

DISRUPTING HARM IN MONTENEGRO

Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

Frequently asked questions (FAQ)

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

This is Montenegro's first comprehensive study on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Drawing on the voices of children, caregivers, frontline workers, justice professionals and law enforcement, it uncovers a stark reality: this type of abuse is happening across the country, and most of it remains hidden.

The *Disrupting Harm* study found that **in just one year, more than 1 in 10 (11%) internet-using children aged 12–17 were subjected to some form of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse**. Most cases occurred through social media, and more than two thirds involved someone the child already knew, challenging the idea that this harm is driven mainly by strangers. These findings highlight how protecting children in Montenegro requires recognizing that online and in-person abuse and exploitation are interconnected and often remain hidden as a result of social attitudes and systems that allow it to go unnoticed.

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 for a total of \$15 million 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 each country, *Disrupting Harm* maps how technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse happens, identifies risk and protection factors, and provides an evidence-based roadmap for governments and partners to act. The findings are [already shaping stronger laws](#), prevention, and child protection systems around the world.

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

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse refers to any form of child sexual exploitation and abuse **where digital technology plays a role** – such as grooming, image-sharing, sexual extortion, live streaming, 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 Disrupting Harm survey looked at the following:

- Receiving unwanted sexual comments, images or videos
- Being pressured to talk about sex
- Requests for sexual content
- Use of fake, AI-generated sexual images
- Sharing or threats to share sexual images without consent

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

4. How widespread is this issue in Montenegro?

According to the household survey, **more than 1 in 10 children (11%) aged 12–17 in Montenegro had been subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in just one year.** Scaled up to the overall population of 12-17-year-old internet-using children in Montenegro, **this represents an estimated 4,900 children.**

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

These findings are **consistent with trends seen across the region** in the other three countries involved in the study (Armenia, North Macedonia and Serbia), as well as with data emerging from the research across 25 countries **globally.** At least one in ten children have been subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and in most cases the perpetrator is **someone the child already knows, rather than strangers.** Across the region, almost half of affected **children did not tell anyone** what happened to them, and this silence is heightened by **stigma, shame and victim-blaming** within communities, which further isolates children and their families. As in many other countries within the study, most cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse took place via social media platforms.

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

In more than two thirds of cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, children were exploited and/or abused by someone they already knew: more than 1 in 2 cases involved friends, acquaintances (51%), and almost a quarter involved current or previous romantic partners or crushes (22%). This shows the importance of prevention and education – not just fear of strangers online. **Less than half (48%) of children in Montenegro reported receiving sexuality education.** While education alone cannot prevent tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, it can play a critical role in helping children understand consent, recognize abusive behaviours, and feel empowered to set boundaries.

In 25% of cases, the perpetrator was a peer under the age of 18, revealing how widespread the reality of children becoming involved in the sexual exploitation and abuse of other children is. This coupled with the fact that 19% of children who were subjected to abuse said they did not tell anyone because they “did not care enough” about the incident, shows how certain behaviours have become increasingly normalised parts of children’s online experiences.

7. How is technology used to sexually exploit and abuse children?

82% of cases of exploitation and abuse took place via social media, most commonly **Instagram (45%), Viber (42%), Snapchat (22%), and Facebook (9%).** **5% of instances of exploitation and abuse occurred on gaming platforms.**

Perpetrators often send sexual images to children without their consent. 7% of children in Montenegro were subjected to this in the past year alone. Whether strangers or peers, perpetrators often initiated contact intrusively, sending explicit images and sexual propositions without prior discussion or interaction.

These online platforms are also being used to groom children, with perpetrators gradually building trust by pretending to be a friend or romantic partner. Children may believe the relationship is genuine or romantic and may not immediately recognise the situation as abuse. Over time, children may be manipulated into sharing sexual images or engaging in sexual conversations. These images can then be used to extort children, with perpetrators threatening to share the material unless the child produces more content, performs sexual acts, or provides money.

Emerging technologies are creating new risks. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools are now being used to generate fake sexual images of children, sometimes using a child's real photo, without their consent or knowledge. These images can be used for blackmail, harassment, or extortion, and can cause serious harm associated with shame, stigma, and fear of exposure. Even AI-generated material that does not depict real children normalises sexual exploitation and fuels demand for abuse involving real children.

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

In over half of cases of abuse (59%) children did not tell anyone about the exploitation and abuse. The most common barrier (21%) shared was not thinking what happened was serious enough to disclose. This suggests that many children may not recognize certain behaviours as abusive. Young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children, front-

line workers and justice professionals described how behaviours like unwanted sexual messages, sexualized teasing, or humiliating jokes **have become increasingly normalized** within peer groups, media and on digital platforms and that children may not always recognise them as harmful. The second most common reason (20%) why children did not tell anyone about the sexual exploitation and abuse they were subjected to was feeling **embarrassed**. Young people interviewed also expressed **fear of being blamed for the abuse, or fearing the shame it would bring shame to their family** or if it became known in their community.

Children also face practical barriers to reporting. Some **do not know how to report** abuse or that it can be reported. In some cases, children lack confidence that authorities will respond supportively. In Montenegro, children typically need a parent or caregiver to file a criminal complaint, which can be another barrier to reporting if they feel unable to tell their family or if the perpetrator is someone close to them. When children did confide in someone, **they went to a friend in 1 out of 5 cases**. The interviews with professionals and young people showed how disclosing the abuse or exploitation to friends or siblings provided emotional relief (friends often offered empathy and reassurance, particularly when they had shared similar experiences). Yet it often does not lead to access to support or accountability for the child.

9. What are the impacts of abuse and exploitation on children? Does technology change the impact of sexual abuse on children?

The impacts on children of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are **serious and long-lasting**, including constant worry that sexual

images of them may be discovered by parents, peers, or their community, or that the abuse could happen again. Many describe feeling **confused, overwhelmed, and powerless**, particularly when sexual material is shared online without their consent.

Survey data shows that children who were subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse had **higher levels of anxiety** than those who were not. They were also **more likely to self-harm** and **more likely to experience suicidal thoughts or attempts**.

Shame and fear are often deeply internalised, affecting children's sense of safety and belonging in their own communities. Fear of judgement can lead to **isolation, avoidance, and long-term disruption to children's lives**. Children frequently blame themselves for the exploitation or abuse they were subjected to – particularly in cases involving sexual images – especially when harmful social attitudes suggest they are responsible for the abuse. **Victim-blaming responses from adults or communities can deepen shame, make recovery harder, and discourage children from seeking help**. Children are never responsible for the exploitation or abuse they were subjected to, whether images were shared voluntarily, under pressure, or fabricated using technologies such as AI.

10. How can parents, the wider community and the tech sector help prevent and respond to this form of violence against children?

Creating **safe, non-judgmental spaces for open conversation** about online and in-person experiences is essential. Children are more likely to speak up when they trust that they will be

listened to calmly, believed, and not blamed or punished. Parenting support programmes can help caregivers understand online risks – such as grooming, coercion, and image-based abuse – and guide them to respond to disclosures with empathy rather than restriction or blame.

Schools and trusted adults are also key points of support. Teachers, psychologists, youth workers, sports coaches and social workers should be equipped to recognise abuse and help children access support. Schools can play an important preventive role by providing age-appropriate education on **consent, healthy relationships, boundaries, and online safety**, and by creating safe spaces where children can discuss sensitive issues without fear of stigma.

Many families do not report abuse simply because they do not know how or where to do so. The wider community – including health services, faith groups, youth organisations, and community services – can help **share information about where children can seek help**. Accessible reporting options, such as **helplines, school-based reporting, and online or chat-based services**, can help children seek support in ways that feel safe and confidential.

Communities also need to challenge harmful social norms. Victim-blaming attitudes, stigma around sexuality, and the belief that “online-only” abuse is less serious can discourage children from speaking out. Public awareness campaigns, community dialogue, and education programmes should reinforce the fact that sexual exploitation and abuse is a violation of children's rights and never the child's fault.

The tech sector can help by **strengthening platform safeguards, improving reporting mechanisms, and detecting and removing harmful content** more quickly, making it harder for perpetrators to target children.

Crucially, prevention should not rely on children. Adults, institutions, and digital platforms all share responsibility for creating safer digital environments.

11. What needs to change in Montenegro's legal and psychosocial systems to better protect children?

To better protect children in Montenegro from technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, **laws need to be updated to address emerging forms of abuse**, including online grooming, sexual extortion, livestreamed abuse, and AI-generated child sexual abuse material, and updated **to ensure equal legal protection for all children under 18**.

Child-centred justice procedures must be applied more consistently. Although Montenegro has safeguards such as specialised prosecutors and child-friendly interview rooms, children may still be questioned multiple times and cases can be delayed due to limited staff and technical capacity. To help guarantee this, **more investment is needed in specialised training and resources** for police, prosecutors, judges and social workers, particularly on trauma-informed responses and child-centred approaches to addressing tech-facilitated sexual violence against children. **Access to psychosocial support must be expanded.** Services are currently limited and concentrated in urban areas, leaving many children and families without specialised care. Finally, **better coordination between institutions is needed**, including stronger referral pathways between schools, social services, health providers and law enforcement. The planned **Barnahus centre in Podgorica**, which will provide child-centered, multi-agency support under one roof, could play an important role in improving protection and care for children.

12. What can be done right now to better protect children in Montenegro?

The findings underline the urgent need for:

- **Strengthen prevention through education** on consent, healthy relationships, and online safety. Parents and communities must be supported to talk openly and without judgement with children about digital risks and how to seek help.
- **Promote child participation in the design and evaluation of digital protections** to ensure that safety measures are age-appropriate, accessible and reflect children's realities. Co-design education and awareness materials with children and young people to ensure relevance and content that reflects their realities.
- **Make reporting easier and safer for children and young people.** Children should have multiple confidential ways to seek help – through helplines, online reporting tools, and trusted adults – supported by professionals trained in child-centred and trauma-informed approaches.
- **Update laws to address new forms of abuse.** Legal reforms should close gaps by ensuring equal protection for all children under 18, and explicitly criminalising offences such as online grooming, sexual extortion, livestreamed abuse, and AI-generated child sexual abuse material.
- **Hold digital platforms accountable for adopting safety-by-design approaches.** Platforms should introduce stronger safeguards, including privacy-by-default settings for children's accounts, restrictions on unsolicited contact, and faster detection and removal of content.
- **Expand access to psychosocial support.** Montenegro needs more trained psychologists and specialised services, especially outside major cities.

- **Strengthen law enforcement and justice responses.** Police, prosecutors, and judges need specialised training (in child-centred and trauma-informed approaches) and resources to investigate digital crimes. Coordination with schools, health services, and social protection systems must also be improved.

13. How can the media help?

Media professionals can be key allies in protecting children.

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

- **Focus on systemic issues, not the child.**
Reporting should highlight perpetrators, harms, and gaps in protection rather than framing the story around "shame."
- **Avoid sensationalism and graphic detail.**
Excessive details about abuse can further harm children and risk revealing their identity.
- **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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