presented in this report would not have been possible without research participants taking the time to speak to the researchers. Our sincerest gratitude goes to all children, young people, parents, law enforcement and other professionals who participated in this study.

# 10. ANNEX: DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

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**Child sexual abuse:** What defines an abusive act can be difficult to capture or to definitively categorize. The term ‘abuse’ often refers to treating another person in a cruel or violent way. The term often focuses on both the act (e.g. violent, non-consensual), as well as the effect of the act, e.g. causing bodily injury, pain (physical or emotional), distress, etc.

Child sexual abuse more specifically, refers to various sexual activities perpetrated on children (persons under 18), regardless of whether the children are aware that what is happening to them is neither normal nor acceptable. It can be committed by adults or peers, and usually involves an individual or group taking advantage of an imbalance of power. It can be committed without explicit force, with perpetrators frequently using authority, power, manipulation or deception.<sup>96</sup>

**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.<sup>97</sup>

**Child sexual abuse material,** including AI-generated child sexual abuse material: Photos, videos, audios or other recordings, or any other representation of real or digitally generated (including generated through/by AI) child sexual abuse or sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.<sup>98</sup>

**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.<sup>99</sup>

**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.<sup>100</sup>

**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.<sup>101</sup>

**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.<sup>102</sup>

**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.<sup>103</sup>

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

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<sup>96</sup> 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.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 39–44.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 97–98.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. 36–38.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

