

DISRUPTING HARM IN MEXICO

Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Frequently asked questions (FAQ)

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

This report, *Disrupting Harm in Mexico*, is the first large-scale study of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the country. Drawing on a household survey with children and their caregivers, as well as interviews with young people who were subjected to abuse in childhood, justice professionals, frontline workers and law enforcement, it reveals a stark reality: this abuse is widespread, mostly hidden, and deeply embedded in children's everyday lives and relationships.

The findings make clear that this is not a marginal issue, but a large-scale child protection issue. By documenting these realities, the report provides crucial evidence to strengthen prevention, improve reporting and justice processes, hold technology platforms accountable, and expand access to survivor-centred care. It underscores the urgent need for coordinated action across government, civil society, tech companies, and families in Mexico to better protect children and uphold their rights in the digital age.

2. What is Disrupting Harm?

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

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

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

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse refers to any form of child sexual exploitation and abuse **where digital technology plays a role** – whether in contacting children, grooming, coercion, image-sharing, livestreaming, or blackmail. It can happen entirely online or shift between online and in-person interactions. In some cases, abuse occurs entirely in-person but is recorded and shared digitally.

The survey looked at the following examples:

- Receiving unwanted sexual comments, images or videos
- Being pressured to talk about sex
- Requests for sexual content
- Fake sexual images made with AI
- Sharing or threats to share sexual images
- Offers of money or gifts for sexual content or meetings
- Threats or blackmail to force sexual activity

4. How widespread is this issue in Mexico?

According to the household survey carried out as part of the study, in just **one year, more than 1 in 8 children** (13%) **aged 12–17** had been subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse in Mexico. This number likely underestimates the issue, given the shame many children feel, and the limited set of behaviors surveyed (listed above).

Crucially, the study revealed that perpetrators are not just strangers online. In fact, **almost 2 in 3 cases** (64%) **involve people the child already knows** – friends, partners, and even family members.

5. Where and how does this abuse typically happen?

Children are often targeted on the platforms they use every day. More than 2 in 3 incidents (67%), occurred **exclusively online**, mostly via **social media platforms** (Facebook [52%], WhatsApp [45%], followed by Instagram [11%]). Justice professionals and front-line workers also described working on cases where exploitation and abuse were facilitated by **video gaming platforms such as Roblox, and video games such as Fortnite and FIFA**.

Yet, contrary to common assumptions, the study revealed that perpetrators are not just strangers online. In fact, **most cases** (64%) **involve people the child already knows** – friends, girlfriends, boyfriends or crushes, and even family members. **Children most often first encountered perpetrators at school (39%)**; with online (31%) being the second most common place. Abuse often begins with unsolicited messages or sexual content and can escalate into coercion, blackmail or sexual extortion.

Abuse can be recorded and shared meaning that harm often continues long after the initial incident, with children re-exposed and harmed every time their images are reshared.

6. Who is most at risk?

Risk is not determined by the time children spend online. Instead, perpetrators take advantage of a child's context and life experiences to abuse or exploit them. Children exposed to or witnessing violence in the home were found to be at greater risk of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. The study also found that risk rises sharply during adolescence: **only 1 in 16** (6%) **12-year-olds reported abuse, compared to one in five** (21%) **17-year-olds**. In Mexico no significant gender differences were found with girls (14%) being subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse at similar rates to boys (13%).

However, the interviews conducted as part of the study revealed distinct gender dynamics to the way abuse unfolds and is perceived by the child and the people around them. **Sexual exploitation and abuse of boys is more easily overlooked or minimized**. **Harmful gender norms** also shaped the ways in which **girls were sexually coerced or pressured and led to violence being normalized**, including in the context of intimate relationships. These same harmful gender norms may influence **boys to draw on dominant masculinities associated with control to subject girls to this type of harm**.

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

Children subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation are **15 times more likely to engage in self-harm, 12 times more likely to have suicidal thoughts and behaviours**, and **more likely to experience anxiety** than those who have not been subjected to this kind of abuse or exploitation. Survivors described living with a sense of exposure and vulnerability that went beyond the time of exploitation and abuse and abuse, if their sexual content continues to be available online and reshared. Frontline workers and justice professionals also described the children they

supported as suffering from **depression, sleep problems, low self-esteem, drug use problems and/or irregular eating behaviors**. Young people also spoke of **missing or changing schools** because they were bullied for being subjected to exploitation and abuse and of **shame, self-blame and rejection by their families** as a result of responses rooted in stigma or victim-blaming.

8. Why don't children disclose or report their abuse?

One in three children never tell anyone about their abuse. Embarrassment, not knowing where to go or whom to tell, or not thinking it was serious enough, fear of blame or judgment, all keep children silent. When they did tell someone, they were sometimes met with negative reactions from family, friends or professionals who judged or blamed them for the abuse as a result of harmful gender beliefs and biases that shift responsibility away from the perpetrator onto the child.

Those who did disclose spoke to friends, mothers/ female caregivers, or siblings. Very few cases – **less than 1% – were reported to the police**. A widespread lack of trust in the justice system and the expectation that nothing will be done discourages children from seeking official help.

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

For those who attempt to pursue justice, **the process itself can be retraumatizing**. Survivors described being blamed for the abuse, pressured to hide their emotions in court, or forced to repeat painful testimonies to multiple officials. Forensic exams were experienced as insensitive and retraumatizing, while protective measures – such as child-sensitive hearings or shielding victims from direct confrontation with perpetrators – were not applied consistently in practice. Legal

proceedings can stretch for years, disrupting schooling and leaving children emotionally drained, with sometimes abandoning their cases to protect their wellbeing.

A critical gap lies between what the law promises and what children actually face in practice. For example, officials often require children to have a caregiver present when filing a complaint, even though this is not mandated by law. Given the stigma and difficulties many children face in disclosing abuse to caregivers, this requirement acts as a serious barrier to reporting and prevents many from seeking justice at all. Even when they do, many forms of abuse, such as livestreaming abuse or online sexual extortion, are not explicitly criminalized in Mexico. In many cases, offences are reclassified under broader charges, erasing the digital dimension of the abuse and making accountability even harder to achieve.

10. What support do survivors receive?

Access to meaningful, trauma-informed support is sometimes inconsistent and inadequate. For those young people who did receive psychological support, it allowed them to recognize that what happened was abuse, rebuild their self-esteem, and move toward healing. Yet many others encountered long waitlists, inappropriate therapy settings, and judgmental attitudes from therapists – which in some cases deepened their trauma. Families sometimes discourage therapy due to **stigma around mental health**, leaving children to cope alone.

11. What needs to change?

Building children's knowledge and preparedness is important, yet solely focusing on children's behavior unfairly places the burden on them for their own safety and overlooks the wider conditions that enable abuse or exploitation.

Some of the key recommendations proposed in the report include:

1. Develop and provide children with support, tools and knowledge to recognize harmful relationship dynamics and sexual behaviors, both in person and online.
2. Develop consistent, adaptable messaging for children, parents, teachers and communities, for example via national awareness and social and behavioral change campaigns, school programmes, parenting programmes, seminars for caregivers, sexuality education and social media. This messaging should:
 - a) Build awareness around technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including perpetrator tactics (e.g. it's usually someone the child knows).
 - b) Challenge existing perceptions that 'online-only' exploitation and abuse are not as harmful as violence that occurs in person.
 - c) Challenge stigma towards seeking access to mental health care.
 - d) Emphasize that it is never a child's fault.
 - e) Highlight that community stigma and fear of parents' reactions is being weaponized by perpetrators to coerce and trap children in a cycle of violence.
3. Tackle the key barriers to disclosure and reporting.
 - a) Destigmatizing this abuse by raising awareness, social behavioural change campaigns and parenting programmes.
 - b) Investing in nationwide campaigns that clearly signpost hotline and helpline numbers and that make the process of reporting or seeking professional help clear and accessible to children and families.
4. Work with platforms and internet service providers as key partners in shaping children's online environments, including the design of safety features, reporting tools and the rapid detection and removal of harmful material, and hold them accountable to these responsibilities by introducing legal provisions for those operating in Mexico.
5. Strengthen education and training of mental health professionals and social workers by integrating trauma-informed care for children subjected to this kind of abuse and exploitation.
6. Enhance access to specialized care, improving coordination and ensuring timely access to specialized mental health and psychosocial support for children.
7. Amend procedural rules and introduce legal provisions to minimize retraumatization during justice proceedings and safeguard children's well-being.
8. Develop a specialized, well-trained (trauma-informed) and well-coordinated group of child protection and justice professionals.
9. Enforce victim protection measures to prevent and address intimidation, harassment, and retaliation by perpetrators.
10. Amend legislation to ensure technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be prosecuted effectively, including by:
 - a) Criminalizing online sexual extortion of children
 - b) Criminalizing livestreamed abuse
 - c) Replace the term "child pornography" with "child sexual abuse material" across federal and state legislation to ensure the use of language that does not trivialise abuse. Updating the definition of child sexual abuse material to include digitally generated content, including content produced through artificial intelligence (AI) tools.
 - d) Aligning sanctions and harmonizing state-level laws and policies with federal legislation, to help ensure consistent prevention, protection, investigation and victim support measures across all states in Mexico.

See the full detailed list of recommendations for a roadmap to action for Mexico here:

12. What role do parents and caregivers play?

Parents and caregivers are essential to children's safety, but many unknowingly reinforce harmful norms. Three in 5 caregivers surveyed said it was wrong for a person to take sexual images of themselves and almost the same number (57%) said it was the child's fault if those intimate images they took were shared. This **victim-blaming perpetuates a cycle of selfblame, shame and silence instead of placing accountability on the perpetrator**, thereby preventing children from disclosing abuse and accessing help. Trust and open communication with caregivers was consistently identified by both children, young people and professionals key in safeguarding children against abuse or exploitation. Emotional support and attention by caregivers were linked to children's awareness about relationship boundaries, understanding of sexuality and what constitutes violence. Supporting caregivers with accurate information and changing harmful social norms and attitudes are vital steps to ensuring children are believed, protected, and cared for. Adults must create supportive, stigma-free environments where children can feel safe discussing these issues.

13. How can the media help?

Media professionals are key allies in protecting children.

- **Avoid victim-blaming, including through the use of appropriate terminology, and protect children's identities.** Ensure that reporting does not inadvertently place any responsibility on a child for the abuse/exploitation they were subjected to. Avoid details that could reveal their identity.
- **Focus on systemic issues, not the child's actions.** Reporting should highlight perpetrators, harms, and gaps in protection rather than framing the story around "shame."
- **Avoid sensationalism and graphic detail.** Excessive details about abuse can further harm children and risk revealing their identity. Trauma-informed language that does not minimize or normalize abuse is key.
- **Respect legal safeguards and investigations.** Follow laws and ethical standards within media protecting children victims of crime and avoid publishing information that could interfere with cases.
- **Share information about support services.** Where possible, include helplines and reporting channels so children and families know where to seek help.

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