

DISRUPTING HARM IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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

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CONTENTS

Executive summary	2	5. Access to justice and legal remedies 70	
Methods	6		
Introduction	11	5.1 Lack of specialized justice professionals	73
Internet use in North Macedonia	12	5.2 Systemic challenges	75
1. Technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children in North Macedonia	16	5.3 Factors contributing to withdrawal from proceedings	76
		5.4 Forensic interviews	78
		5.5 Access to compensation	80
1.1 Unwanted exposure to sexual material	19	6. Prevention efforts and opportunities 82	
1.2 Image-based sexual abuse	21		
1.3 Sexual extortion	26	6.1 Policy and institutional initiatives	84
1.4 Who perpetrates technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse?	29	6.2 The need for child-centred, multisectoral prevention	85
1.5 The role of online platforms in facilitating child sexual exploitation and abuse	34	6.3 Prevention efforts in schools	86
2. Disclosure	38	7. Conclusion	89
2.1 Disclosure as a last resort	40	8. Recommendations	91
2.2 Who do children disclose to?	41		
2.3 Barriers to disclosure	44	9. Acknowledgements	101
3. Reporting	49		
		10. Annex: Definitions of key terms	102
3.1 Formal reporting channels	51		
3.2 Barriers to reporting	52		
4. Impact on children and access to care	58		
4.1 The impact on children	60		
4.2 Challenges in service provision	62		
4.3 Barriers to access	65		
4.4 Challenges with multisectoral collaboration in service provision	66		

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-facilitated¹ 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 North Macedonia, from 2023 onwards.

Between 2023 and 2025, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti conducted research in North Macedonia to understand tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse from multiple viewpoints. The data in North Macedonia were collected through a national household survey with 12–17-year-olds and one of their parents or guardians, interviews with front-line workers, justice professionals, young people 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 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 preferred² 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 North Macedonia

- According to Disrupting Harm survey data, 10 per cent of internet-using children in North Macedonia aged 12–17 years were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed.
- Forty-eight per cent of these children were subjected to more than one of the measured forms of exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed.
- The most common form of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse among the indicators measured was receiving unwanted sexual images, with 8 per cent of children responding that they were subjected to this in the year before they were surveyed. This is followed by 5 per cent of children responding that they had been asked to share an image or video of their private parts when they did not want to.
- The survey found no statistically significant differences in children's exposure to sexual exploitation and abuse across age, gender, location (urban versus rural), digital skills or parental education. While boys and girls were equally affected, it should be noted that no boys or young men participated in interviews despite extensive recruitment efforts, limiting insights into their experiences and implications for prevention and response.
- Survey analysis shows that children who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were 12 times more likely to report

¹ The report uses the terms 'technology-facilitated' and 'tech-facilitated' interchangeably.

² 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.

suicidal thoughts or behaviours³, and 11 times more likely to report self-harm⁴ in the past year, compared with children not subjected to such abuse.

- Survey data found that 52 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse involved the use of social media, and 30 per cent occurred via online games.

Perpetrators of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- In 78 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation or abuse measured by the survey, the perpetrator was someone the child already knew. Sexual exploitation and abuse by a person unknown to the child accounted for a much smaller percentage of instances, at 5 per cent. In 16 per cent of instances, children could not or did not want to identify the perpetrator(s).
- Tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse by adults was more common (57 per cent of instances) than exploitation and abuse by peers (22 per cent of instances), according to the survey data. However, qualitative data provided insight into exploitation and abuse within both friendly and intimate peer relationships.
- Tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse by a former or current intimate partner or crush were particularly common, accounting for 39 per cent of instances captured by the survey.

Criminalization of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- The legal framework in North Macedonia in relation to child sexual exploitation and abuse provides a solid basis for protection, including offences related to tech-facilitated sexual extortion and the creation, use or dissemination of digitally generated material with sexually explicit content depicting a child. However, the legislation could be further strengthened to better address evolving online risks.

- Legal protection from unwanted exposure of children to sexual material does not extend to conduct targeting children aged 14 to 17.
- Legislation in North Macedonia criminalizes a range of conduct related to child sexual abuse material, including production, dissemination and possession without intent to distribute. However, mere access to such material is not criminalized, creating a loophole that allows individuals to deliberately seek out and view it with impunity.
- The Criminal Code defines child sexual abuse material primarily in terms of visual representations, which leaves scope for expanding protection to include non-visual materials, such as audio-only content.
- Legislation in North Macedonia 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 14 years and no exemptions exist, children aged 14–17 years could potentially face prosecution for voluntarily creating or sharing their own sexual content, despite such acts arising from sexual exploration.
- The law does not explicitly criminalize the livestreaming of child sexual abuse, nor does it clarify whether the offence of coercing a child to participate in “*pornographic performances*” extends to such conduct.
- While legislation in North Macedonia criminalizes the online grooming of children under 14 for sexual purposes, the offence is contingent on the occurrence of a physical meeting, thereby excluding conduct targeting children aged 14 to 17 or resulting exclusively in exploitation and/or abuse occurring entirely online.

³ 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. Estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals (2.56, 55.236).

⁴ 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. Estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals (6.683, 65.691).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disclosure and reporting of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- Survey data show that in 88 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that occurred in the previous year, children disclosed to someone. In contrast, in 9 per cent of instances children surveyed did not tell anyone.
- Despite the high disclosure rates, several justice professionals and front-line workers spoke of cases they supported where disclosure was a last resort for the child after escalating threats and abuse became unbearable.
- Several barriers to disclosure emerged from the survey and qualitative data, including stigma around sexual abuse, fear of judgment, taboos and silence around sex and sexuality, normalization of some forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and past unsupportive responses from parents or institutions.
- For children who disclosed, the survey data show that they were most likely to speak to a female caregiver, followed by siblings and friends.
- According to the survey data, reporting and seeking help from formal services was rare among children who were exploited and abused in the previous year. Children reported to the police in only 1 per cent of instances. Similarly, in 1 per cent of instances they spoke to a social worker and in only 0.2 per cent of instances they called a helpline.
- Some of the key barriers to reporting identified by the survey and qualitative data included shame and stigma around sexual violence, lack of knowledge of reporting processes, lack of trust in institutions and mandating parental involvement to progress with formal reporting processes.

Access to services and justice for children subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- Legislation requires the State to implement special programmes to support the physical and psychological recovery, rehabilitation, resocialization and social reintegration of children who have been subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Professionals raised resource constraints, heavy workloads and systemic challenges in relation to multisectoral coordination and collaboration as barriers to the effective provision of services for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Qualitative data further indicate that the centralization of psychosocial services in urban centres, in particular specialized services, can create logistical and financial obstacles for families in accessing these services.
- Statutes of limitations for criminal offences ranging from 3 to 20 years can limit access to justice in cases of (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, as children may only feel ready to disclose after the legal time limit for prosecution has expired. The existence of statutes of limitations risks shielding perpetrators from accountability and deprives individuals subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse during childhood of the right to seek justice.
- Legislation in North Macedonia includes a range of safeguards aimed at protecting child victims of crime throughout justice proceedings, including rights to receiving age-appropriate information, privacy, protection from secondary victimization, child-sensitive participation and support from intersectoral protection teams.
- Proceedings involving child victims of crime in North Macedonia must be conducted by justice professionals with significant experience. As staffing constraints make it difficult to develop such expertise, professionals may lack familiarity with child-specific safeguards and tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Systemic resource constraints, including understaffing, heavy workloads and limited institutional support, contribute to delays in judicial proceedings, which may erode trust in the justice system and lead some families to withdraw from the process.
- Although legislation in North Macedonia provides for child-centred forensic interview measures, gaps remain in the framework and practice surrounding their implementation, including the absence of a requirement that interviews be conducted by specially trained

professionals, limited training opportunities, the lack of standardized interview protocols and reports of children being questioned multiple times before formal testimony takes place.

- Effective and timely access to compensation remains challenging, despite the availability of mechanisms to claim it during criminal proceedings. Although a State-funded victim compensation scheme exists, the amounts that may be awarded to children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are relatively low.

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 91](#) of this report.

METHODS

The Disrupting Harm methodology combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a better understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in North Macedonia. The quantitative data provide an understanding of the scope of this issue among children in North Macedonia. 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 child sexual exploitation and abuse. It also offers 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. In total, six separate but complementary research activities (discussed in further detail below) 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 against, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
6. How does existing policy and legislation protect against, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

A summary of methods used for each of the six 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 of over 140 items, ensuring consistency across countries analysed. The 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 that they reflected current legal frameworks. These were then 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 the ECPAT member organization and the UNICEF country office, to ensure accuracy and real-world relevance.

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

Household survey of 12–17-year-olds and their parents or 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 those around sexual violence, respondents input their answers directly into the tablet to ensure that their 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 had

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.⁵

To achieve a nationally representative random sample of 12–17-year-old internet users, the survey used random probability sampling with national coverage. In North Macedonia, the fieldwork coverage was 99.2 per cent. Poorly accessible, remote parts of the country – accounting for 0.8 per cent of the population – were excluded from fieldwork. '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 collection took place from May to October 2024.

The sampling followed a three-stage random probability clustered sample design. The response rate in North Macedonia was 51 per cent, and the sample achieved included 1,005 children and 1,005 of their parents or guardians.

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

Age and gender distribution of child sample:

12–14 years	53%
15–17 years	47%
Girls	50%
Boys	50%

Age and gender distribution of parent/guardian sample:

Aged under 40 years	25%
Aged 40 and above	75%
Women	75%
Men	24%
Other	1%

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

Interviews with children and young people subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse while under the age of 18

This research activity aimed to include the voices of children and young people (16–24 years old) who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse while under the age of 18.⁶ 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 North Macedonia (see '[Acknowledgements](#)' section).

Three main engagement strategies were developed to connect children and young people with a clinical researcher to participate in an interview:

1. Professional networks: Service providers were asked to share information about the study and the opportunity to participate in an interview with young people (aged 16–24) within their networks. This included Centres for Social Work, schools – through school psychologists, psychologists and psychotherapists from the public health care system and working as private practitioners, and civil society organizations providing legal and/or psychosocial services.
2. Digital networks: Social media posts providing information about the study and the opportunity for young people (aged 18–24) to participate in an interview were shared via the UNICEF North Macedonia Facebook and Instagram accounts. The posts included links to the UNICEF North Macedonia website where more information about the study, participation, the consent process and contact details could be found.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

3. The research team worked together with the Scout Association of Macedonia to reach young people (aged 18–24) with information about the study and the opportunity to participate in an interview. Social media posts were shared via the Scout Association's Facebook and Instagram accounts (achieving 27,000 views on Instagram), as well as via the Instagram accounts of local scout units. Posters were placed in local scout units, at university campuses and in a few selected public places where young people gather in Skopje and Prilep. Short presentations about the project were also delivered by two trained members of the scouts to young people within the eligible age range at scout events. Information about the study, including social media cards and posters, was also shared with organizations within the Scout Association's network for those organizations to share it further.

Information shared about the project included contact details to organizations providing services for anyone wishing to seek support.

Trauma-informed interviews were conducted with five young women from Skopje between the ages of 18 and 24 in October 2025.

Despite the use of multiple means over several months to inform young people of the opportunity to participate in an interview, only five young women came forward to take part in the study. It is possible that trauma and stigma related to sexual violence, and a lack of trust in confidentiality, deterred participation. The recruitment efforts underscored the social and systemic challenges of engaging young people subjected to (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse in research.

Throughout the report, attributions to data from this research activity 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 front-line workers

This research activity aimed to understand how front-line workers in North Macedonia support

children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and to identify how systems can better prevent and respond to these forms of violence. It also aimed to explore the experiences of front-line workers handling cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as their perceptions of good practices and challenges.

The population of interest for the study was front-line workers in North Macedonia who provide support or essential services directly to individuals who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Front-line workers were included in the study if their case or patient load over the last 12 months included at least one child or young person who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse while under the age of 18. Front-line workers were only invited to participate if they were able to talk to the researchers about a de-identified case.

Trained researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 front-line workers. The sample included psychologists and psychotherapists from statutory services and working as private practitioners, social workers, school psychologists, and social workers and psychotherapists from civil society organizations.

A pilot was initially conducted between July and September 2024 with four front-line workers. The remaining interviews were conducted between July and September 2025. Of the 18 front-line workers interviewed, 15 were women and 3 were men. Participants were based in Kichevo, Kumanovo, Skopje and Tetovo.

Throughout the report, attributions to data from this research activity with front-line workers will be indicated with (FW) at the end of quotes.

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

Interviews with justice professionals

This research activity aimed to understand how justice mechanisms in North Macedonia respond to children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to identify how systems can better prevent and respond to these forms

of violence. The research also aimed to explore the experiences of justice professionals handling cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as their perceptions of good practices and challenges.

The population of interest for this study was justice professionals in North Macedonia, such as judges, prosecutors and lawyers. Justice professionals were included in the study if they had a direct role working on a case of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the last five years. Justice professionals were only invited to participate if they were able to talk to the researchers about a de-identified case. Ongoing cases were excluded to ensure the integrity of the case in the justice system.

Trained researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 justice professionals including judges, prosecutors and lawyers, as well as lawyers, paralegals and legal advisers from civil society organizations.

A pilot was initially conducted between July and September 2024 with four justice professionals. The remaining interviews were conducted between July and September 2025. Of the 16 justice professionals interviewed, 12 were women and 4 were men. Participants were based in Bitola, Kavadarci, Kumanovo, Prilep, Skopje and Tetovo.

Throughout the report, attributions to data from this research activity with justice professionals will be indicated with (JP) 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 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. The engagements focused 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 North Macedonia.

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 North Macedonia. The survey is cross-sectional, not longitudinal, meaning that the data capture a single moment in time in the lives of the 1,005 children surveyed. While the Disrupting Harm data highlight relationships between sexual exploitation and abuse and other factors in children's lives, it is not possible to determine cause and effect based on these 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.

While survey data showed high levels of disclosure among children, as with other studies on sexual violence, underreporting is still expected due to several factors including potential discomfort

METHODS

speaking about something very personal and painful, fears around confidentiality and anonymity, and social norms and taboos around sexual violence, among others. Social norms around gender, sexuality and sexual violence, along with victim-blaming attitudes, were described by professionals and the young women subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, and are likely to contribute to underreporting. 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.

Data from the **interviews with front-line workers and justice professionals** do not aim to provide a measure of the forms or amount of violence in North Macedonia due to the nature of this research method. In many cases, the data presented represent the perceptions of participants. However, these data can help provide context and meaning for understanding these forms of abuse and how they occur. It is also important to note that the cases that reach formal support or justice systems represent a minority of abuse cases and may disproportionately reflect forms of abuse that are more widely recognized or acknowledged.

As described above, despite extensive efforts to engage with **young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse while under the age of 18**, only five young women came forward to participate in interviews. No males or young people identifying as LGBTQI+ came forward. This limits insight into the important perspectives of those subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and how these forms of violence can affect children differently.

Ethical approval

UNICEF Innocenti obtained ethical approval for the Disrupting Harm project from the Health Media Lab, a global institutional review board.

No appropriate national ethics review board that could review the study in North Macedonia could be identified. Available review boards existed only in academic settings and were available to university faculty staff and students only. The approval obtained from the Health Media Lab was therefore also considered at the national level. In addition, UNICEF Innocenti worked closely with UNICEF North Macedonia to ensure that relevant ministries were informed about and endorsed the study.

National consultation

A national consultation was held in May 2026 with representatives from relevant line ministries, the judiciary and civil society in North Macedonia in order to receive input on the Disrupting Harm findings and recommendations, to enhance their relevance for the national context.

INTRODUCTION

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 have taken place.

Tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse affect children in different ways. 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 contact 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 risk overlooking 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, meaning 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 North Macedonia. It adds much-needed nuance and understanding to this issue, grounded in the experiences of children and young people, and the professionals working to support them.

INTERNET USE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

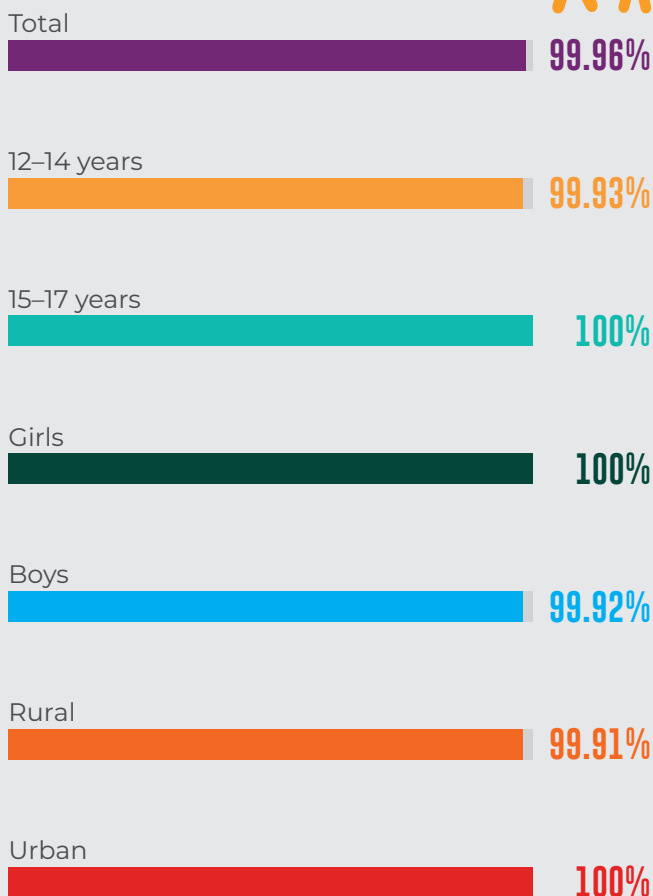
The Disrupting Harm project collected key indicators on children's internet use via the household survey. This data is intended to complement available studies and provide up-to-date national data.

Understanding how children access the internet, whether they can go online regularly or not, what they do online, and how parents or guardians 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. Disrupting Harm data 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.

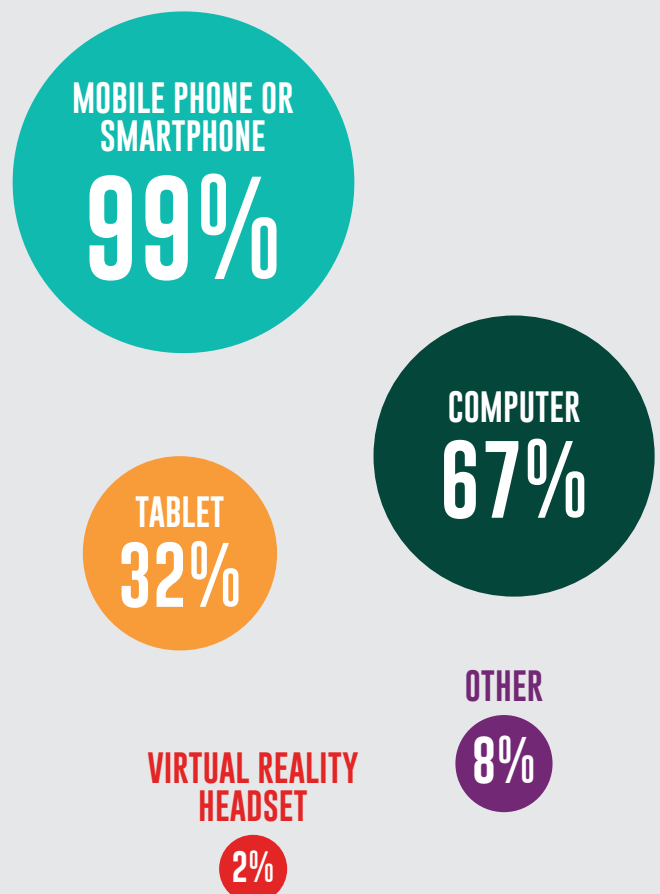
Any effort at prevention must therefore look beyond what children are doing online; not doing so often results in victim-blaming or treating children as complicit in the exploitation and abuse they have been subjected to, as evidenced in this report. Instead, prevention requires a multipronged approach 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 NORTH MACEDONIA



Base: 1,055 households.

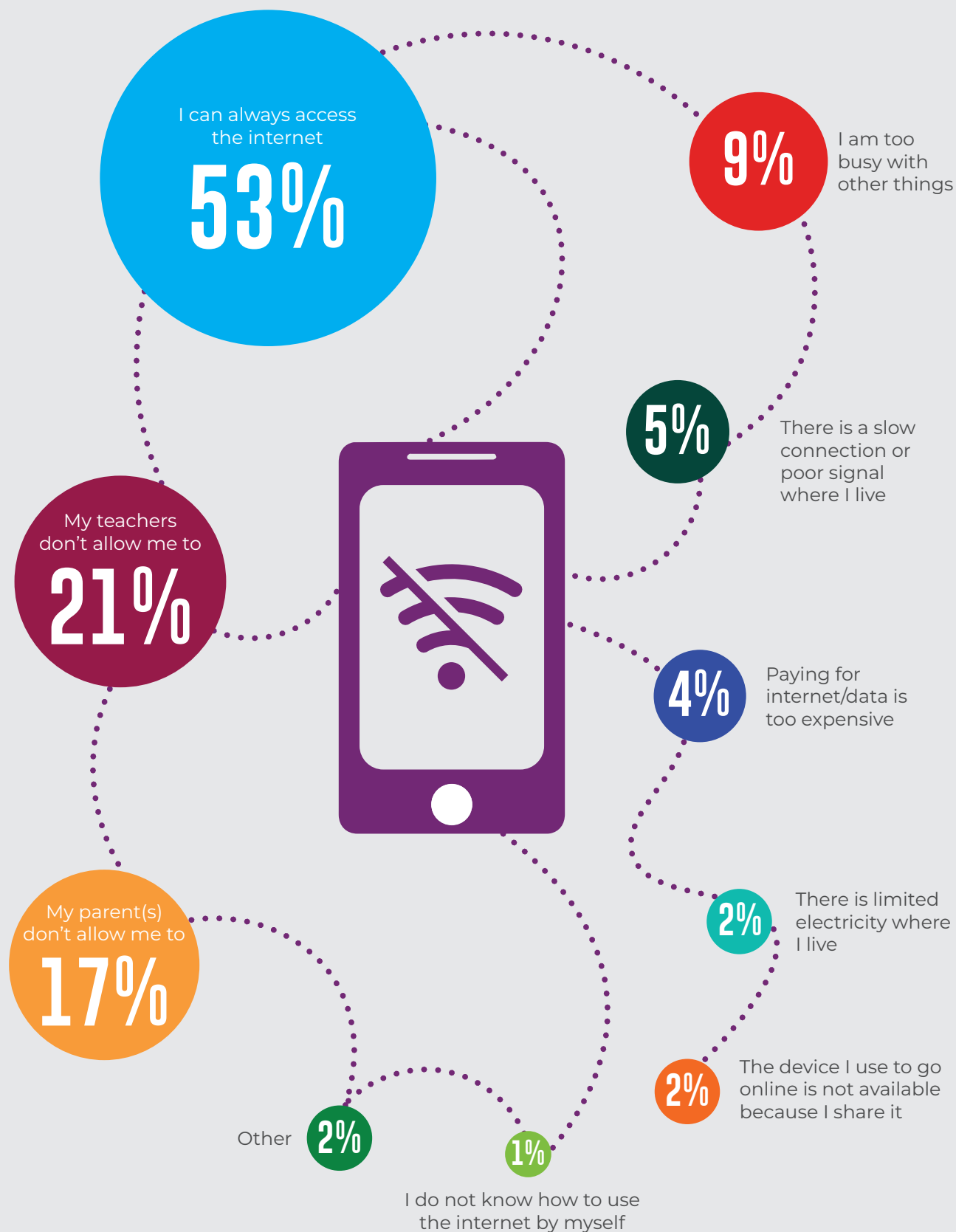
MOST POPULAR DEVICES TO ACCESS THE INTERNET AMONG 12–17-YEAR-OLDS



Base: 1,005 internet-using children.

INTERNET USE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

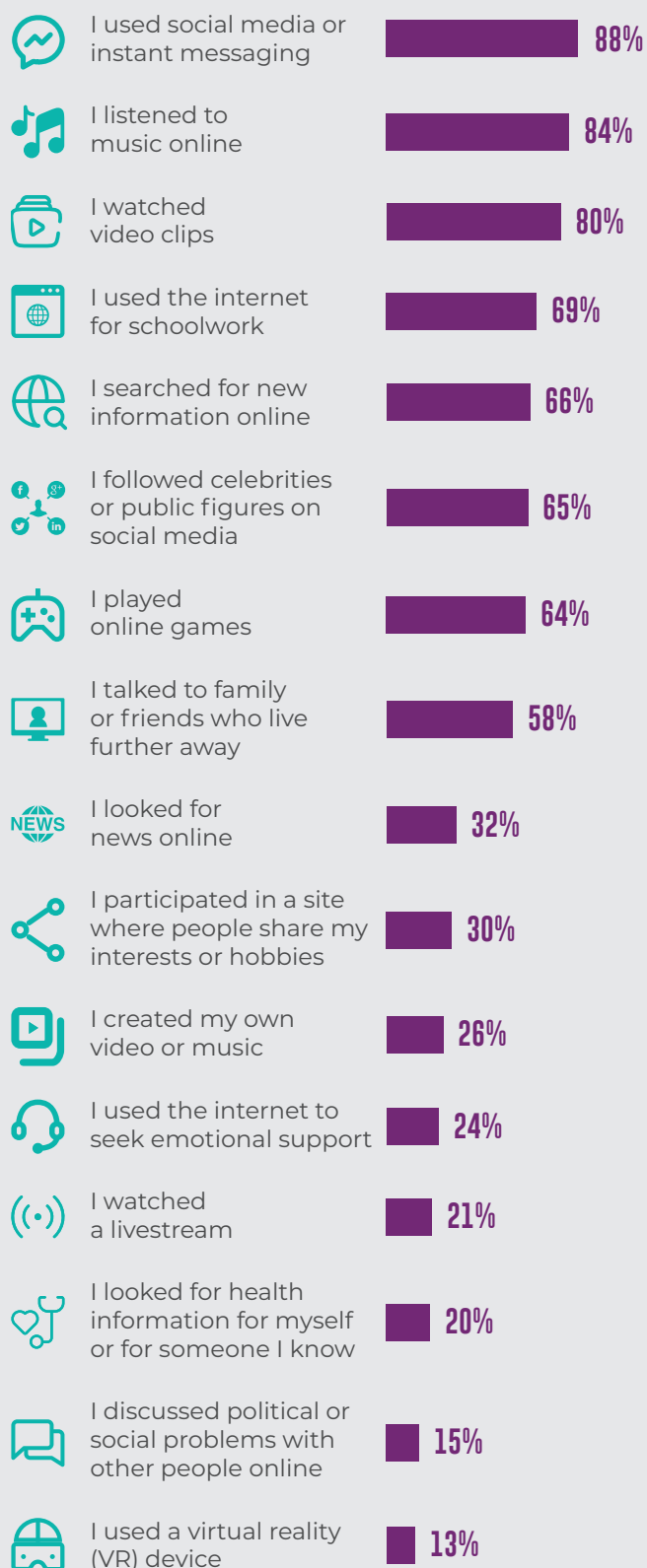
BARRIERS TO INTERNET ACCESS AMONG INTERNET-USING 12–17-YEAR-OLDS



Base: 1,005 internet-using children.

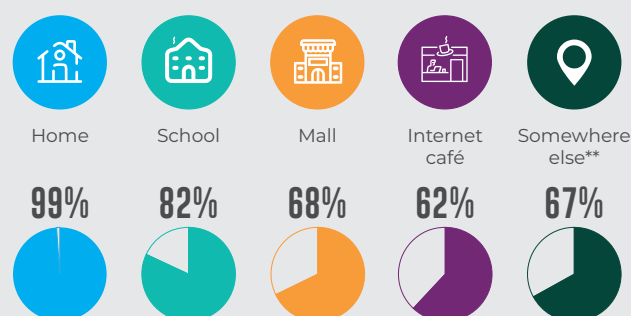
INTERNET USE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

ACTIVITIES CHILDREN ENGAGE IN ONLINE AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK



Base: 1,005 internet-using children.

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



Base: 1,005 internet-using children.

* Multiple-choice question.

**Common responses included going online 'everywhere', in-transit (e.g. while walking, on a bus or in the car), at a friend or relative's house, at the gym or in public areas, such as cafes and parks.

DIGITAL SKILLS AMONG 12–17-YEAR-OLD INTERNET USERS IN NORTH MACEDONIA*

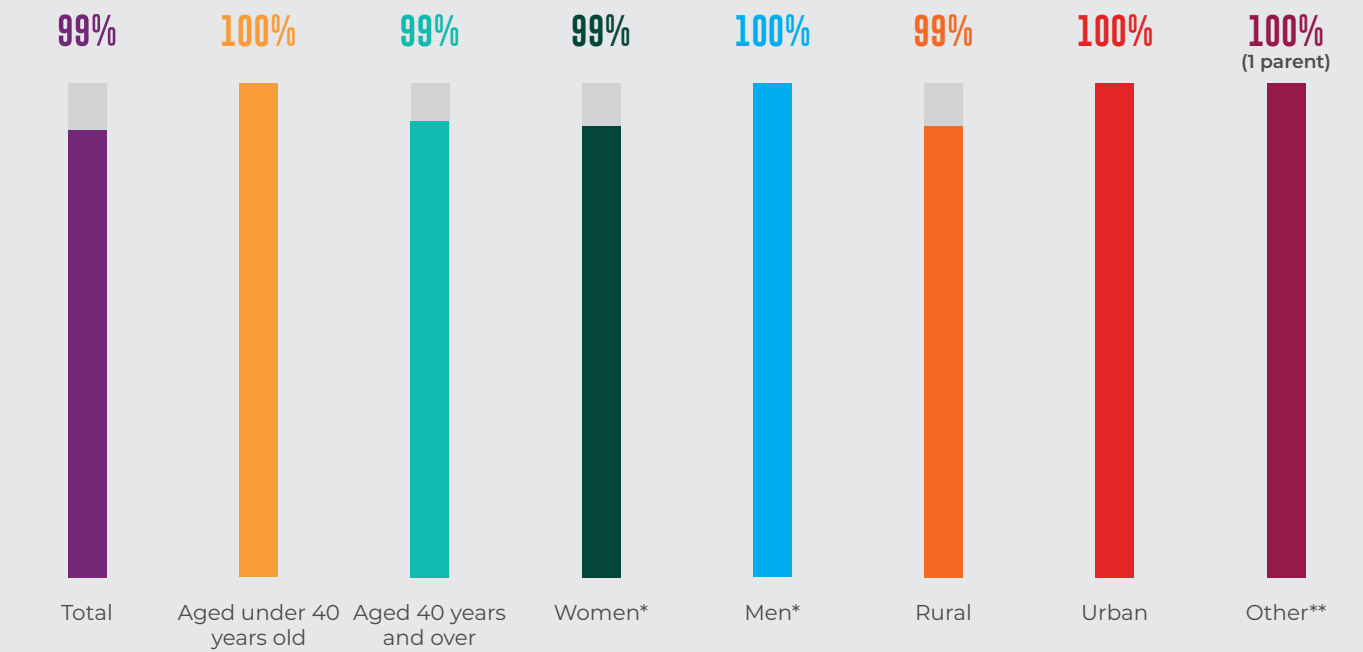


Base: 1,005 internet-using children.

*Percentage of children who say it is 'mostly' or 'very' true that they can do this.

INTERNET USE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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



Base: 1,005 parents/guardians of internet-using 12–17-year-old children.

* Women made up a majority of the parents sample (75 per cent), therefore these results should be interpreted with caution.

** Only one parent/guardian in the sample selected 'other' when asked to state their gender.

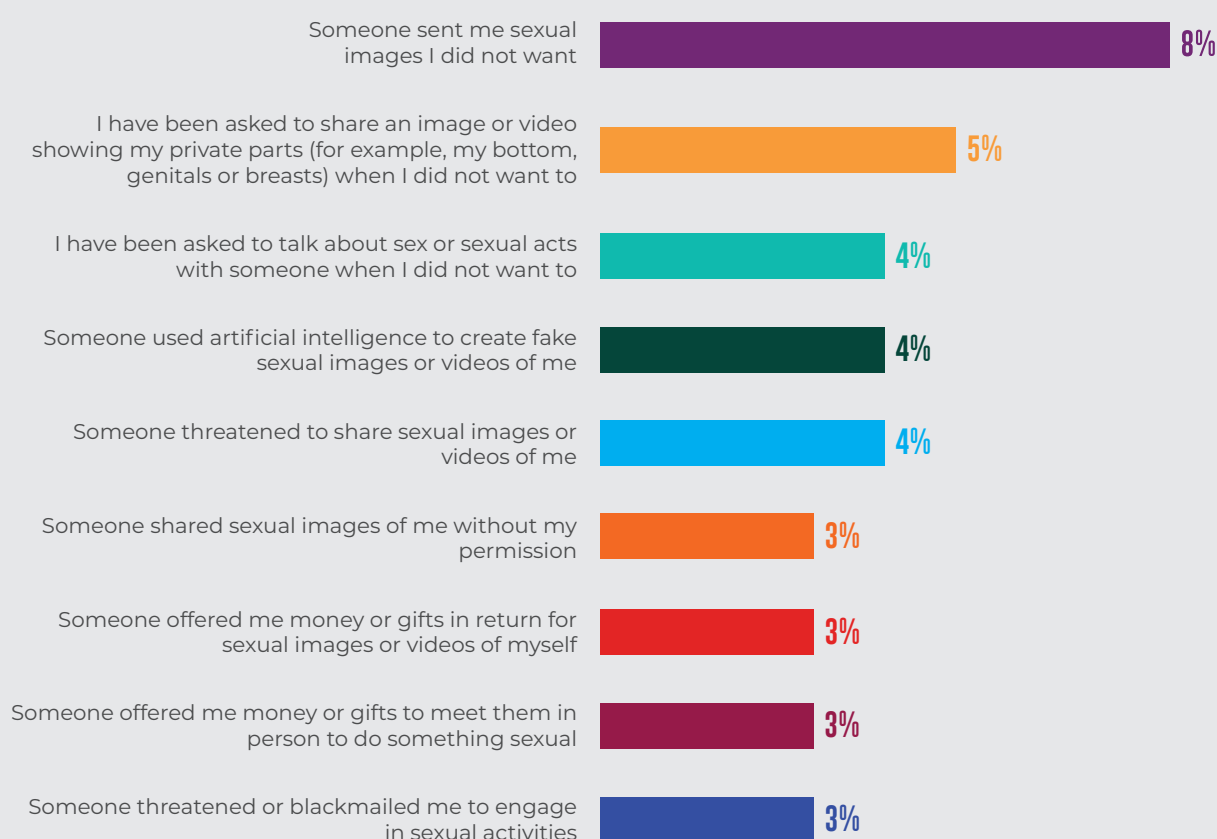
1. TECHNOLOGY- FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN NORTH MACEDONIA



1. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Based on the household survey, 10 per cent of internet-using children surveyed in North Macedonia were subjected to at least one of these instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed. Scaled up to the overall population of 12–17-year-old internet-using children in North Macedonia, this represents an estimated 12,000 children 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: 1,005 internet-using children aged 12–17 in North Macedonia.

Understanding the data

Ten per cent of children surveyed in North Macedonia responded that they were subjected to at least one of the forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse above. **This represents 100 children from the survey sample.** Of those 100 children, 48 per cent were subjected to **more than one** of the forms of exploitation and abuse above in the year before they were surveyed. Taken together, **these 100 children were subjected to a total of 366 instances** of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured in the survey. **These 366 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 presented therefore exceed 100 per cent.

1. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN NORTH MACEDONIA

The Disrupting Harm household survey measured nine forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (see *Infographic*). The survey data reveal that, in the year prior to being surveyed, 10 per cent of children were subjected to at least one of the measured forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Further, for all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse measured by the survey, there were no statistically significant differences found in the proportion of children impacted depending on their age, gender, whether they lived in urban or rural parts of the country, their digital skills,⁷ or their parents' level of education. Despite the survey data showing that equal proportions of boys and girls were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, no boys or young men or young people identifying as LGBTQI+ came forward to participate in interviews. As mentioned in the methods chapter, this limits insights into the perspectives of children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and the implications this has for prevention and response.

This chapter presents some of the most common forms of tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse that emerged from the findings, based on data from the household survey with 1,005 children and 1,005 of their parents or guardians, and from interviews with front-line workers, justice professionals and young women who were sexually exploited and abused as children. It discusses the scope and nature of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse as well as the trajectories, patterns and contexts of these forms of violence. It also assesses whether its different manifestations are adequately criminalized under law in North Macedonia.

⁷ Children were asked to rate themselves in relation to several digital skills, including the ability to change their privacy settings, make decisions around which photos of them or their friends to post online, and how to block people online.

1.1 UNWANTED EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL MATERIAL

Unwanted exposure to sexual images was the most common form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that children were subjected to in the year prior to being surveyed (8 per cent of children). The data further illustrated the wide range of circumstances in which it occurs. Beyond being age-inappropriate, such exposure can violate children's agency and informed choice regarding whether and when they encounter such material. In some cases, it may also signal attempts to desensitize children to sexual content, including in the context of grooming.

The instances shared were perpetrated by strangers and people in the child's social circle alike. They ranged from one-off incidents to repeated exposure that was part of a broader pattern of violence. For instance, one young woman described receiving such images from strangers online when she was a child:

[...] there are 'requests', someone writes something, [...] I'm not friends with them on Instagram because I personally never accepted people I don't know. And they send some nude picture, something of that sort, I mean, it's all good but it's very uncomfortable. (YP)

Another young woman recalled being introduced to her neighbours' son, a 25-year-old man, when she was 10 or 11 years old. Having just met, they started playing Minecraft together and after some time:

[...] I started getting notifications from Snapchat, pictures. Okay, I open them, and they're from the forest, [...], like professional photos, good pictures, from skiing, one thing or another... And okay, he kept sending them, and suddenly he sent a picture of himself in the mirror, only in his underwear. (YP)

Other accounts illustrated how sexual violence online and in person can be intertwined. One of the young women described being sexually harassed by a boy while on a bus, and how the same boy later found and contacted her online:

[...] later at the end when I was getting off [the bus] [...] trying to move him away, and he just got even closer to me and was pressing on to me. [...] And then, I don't know if it was that same day or later during the week, [...] someone had written to me whom I didn't know. I saw that it was him, and he was writing some stupid things, [...] something like asking to meet. And after some time, he just sent like a dick pic and then I blocked him immediately. (YP)

This example illustrates that, while digital technologies do not necessarily create 'new' forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, they can be used to find and contact children and to extend the reach of contact beyond physical spaces.

In their interviews, the young women reflected on the normalization of exposure to sexual content online. They recounted receiving unwanted sexual images or messages on several occasions during their childhoods and how this had almost become an expected part of being online among them and their friends. As noted by one of them:

I've kind of accepted in my mind that many men don't behave properly [...] and by now it even seems normal for someone to send or write something like that [messages and photos with sexual connotations]. (YP)

Although they described this form of violence as normalized, this did not imply that these interactions had no impact on them when they were children. They recounted feeling shocked,

1.1 UNWANTED EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL MATERIAL

uncomfortable and even disgusted, and stated how such behaviours were not okay and were inappropriate. However, despite recognizing these behaviours as inappropriate, the young women did not refer to this as something that required outside intervention or reporting, perhaps due to it feeling normalized. Their responses often involved blocking the person or just ignoring the messages. They also described how they might share it with friends, as referred to by one of the young women exposed to sexual content by a person she met via an online game:

“

I think I shared it with a friend, but it was more like: ‘Look it happened to me too, what other girls have mentioned has happened to them, that men send them nudes of themselves.’ (YP)

”

Despite its apparent prevalence and that, according to survey data, exposure to sexual content is equally common across 12- to 17-year-olds, not all children are equally protected from this form of abuse under legislation in North Macedonia. The Criminal Code prohibits showing or otherwise making available “*pornographic*” images, videos or other types of materials, as well as showing “*pornographic performances*”

to children under the age of 14. Penalties range from six months to three years in prison, increased to a term of three to five years if this crime is committed using media.⁸ However, this protection does not apply to children aged 14 to 17. This legal gap has several implications. From a legal perspective, it means that not all children are equally protected, despite being equally at risk. In addition, it may contribute to uncertainty about whether experiences that feel harmful are recognized as serious or worthy of intervention.

When unwanted sexual messages, images or interactions are perceived as a routine part of being online, and when legal protections do not extend equally to all children, harmful experiences may be less likely to be disclosed, reported or addressed. This calls for education and open discussions around healthy relationships, boundaries, and sex and sexuality, including the availability of trusted adults who can support children without judgment or blame. According to survey data, only 19 per cent of the 12–17-year-olds surveyed reported receiving either formal or informal sex education.⁹ As discussed further, particularly under [section 2.3](#), interviews with professionals and young women subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood showed how discussions around sex and sexuality are seen as taboo and are avoided.

8 Republic of North Macedonia (1996). *Criminal Code*, Art. 193(1) and (2).

9 This term is used to mirror the term used in the survey.

1.2 IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE

Image-based sexual abuse covers various abusive behaviours involving sexual images. This includes taking, creating and disseminating sexual content without the permission of the person depicted, or the threat of doing so.

Through the survey and interview data, this section explores the different circumstances under which this content may be obtained, created and shared, from grooming by adults to initially consensual interactions with peers. Considering the varying ways in which image-based abuse can occur is critical, as this will inform the interventions and prevention strategies required.

Child sexual abuse material in legislation in North Macedonia: Definition, gaps and terminology

Under legislation in North Macedonia, child sexual abuse material is defined as any visual content, including realistic images, that shows a child, or a person who appears to be a child, engaged in explicit sexual acts or portrayed in an explicit sexual pose.¹⁰ The Criminal Code prohibits a wide range of acts related to such material, including its production for the purpose of distribution, transmission, offering, making available, acquisition for oneself or a third party, and possession.¹¹ Perpetrators face a minimum of eight years' imprisonment when such offences are committed through a computer system, or another means of mass communication.¹² The same penalty applies to coercing a child to produce such material, increasing to a minimum of 10 years in prison if the child is under the age of 14.¹³ However, legislative gaps remain. The definition of child sexual abuse material excludes non-visual materials, such as audio-only content. This is narrower than international standards, such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, which covers "any representation, by whatever means."¹⁴

In addition, legislation in North Macedonia does not expressly criminalize simply accessing or viewing this type of material. This creates a potential loophole, whereby individuals may deliberately seek out and view this type of content online without facing legal consequences. Such gaps risk undermining efforts to reduce demand for this material and to hold perpetrators fully accountable. There are also questions about whether current laws fully cover livestreamed abuse, where no material is saved or shared. Although the transmission of child sexual abuse material through a computer system is criminalized,¹⁵ this may be insufficient to cover the livestreaming of child sexual abuse where no actual 'material' is created, downloaded or stored.¹⁶ While such cases could, in theory, be prosecuted under provisions criminalizing the coercion of a child to participate in, or attend, "pornographic performances,"¹⁷ the introduction of a specific offence would be preferable to avoid interpretative ambiguity and inconsistent judicial outcomes.

¹⁰ Republic of North Macedonia (1996). [Criminal Code](#), Art. 122(24).

¹¹ Ibid., Art. 193-a(1), 193-a(2).

¹² Ibid., Art.193-a(3).

¹³ Ibid., Art.193(5), 193(6).

¹⁴ United Nations General Assembly (2000). [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography](#), Art. 2(c).

¹⁵ Republic of North Macedonia (1996). [Criminal Code](#), Art. 193-a(1), 193-a(2), 193-a(3).

¹⁶ Ibid., Art. 122(24).

¹⁷ Ibid., Art. 193(3), 193(4), 193(5), 193(6).

1.2 IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE

Lastly, the Criminal Code continues to use the outdated term “*child pornography*” to refer to child sexual abuse material.¹⁶ 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 be used instead, as it more accurately reflects the nature of the harm involved.¹⁷ This switch in terminology was also recommended by the Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention to the Government of North Macedonia in 2023.¹⁸

Unwanted requests for sexual content

The second most common form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured in the survey was unwanted requests for a child to share images or videos showing their private parts. Five per cent of children surveyed responded that this had happened to them in the past year. Professionals interviewed also described several instances in which children were pressured or coerced into creating and sharing sexual content.

Interviews showed how unwanted requests occurred across different relational contexts, in adult–child interactions involving grooming but also within peer relationships (both friendly and intimate). It also demonstrated how these requests take many forms, including manipulation, lies, fake affection and threats.

A young woman recalled interacting with a man she got to know via an online game:

“

[...] I spoke to him often and we... I think we added each other as friends on Skype, so we spoke there [...] he asked me frequently to send him [sexualized] photos of myself. (YP)

”

In another instance the ‘request’ for sexual content was accompanied by coercion and threats. A lawyer referred to a case where a 16- or 17-year-old girl shared sexual content with a person acquainted with her brother as he threatened that he would physically harm her brother unless she did so.

The data further captured how requests for sexual images may be accompanied with offers of money or gifts to manipulate children into accepting. In the year prior to being surveyed, 3 per cent of children reported being offered money or gifts to share sexual images or videos of themselves.

Digitally created or manipulated sexual content

Increasingly, digital technologies are making it easier to create sexual content depicting children. These forms of exploitation and abuse have recently been intensified by generative artificial intelligence tools that are easily accessible to the public and enable the creation of manipulated but visually realistic sexual content of children.

The Disrupting Harm data show that these forms of abuse are already impacting children in North Macedonia. According to survey data, 4 per cent of children said that artificial intelligence was used to create sexual images of them in the year prior to participating in the survey. Considering that

18 Republic of North Macedonia (1996). *Criminal Code*, Art. 122(24), 193-a, 193-b.

19 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.

20 Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention, ‘Factsheet – North Macedonia: Lanzarote Committee Implementation Report on “The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos (CSGSIV)”’, p.6 (last updated May 2023), <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-serbia-the-protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploitation/1680acdef1>.

children may not be aware that the material was created and/or whether artificial intelligence was used, this proportion could be even higher.

In interviews, professionals described cases where children digitally manipulated photos to create sexual content of peers. For example, a lawyer referred to a case where two girls created digitally manipulated sexual content of another girl after an argument and then shared this among peers in school. Similarly, a prosecutor described a case where 13- and 14-year-old boys accessed photos of girls in their school via social media and created manipulated images:

“

They took pictures, and then in a private Facebook or Instagram group, they edited those images to include explicit content. [...] They started sharing those images among themselves, and then they spread beyond that group. (JP)

”

These findings illustrate how digital and artificial intelligence-enabled image manipulation can be used within everyday peer interactions and disputes, introducing another way that interpersonal conflict can be escalated into sexualized harm. As reflected upon by a lawyer, the fact that the content was fabricated did not lessen its impact. The realism and circulation of manipulated images caused distress and had social repercussions for the child. These cases highlight how emerging technologies expand existing forms of sexual abuse, creating new challenges for legislation, child protection and justice systems to respond to.

However, recent legal reforms in North Macedonia include positive developments in this area. In January 2026, the Criminal Code was amended to criminalize the creation of new – or the alteration

of existing – visual, audio or written material with sexually explicit content relating to a specific person by using digital or other tools, and the use or dissemination of such material. Where the offence targets a child, perpetrators face a prison sentence of 3 to 10 years.²¹ However, the wording of the provision suggests that it does not extend to content depicting non-existent children. Given that digitally generated depictions of child sexual abuse involving non-existent children can normalize or fuel demand for child sexual abuse material, explicitly criminalizing the production and dissemination of such content would further strengthen the legal framework.

While legal responses are essential, the accounts above point to a need for a multipronged approach that includes education and awareness-raising initiatives that help professionals, children and the wider community to fully understand the harmful impact of these types of actions. What may be perceived as a joke or something harmless can cause real harm, distress and lasting consequences.

Sharing sexual content with peers

The creation and exchange of sexual images or videos can also be a part of consensual peer relationships where children explore their relationships and sexuality. In this discussion, it is critical to distinguish carefully between consensual and abusive relationship dynamics to avoid inadvertently punishing or criminalizing children for consensual sharing of sexual content. On this point, it is worth considering that legal provisions on child sexual abuse material in North Macedonia do not exempt the voluntary creation or sharing of self-generated sexual content by children from criminal responsibility.²² This leaves children who have reached the age of criminal responsibility (14 or above)²³ at risk of prosecution for non-malicious behaviour arising from sexual exploration, trust or peer interaction. In 2023, this legal shortcoming led the Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote

21 Republic of North Macedonia (2026). [Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code](#), Art. 6 (new article 152-a).

22 Republic of North Macedonia (1996). [Criminal Code](#), Art. 193-a.

23 Republic of North Macedonia (1996). [Criminal Code](#), Art. 6-a(1).

1.2 IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE

Convention to request that North Macedonia ensure that its legal framework protect children from prosecution for possessing self-generated sexual images or videos of themselves or peers shared consensually or received passively without solicitation, and for voluntarily sharing their own self-generated material with peers for private use.²⁴

At the same time, recognizing consensual image sharing among peers should not obscure the fact that consent and coercion may exist on a spectrum and can be difficult to easily identify in practice. This nuance is important not to justify the criminalization of children's consensual behaviour, but to ensure that prevention and response efforts are attentive to the social expectations and relational pressures that may shape children's experiences. Requests for sexual content may be accompanied by pressure or emotional manipulation, and children may also experience pressure in relation to what they think is expected in a relationship, making it difficult for them to refuse. A psychologist pointed out how sexual content may be requested as proof of trust or love:

“

They would say ‘If you love me, you’ll do it’ [...] A kind of blackmail. (FW)

”

A lawyer further reflected on how underlying threats may not be easily identified:

“

But if it is voluntary, it doesn’t mean that it really is, behind all that voluntary action there may be a threat. (JP)

”

Considering the context and relational dynamics under which sexual content was created and shared is therefore important.

Professionals described cases where photos or videos initially created and shared within what the child understood to be a trusting relationship were later shared with others without the child's permission. A psychologist described this in a case involving a 13-year-old girl:

“

There was mutual attraction, and the girl had feelings for the boy. He then exploited that, distributing the material, and eventually everyone in the class, and even the entire grade, found out. That was the hardest part for her to cope with. (FW)

”

The distribution of private content in peer chat groups caused significant emotional harm to the girl. From a legal perspective, this kind of situation would fall within the prohibition on the dissemination of child sexual abuse material.²⁵ It may also constitute the offence of misuse of another person's recording, photograph, audio recording or written material containing sexually explicit content, introduced in January 2026, which is punishable by 3 to 10 years in prison when committed against a child.²⁶

Beyond content being shared non-consensually, professionals also discussed multiple cases where sexual content created in the context of intimate relationships was used as leverage to coerce, control and extort a child, as recounted by one lawyer:

²⁴ Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention, 'Factsheet – North Macedonia: Lanzarote Committee Implementation Report on "The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos (CSGSIV)"', p.5 (last updated May 2023), <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-serbia-the-protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploitation/1680acdef1>.

²⁵ Republic of North Macedonia (1996). *Criminal Code*, Art. 193-a(1).

²⁶ Republic of North Macedonia (2026). *Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code* Art. 6 (new article 152-a).

“

[...] the girl actually realizes she doesn't want to be with him [...]. [She] was abused with threats, with videos, with images sent to her relatives and loved ones, her nude images and videos of her where he made her make them. (JP)

”

In another case described by a professional from the Centre for Social Work, photos with sexual content shared by a 14-year-old girl with a boy she considered her boyfriend were used by him to extort her into sex, exemplifying how sexual content once obtained (either consensually or through coercion and manipulation) can extend into sexual extortion.

Considering the varying ways in which image-based abuse can occur is critical, as this will inform the interventions and prevention strategies required.

1.3 SEXUAL EXTORTION

Sexual extortion is a form of blackmail where threats of sharing a child's sexual content are used to extort them into the creation of further sexual material, sexual acts, money or other benefits.²⁷ The survey data capture some examples of sexual extortion. In the year prior to being surveyed, 4 per cent of children in North Macedonia were blackmailed or threatened *to share sexual content* of themselves. Further, 3 per cent of children said that someone threatened or blackmailed them *to engage in sexual acts*. However, children can be sexually extorted at various moments during exploitation and abuse and in a variety of situations and contexts. This includes sexual extortion as a one-off instance online, sexual extortion within peer relationships, or sexual extortion that occurs while a child is being groomed, among others.

A psychologist from the Centre for Social Work described a case where a boy used sexual content of a girl to force her to have sex with him:

“ [...] she thought he was her boyfriend, he told her: ‘Send pics of your boobs.’ [...] ‘Send pics of your intimate parts.’ And she did that. (FW) ”

The psychologist explained how the boy later asked the girl to meet and then locked her in the car, pulled up her top and took photos of her. He then used those photos to blackmail the girl further.

A psychotherapist described a case where a boy was subjected to extortion by peers from his school after intimate photos of him were shared without his consent. The child was repeatedly threatened and pressured; if he did not give his peers what they demanded, they would circulate the photos. As the situation escalated, the child was subjected to ongoing threats, pressure and emotional distress.

Qualitative data also show how perpetrators could further amplify coercion by involving people in the child's social network. A lawyer described how an adult perpetrator contacted the child's mother directly to maintain control and pressure the girl to stay in the relationship:

“ The mother had found out about the case from the perpetrator himself, so he had already contacted her. The perpetrator who had the videos and was mentally abusing her daughter was not successful probably, and he believed that, if he got in touch with the mother, he would achieve his goal. He had contacted the mother and told her that he had in his possession some images of her daughter and that he would release them to the public. (JP) ”

The cases shared above demonstrate that perpetrators will use sexual content of children to extort them for many different purposes, be it gifts, money, more sexual content or to facilitate contact sexual abuse. Amendments to the Criminal Code adopted in January 2026 recognize this and criminalize threatening another person with sharing sexually explicit materials portraying them. Aggravated prison penalties ranging from 3 to 10 years apply when the offence targets a child.²⁸ This closes a previous gap in legislation identified by the Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention which invited North Macedonia to introduce a specific criminal offence addressing this conduct or, alternatively, to prosecute both the possession of the sexual content by the perpetrator and the subsequent act of extortion.²⁹ By centring on the threat of disclosure of sexual content rather than any particular purpose, the new provisions ensure that sexual extortion of children is fully covered, irrespective of what the perpetrator seeks to obtain.

27 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, p. 97.

28 Republic of North Macedonia (2026), *Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code*, Art. 6 (new article 152 a).

29 Committee of the Parties to the Lanzarote Convention, 'Factsheet – North Macedonia: Lanzarote Committee Implementation Report on "The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs): addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos (CSGSIV)", p.6 (last updated May 2023), <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-serbia-the-protection-of-children-against-sexual-exploitation/1680acdef1>.

Grooming of children for sexual purposes

Many of the behaviours described in this chapter may occur in the context of grooming, often described as a 'crime of intent', where perpetrators gradually build a relationship with a child with the goal of sexually exploiting or abusing them. When describing cases that they supported, front-line workers and justice professionals often reflected on the deliberate and patterned tactics used by perpetrators to mimic affectionate or romantic interactions, gaining the child's trust, and gradually introducing coercion, exploitation and abuse.

Although grooming can be a long-term and subtle process and will look different depending on the individual case, the interviews with professionals generally described several 'stages' in the grooming process that are summarized below:

- **Initial, non-sexualized contact with the child:** Professionals described early stages of grooming as intentionally mundane and socially acceptable contact with the child including via social media and online games.
- **Building trust:** Through these interactions, perpetrators gradually build trust with the child by engaging in shared interests and activities, showing an interest in the child's life, and engaging with them in a caring and attentive manner. Professionals described how once initial trust was established, grooming frequently involved intense attention and affection, described by one professional as including 'love bombing'. These behaviours can contribute to building emotional dependency and reinforcing the perception of a 'special bond' between the child and the perpetrator. Professionals also described some cases where perpetrators contacted children through fake profiles and pretended to be peers to lower the child's guard.

Escalation: Once the perpetrator has the child's trust, interactions frequently become more sexualized, for example through exposing the child to sexual content or manipulating them into engaging in sexualized behaviours. At this stage, the interactions can become more intense and abusive, with sexual content of the child sometimes being used as leverage to escalate exploitation and abuse.

Data from the interviews brought to light the subtle ways in which 'relationship building' can operate and how boundaries around consent and healthy relationship dynamics can shift and become blurred. One of the young women recalled meeting a 20-year-old man through an online game when she was around 11. Her account shows how the perpetrator built a relationship with her over several months, understood by her as a friendship centred around a shared interest in the game. Eventually, the man offered to pay for in-game benefits. These kinds of offering of gifts or money can serve to build closer connections and create a sense of obligation or gratitude. The young woman explained:

“

[...] it's an Asian game, and in those games there's usually a marriage system. If you participate in that system, you get some in-game benefits [...]. But usually, that didn't necessarily mean anything romantic, it was just something friends did so they could continue that part of the game. [...] And I agreed because I wanted to, I was excited to learn more about it, and I didn't see it as anything serious. (YP)

”

1.3 SEXUAL EXTORTION

When the perpetrator then introduced sexual talk in their communication, she described how this caught her completely off guard:

“

[...] it was uncomfortable. And I felt, in that moment, kind of betrayed, because I really thought I had a good online friend... and I was happy to have a friend, and suddenly it felt like a betrayal, like something bad happened. It completely shattered my image of that person. (YP)

”

The dynamics around boundaries and consent can be further complicated by perpetrators' use of digital technologies to create fake profiles and hide the fact that they are adults to gain the child's trust. Children are therefore left to grapple with what is real and what is fake, and to identify when an interaction is about to become harmful or abusive. This begs the question of how children can be best supported at a policy, social and interpersonal level to identify abusive patterns in their daily interactions and feel supported to seek help from trusted adults when needed.

From a legal perspective, it should be noted that existing criminal provisions on grooming in North Macedonia do not account for the complex process of trust-building and emotional manipulation that is characteristic of grooming. The Criminal Code prohibits the use of digital communication to lure a child under the age of 14 into engaging in sexual acts or in the production of child sexual abuse material. Prison penalties range from one to five years. However, the offence requires a physical meeting to take place between the child and the perpetrator.³⁰ This means that grooming that results in exploitation and/or abuse that occurs entirely online (for example, coercing a child to produce and share online sexual content) falls outside the scope of this provision. In addition, children aged 14 to 17 are excluded from legal protections against online grooming, despite being equally at risk according to Disrupting Harm survey data.

This approach does not align with the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime, adopted in December 2024, which recognizes grooming as a crime of intent aimed at sexual abuse and/or exploitation that can take place entirely online or involve in-person elements, and ensures equal protection for all children, regardless of age. As this broader understanding of grooming emerges as the new international standard, it offers important guidance for aligning the legal framework in North Macedonia with evolving international best practices.

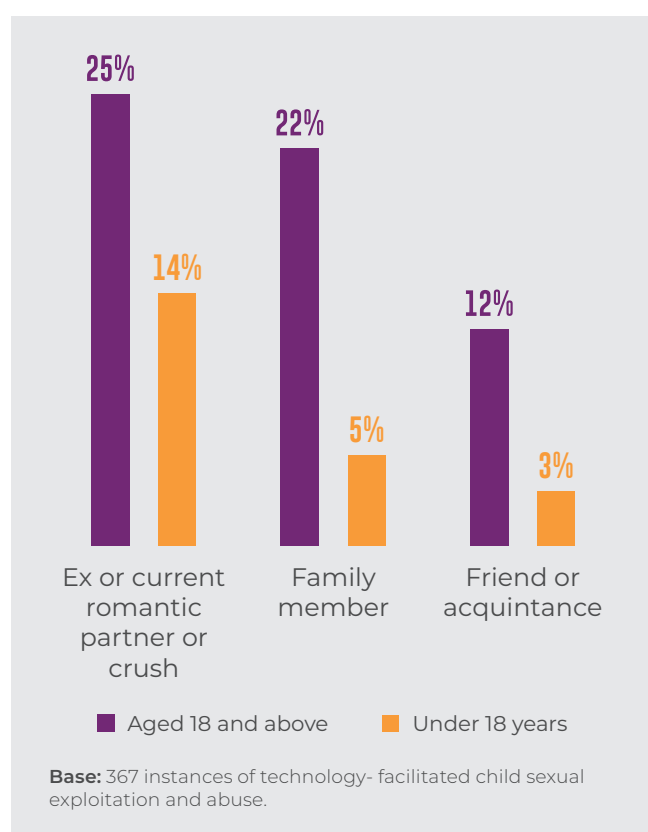
³⁰ Republic of North Macedonia (1996). [Criminal Code](#), Art. 193-b.

1.4 WHO PERPETRATES TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

Disrupting Harm data illustrate that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in North Macedonia is perpetrated by a range of people that children encounter, from family and friends to strangers. The survey data show that most incidents of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse – 78 per cent – were perpetrated by someone the child already knew. This includes family members, romantic interests, and friends and acquaintances, as shown in chart 1 below. Sexual exploitation and abuse by a person unknown to the child accounted for a much smaller percentage of instances, at 5 per cent. In 16 per cent of instances, children could not or did not want to identify the perpetrator.

Understanding the relational dynamics and contexts in exploitation and abuse play an important role in identifying appropriate detection, prevention and response strategies, as discussed further in this section.

Chart 1: Who perpetrates technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, by relationship to the child and age



Intimate relationships

As shown in chart 1 above, tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the context of intimate relationships (former or current partner, or crushes) was particularly common in North Macedonia, accounting for 39 per cent of instances. According to survey data, it was more common for these cases to be perpetrated by a person 18 years and older, than by another child.

This could be an indicator of grooming by adults, where the perpetrator manages to build a relationship with the child, which the child may not recognize as being abusive, as discussed on [page 27](#). These dynamics can complicate detection efforts and disclosure, especially if children consider themselves to be in an intimate rather than abusive relationship with the person grooming them and are emotionally dependent on the perpetrator. This highlights the importance of nationwide and community-level awareness around various forms of sexual exploitation and abuse including grooming, the harms caused by adults engaging with children in this manner, and the importance of creating safe channels for children to seek relationship advice and support from trusted adults and from qualified professionals, especially if the child does not feel comfortable or safe speaking to the other adults in their lives.

As explored earlier in this chapter, professionals also described cases where children were sexually exploited or abused by peers in the context of an intimate relationship.

A psychologist recounted a case where a 14-year-old girl was non-consensually recorded by her boyfriend. The psychologist reflected on how harmful gender norms came into play in this case:

“

He had photos taken [of the girl] [...] Well, he shares them, wanting to say ‘Here, I was with her.’ To show off, like a trophy or something, in that sense. (FW)

”

1.4 WHO PERPETRATES TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

A psychotherapist who supported a girl whose intimate photos were non-consensually shared by a boy she was romantically interested in made a similar reflection:

“

Even she said that he mostly cared about bragging to his friends. (FW)

”

These examples show how rigid and harmful gender norms can perpetuate sexual exploitation and abuse in the context of intimate relationships. In these cases, harmful gender norms around masculinity appeared to encourage behaviours in which girls were treated as objects of status or achievement, with the non-consensual sharing of intimate images used as a means of gaining recognition or approval from peers. While the interviews capture the experiences of some girls, it is important to examine how harmful gender dynamics and expectations affect all children, and how social and gender norms can shape (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse. These norms influence the circumstances, behaviours and responses of children across all genders in different ways. Nonetheless, these findings further highlight the need for consistent and gender-transformative education, including in relation to consent, boundaries, bodily autonomy and healthy relationships.

Family members

Sexual exploitation or abuse by family members accounted for 27 per cent of instances in the survey and more often involved an adult family member as opposed to another child. Tech-facilitated sexual violence by parents did not feature strongly in the qualitative data and was only discussed by one prosecutor relating to a case where a child was sexually abused by their parent. In this case, the combination of relational closeness and the child's very young age (4 years old) significantly compounded barriers to disclosure.

The limited qualitative data from the study does not lend itself to drawing conclusions about the contexts and factors related to perpetration by family members and should be further explored

in future research. However, it is likely that a comprehensive public health approach would be required to tackle this kind of perpetration and address possible drivers. Within the family context, this may include strengthening family resilience, reducing economic stress, and promoting positive parenting skills and practices. Beyond that, children should have access to multiple safe and accessible disclosure and support mechanisms beyond the family, including within their community and through trained professionals. Further, a focus on community-based initiatives to raise awareness around signs of sexual violence against children may also be needed, given the particular challenges when it comes to disclosing and reporting sexual violence within family contexts.

Friends and acquaintances

Friends and acquaintances were the least common category of perpetrators according to the survey data but still accounted for 15 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, sexual violence by peers featured strongly in the interviews with professionals and the young women subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The data from Disrupting Harm does not explain why children may sexually abuse or exploit others, or which factors increase the likelihood of harmful sexual behaviours. The qualitative findings show how abuse might unfold and its dynamics, suggesting possible prevention and response strategies. However, understanding why children in North Macedonia perpetrate such harm is essential for a more complete picture. Qualitative data showed how abusive behaviours – in particular among peers – were sometimes minimized or framed as joking, teasing, flirting or misunderstandings.

One of the young women recalled how, when a boy in her class was staring and making sexualized comments towards her and female peers, they initially interpreted this as joking or typical teasing within a 'fun' class culture. This contributed to the situation being downplayed at first, until the in-person comments escalated to repeated online contact, unwanted messages and exposure to sexual content. At this point they were no longer perceived as a joke and were eventually reported. However, the dismissal of harassing comments or

threats and unclear social boundaries might cause children to doubt when a situation feels violating, which may delay children speaking up about harmful sexual behaviours.

Professionals also highlighted cases where children who were displaying harmful sexual behaviours did not seem to fully comprehend the harm caused by their actions or that what they had done was illegal. Referring to a case involving the non-consensual sharing of sexual content by a boy, a judge explained:

“

The boy understood. But I don't think he realized it was a criminal offence; he just asked me: 'Why wasn't I allowed to do this?'. (JP)

”

This can suggest that abusive behaviours among peers can arise from a lack of understanding and guidance around the potential consequences as well as consent, boundaries and healthy relationships, combined with peer and social dynamics.

With several cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by peers discussed in interviews, it is relevant to consider how the legal and justice systems respond. The age of criminal responsibility in North Macedonia is 14.³¹ Proceedings involving children under the age of 18 suspected of criminal offences must be conducted by specialized juvenile justice departments,³² with specially trained judges, prosecutors and lawyers.³³ The system includes safeguards such as expedited proceedings,³⁴ free legal representation

where needed,³⁵ closed hearings,³⁶ the right to be informed of their rights in a clear manner,³⁷ and protection for the privacy of the child and their family.³⁸

The system is designed to focus on education and rehabilitation rather than punishment. The law provides that sanctions should support children's re-education and proper development by helping them understand the impact of their actions and take responsibility.³⁹ As one judge explained, the goal is not to criminalize children, but to encourage accountability, prevention and rehabilitation.

Children aged 14–15 can only receive educational measures, such as reprimands, enhanced supervision by parents/guardians, a foster family or social services, and referral to a child centre or educational institution. The court can also refer a child to an educational correctional facility when warranted by the gravity of the offence and specific circumstances, and for no more than five years.⁴⁰ However, in practice, children are placed in an educational correctional facility, which is a closed, custodial institution, even for less serious offences.⁴¹

For children aged 16 to 17, imprisonment is possible but remains exceptional and only for offences punishable by at least five years in prison.⁴² Depending on the circumstances of the case, judges may also opt for alternatives to detention, including suspended sentences with protective supervision, community service or conditional suspension of proceedings.⁴³ A judge indicated that courts typically rely on family and community-based interventions in cases involving children who have committed crimes, with the Centre for Social Work playing a central role throughout the intervention process:

31 Republic of North Macedonia (1996). [Criminal Code](#), Art. 6-a(1).

32 Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art. 107(1).

33 Ibid., Art. 107(3).

34 Ibid., Art. 13, 92(2).

35 Ibid., Art. 94(1), 94(4), 94(5).

36 Ibid., Art. 95(2).

37 Ibid., Art. 97(1), 97(2), 97(3).

38 Ibid., Art. 95(1).

39 Ibid., Art. 37.

40 Ibid., Art. 36(1), 48.

41 UNICEF North Macedonia. (2026). Personal communication.

42 Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art.36(3), 38, 53.

43 Ibid., Art. 62.

1.4 WHO PERPETRATES TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

“

They worked on overcoming the adolescent phase, changing behaviour, strengthening self-confidence, conversations with the child and parents, raising awareness, setting criteria for choosing friends, expected outcomes for constructive use of free time, academic success, school behaviour, upbringing, parenting styles and pedagogical support. That was with the full team involved: a social worker, a pedagogue and a psychologist. (JP)

”

However, justice professionals interviewed also pointed to structural limitations in the availability and effectiveness of more restrictive non-custodial measures. They noted the absence of adequately functioning centres for children to spend their day and expressed concerns about the effectiveness of correctional facilities, which are generally used only as a last resort after repeated unsuccessful interventions. This is in line with the available evidence suggesting that the use of alternative measures in practice remains limited. Older reports indicate that, despite legislative efforts to promote alternatives to detention, relatively few children have benefited from such measures, while concerns have also been raised regarding the adequacy of educational, vocational and psychological support available in custodial and correctional settings.⁴⁴

These findings suggest that while the legal framework strongly emphasizes rehabilitation and re-education, gaps in available support services may limit the effectiveness of longer-term reintegration efforts. These gaps further appear to contribute to a progressive escalation in responses, whereby children who do not respond to less restrictive measures are ultimately channelled towards correctional facilities, as noted by the same judge:

“

Now, there are cases where we have no choice but to send a child to a correctional facility, to completely remove them from their environment. These are children who have been given many chances, first through their parents, then through the Centre, and they keep repeating the same harmful behaviour. At that point, we have no other option but to send them to a correctional facility. Personally, I do not believe those facilities yield good results. (JP)

”

Strangers

Despite the higher prevalence of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse by people known to the child, it is nevertheless important to recognize that these forms of exploitation and abuse are also perpetrated by strangers and the implications of this for detection, prevention and response.

In several instances discussed during the interviews with professionals and the young women, perpetrators were initially unknown to the child and made contact through social media platforms, online games or messaging apps. In other instances, they had brief in-person contact with the child and later contacted the child online. As seen above, some interactions involved brief, unwanted sexualized messages or images that were perceived as distressing but ended at that point, for example, by the child ignoring the messages or blocking the sender. Professionals more frequently described instances in which adults unknown to the child actively sought to establish ongoing contact. Digital communication enabled repeated interaction, personalized attention and the gradual creation of familiarity, blurring the boundary between stranger and acquaintance. As described in the sections above, these dynamics could also facilitate transition to in-person meetings.

⁴⁴ UNICEF (2025). [Situation analysis of children and adolescents in North Macedonia 2024](#), pp. 60–61.

Depending on the context and the child's relationship to the perpetrator, prevention strategies will need to focus on relational management and awareness, and on creating barriers for perpetrators by establishing physical and digital safeguards in the environments that children frequent.

Overall, the data presented in this section show that sexual exploitation and abuse most often occur within relationships marked by familiarity, trust and/or everyday contact – whether with peers, intimate partners, acquaintances or family

members. Across contexts and regardless of their relationship to the child, perpetrators exploited relational proximity, trust, violence-permissive norms and attitudes, and digital tools to secure compliance, silence or continued communication with children. These findings emphasize the important role of relational dynamics, including peer dynamics, and gaps in understanding of consent and boundaries in how harm emerges, is justified or contested and underscores the need for prevention and intervention strategies that address these social and normative dimensions rather than focusing only on individual wrongdoing.



1.5 THE ROLE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS IN FACILITATING CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

As discussed throughout this report, online and in-person sexual exploitation and abuse are closely interconnected, with perpetrators moving between digital and physical spaces to gain access and control. Technology and online platforms can facilitate contact with children and the creation of child sexual abuse material, and enable ongoing exploitation and abuse.

The findings highlight the important role of social media, messaging apps, online games and image-editing tools in facilitating exploitation and abuse in North Macedonia. The survey data revealed that 52 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse occurred on social media, with 30 per cent of instances occurring via online games. Among the instances where children were sexually exploited and abused on social media, the top platforms where children were targeted were Instagram, followed by Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and X (formerly Twitter) as shown in chart 2.

Most of the platforms shown in chart 2 are also the most popular among 12–17-year-old internet users in North Macedonia (see chart 3), which could explain why they account for some of the highest proportions of instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. However, some exceptions were seen; while YouTube stands out as the most popular platform among children, it accounted for relatively few instances of sexual exploitation and abuse compared with other platforms that are less popular. On the other hand, platforms such as X, only used by 7 per cent of children surveyed, featured in the top five platforms where children targeted on social media are exploited and abused. This suggests that platform design, moderation and policies also play a role.

Chart 2: Top platforms where children who were exploited and abused on social media were targeted

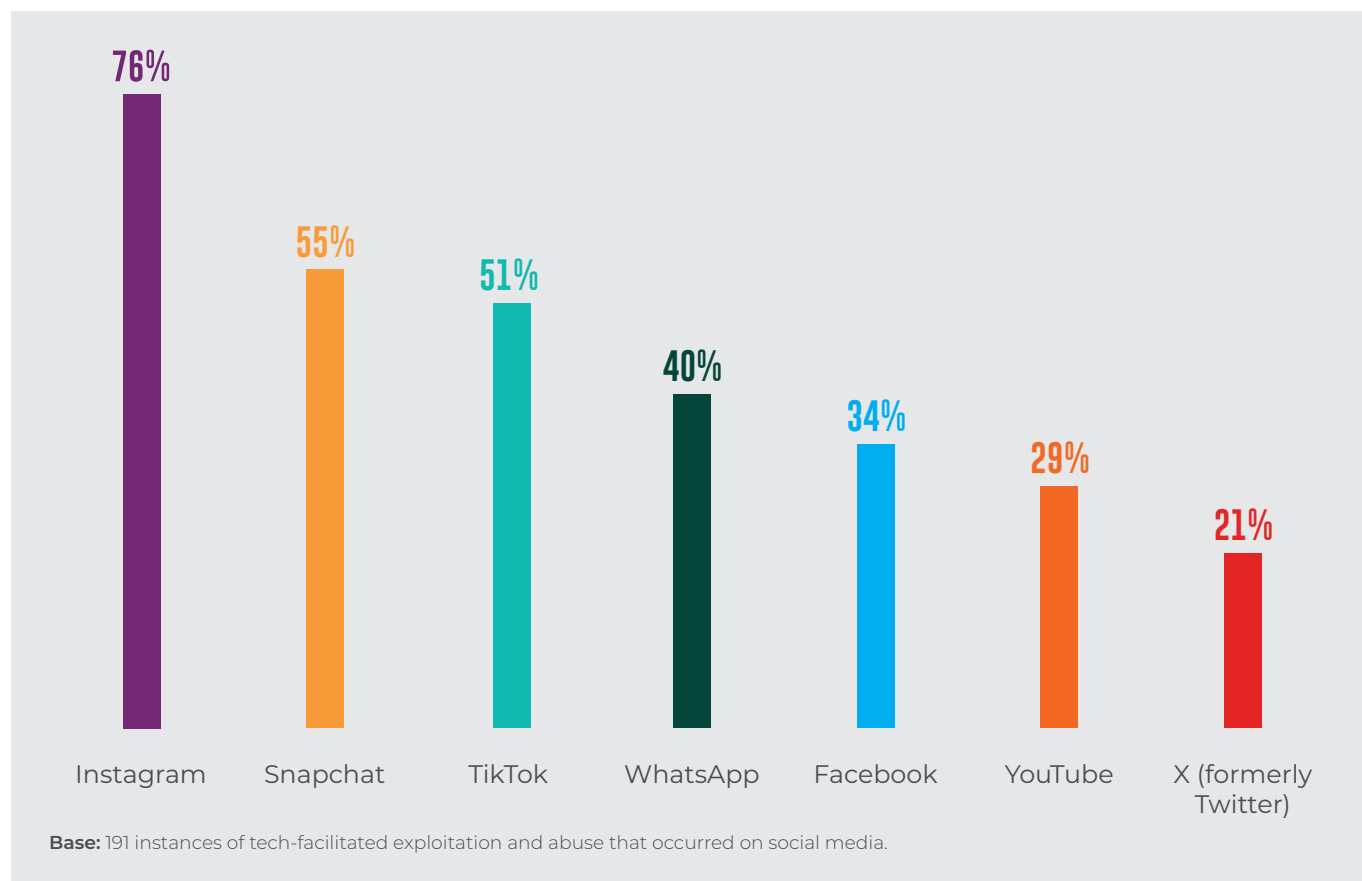
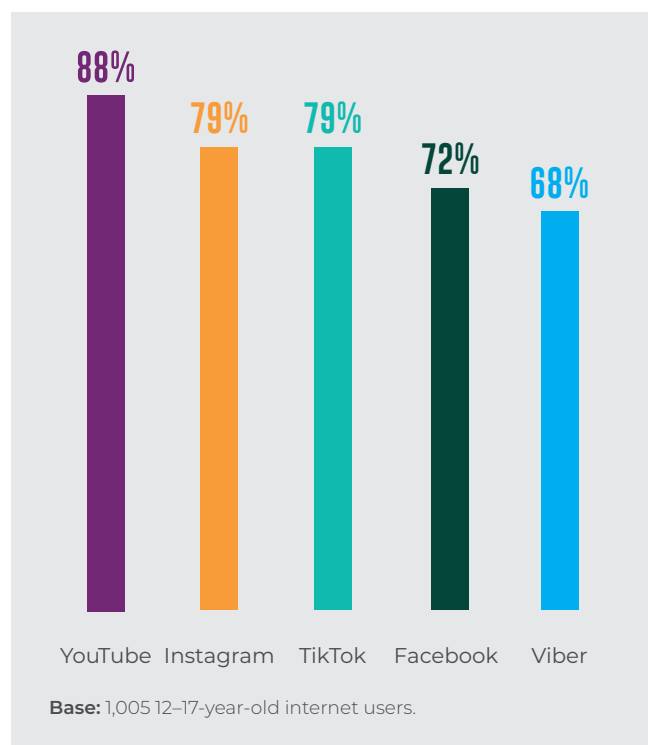


Chart 3: Top five most popular platforms among 12–17-year-old internet users



These findings provide clear support for the central role of technology platforms as actors in child (online) protection and the value of a clearer and more comprehensive regulatory framework to prevent abuse and hold platforms accountable when harm occurs. The current legal framework in North Macedonia imposes few child protection obligations on online platforms. The *Law on Electronic Commerce* states that “information society services” (a term that encompasses both internet service providers and online platforms) must report suspected unlawful user activity to the competent authorities or face fines.⁴⁵ However, they are not obliged to monitor data they stored, transmitted or made available, nor to investigate circumstances that may suggest that unlawful activity is taking place.⁴⁶ This can significantly constrain early detection of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, allowing child sexual abuse material to circulate and illegal conduct to continue unchecked until it is reported.

In addition, the *Law on Electronic Commerce* exempts information society services from liability for third-party content transmitted through their services, provided they do not initiate the transmission, select the recipient or modify the data.⁴⁷ Likewise, they can only be held liable for illegal data stored on or accessible via hyperlinks made available through their services if they fail to promptly remove or disable access to such data upon becoming aware of its unlawful nature.⁴⁸ Further, information society services are not required to establish clear, accessible and user-friendly mechanisms for reporting illegal content or conduct. Thus, the availability of such tools depends on the policies of each platform, which may leave ordinary users, including children, with no straightforward path to trigger content removal or report abusive conduct.

Compounding these issues, law in North Macedonia 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. Introducing clearer standards in these areas could help encourage more consistent preventive practices across platforms and strengthen accountability mechanisms. A more comprehensive regulatory approach, combined with proactive cooperation from technology companies, could contribute to a safer and more child-centred digital environment.

Collaboration with technology companies

Given the findings above, effective information-sharing and collaboration between national actors and technology providers (both global and national) is essential in early detection and response. Data from the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) is one example of engagement and information-sharing between electronic service providers (i.e., technology companies) and law enforcement in North Macedonia.

45 Republic of North Macedonia (2007). [Law on Electronic Commerce](#), Art. 20(2), 22-a(1).

46 Ibid., Art. 20(1).

47 Ibid., Art. 15(1).

48 Ibid., Art. 17(1), 18.

1.5 THE ROLE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS IN FACILITATING CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Legislation in the United States of America requires electronic service providers based there to report suspected cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse to NCMEC, which then forwards them to law enforcement via a CyberTip report. In 2024, 6,162 CyberTips were sent to North Macedonia, a decline from the 12,310 CyberTips sent in 2023. It is unclear why the number of CyberTips was reduced by about half. However, a possible contributing factor could be the introduction of a 'bundling system' by NCMEC. While previously, each individual share of a specific illegal file could trigger a separate report, under the new system, electronic service providers can group thousands of related instances into a single 'bundle' report. While NCMEC reports provide an important insight into the number of reports made, more research is needed to understand how technology platforms and actors such as law enforcement in North Macedonia are collaborating in practice. This requires in-depth data collection with law enforcement, regulators and service providers.

While the evidence presented here offers only part of the picture, interviews with justice professionals provided insight into some practical constraints faced in cases involving child sexual exploitation and abuse. They pointed to procedural barriers in obtaining data from international technology providers, describing the formal pathway as lengthy and procedural, delaying access to evidence-gathering and building a case. As one prosecutor explained:

[...] the formal way of obtaining [digital evidence] is above all the profiles of Google and Facebook [...]. This should move in a strictly formal path through the Ministry of Justice, all the way to the judicial institutions in America above all. All this can take years. Acting on such criminal acts after all those years simply loses its meaning. (JP)

Another prosecutor referred to the process of obtaining digital evidence from Meta, saying:

“ If you go to Facebook to request it, it has to go through the public prosecutor, then to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then from them to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the country where Facebook is, through their prosecution, and then to Facebook. And can you imagine how long it would take to go through that process. (JP)

This suggests that delays may stem not only from platform responses, but also from the complexity of international legal cooperation mechanisms and the absence of streamlined procedures for accessing digital evidence across jurisdictions, including, for instance, through direct connection between authorities and platforms.

Some justice professionals also described how, in their experience, technology platforms may prioritize responding to the most severe categories of harmful content, such as sexual content involving exploitation or terrorism-related material, while cases considered to be less severe or not connected to organized crime – for example sexual content involving nudity – may receive a delayed response or no response at all. It is not clear from these accounts alone the extent to which these delays or lack of responses occur, but as one prosecutor explained:

“ If it's terrorism, they'll cooperate, and for pornographic materials too. [...] For other requests, they sometimes don't respond at all, or it takes them a minimum of six months [...]. (JP)

A lawyer working on a case of non-consensual sharing of photos with sexual content in chat groups further reflected on how institutional reliance on platform responses may affect access to justice:

“

Their only step was to send a single request to Facebook. And that highlights a second problem with how the Prosecutor's Office handled the case. Even when they claim to act urgently, the whole process of reaching out to Facebook or other social media platforms through international legal channels and waiting for their replies slows everything down. It undermines how efficiently and promptly our institutions can respond. (JP)

”

These findings point to the importance of strengthening not only cooperation with the platforms, but also institutional capacity, and ensuring clear procedural frameworks for obtaining and using digital evidence. Addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse requires a collaborative approach in which governments, law enforcement agencies, technology companies and civil society work as partners, with platforms possessing important expertise, infrastructure and tools that can support prevention, detection and response efforts.

The findings highlight the important role of social media, messaging apps, online games and image-editing tools in facilitating exploitation and abuse in North Macedonia.

2. DISCLOSURE



2. DISCLOSURE

The Disrupting Harm project defines disclosure as a child conveying or attempting to convey that they are being or have been sexually exploited or abused. Disclosure can take many forms: some children may speak explicitly about what happened, while others may express themselves indirectly through changes in behaviours, body language or other non-verbal cues. Disclosure is not always deliberate; it can be accidental, partial or unclear, and is not always a one-time event. It can unfold gradually, reflecting the child's evolving sense of safety, trust and readiness, or it can be a last resort for children once all other protective and defence mechanisms have been exhausted.

According to the survey data, children told someone about what they had been subjected to in 88 per cent of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that occurred in the previous year. This is a relatively high disclosure rate compared with other countries where the Disrupting Harm research has been conducted.⁴⁹ In a minority of instances (9 per cent), the children surveyed did not tell anyone.

The reasons for this comparatively high disclosure rate are not clear from the available data and this is an area where further research is needed in North Macedonia. A range of factors could potentially contribute, including levels of trust in family members, peers and professionals, prevention and awareness initiatives, school-based safeguarding mechanisms, and broader social and cultural norms around help-seeking and discussing sexual exploitation and abuse. The research does not allow for conclusions about the relative influence of these factors.

However, as further described in the following sections, the journey towards disclosure can be filled with fear and uncertainty. Despite the high rate of disclosure, sharing about being subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse can still be extremely difficult for children. The qualitative data reveal how disclosure can be a last resort for children and can require overcoming a range of barriers after attempts to contain the situation independently.

49 UNICEF Innocenti. Data Insight 2: Disclosures of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. (forthcoming). Safe Online.

2.1 DISCLOSURE AS A LAST RESORT

Professionals described several instances where disclosure appeared to be a 'last resort' following a period of escalating threats, extortion or fear of further harm. As the abuse intensified or extended over time, children's attempts to manage the situation collapsed, narrowing their options and eventually leading to disclosure.

This was demonstrated in a case described by a lawyer, where a 15-year-old girl was extorted by her 17-year-old boyfriend when she ended the relationship. The boy threatened to circulate the girl's sexual images unless she gave him money. After finding ways to pay him twice, she finally told her mother when he extorted her for money for a third time. The lawyer explained:

“

After, I'm not quite sure... a month of constant mental and physical abuse and threats, and in a way, this is a classic threat... that her nude photos would be published and sent to her friends at school, and they would be shared publicly. After a month of struggling with herself, she confided [in her mother] and that's how the mother found out. (JP)

”

In other cases, children may not actively disclose, but changes in their behaviour may prompt concern from those around them. A front-line worker described how the parents of a girl decided to seek professional help after she stopped wanting to go to school and became withdrawn. During the sessions with the professional, the girl disclosed how she was being bullied and eventually that she had been exposed to online sexual content by a man selling food in the school yard:

“

The girl opens up after about two years. So, in her own way, she's processing it, coping... and eventually, her psychological strength, her defence mechanisms, start to break down. She finally says, 'I don't want to go to school' [...] Something is happening. Why doesn't she want to go to school? Why is she withdrawn, not socializing anymore, losing contact [...] Her behaviour changed, and that's when they [her parents] start seeking help. (FW)

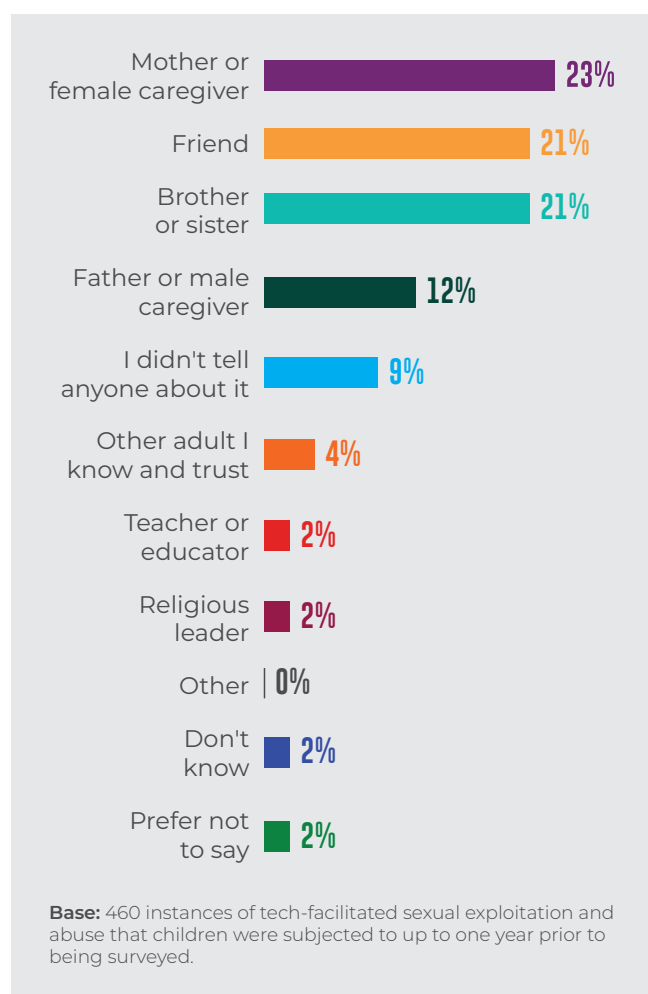
”

As seen in these cases, disclosure may happen incrementally, when self-protection strategies collapse, threats become intolerable or when coping independently is no longer feasible. Even though the survey data show that a majority of children eventually disclosed past-year abuse, the qualitative data demonstrate some of the hurdles and doubts children may face before and during disclosure. This raises the question of why for some children, disclosure and help-seeking from adults is not always seen as a viable course of action, and whether they have enough safe spaces and open communication with parents and other trusted adults to seek advice and help when needed.

2.2 WHO DO CHILDREN DISCLOSE TO?

Although disclosure is not always immediate, the survey data revealed that when children did disclose, mothers and female caregivers were the most common confidants. This was followed closely by friends and siblings, as shown in chart 4. The role of mothers and peers was evident in both the survey and the qualitative data, and is discussed in further detail below.

Chart 4: Who do children disclose to?



The role of parents

The important role of mothers and female caregivers was also underscored in accounts by professionals. For example, a psychotherapist described a case where a 14-year-old boy shared private images of a 13-year-old girl with whom he was in a relationship. From the perspective of this professional, the girl's close relationship with her mother was central to her disclosing:

“

They still have some kind of closer relationship, because the mother is the only guardian [...] well, naturally, like every mother who wants to raise her child, they have some closeness. And that was the advantage in their relationship, that when it was hard for her, she would approach her mother. (FW)

”

At the same time, the survey data show that disclosures to fathers in the year after the abuse occurred less frequently. In line with this, some professionals reflected on how they often observed a gendered division of relationship management and emotional labour within families – with such responsibilities falling more heavily on female caregivers – including in cases of sexual exploitation and abuse. This suggests that there could be a need to further support fathers to be available as trusted sources of support for children, including in relation to difficult or sensitive issues, for example via parenting programmes and educational initiatives.

While both professionals and the young women identified parents and caregivers as central in responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse, some also noted how parental approaches may at times reinforce harmful gender norms and victim-blaming attitudes, or take an overly restrictive approach to prevention.

One of the young women subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood explained how she considered parental restrictions unhelpful and ineffective:

“

Right now, parents say things like: ‘Be careful, there are all kinds of people on the internet,’ but it’s too black and white. Either: ‘It’s forbidden’, or they say: ‘Be careful, but I don’t know what you are doing online’. (YP)

”

2.2 WHO DO CHILDREN DISCLOSE TO?

Instead she emphasized the importance of parents showing an interest in their children's online use and children feeling supported to share their online experiences. Similarly, when asked what kind of support she would have liked when she received unwanted sexual content as a child, another of the young women shared:

“

[...] to feel inside that: 'My mom and dad told me they'll always have my back. Whatever happens, I can call them right away.' (YP)

”

These reflections by the young women interviewed contain some insights into what children and young people may want and need to feel supported. However, to better equip parents to support children, there is a need to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and constraints that parents and caregivers face. Further research that centres on the experiences of mothers, fathers, other caregivers and broader family experiences is essential to better understand pathways to prevent, detect and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

The role of peers

Aside from mothers, peers were also found to be central to disclosures in the survey data and in interviews with professionals and the young women. While disclosure to peers may be the most intuitive and accessible course of action for some, it can place a responsibility on children receiving the information to know how to respond in a safe and sensitive way, especially if it is not complemented by a strong network of trusted adults who can further support the children involved and help them to seek specialized support.

Some of the young women who were exploited and abused during childhood described peers as a first point of support, not just in receiving disclosures but also as a source of emotional support or for protection. This was the case for one young woman who, as a child, received multiple online messages from a stranger. At one point, while on a bus, the

unknown person commented on the dress she was wearing, indicating that they were watching her. In recalling this situation, she described the fear of having to walk from the bus stop to her house alone and how she relied on her friends:

“

When that particular incident happened, I immediately contacted my friends and they escorted me home, waited for me, took me somewhere. A true friendship. (YP)

”

Another young woman recounted how she and her classmates initially tried to handle a boy in class who sexually harassed her and other girls in the school and exposed them to sexual content. She explained how some of the boys in class found out and intervened, trying to scare the boy into stopping. When reflecting on it, she considered the limitations of this approach and of not involving adults:

“

[It was] childish thinking, we didn't tell anyone, not the class teacher, not any adult – because we thought, maybe if all the guys confronted him [the boy harassing his female classmates], he'd be scared [...]. (YP)

”

She further explained how this led to the boy continuing the harassment as soon as one of the boys who had told him to stop was not present.

Interviews with professionals touched on the dual role that peers can play in both facilitating and constraining disclosures and help-seeking. For example, a school psychologist described a situation in which peers expressed concerns to school staff about a classmate. The girl had an intellectual disability and was being threatened and coerced by an older child into sharing sexual photos. As noted by the professional, the fact that they alerted the school psychologist enabled a timely response.

“

And I was even pleasantly surprised that the children noticed on their own. The girls told us that something was happening. So, this was specific. If the children hadn't pointed it out, we would have had no chance to find out. And maybe that child would have been abused because he was calling her. (FW)

”

The girl eventually disclosed to the school psychologist and explained that the boy was threatening to come to her school, circulate photos of her and tell people that they had sex. Yet the same school psychologist also reflected on another instance where peers constrained disclosure by withholding information:

“

A student complained that in the Viber group her class had, without the homeroom teacher, they were mocking her. Like: 'What's going on, how is it?' but she wouldn't say, she was crying. Later we called other children from the class, but they also didn't want to reveal anything. The class president told us, because they had already deleted some of the messages. [...] He told us that two students from the class were, in a way, 'flirting' with her through the Viber group. (FW)

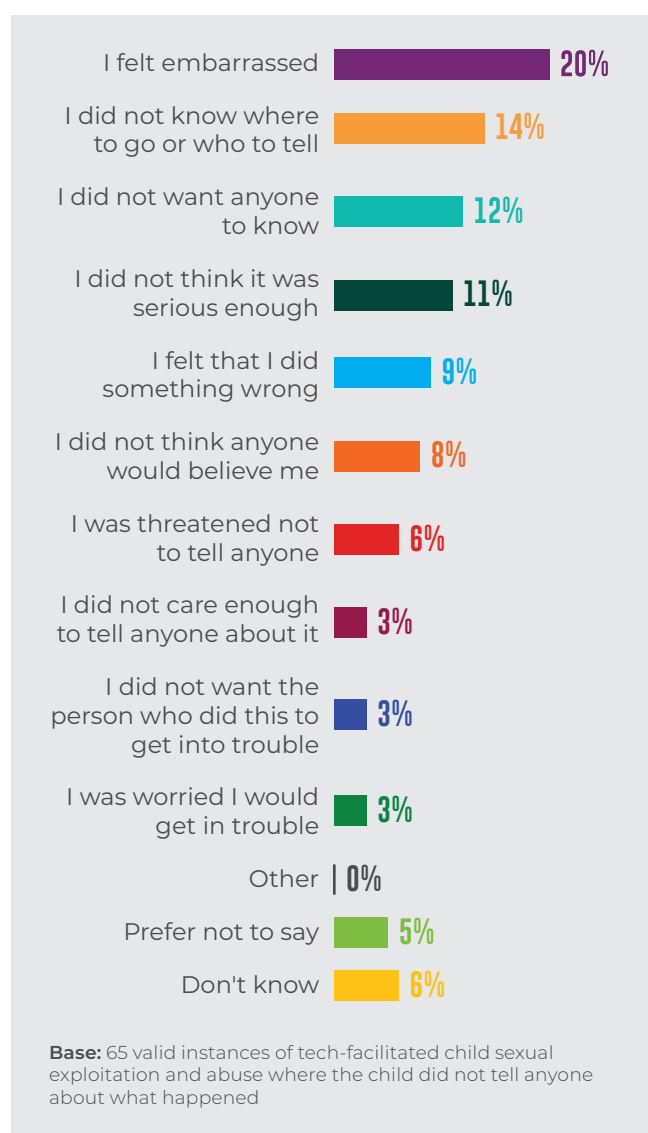
”

Accounts by the young women subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children and by professionals showed how children may disclose to and depend on peers for support and protection or in other instances, witness abuse but be reluctant to tell adults. These courses of action should be considered in light of the normalization of some forms of abuse, as discussed above, and barriers faced by children in relation to disclosure, some of which are discussed further on in this chapter. Understanding how to safely and responsibly respond to a disclosure can be difficult, even for adults. It is therefore imperative that adults have created enough trust and confidence to encourage children to speak out about sexual violence against them or other children. Simultaneously, the important and evident role of peers in receiving disclosures should not be overlooked. It is critical to understand how children can be provided with knowledge, tools and support networks in case they receive a disclosure, while not placing too heavy a burden on them to support others in situations where specialized support from a trained professional is required. Further research with children who have received disclosures is required to better understand what kind of information, resources and support they needed. In the meantime, adults must equip children with age- and culturally appropriate knowledge of sexual violence and the various contexts in which it occurs. Children should also be provided with tools to handle disclosures safely – including when and how to seek help from adults or support services.

2.3 BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

While the survey data showed that many children disclosed to someone, qualitative interviews identified multiple and significant barriers that can delay disclosures or prevent children from speaking out. The reflections by the young women subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood and the children surveyed were particularly important in understanding key barriers to disclosure. These barriers were often intertwined and further intersected with barriers to reporting to the police or social services, as will be discussed in chapter 3.

Chart 5: Barriers to disclosure and reporting



Shame and embarrassment

Shame and embarrassment emerged as key barriers to disclosure for children based on the survey and qualitative data. Feeling embarrassed was the most common barrier to disclosure among the children surveyed, accounting for 20 per cent of instances where children did not disclose tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that occurred in the previous year (see chart 5). Other responses that could be related to embarrassment and self-blame included not wanting anyone to know (12 per cent) and feeling they did something wrong (9 per cent).

Similarly, the young women interviewed spoke about embarrassment and shame, including a desire to distance themselves from what had happened. One of the young women who was exposed to sexual content by an adult when she was 11 years old described how embarrassment and shame shaped her silence:

“

Back then... at that age, I didn't feel like it was appropriate to talk about something like that with friends. And now I don't want to make them feel embarrassed if someone mentioned something like that... And with my parents, it's the same. I was too embarrassed to say that something like that had happened to me. (YP)

”

Here, embarrassment around sex played a role in non-disclosure. However, this young woman's account also seems to indicate that as a child, she had internalized the perception that sexual abuse is something that is inappropriate to discuss, as opposed to a crime that should be reported and addressed.

The data further showed how self-blame played a role in keeping children silent. A social worker reflected on a case where a girl was exposed to sexual material by a man and explained how self-blame reinforced silence:

“

She thinks: ‘Why me? Why did it have to be me? I went there, I stayed, I responded to his invitation to show me something.’ I think that this feeling of guilt for being responsible along with the lack of acceptance and judgment from others around them, is what drives people to stay silent. (FW)

”

In this case, self-blame and fear of judgment were intertwined in the child’s decision not to disclose. Fear of blame and judgment emerged as prominent barriers to disclosure, as discussed below.

Taboos around sex

The qualitative data suggest that shame and self-blame were further compounded by taboos and silence around sex and sexuality, in particular in relation to children. In their interviews, the young women subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children often described discomfort with sexual topics as something that predated the exploitation and abuse itself. This made disclosure feel inappropriate or shameful, even though the child had been harmed.

Linked to this, some professionals reflected on the lack of sexuality and relationship education, further contributing to limited discussions of these topics and guidance for children. A psychologist noted:

“

And perhaps the main issue is that schools provide no education on these topics, neither on violence, nor on romantic relationships, nor on sexuality. None of this is covered. (FW)

”

Similarly, another psychologist noted:

“

In relation to sexual education. I see taboo topics that are not discussed [...] I see a traditional style of upbringing... I also see peer pressure. This again ties back to our culture – what we, as a culture and society, tolerate. (FW)

”

Professionals also discussed how the silence around topics relating to sex and sexuality manifested within families. They discussed how the lack of space for open discussions, particularly within family relationships, could also impact the ability for children to process or articulate sexual harm. A social worker described a family’s response to child sexual abuse material depicting a 13-year-old girl being circulated online. The social worker noted how was a lack of open communication within the family around things happening in the child’s life including discussions around relationships and sexuality. Reflecting on her discussions with the mother she recalled:

“

And then she said, at home, we don’t talk about things like that. We talk about competitions, piano, seminars in France, doctorates, natural sciences. (FW)

”

These reflections indicate a lack of formal and informal guidance for children around sex, relationships, healthy boundaries and consent.

2.3 BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

Limited awareness and normalization of some forms of sexual violence

Professionals pointed to a limited recognition of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and the normalization of abusive behaviours, especially within peer relationships, as discussed in chapter 1. This has implications on disclosure; one lawyer explained how even when a child might sense that something is not right about an interaction, they might not understand the criminal significance of what they were subjected to:

“

Very often, when a victim comes in, even if it's not a child, just based on what they've experienced, they know something bad happened. But they don't recognize that it's a serious criminal offence, that it's exploitation. They feel disturbed or violated, but legally speaking... (JP)

”

Findings from the survey data could also point to normalization of, or limited awareness around, these forms of abuse. Not thinking that what happened to them was ‘serious enough’ was the fourth most common barrier to disclosure among the children surveyed (11 per cent of instances) as shown in chart 5, above. In 3 per cent of instances, children did not tell anyone because they did not ‘care enough’ to do so. However, it is unclear from this data point whether this reflects a true ambivalence towards what happened, a lack of understanding that what the child was subjected to constitutes abuse, or if it is simply a reflection of the normalization of some forms of violence against children.

Taken together, this indicates a need for further support from adults at the family, school, community and system levels so that children and those with a duty of care are aware of children's rights (including their legal rights), know what (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse is, and understand the many ways that this kind of violence manifests. Some professionals shared their perspectives on what they felt were positive interventions in this regard. A school psychologist reflected on workshops that she organized and some misconceptions that were addressed in her sessions with children:

“

And now, the students connected that earlier lesson to this situation, saying that in this case, there were no touches, so it wasn't something to be afraid of. [...] Yes, that's how they understood it — even though they were already in ninth grade. So, here, we tried to demystify things a bit for them. Abuse isn't only when someone hits you, and it's not only when someone touches you. For example, they would say, 'How can this be sexual abuse?' They think sexual abuse only means rape. Everything else, they don't really recognize as abuse. And then we also spoke with the girls privately, that when you say no, it means no. In every relationship. Both romantic and friendly. (FW)

”

This quote points to the importance of appropriate guidance being provided to children, not only about what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse, but also about relationships more generally and how to recognize and respond to abusive or violent behaviours. Equally, children must know that they have reliable and safe spaces where they can ask for advice, disclose or seek help from trusted adults.

Fear of judgment

Fear of judgment, especially from parents, was particularly salient in the qualitative data. Several of the young women described how they did not disclose the abuse they were subjected to due to anticipating negative reactions from their parents. One of the young women described anticipating criticism from her mother:

“

[...] with my mom, I immediately know how she would react. She'd say: 'Why are you even posting pictures? Of course, people will write to you, there are all kinds of people in the world,' or something like that. And in that case, I'd end up feeling guilty. (YP)

”

Professionals also observed how fear of negative parental reactions may shape children's silence. A lawyer shared that:

This is probably one of the reasons why girls in similar situations often do not want to confide in their parents. They already know what the reaction will be. [...] For them, it feels easier to live every day in fear, wondering, 'Will he release it [the sexual content] or not? Will it get out or not?' than to face their parents. (JP)

A front-line worker who supported a boy who received sexualized online communication from an adult that developed into persistent messages and requests to meet in person, reflected on how strong the fear of parental reactions and judgment can be and its impact on disclosure or help-seeking:

[...] the main thing was the parent. 'If my mum finds out, she will kill me.' [...]. The first thing was the fear of being condemned and grounded by the mother. That was the main reason not to report. [...] maybe we should think about how big that fear is when you don't care if you will be hurt, but you only care not to be condemned by the parent. Horrible! (FW)

The qualitative data showed that fear of judgment also extended to peers and the community. This included how the child would be perceived by others, and how friends and peers would react, including fear of rejection. A psychotherapist supporting a girl whose intimate photos were shared in peer chat groups captured the intensity of these concerns:

She thought her life was over. 'What happens to me now?', 'I'm labelled for life.' [...] Yes, she was convinced she wouldn't be able to make new friends or have another boyfriend. She was afraid people would keep bringing it up, that it would follow her wherever she went. (FW)

As noted by the psychotherapist, the fear of what others might think functioned as a powerful barrier to disclosure.

Interviews with professionals further indicated how fear of judgment from the community could be particularly salient in small or close-knit communities, with children fearing gossip, public judgment, labelling and social exclusion, especially if the perpetrator is known and connected within that community. A justice professional discussed the redistribution of intimate images of two girls, years after they were initially shared. She noted:

When it's a small place, the treatment [of the person subjected to abuse] is very different. It's actually worse. Everyone knows the perpetrator. He's a friend, cousin, neighbour [...]. (JP)

Previous unsupportive responses

Regardless of why children receive negative reactions when they disclose, the qualitative data from professionals and the young women indicated that previous negative experiences, for example with parents, other trusted adults such as school staff or institutions can erode trust and a child's willingness to disclose. For example, a psychologist at the Centre for Social Work described a case in which a girl's previous disclosure was met with disbelief:

2.3 BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

“

[She] was previously raped by an adult, a case she claimed was not processed, and we really did not have the case. She disclosed that information now. Even that her parents knew about it, especially her father, that he was friends with the person who raped her, but that no one took her seriously. (FW)

”

Later, when the girl was recorded during a sexual act without her knowledge and this material was circulated online via peer group chats, she did not disclose to her parents. This illustrates how responses that dismiss or minimize exploitation and abuse of a child may reinforce the belief that disclosure is futile and unwarranted.

Additionally, a lawyer noted that during prolonged abuse, systemic failures could further reinforce the perception that help-seeking is ineffective. Reflecting on a case that began with sexual extortion and progressed to repeated in-person sexual abuse, a lawyer noted:

“

Even as a minor, she knew exactly what kind of society she was living in, because she had seen it first-hand. She saw what happened around her and how no one was ever held accountable. (JP)

”

Help-seeking and disclosure therefore emerged as a complex process for children. The interviews with professionals and young women revealed the importance of supportive and proactive adults, with mothers emerging as particularly central figures in children's disclosure in both the survey and qualitative data. While the survey data show that in a majority of instances, children disclosed the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to in the previous year, the qualitative data reiterated that children must feel heard, protected and free from judgment to disclose. The interviews also demonstrated how, even if children do disclose, this may only be a 'last resort' once protective strategies have collapsed or during moments of escalation and unbearable pressure. Even then, help-seeking may be gradual. Shame and stigma, compounded by the taboo around sex, especially in relation to children, were also seen as factors delaying or preventing disclosure. These patterns underscore how children's willingness to disclose is shaped not only by individual awareness or desire but by the broader social, familial and institutional environments that determine whether disclosure is met with protection, judgment or inaction.

3. REPORTING



3. REPORTING

While most children surveyed reported disclosing the abuse to someone, the survey data show that few children formally reported the abuse they were subjected to in the one-year period prior to being surveyed. According to these data, only 1 per cent of children responded that they had reported what they were subjected to, to the police. Further, only 1 per cent spoke to a social worker and 0.2 per cent called a helpline.

As with disclosure, a range of barriers may delay and impact whether children and families report or seek help from professionals, some of which are discussed further below. Additional reasons for the low survey figures could include the 'forms' of exploitation and abuse captured in the survey, or the fact that the exploitation and abuse measured in the survey occurred in the previous year. Understanding the considerations of and potential barriers for children and families is essential for ensuring access to professional services and justice.

Delays in disclosure and reporting can have profound implications for access to justice. In North Macedonia, statutes of limitations – the period after which legal action can no longer be initiated for a criminal offence – typically range from three to 20 years for offences related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, depending on the sentence prescribed.⁵⁰ Importantly, this time is counted from the point when the child turns 18,⁵¹ a positive provision that acknowledges the difficulties of disclosure during childhood. Yet the very existence of statutes of limitations risks shielding perpetrators from accountability: by the time the person subjected to abuse or exploitation is ready to report it, the window for prosecution may already have closed. To truly protect children and uphold their right to justice, statutes of limitations for all sexual offences against children should be abolished.

It should be noted that qualitative data in this chapter relies heavily on the perspectives of front-line workers and justice professionals, as none of the young women who participated in interviews reported the abuse to the formal channels measured in the survey, leaving a gap in relation to the direct voices of children.

⁵⁰ Republic of North Macedonia (1996). [Criminal Code](#), Art. 107.

⁵¹ Ibid., Art. 108(1).

3.1 FORMAL REPORTING CHANNELS

Under legislation in North Macedonia, offences related to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse of children can be prosecuted even without a formal complaint by the child.⁵² Criminal complaints can still be submitted through various channels, including directly to a public prosecutor,⁵³ or to the police, who are then required to refer them promptly to the competent prosecutor.⁵⁴

Child abuse and illegal online content can also be reported through the police's Red Button portal, which is continuously monitored.⁵⁵ However, interviews with law enforcement suggested that the platform is not used extensively, partly because it remains insufficiently known to the public.

Once there are grounds to suspect that an offence has been committed, the public prosecutor must open a case⁵⁶ and then conduct the investigation with the support of the judicial police.⁵⁷ Prosecutors have three months to reach a decision on whether criminal charges should be pressed.⁵⁸ If a report is dismissed or an investigation is closed – for example, because the offence is not subject to public prosecution or because there is insufficient evidence, the victim of the crime must be informed of the decision and that they have eight

days to appeal to a higher prosecutor. A decision on the appeal must then be made within 30 days, either confirming the decision or instructing the prosecutor to continue the proceedings.⁵⁹

Despite the existence of this framework – which is intended to facilitate reporting – a lawyer indicated that challenges may arise in triggering legal proceedings. They described how an incorrect legal classification was applied by the police and not subsequently reviewed by the prosecutor in a case of sexual extortion of a child. As a result, the case was initially dropped on the basis that the offence was not deemed to be subject to public prosecution. Although the Higher Prosecution Office later ordered a new investigation following an appeal, the lawyer indicated that no further action had been taken a year later.

While limited data are available from this study, this may be an area for further inquiry, to ensure that case classification is correctly implemented and that enforcement of existing deadlines governing prosecutorial decision-making to ensure that criminal proceedings involving tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are systematically and effectively initiated.

52 Ibid., Art. 193, 193-a, 193-b; Republic of North Macedonia (2026). [Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code](#), Art. 6 (new article 152 a).

53 Republic of North Macedonia (2010). [Criminal Procedure Law](#), Art. 274.

54 Ibid., Art. 282.

55 See Police of North Macedonia (accessed on 31 March 2026). [Red Button](#), [Child Abuse](#).

56 Republic of North Macedonia (2010). [Criminal Procedure Law](#), Art. 18.

57 Ibid., Art. 291(2).

58 Ibid., Art. 275.

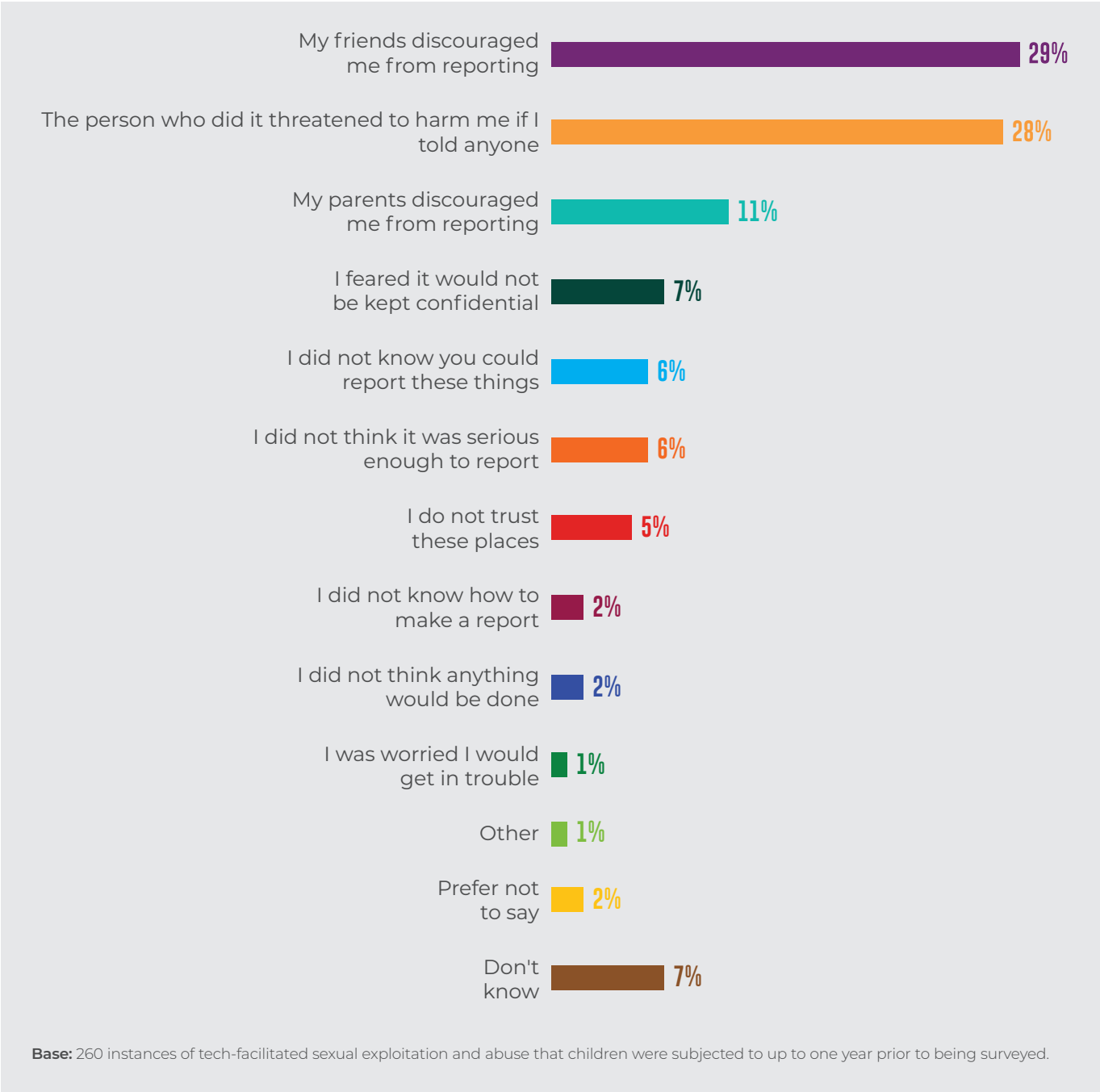
59 Ibid., Arts. 288, 304.

3.2 BARRIERS TO REPORTING

Children surveyed who did not report via formal channels, the police, a social worker or helpline were asked why they did not do so. As presented in chart 6 below, the main responses included friends discouraging reporting (29 per cent) and being threatened by the perpetrator (28 per cent). Chapter 2 highlights the pivotal role that peers can have in supporting children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. Peers may not only provide

immediate assistance but can also encourage further help-seeking. These findings on barriers to reporting demonstrate that it is essential that all children trust justice systems and support services, and that they perceive them as accountable. It is not sufficient for services to exist; they must also be seen as viable options, ensuring children feel confident in reporting and do not discourage peers who wish to do so.

Chart 6: Barriers to formal reporting and help-seeking



Other barriers highlighted from the survey with children reflect the barriers identified and discussed in relation to disclosure. These included: not thinking it was serious enough, reasons that could be linked to a lack of trust in institutions; fears around confidentiality, not trusting these places, not thinking anything would be done and fears about getting in trouble. The common nature of these barriers and the links between decision-making around disclosure and reporting underscore the value to detection and prevention efforts if these barriers are effectively addressed.

Parents may also grapple with fear, hesitation and other barriers. As shown in chart 6, parents discouraging their child from reporting was the third most common barrier shared by the children surveyed.

In interviews, some professionals reflected on their experiences working with families in relation to reporting. A school psychologist described the persistent advocacy needed to ensure that sexual extortion by a peer was reported to law enforcement:

“

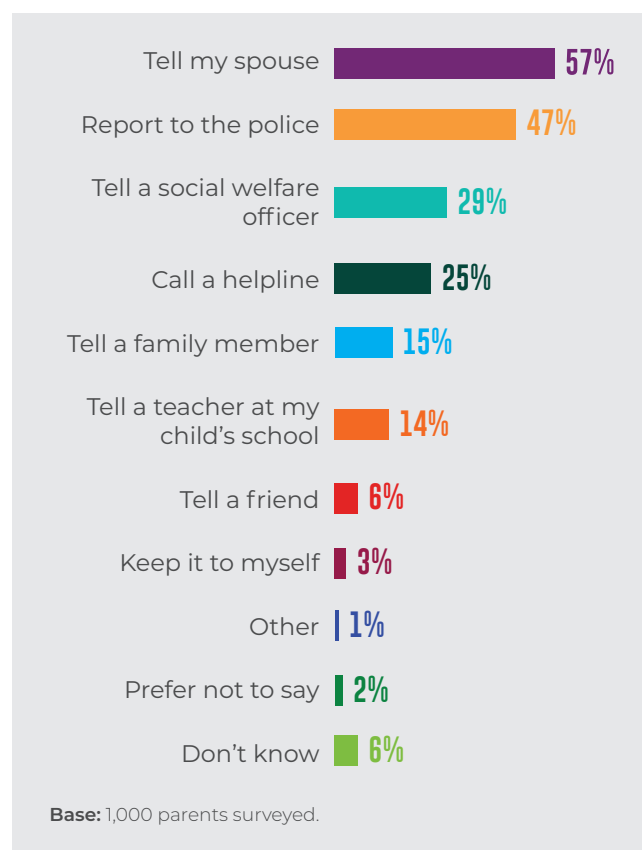
We were very persistent in urging the parents to take action and we kept pushing them until they finally went and reported the case to the police – to the Cybercrime Unit. Because in cases like this, the police have to get involved. (FW)

”

According to this professional, such persistence was often necessary due to parental hesitation, fear or uncertainty about reporting procedures. However, this raises a potential question about why the school did not report the concern directly.

Data from the survey with parents further reveal some of the barriers and concerns that parents and caregivers might grapple with. Parents were asked what they would do if their child was sexually harassed, exploited or abused. As shown in chart 7, most parents responded that they would act, while a minority (3 per cent or 28 parents) would keep it to themselves. Among the 28 parents who responded that they would keep it to themselves, the most common barriers were fear of reprisal and not being treated well.

Chart 7: What parents said they would do if their child was sexually harassed, exploited or abused



Stigma and shame

According to professionals, shame and stigma remained central barriers for children, reflecting patterns already observed in relation to children's considerations around disclosure. A social worker described how she perceived a 17-year-old boy's refusal to report attempted sexual assault by an adult he met online to be related to not wanting to be formally identified as subjected to abuse:

“

And I also think the child did not want to involve himself in such a thing where his name would be mentioned and present in documents stating that he was sexually harassed, etc. I think that he wanted to start a life outside of the country, and he didn't want to get involved in such investigations [...]. (FW)

”

3.2 BARRIERS TO REPORTING

Fear of others learning about the abuse and concerns about its consequences, such as blame and broader social repercussions, also contributed to reluctance to report according to interviews with professionals. A lawyer observed how community stigma and victim-blaming may deter reporting:

“

Victims are stigmatized and further marginalized because people don't understand how this type of violence occurs, nor are they aware that it even exists. [...] there's this assumption that 'something must have happened' for it to occur. [...] There's also this imposed shame on the family itself [...] You hear things like, 'Where did the child see something like that to end up being sexually abused?' or 'What were the parents doing?' (JP)

”

A psychotherapist similarly described the hesitation by parents to report, reflecting on how they may weigh concerns such as the implications of others becoming aware of the abuse and whether reporting would lead to a positive outcome:

“

'Should we file a report?' 'Should we not file a report?' 'Even if we did, most of the time nothing is done.' 'We have no evidence.' Okay, some have evidence. [...] 'But what if they don't do anything with it?' 'People will just know that this or that happened to my girl.' 'That she was asking for it' or, as they say, was 'a dog who wagged her tail' and so on. (FW)

”

Concerns about the reporting process and lack of trust in institutions

As indicated in the quote just above, decisions about reporting and seeking professional help may also be impacted by concerns about the process and its outcomes.

Qualitative data from professionals and the young women subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children identified concerns around what the reporting process would entail and what would happen next, in particular for children. A front-line worker described how a 15-year-old boy who was groomed by a man refused to report it to the police. In this case, the professional noted how fear and uncertainty, compounded by limited knowledge of what reporting would imply impeded reporting:

“

The problem was that the child at the moment refused, which is normal, to report it to the mother and the police because he was afraid of being discriminated. [...] He was not willing, I will say it again, because he had a lot of distrust. He didn't know what the protocol and the procedures were. He was very ashamed of the fact that the conversations were being read, that he could be the one to blame... 'What will they do to me?' (FW)

”

The front-line worker highlighted the need for prolonged engagement with children and reassurance about confidentiality, protection and procedural safeguards for children to feel comfortable to report.

Similarly, reflecting on a case that began through online contact and involved repeated in-person abuse, a lawyer noted:

“

For her, being discovered was deeply traumatizing, because she had not wanted it. As bad as her situation was, being continuously exploited, she did not want to go to the police, she did not have the courage, she had no idea how to handle what would come next. (JP)

”

Highlighting uncertainty about the consequences of reporting as profound barriers to doing so.

Unclear reporting outcomes may also deter children's and families' willingness to disclose and report. A young woman reflected on this uncertainty:

“
Even if we reported it, I don't know what could have been done. (YP)
”

This could be an indication that when children are unsure whether reporting to the police will lead to meaningful action, they are less likely to come forward.

The qualitative data also indicated how parents may discourage reporting. A lawyer from a civil society organization noted that some parents discouraged reporting to shield children from anticipated secondary victimization:

“
[families] sometimes choose not to report certain things, because they believe that doing so will cause additional victimization, which, unfortunately, we can't guarantee won't happen. (JP)
”

Professionals also discussed how parents may be reluctant to report due to a lack of trust in institutions. This included not trusting that the case would be handled correctly or result in justice, or that the anonymity of the child would be protected.

In addition, some professionals also shared how families and children may lack information about how to access reporting mechanisms, particularly specialized units, such as cybercrime departments. A psychotherapist who had supported a girl being sexually extorted by a boy explained:

“
I don't think they go to the police, but rather they talk to a friend who works in that department... [...] Do you know someone who knows something, who can give you information, someone from that department [...]. (FW)
”

This gap in understanding can lead both parents and children to seek informal advice rather than engaging with formal channels.

Mandating parental involvement in reporting

Qualitative data also identified practical barriers to reporting for children, in particular mandatory parental involvement. Under the Criminal Procedure Law, when the victim of a criminal offence is a child, their legal representative is authorized to make all statements and undertake all procedural actions on their behalf;⁶⁰ meaning the child cannot act independently in such matters. Alternatively, the legal representative may appoint a proxy to act on the child's behalf.⁶¹

A school psychologist described how a girl's ability to seek assistance from the police was hindered by the fact that she went to the police station without a parent or guardian. The school psychologist described how the girl had told her that she was afraid that her father would use physical violence against a boy who was sexually extorting her. While the school psychologist contacted the girl's mother, the girl decided to leave school and go to the police, accompanied by a friend. The psychologist explained:

“
I get a call from [area in Skopje] police station, from the inspector. [...] And this is what she said to me: 'I explained to them that without parents, I can't take them in, and I sent them back to school.' (FW)
”

60 Ibid., Art. 66.

61 Ibid., Art. 67.

3.2 BARRIERS TO REPORTING

In other instances, data from interviews highlighted how this procedural requirement could deter children from reporting to the police due to not wanting their parents to know about the exploitation and abuse they had been subjected to. One of the young women described how this affected her decision not to report:

“

Well, no, I've known for a long time [...] how it works, that I can't go to the [police] station alone, you have to go with a parent or guardian. I'll say again, back then... I wasn't that close with my mom to share things like this. Not that we weren't close, but I knew how she would react. So, there was fear, and I knew there would be arguments, and I didn't want to share it with her. (YP)

”

A lawyer from a civil society organization similarly noted that children seeking help sometimes hesitate or withdraw when told that progressing with a police investigation would require parental involvement.

Underreporting of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse by boys

Professionals noted that *reported* cases of sexual exploitation and abuse, including those that involve digital technologies, predominantly involved girls and women. In doing so, they considered how this might be due to particular barriers for boys and reflect the under-recognition of harm against boys. The fact that the survey data shows no statistically significant difference in the rates of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse against boys and girls seems to support this view.

Several professionals suggested that boys may be less likely to disclose and report abuse due to social norms around masculinity, shame and fear of being perceived as vulnerable. A psychologist noted:

“

For boys, there is hardly any discussion about how many are victims. And they are victims. [...] Boys are also victims of violence via technology, but we don't have statistics, nor do we keep records. (FW)

”

She further linked this observation to broader social norms that may discourage recognition or reporting of sexual violence against boys.

Similarly, a prosecutor who worked on a case of child sexual abuse material generated through artificial intelligence also considered the gender dynamics involved in reporting:

“

There have been cases involving boys as well, but somehow they're more ashamed to admit it. I don't know, they tend to come forward less. They report it less. (JP)

”

It is important to emphasize that these data did not indicate that formal reporting channels were unavailable to boys. Instead, the professionals' reflections pointed to gender and social norms as potential barriers to reporting for boys and that there is a need for accessible, safe and anonymous avenues that account for these barriers. Understanding boys' realities and concerns around reporting and adapting current reporting mechanisms and approaches to account for their specific needs is an important first step. However, without addressing the underlying factors that lead to boys not coming forward to report and sexual violence against boys being overlooked, it is likely that these changes on their own will be insufficient.

Overall, reporting tech-facilitated sexual abuse is fragile and shaped by trust, capacity and institutional response. When reporting mechanisms are perceived as inaccessible, unsafe or ineffective, they cease to function as protective pathways and instead, become additional sources of risk and burden.

Strengthening reporting therefore requires not only clearer procedures and alternative child-sensitive pathways, but also consistent institutional action, trauma-informed practice and visible accountability, so that reporting is experienced as meaningful, predictable and survivable for children and their families.

One of the young women discussed what she thought could make it easier and more comfortable for young people to report:

“

Well...maybe there should be some kind of system, online, where you can send evidence or write down your experience, upload proof, [...] so it can be investigated [...]. A system where, for example, you don't have to go to the police in person and face all the anxiety and fear about that. Something more comfortable, so you can do it without... without any judgment about what happened. (YP)

”

In this regard, the anticipated introduction of the European child helpline number 116 111 in North Macedonia would represent a step towards strengthening accessible support and reporting pathways for children and young people. This builds on Megjashi's long-standing experience operating the AloBushavko helpline for children and youth for over 30 years.⁶² While a helpline does not fully replace the need for dedicated online reporting tools for tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse, it can provide a more visible, accessible and child-friendly entry point for children seeking support, guidance or referral.

Beyond the barriers that discourage reporting, some professionals also described how cases that are reported may fail to progress through the next stages of the justice process, as further detailed in chapter 5. As one professional explained:

“

We've had cases where, for example, a victim calls and says, 'I already called the police, they told me I don't have a case and that even if I report it, nothing will change'. (JP)

”

This reflects broader concerns around trust and confidence in institutional responses to reporting of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

⁶² Better Internet for Kids, [Macedonia reaches milestone in child protection: child helpline number 116 111 assigned to AloBushavko Helpline by Megjashi](#), European Union, 12 January 2026.

4. IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND ACCESS TO CARE



4. IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND ACCESS TO CARE

The Disrupting Harm data highlight several impacts on children who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. These included anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideation or attempts. Access to specialized care services, such as psychosocial support, are therefore integral to helping children manage the impact of sexual exploitation and abuse and to processing the violence they were subjected to. This chapter will discuss some of the mental health impacts on children that emerged from the data, before describing professionals' perspectives and experiences of service provision.

Professionals highlighted the severe and long-term impacts on children's mental health, including anxiety, self-harm and suicide. They described how this was often linked to ongoing or intensified threats, coercion and the anticipation (or reality) of the perpetrator circulating their sexual content.

4.1 THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

The impact of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse – including image-based abuse – was commonly discussed by professionals, especially when a child's sexual images were shared online.

Children were described as blaming themselves for the abuse, internalizing social norms and victim-blaming attitudes. A psychotherapist recounted the reactions by a girl whose sexual content was circulated online by a male peer and described the profound impact this had on her. The girl experienced ongoing stress and anxiety in relation to the fact that this content would remain online permanently and the impact this would have on her future:

“

Everyone stared at her in the school hallway. She was humiliated.” She went on to say: “Yes, she was afraid people would keep bringing it up, that it would follow her wherever she went. She even thought about running away to another city. [...] The same thoughts kept repeating. (FW)

”

Professionals further highlighted the severe and long-term impacts on children's mental health, including anxiety, self-harm and suicide. They described how this was often linked to ongoing or intensified threats, coercion and the anticipation (or reality) of the perpetrator circulating their sexual content. Professionals described the intense shame and sense of loss of control felt by children following non-consensual sharing of their sexual content or continued abuse.

A social worker recalled a case of sexual extortion, where the perpetrator used escalating threats and manipulation to sexually exploit a girl. The

social worker described how the sense of being trapped with no viable escape led to a loss of sleep and to suicidal thoughts. In another case, a psychotherapist supported a 13-year-old girl who attempted suicide after she was sexually extorted and the perpetrator took nude images of her against her will.

The survey data support these findings, showing that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is associated with indicators of mental ill-health. The data show how children who were subjected to any form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse reported noticeably higher levels of anxiety. On average, their anxiety scores were about 21 percentage points higher than those of children who were not subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year.⁶³

In addition, the survey data indicated elevated risks of self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. Children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were 11 times more likely to report self-harm⁶⁴ and 12 times more likely to report suicidal thoughts and behaviours compared to children who were not subjected to these forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.⁶⁵

Impacts can be enduring and may continue to affect children in new environments or long after the exploitation or abuse. A lawyer reflected on the impact on two adult women whose sexual content from when they were children was shared in online groups:

“

They have families now – one of them even has children – but she still lives in shame. (JP)

”

⁶³ 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.

⁶⁴ 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. Estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals (6.683, 65.691).

⁶⁵ 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. Estimates are based on smaller subgroups and should be interpreted with caution due to wider confidence intervals (2.56, 55.236).

She described how this led one of the women to attempt suicide.

Reflecting the impact that sexual exploitation and abuse has on children and the need to provide them with support, the Law on Justice for Children establishes the right of child victims of crimes to receive information on how to access available medical, psychological and other professional assistance from relevant authorities, institutions and organizations before, during and after criminal proceedings, and to access the victim support services they provide.⁶⁶ Further, the Law on the Protection of Children mandates the State to implement special programmes to support the physical and psychological recovery, rehabilitation, resocialization and social reintegration of children subjected to exploitation and abuse.⁶⁷

Against this legal framework, this chapter considers how these rights are protected in practice. It draws on professionals' experiences providing care to children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and their perspectives on aspects of service provision in North Macedonia. This analysis is not intended to be exhaustive or to provide a full picture of service provision in North Macedonia; due to the semi-structured nature of interviews, participants had the freedom to discuss the aspects of service provision that were most relevant for them. As such, most of the accounts shared highlighted gaps in effective service provision, as opposed to strengths. When reading this chapter, it should also be noted that none of the young women subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse as children spoke about accessing psychosocial support or professional mental health services. This shapes the analysis in important ways, leaving an important gap and need for further research into how these services are understood by children.

66 Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art. 166(1).

67 Republic of North Macedonia (2013). [Law on the Protection of Children](#), Art. 56(3).

4.2 CHALLENGES IN SERVICE PROVISION

Psychosocial support for children subjected to exploitation and abuse in North Macedonia is provided through various organizations, including statutory institutions, civil society organizations, schools and private practitioners. This section examines some of the pathways to accessing psychosocial support, along with challenges described by the professionals interviewed.

Statutory services are primarily delivered through Centres for Social Work and the public health sector, with civil society organizations providing psychosocial support and community-based services. Private psychologists and psychotherapists complement this provision, often providing child- and trauma-focused expertise. Schools therefore constitute one of the key entry points for access to service provision, with professional services (specialist school staff) supporting students' psychosocial well-being and linking children and families to external services.

Centres for Social Work

The Centres for Social Work constitute a central part of service provision in North Macedonia. These are public social protection institutions staffed by licensed multidisciplinary teams, including social workers, psychologists, pedagogues and lawyers.⁶⁸ They operate through a case management model, under which case managers assess users' needs, prepare individual plans to address them, coordinate services across institutions and mobilize the professional and other resources necessary to ensure access to appropriate support.⁶⁹ In interviews, professionals reflected on the breadth of responsibilities covered by Centres for Social Work and highlighted heavy workloads, limited human resources and how this affects the ability to provide quality services for children and families.

A psychologist at a Centre for Social Work illustrated how workload pressures accumulate within small teams tasked with handling multiple areas simultaneously:

“

In domestic violence and juvenile cases, it's just one team handling both areas. There aren't enough people... only five of us are working on both domestic violence and juvenile cases. For juveniles, every other week each of us gets about 7 new cases in a single day, plus 3 domestic violence cases – that's 10 new cases at once. (FW)

”

Reflecting on the consequences of this, she added:

“

So, we're overloaded with work just to keep up, and of course not everyone will be satisfied, that's normal, it really is. (FW)

”

She also described high staff turnover within the Centres due to the heavy workloads.

Another psychologist from a Centre for Social Work described the range of responsibilities covered by her and her colleagues:

“

[...] I am the only psychologist in the [department] for the entire territory of the city [one of the largest towns in North Macedonia]. There are two other social workers. We work with unaccompanied foreign children, with victims and perpetrators, with adult asylum-seekers, with returnees from readmission, child victims of sexual violence and paedophilia, child victims of human trafficking [...] we cooperate with NGOs [...] We actually provide accommodation and daycare services. (FW)

”

68 Republic of North Macedonia (2019). [Law on Social Protection](#), Art. 113.

69 Ibid., Art. 4(13).

Front-line workers also highlighted a perceived lack of specialized and accessible psychosocial resources. The same psychologist – discussing the heavy workload in her team – emphasized the limited availability of counselling services:

“

We have endless challenges and no resources. After all these years of the Centre for Social Work in [one of the largest towns in North Macedonia] existing, we still have just one counselling service – just one resource. [...]. Honestly, I've also been assigned to work in the counselling office. But with all these other responsibilities – how can I possibly make it? I'm handling case management, urgent interventions, guardianship, probation, everything. I can't split myself into seven people to do seven different jobs. (FW)

”

A prosecutor described these limitations from an inter-institutional perspective, noting how at times there may be a need to prioritize between cases due to limited resources:

“

And the cooperation with the Centre for Social Work – when it comes to cases like this, they too will get fully involved. However, for other, let's say, smaller incidents or less serious ones – although for us all incidents are significant – they don't have the capacity. [...] I think they lack sufficient capacity, both in terms of human resources and technical means. (JP)

”

The healthcare system or private practice

Psychiatric and/or psychological services are not part of the primary health care package in North Macedonia but are categorized as specialist–consultative health care.⁷⁰ For children under the age of 14, parents or guardians select the primary care physician and must initiate access to such specialist services on the child's behalf. Usually, access requires a referral from a primary care doctor and is delivered either through authorized public institutions or private practitioners contracted by statutory services.⁷¹ As a result, access to care depends not only on service availability but also on administrative procedures and coordination across multiple providers.

A psychotherapist described how these procedural requirements can create significant delays and how long waiting lists often prevent timely access to services, even when they are formally available. She noted how although services were formally covered by the health insurance fund, obtaining an appointment could take up to two years due to limited availability.

In addition, this means that specialist psychosocial services are not directly accessible for children independently. Even for older children, services remain referral-based and navigating the system typically requires family involvement, as the parents are the holders of the primary health insurance or healthcare plan. This could create additional barriers for children who do not want their parents to know that they are seeking services.

As mentioned above, access to services is also available via private practitioners. However, a private psychotherapist described how private practitioners remain largely disconnected from public institutions and health insurance systems.

⁷⁰ Health Insurance Fund of Republic of North Macedonia. “How an Insured Person Can Choose a Doctor” [translated from Macedonian]. Accessed June 6, 2026. <https://fzo.org.mk/nachin-kako-osigurenoto-lice-da-izbere-lekar>; Health Insurance Fund of Republic of North Macedonia. “Rights to Primary Health Care” [translated from Macedonian]. Accessed June 6, 2026. <https://fzo.org.mk/prava-od-primarna-zdravstvena-zashtita>; Health Insurance Fund of Republic of North Macedonia. “II. Rights to Specialist-Consultative Health Care” [translated from Macedonian]. Accessed June 6, 2026. <https://fzo.org.mk/prava-od-specijalistichko-konsultativna-zdravstvena-zashtita>

⁷¹ Health Insurance Fund of Republic of North Macedonia. “How an Insured Person Can Choose a Doctor” [translated from Macedonian]. Accessed 6 June 2026. <https://fzo.org.mk/nachin-kako-osigurenoto-lice-da-izbere-lekar>; Health Insurance Fund of Republic of North Macedonia. “Rights to Primary Health Care” [translated from Macedonian]. Accessed 6 June 2026. <https://fzo.org.mk/prava-od-primarna-zdravstvena-zashtita>; Health Insurance Fund of Republic of North Macedonia. “II. Rights to Specialist-Consultative Health Care” [translated from Macedonian]. Accessed 6 June 2026. <https://fzo.org.mk/prava-od-specijalistichko-konsultativna-zdravstvena-zashtita>

4.2 CHALLENGES IN SERVICE PROVISION

Accessing private services requires families to shoulder both the financial and administrative burden and further depends on their ability to navigate this parallel system.

One psychotherapist reflected more generally on the lack of professionals who are specialized in working with children and how in turn this impacts the availability of specialized services for them:

“

[...] very few professionals choose to work with children. For example, there are very few child psychiatrists. [...] there are only a handful in this city, and we refer clients to each other. [...] Also, there is not much training here for working with children and young people; most training is abroad. (FW)

”

Interviews further indicated that access to psychosocial services may be impacted by geography. One psychotherapist noted how qualified mental health professionals – particularly those specialized in working with children – are heavily concentrated in urban centres, especially Skopje. Rural and smaller-town communities often lack such specialists, which may then require families to travel or rely on private provision, incurring costs.

Front-line workers described how families travelled to Skopje to access psychosocial support when local services were unavailable or did not meet their needs, often relying on private practitioners. A psychotherapist, supporting a girl whose photos with sexual content were shared non-consensually, emphasized how access services depended on family resources:

“

The girl was very lost and needed more support, but the support depended on how much they could afford financially. The health insurance doesn't cover the sessions [...]. (FW)

”

These accounts by professionals suggest a degree of fragmentation in the provision of psychosocial support, where navigating the system could create delays or challenges for children and families attempting to access these services. Centralization of services, particularly in Skopje, a lack of specialized services and private service providers may further create barriers in terms of availability, logistics and costs. However, as these insights are based on interviews with a group of front-line workers and justice professionals, they are limited and cannot be extrapolated to the entire system in North Macedonia.

4.3 BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Beyond some of the systemic and institutional challenges described above, professionals referred to other considerations for families that might impact on whether they seek services. Lack of trust in institutions, concerns about the quality of care and the fear of others finding out about the exploitation or abuse were described as factors that can shape families' decision-making. A psychotherapist from a civil society organization explained:

“

[...] victims who come to me don't believe they will be protected. And this keeps happening. Even those with resources, connections and financial means don't trust the system. They don't believe in justice or resolution. (FW)

”

Referring to a specific case, he pointed out the parents' concerns about continuing to live in the same community.

Front-line workers highlighted how service provision is dependent on the engagement between institutions and families, and described how weak relationships can limit the effectiveness of service provision. They described families approaching institutions cautiously, assessing whether professionals could be relied upon and whether engagement with institutions could jeopardize the child's anonymity.

Front-line workers also described cases including parental avoidance, resistance or hostility, shaped not by a lack of concern for the child but by concern for the exploitation and abuse becoming known in the community and uncertainty about the outcome following involvement of institutions. A psychotherapist reflected on a case where parents sought to end psychosocial support quickly, declining referrals for continued care:

“

[...] I told them that, depending on what they could afford, they could continue counselling elsewhere. [...] But no. [...] And I guess many people act like: 'Let's cover this up as quickly as possible'. (FW)

”

Similarly, a psychologist from the Centre for Social Work described how stigma surrounding mental health issues may lead parents to resist referrals, due to concerns that their child will be labelled and around social implications if others find out that they are accessing services.

Interviews with front-line workers highlighted the fact that while services may be available, decisions to seek services and the engagement with such services may also be shaped by families' social, emotional and economic resources and their ability to navigate institutions, as well as trust in institutions and concerns around the social consequences if the exploitation and abuse become known to others.

4.4 CHALLENGES WITH MULTISECTORAL COLLABORATION IN SERVICE PROVISION

Beyond access to services, the professionals interviewed also identified a number of barriers and challenges to effective service provision. As mentioned above, this is not intended to be a systematic review of the quality and effectiveness of service provision, however the interviews with over 30 professionals offer important insights into the challenges that some professionals face in their day-to-day work.

Interviews with front-line workers brought up overarching issues affecting their work and the handling of cases. An issue highlighted by professionals across institutions – from Centres for Social Work, civil society organizations and schools – was the need for strengthened communication, information-sharing and coordination between institutions.

A school psychologist emphasized the need for more formalized communication and collaboration, raising the need for:

“

[...] something systemic, a connection between the police, social services, the Centre for Social Work, doctors, us. Because... I can't really reach social services. Their phone doesn't work; I have to find some number on the internet, send an email, and then [...] it might take three months for it to go anywhere. So, we need some link, some people who have direct contact with each other. (FW)

”

Other professionals noted how in the absence of formal communication channels or points of contact, they would rely on informal networks and personal connections. While this can facilitate communication and possibly accelerate processes, it risks creating unequal responses. A psychotherapist working as a private practitioner noted:

“

[...] I'm a therapist who is fairly well connected with the NGO sector. So, I have all these resources for referrals. Many of my colleagues don't have that [...] we constantly face these gaps in connectivity. I have someone to refer to, or sometimes they might refer someone back to me. But what about the institutions? (FW)

”

Professionals further described how limited communication and sharing of information between institutions could lead to uncertainty about whether children were already in contact with other institutions, if risk had been assessed or action had been taken in a case and whether the child was receiving ongoing support. A professional from a health institution reflected on delays in or a lack of responses from social services following formal reports, leaving uncertainty about next steps and accountability:

“

[...] in certain situations, the Centres [for Social Work] don't even respond to our reports. They do have a practice of responding in some cases, but it takes a very, very long time. I understand they probably have many cases themselves. We didn't get any response from the Centre, no. Most likely because they coordinate with the police, and then the inspector takes it over, I assume, which ideally shouldn't be the case. (FW)

”

Children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse often require multisectoral services and interventions from different institutions. Weak communication and collaboration between institutions could affect access to and the quality of services for children. It could risks creating delays or gaps in service provision and may also impact trust in these institutions.

Gaps in the continuity of care and services

In a few separate cases, professionals raised concerns about gaps in the continuity of care and support for children. In particular, gaps were identified as a case progressed through the system at points where there may be a shift in the institutions involved.

A justice professional referring to a case where a girl was sexually extorted and then exploited described how institutional responses prioritized acute protection measures. However, according to the professional, recovery-oriented support, social reintegration and long-term care were less systematically planned and implemented. A lawyer made a similar reflection in relation to a case after criminal proceedings ended:

“

This case once again highlighted how the lack of victim support services, beyond legal support, which itself is precarious and unregulated, leaves victims largely on their own. In reality they are left to rely on their families, or [to] simply fend for themselves. (JP)

”

Another professional highlighted the need for a more structured process, referring to a case when a child left residential care.

While these challenges were only raised by a few professionals and the circumstances varied, this may warrant further inquiry into the continuity of care, recovery-oriented intervention and coordinated multisectoral follow-up.

The role of the education system in detection and response

Schools are environments where tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse take place, but they are also important spaces for prevention efforts and where adults may detect exploitation and abuse, receive disclosures and refer children to the appropriate services.

In their interviews, professionals and the young women subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse as children provided examples where schools intervened in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. A school psychologist described how a girl had been sexually extorted by her boyfriend. The school informed the parents, adjusted the girl's schedule to give her time for emotional recovery and arranged regular check-ins with the school psychologist. In another case, described by a justice professional, a 12-year-old girl's sexual images were shared in peer chat groups. This was reported by the girl's teacher to the Centre for Social Work, which then reported it to the police, who took action, illustrating how formal reporting pathways between institutions functioned effectively in this case.

While several accounts demonstrated positive examples of how schools identified and coordinated response to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, interviewees also raised issues in relation to the response by schools and school staff.

Delayed responses or inaction by schools:

Some front-line workers discussed instances where schools failed to take appropriate action. A social worker described how a case involving the creation and circulation of digitally manipulated sexual images by peers was only referred by the school to the Centre for Social work once the parents had reported it to the police.

4.4 CHALLENGES WITH MULTISECTORAL COLLABORATION IN SERVICE PROVISION

According to a professional from a health institution, disclosures by a child in school of sexual bullying by peers and exposure to sexual content by an adult on school premises were not acted upon by the school. The girl's mother sought psychosocial support for the girl as the child started avoiding school. When the girl then shared the information about the abuse, the professional reported the man who exposed the girl to sexual content to the police, later receiving feedback from the police that upon investigation, other girls in the school had also been subjected to abuse by the same adult.

Some professionals also observed how the minimization of incidents or limited response by schools may be affected by other concerns, such as the reputation of the school or concerns about negative reactions from parents.

Lack of comprehensive and sensitive responses:

In interviews, front-line workers and justice professionals reflected on how some abusive behaviours may not be properly recognized or downplayed by school staff.

A psychologist from the Centre for Social Work described a case involving the circulation of sexual content of a girl in a school. The school referred the case to the Centre for Social Work, however the referral expressed concern with the 'behaviour' of the girl and the negative impact of the video on other students, rather than with the abuse the girl was subjected to:

There was no sensitivity that the child was a victim of violence, of something, of anything, but that the child was a problem which they, as a school, could not resolve. (FW)

The professional further reflected on how the school also failed to recognize its role in addressing the peers involved in sharing the video.

Professionals also described actions by schools that seemed focused on solving the immediate issue, but where they considered the response to lack a significant assessment of the child's needs or include insufficient follow-up. A psychotherapist supporting a girl whose intimate photos were shared non-consensually by a peer made reference to this:

“

It was left to the school to handle, but I don't think anything actually happened. The school psychologist was informed and contacted once, but after that there was no follow-up. The process stopped at acknowledging what happened, with no further action, no repeated meetings and no ongoing work with her. (FW)

”

Structural constraints in schools: Front-line workers, however, also recognized how responses by schools to violence and abuse may be impacted by structural and capacity constraints, including insufficient staffing and administrative burdens. A psychotherapist reflected on the impact that this may have on the ability of school staff to respond appropriately:

“

They [school staff] are busy with other matters. I think they are overloaded with administrative work, other cases like bullying, behavioural issues, and the various tasks the school psychologist handles. [...]. As a result, they report [make referrals] very little and often feel it isn't their job to involve the parents. (FW)

”

She added:

“

Well, it's also a question of how well they know it. They have so many protocols, right? (FW)

”

The same professional also reflected on the lack of consistency in the number of specialized staff, their capacity and the training they receive. She pointed out how school psychologists may not be available in schools outside urban centres.

A school psychologist raised how, in her view, more support is needed to be able to handle complex issues and situations. She explained how guidance should be available from the pedagogical service⁷² at the Ministry of Education and Science if schools are unsure about what is within their jurisdiction or the correct legal action, however she explained how due to limited capacity, she felt this support was unavailable in practical terms:

“

In the end, the school is blamed, even though in reality the school has no real support from anyone. [...]. So, the law [on pedagogical services] itself is great, but it functions with just two or three people in the service, and all they ask from us is data: 'How many victims have you had, how many incidents in the first semester with numbers, and how many in the second semester with numbers?' [...] but the cases where someone actually reached out for help are such that no one ever received real support, because the service isn't properly staffed. (FW)

”

The data presented here highlight schools as places where tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse takes place but also as important places for the identification of child protection concerns, the provision of support and services to children, and referrals to other institutions when needed. However, findings show how there is a need to strengthen the understanding of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and its harms, ensuring that clear protocols are in place and their practical implementation is understood, as well as strengthening coordination with other institutions in schools to better protect children.

⁷² The Pedagogical Service under the Ministry of Education and Science supports students' mental health, guides schools in handling educational and psychosocial issues, and assists parents through counselling and guidance. It provides access to child psychologists, develops service models, monitors educational practices and proposes measures to address conflicts and promote a healthy learning environment.

5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES



5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

This chapter focuses on how institutions and professionals in the justice system address children's needs, protect them from further harm and uphold their rights, particularly through the use of child-centred procedures. It also assesses the extent to which the legal framework in North Macedonia provides for such procedures.

The Law on Justice for Children outlines a wide range of safeguards for child victims of crime. Children have the right to be treated with dignity, to have their privacy respected and to be protected from intimidation, retaliation and any form of discrimination. They must also be informed of their rights in clear language that is appropriate to their age and psychophysical condition, and both they and their guardians must be kept informed of all matters related to the proceedings. The law further enshrines the right of child victims of crime to special protection against secondary victimization or revictimization, including the right to give statements in conditions adapted to their needs and development, without unnecessary delay after filing a complaint.⁷³ Cases involving child victims of crime must be handled by an intersectoral protection team⁷⁴ and the police, prosecutors and courts are expressly required to exercise special care towards them.⁷⁵

Child victims of crime are also entitled to receiving legal advice from a lawyer trained in children's rights prior to their first statement.⁷⁶ This assistance is always free of charge in cases involving offences against sexual freedom,⁷⁷ and can be provided by the Ministry of Justice, its regional departments, legal clinics and authorized organizations.⁷⁸ Children are further entitled to be represented by

a lawyer throughout the proceedings,⁷⁹ but the law does not clearly establish that such representation should be provided free of charge. While free legal representation is, in principle, available in matters related to the protection of children or victims of crime in judicial procedures, it requires children and their families to submit an application and demonstrate financial eligibility, which can potentially limit effective access.⁸⁰ Positively, however, free legal assistance includes support in completing this application.⁸¹

The justice professionals interviewed indicated that the need to adapt legal procedures to children's developmental capacities and particular vulnerabilities is well established in practice. Although the child-centred safeguards embedded in legislation were widely recognized by justice professionals as essential to preventing retraumatization, their accounts also pointed to uneven implementation in practice:

“

We don't always have trained staff who know how to work with children or who are assigned to child-related cases. There's overcrowding and other issues that lead to... lead to potential secondary victimization. (JP)

”

In the same vein, a lawyer from a civil society organization reflected on progress in the adoption of child-centred approaches, while highlighting persistent gaps in their application:

73 Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art. 166(1).

74 Ibid., Art. 166(4).

75 Ibid., Art. 166(3).

76 Ibid., Art. 167(1), 167(2).

77 Republic of North Macedonia (2010). [Criminal Procedure Law](#), Art. 55(1).

78 Republic of North Macedonia, [Free legal aid](#) (accessed on 4 April 2026).

79 Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art. 167(1).

80 Republic of North Macedonia (2009). [Law on Free Legal Aid](#), Art. 8.

81 Ibid., Art. 12; Republic of North Macedonia, [Free legal aid](#) (accessed on 4 April 2026).

5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

“

Over the years, from what we've observed, training and contributions from institutions themselves, as well as from the NGO and international sectors, have had a genuinely positive impact on improving practice. We now have more aware professionals dealing with this type of violence. But still, we definitely face non-ideal situations, and that's partly because it's often impossible to have ideal conditions. For example, we don't always have appropriate rooms for interviewing children, we don't always have trained staff who know how to work with children or who are assigned to child-related cases. (JP)

”

The findings presented below reflect the perspectives and experiences of the 16 justice professionals interviewed, complemented by relevant insights from interviews with front-line workers. It should be noted that none of the five young women subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse as children had contact with the justice system. As such, the findings presented in this chapter are based solely on the accounts of professionals who have supported children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. The findings related to access to justice and legal remedies should therefore be interpreted in light of the absence of perspectives from children.

5.1 LACK OF SPECIALIZED JUSTICE PROFESSIONALS

The Law on Justice for Children states that proceedings involving child victims of crime must be conducted by judges, prosecutors and police officers with knowledge of, and at least 10 years of experience in children's rights and the legal protection of children in criminal proceedings.⁸² In practice, this requirement may pose questions in terms of feasibility. One prosecutor highlighted the need to identify practical solutions for its implementation, pointing to the circular barrier it may create, whereby professionals without prior experience would be effectively precluded from acquiring it:

“

That [formulation] is problematic in itself because if that is the case, it's okay – some prosecutor's offices, judges and police officers maybe have it, but the question still poses itself – if they don't, how would they acquire that 10 years of experience to fulfil the condition. Before I even begin, I have no right to act in such cases. (JP)

”

Several justice professionals interviewed also noted that, in practice, they are required to cover a broad range of cases, which restricts opportunities to build and maintain such specialization. For instance, one prosecutor remarked:

“

I am not focused solely on juvenile cases. We do not have the volume of cases for one prosecutor to work only on juvenile matters. (JP)

”

According to professionals, the challenge around specialization is compounded by staffing constraints, which may result in judges being required to take on cases outside their usual area of practice and, as a result, not being fully familiar with the procedural safeguards applicable

to child victims and witnesses of crime. In such circumstances, there is a risk that professionals may not be sufficiently prepared to implement child-sensitive approaches that enable children to participate meaningfully in proceedings in a way that upholds their rights and best interests.

A more significant concern of this lack of specialization is the potentially limited understanding of the nature and scope of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse among some justice and front-line professionals, which may result in the mischaracterization of offences. A legal adviser from a civil society organization described a case involving the recording of child sexual abuse in which the primary perpetrator was indicted for sexual assault on the child, while the individuals who recorded and disseminated the material were treated solely as witnesses, thereby shielding them from prosecution:

“

The recording was taken as evidence in the procedure, but it was not qualified as a separate offence on which we insisted – for creating pornography and distributing pornographic material. No such indictment was filed by the Prosecutor's Office. I don't know why [...]. (JP)

”

In the same vein, two lawyers from civil society organizations recounted two separate cases involving the digital manipulation of children's images to create sexual content that were classified as misuse of personal data under the Law on Personal Data Protection rather than as offences relating to child sexual abuse material. While both cases concerned conduct committed by children, one of the lawyers suggested that this was not the primary factor behind this less severe legal qualification, instead attributing it largely to a lack of awareness of the applicable provisions. It should be noted that one case was handled by the Centre for Social Work rather than referred to the Prosecutor's Office, illustrating how knowledge

⁸² Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art. 172.

5.1 LACK OF SPECIALIZED JUSTICE PROFESSIONALS

gaps among professionals involved at an early stage of the response may also result in conduct being diverted away from the criminal justice system altogether, hindering effective access to justice and accountability.

These accounts highlight a disconnect between formal knowledge and experience requirements and their implementation in practice, pointing to broader systemic challenges that may undermine

the consistent application of safeguards and the effective prosecution of offences. While continuous training remains essential to addressing gaps in specialization, it is not sufficient on its own. Structural constraints that limit the development of specialized expertise and otherwise undermine the effectiveness of the judiciary – and the broader system of case identification and referral – must also be addressed. These issues are explored further in the following section.

Although the child-centred safeguards embedded in legislation were widely recognized by justice professionals as essential to preventing retraumatization, their accounts also pointed to uneven implementation in practice.

5.2 SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Interviews with justice professionals and front-line workers identified systemic constraints, particularly understaffing, and limited human and technical resources, as key factors affecting the functioning of the justice system. Justice professionals described high workloads and limited institutional support, which affect both case handling and the timelines of judicial proceedings. One judge shared his view that these challenges are not isolated but affect multiple institutions across the system:

“

The prosecution and the courts are depleted. We have too few judges. As for prosecutors, I don't know their exact situation or how well staffed they are. [...] but I know their service is in worse shape than ours, and we're already in poor condition. [...] But I keep asking myself, how is it that no institution works, no judge, no prosecutor, no court, no clerk, no social worker, or anyone else is functioning properly, and yet we treat that as normal? So, clearly, the problem is systemic. (JP)

”

Similarly, a prosecutor highlighted the impact of understaffing, noting growing strain on the service:

“

I really love the work. But unfortunately, every year the demands get harder and harder because we're understaffed. We don't have enough people, we don't have enough qualified staff. I believe that for a prosecutor's work to be high quality, it's essential to always have support. Someone to take minutes, a typist, someone to help with the case files, draft summonses. [...] But right now, unfortunately, we're severely understaffed. Severely. And we're overwhelmed. (JP)

”

Although these accounts do not specifically relate to cases involving tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, they illustrate broader challenges within the justice system that are likely to affect its overall efficiency and capacity to respond to such cases in a child-centred way. In practice, staff shortages and high caseloads may indeed result in delays and limited continuity in proceedings, undermining the trust of children subjected to such crimes and their families in the process, as explained by a legal adviser from a civil society organization:

“

Additionally, what made things difficult for us was that in [town] over the last five years, the court had a shortage of judges. There were only a few, and they had a huge caseload. Hearings were being scheduled every three or four months, meaning there was no good continuity. For example, if we had one in March, the next one would be in September, and so on. This further affected the parents, making them lose trust in the system, and honestly, I'd say everyone involved got fed up with the whole process. Especially when the judge changed. (JP)

”

It stems from the above that sustained public investment in human and technical capacity within the justice sector is needed to address resource constraints, particularly given their contribution to delays in the progression of cases involving tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

5.3 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WITHDRAWAL FROM PROCEEDINGS

Several justice professionals raised concerns regarding the extended duration of judicial proceedings related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. While the Law on Justice for Children requires that cases involving child victims of crime be treated as “urgent,”⁸³ it does not set binding deadlines for court proceedings, limiting the practical effectiveness of this safeguard. In some of the cases described by the professionals interviewed, delays seemed to be linked to broader systemic issues, such as an overburdened justice system or coordination challenges within the system itself and with external institutions. In other instances, participants identified issues more specifically related to the complexity of such cases, including difficulties in meeting applicable legal requirements and evidentiary considerations.

For instance, a judge referred to a case of sexual extortion by peers that he had taken over from another judge. The case had already been ongoing for 18 months, during which time the child had yet to be interviewed. He attributed the delays to multiple factors, including difficulties in securing the attendance of experts involved in forensic evaluations at the hearing, as well as the fact that no psychiatric evaluation of the child had been conducted:

“

[...] there's the challenge of gathering all the expert witnesses who conducted the forensic evaluations, since their testimony is also required. [...] So, I found myself in a situation where, once I scheduled the hearing for September and certain conditions were met, I contacted everyone. During my communication with the last one, the psychologist pointed out that the psychiatric evaluation was missing from their report. That's now holding me back from scheduling the hearing. (JP)

”

Similarly, a legal adviser from a civil society organization described a case involving the recording of child sexual abuse in which the court faced challenges in compiling evidence and coordinating expert involvement, resulting in several postponed hearings. The proceedings were prolonged to such an extent that the child's family eventually decided not to pursue the case further:

“

What exactly happened at the very end, I don't know, because at one point in the proceedings the parent said: 'I give up. I can't go through this anymore, I'll solve it in my own way.' We insisted that there is no such thing as 'my way, your way,' but only the legal way. He kept insisting he was fed up with all of this, with the procedures, with everything. (JP)

”

This illustrates how prolonged legal proceedings and repeated procedural disruptions may contribute to frustration among families, ultimately leading them to withdraw from the process. Referring to a specific case involving a lengthy appeal process, a social worker from a civil society organization also considered how such delays can lead to sustained uncertainty for children, resulting in significant emotional distress:

“

Because she attends psychotherapy. She's doing well, but there are moments when she calls and says, 'I can't do this anymore. I know they'll be released, [...] this is taking so long... what will happen?' She experiences the same old thoughts, gets frustrated, but then stabilizes. Still, the waiting for so many years for things to unfold really affects her a lot. (FW)

”

⁸³ Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art. 173(2).

Returning to the case described by the legal adviser above, the child involved was also subjected to repeated intimidation and assault by the alleged perpetrator, raising concerns as to whether existing protection mechanisms are being systematically implemented in practice. Indeed, the law empowers courts to impose special measures to protect the psychophysical integrity of child victims of crime,⁸⁴ including alteration of personal data in official documents;⁸⁵ personal protection;⁸⁶ temporary or permanent relocation;⁸⁷ or identity change.⁸⁸ This case points to the potential consequences where such measures are not effectively applied, including exposure of children and their families to multiple forms of pressure, which may affect their ability or willingness to continue with proceedings. However, the data collected during this research does not allow for an assessment of the extent to which such situations occur.

84 Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art. 175(2).

85 Republic of North Macedonia (2005). [Law on Witness Protection](#), Art. 28.

86 Ibid., Art. 29.

87 Ibid., Art. 30.

88 Ibid., Art. 31.

5.4 FORENSIC INTERVIEWS

The Law on Justice for Children provides that child victims of crime have the right to special protection when giving testimony, and courts must apply these measures in cases of sexual abuse.⁸⁹ Before interviewing a child, the competent authorities, together with relevant victim support bodies, institutions and organizations, must assess the child's situation to determine which measures are required.⁹⁰ This includes considering the child's age, development and personal circumstances, and the nature of the offence.⁹¹ Depending on the case, courts may introduce protective screens or take other measures to protect the identity and privacy of the child and their family. They can also allow testimony via videoconference or other technical means of communication, remove formal judicial attire, exclude the public or take the child's testimony through an expert intermediary.⁹² Child victims of crime must be interviewed in a manner that does not harm their well-being, with police, prosecutors and courts required to take each child's individual characteristics and needs into account.⁹³

The Criminal Procedure Law allows courts to take testimony from children subjected to sexual abuse with the assistance of a psychologist, pedagogue, social worker or another competent professional. Questions from other parties are then filtered through that expert or the judge conducting the proceedings.⁹⁴ However, the law does not expressly require that such interviews are systematically conducted by specially trained professionals. The absence of this safeguard may result in children being questioned by personnel who lack the necessary trauma-informed skills, increasing revictimization risks, as noted by a lawyer from a civil society organization:

“

Very often, even in cases of human trafficking, we still encounter situations where the victim is interviewed multiple times, where the interviews are conducted inappropriately, where the interviewer – and we're present for part of the interview – doesn't adjust to the victim's level so she can understand what's being asked, or doesn't fully grasp her responses. (JP)

”

Several professionals interviewed highlighted the need for specialized training in conducting forensic interviews of children. Reflecting on a case she worked on, another lawyer shared her opinion that prosecutors, in particular, would benefit from such capacity-building initiatives:

“

[...] prosecutors who work with victims definitely need specialized training in how to approach and communicate. A single training on working with child victims is nowhere near enough to actually adjust how you question them. And I am not even talking about the way questions are phrased. For example, this girl was explaining how degraded she felt, [when she was abused] [...], and then the prosecutor asked: 'But you... but you did not want that, right?' In moments like that, I have to intervene. (JP)

”

89 Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art. 170(1), 170(2).

90 Ibid., Art. 169(1).

91 Ibid., Art. 169(2), 169(3).

92 Ibid., Art. 171.

93 Ibid., Art. 173(4), 173(5).

94 Republic of North Macedonia (2010). [Criminal Procedure Law](#), Art. 232(1), 232(4).

This need was also acknowledged by a prosecutor, who highlighted the limited availability of training opportunities and pointed to the absence of standardized protocols for interviewing child victims of crime:

“

[...] working with children is very delicate, very sensitive. And it's not just a matter of having a designated staff of people to work with them; they also need to go through specific training, workshops. The method of interviewing a child victim must be specially tailored. There should be a proper set of regulations for this. [...] We, as legal professionals who are in daily contact with such child victims, also need training. [...] It's not enough that the prosecutor or judge is sensitive on their own. We need to have a course for this. (JP)

”

In child sexual abuse cases, courts are required to order the video recording of the child's testimony. One additional hearing can be held only in exceptional cases where new circumstances arise, provided it is in the child's best interests and is carried out using technical means of communication.⁹⁵ Despite these safeguards, one lawyer interviewed highlighted the fact that, in practice, children may have to recount the abuse multiple times to different professionals before the formal recorded interview takes place, effectively undermining the protective purpose of these safeguards:

“

According to the law, the processes and measures are set in place for that when the child gives the statement, we record them, and then we try to include everything in that one hearing, but until that moment comes, the child tells the story many times. [...] and the child relives the same trauma over and over. (JP)

”

Taken together, these accounts suggest that further steps could be considered to significantly reduce revictimization risks arising from forensic interviews, including the introduction of an explicit legal requirement that they be conducted by professionals with specialized training in trauma-informed, child-sensitive approaches. Such an approach should be supported by the development of dedicated, standardized interview protocols for cases of sexual violence, alongside continued investment in capacity-building for relevant actors to promote their consistent application. Establishing clear procedures to ensure that the video recording of the child's testimony takes place at the earliest appropriate stage – guided by the child's individual needs, preferences and circumstances – and is effectively relied upon throughout proceedings, is also essential to operationalizing existing legal safeguards aimed at preventing repeated questioning.

At the same time, it is important to note that the practice of recording or livestreaming forensic interviews has not yet been tested from a trauma-informed perspective for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse that involved the use of digital technologies, who may have heightened sensitivity to being recorded 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 on a case-by-case basis.

95 Republic of North Macedonia (2024). [Law on Justice for Children](#), Art. 170(4).

5.5 ACCESS TO COMPENSATION

Access to compensation is an essential element of the right to justice, providing both recognition of and material redress for the harm suffered. Under legislation in North Macedonia, victims of crime can seek compensation from the perpetrator by filing a property claim during criminal proceedings.⁹⁶ This motion must be filed before the conclusion of the main hearing in the court of first instance and should specify the nature and amount of the claim, along with supporting evidence.⁹⁷ In the event of a guilty verdict, the criminal court may award the claim in full or in part, and refer the victim to civil proceedings for the remaining amount.⁹⁸ In cases where the supporting evidence is insufficient to reach a decision and obtaining additional evidence would unjustifiably delay proceedings, the victim will also be referred to civil litigation.⁹⁹ If the court acquits the defendant or discontinues the proceedings, compensation may still be pursued before a civil court.¹⁰⁰

Since 2022, North Macedonia has established a state-funded compensation mechanism for victims of violent criminal offences, including sexual offences.¹⁰¹ Under this framework, victims can claim compensation regardless of whether the perpetrator has been identified or whether criminal proceedings have been initiated,¹⁰² provided that the offence has been reported to the police or a prosecutor.¹⁰³ None of the interviewees referred to this mechanism, making it unclear whether it is used in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. In practice, its impact in such cases may be limited. Individuals subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse would likely be eligible only for compensation covering treatment and medical costs, capped at EUR 2,000,¹⁰⁴ and solidarity assistance of up to EUR 500,¹⁰⁵ a relatively low total amount given the gravity and often long-term impact of these offences.

Despite the existence of these legal pathways, one lawyer suggested that access to compensation within criminal proceedings remains inconsistent in practice. They described a case of tech-facilitated child exploitation and abuse in which no compensation was awarded by the court despite an expert assessment and the testimony of a psychiatrist confirming the long-term impact of the offence on the child. The lawyer noted that this was not an isolated outcome:

“

[...] I keep seeing this inconsistent practice. Even when there is expert testimony and a clear request for damages during a criminal trial, victims are denied compensation. Under both our law and international standards, [the child] must be awarded damages. But the courts do not respect that. They say, 'Just file a civil lawsuit. Sue [the accused] separately'. (JP)

”

Pursuing compensation claims in civil courts places an additional burden on children, requiring them to initiate new proceedings, mobilize additional resources and once again be questioned about the abuse. The lawyer highlighted the potentially traumatic impact of such processes:

“

You are throwing [the child] back into years of legal battles, forcing [them] to relive it all and see [the accused] again and again. (JP)

”

96 Republic of North Macedonia (2010). [Criminal Procedure Law](#), Art. 111(1).

97 Ibid., Art. 112(2), 112(3).

98 Ibid., Art. 114(2).

99 Ibid., Art. 114(2).

100 Ibid., Art. 114(3).

101 Republic of North Macedonia (2022). [Law on State Compensation for Victims of Violent Crimes](#), Art. 9.

102 Ibid., Art. 14.

103 Ibid., Art. 13.

104 Ibid., Art. 16.

105 Ibid., Art. 20.

.....

The perceived complexity and risks associated with civil claims led the lawyer to view supranational mechanisms, particularly the European Court of Human Rights, as a more viable avenue for securing compensation in this case.

While reflecting an individual professional perspective, this account suggests that domestic pathways for securing compensation may, in some cases, prove lengthy and ineffective, pointing to a need for more streamlined procedures. The lawyer indicated that a judgment from an international court could help compel such change:

“

A ruling from [the European Court of Human Rights] could trigger training programmes, action plans, and reporting obligations to the Department for the Execution of Judgments, forcing the state to show what it's doing to comply. (JP)

”

.....

Pursuing compensation claims in civil courts places an additional burden on children, requiring them to initiate new proceedings, mobilize additional resources and once again be questioned about the abuse.

.....

6. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES



6. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Effective prevention requires a clear understanding of the factors underlying (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse and that allow it to continue. This chapter discusses a number of prevention efforts in North Macedonia, drawing on current policy and institutional initiatives, as well as interviews with professionals and the young women subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse as children to understand their perspectives. The findings also highlight certain gaps, including a need for coordinated and sustainable interventions with a focus on root causes and factors facilitating (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Professionals called for prevention that is not merely a set of discrete activities but an ongoing institutional and multisectoral responsibility.

6.1 POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

The Cybersecurity Strategy 2025–2028 is a key policy framework, as it places a strong emphasis on safeguarding children in the digital environment. The Strategy outlines plans to involve the private sector in prevention efforts through the establishment of partnerships with technology companies and internet service providers to develop tools aimed at protecting children from harmful content, cyberbullying and sexual exploitation. Other key measures include improving cybersecurity laws to incorporate specific provisions on tech-facilitated abuse, harassment and exploitation of children, creating clear reporting mechanisms for such crimes and promoting the use of parental control tools and safer internet browsing for younger users.¹⁰⁶

Additionally, the Cybersecurity Strategy mandates the Ministry of Digital Transformation to initiate, in cooperation with relevant ministries and stakeholders, the development of a dedicated Plan for the Protection of Children and Youth online.¹⁰⁷ This represents a significant step, demonstrating a clear recognition of the need for a coordinated and proactive approach to online child protection. However, as of May 2026, there is no publicly available information confirming that this Plan is currently under way. Moving forward, in developing and implementing such a plan, particular attention should be paid to systematically integrating specific activities to prevent and respond to the different forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including proactive measures to address emerging risks such as artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material. Each activity should be accompanied by clearly identified lead agencies or organizations, defined roles and responsibilities, timelines and dedicated budget allocations to support effective implementation and accountability.

Another important objective of the Cybersecurity Strategy is the creation of a National Safer Internet Centre under the MKSafeNet project. The Centre, which will bring together experts from the public and private sectors, academia and civil society, is set to play a major role in prevention efforts by monitoring online threats, increasing awareness of online risks and reporting mechanisms, and strengthening national capacities to support children, parents and teachers in ensuring a safer digital experience. It is also intended to provide support to anyone subjected to cyberbullying and other vulnerable groups.¹⁰⁸

As of May 2026, the MKSafeNet project was actively working with the Ministry of Digital Transformation to establish the Centre, expand digital literacy programmes, strengthen partnerships with schools, the private sector and policymakers, and raise public awareness of digital safety through events such as Safer Internet Day.¹⁰⁹ In addition, it offers a wide range of resources on online child safety through its MKSafeNet website, including tutorials on parental control tools and child-friendly education materials, such as colouring books and the educational video game Find Miki.¹¹⁰ Taken together, these developments demonstrate a growing commitment towards a more structured and prevention-oriented framework for online child protection in North Macedonia. Going forward, sustained and effective efforts in terms of implementation will be key to ensuring these efforts deliver meaningful and lasting results.

¹⁰⁶ Republic of North Macedonia (2025). [Cybersecurity Strategy 2025–2028](#), 30, 31.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ [Better Internet for Kids](#) (accessed on 31 March 2026).

¹¹⁰ See [MKSafeNet Resources](#) (accessed on 31 March 2026).

6.2 THE NEED FOR CHILD-CENTRED, MULTISECTORAL PREVENTION

Besides the existing initiatives mentioned above, the professionals interviewed reflected on how they see prevention efforts and initiatives in their day-to-day work. While they referred to a range of prevention activities in different sectors, they also highlighted the lack of multisectoral coordination around prevention, describing a lack of coordination on prevention efforts across sectors, including education, social protection and law enforcement.

Several professionals also described how prevention initiatives and programmes were disjointed, indicating that they tended to be project-driven, short-term and reliant on external funding, as opposed to being part of a clear, long-term national strategy around prevention. They noted how short-term initiatives and a lack of multisectoral coordination contribute to a system that is reactive in nature.

Across interviews, professionals spoke extensively about prevention efforts in school, further discussed below. However, they also expressed the need for long-term, sustainable prevention programming, embedded within institutional practice and supported by broader public discourse at national level around tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and how to prevent it. In this way, professionals called for prevention that is not merely a set of discrete activities but an ongoing institutional and multisectoral responsibility.



6.3 PREVENTION EFFORTS IN SCHOOLS

In interviews, professionals referred to the central role of schools in preventing (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse. Prevention of violence against children, including 'cyber violence', is embedded in national protocols for primary and secondary education.¹¹¹ These frameworks position schools as key actors in prevention and awareness-raising, as well early identification and reporting of violence, with shared responsibility across teachers, 'professional services' and school leadership.

A school psychologist referred to a recommendation from the Ministry of Education for schools to develop and implement their own programmes in relation to mental health and well-being, which could incorporate issues in relation to abuse:

“

Each school was asked to create its own school programme. That came from the Minister. It's a recommendation for each school to prepare its own programme and implement workshops, activities. (FW)

”

According to several professionals interviewed, prevention efforts in schools focus mainly on awareness-raising, teaching children to identify tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, and encouraging disclosure. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, professionals referred to children struggling to identify (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly within peer interactions. A front-line worker from a civil society organization stated that:

“

[...] young people, at least in my experience, demonstrate that they don't perceive it ['cyber violence'] much, and they are not very able to recognize it. (FW)

”

A school psychologist further described prevention activities in schools as sporadic and project-based:

“

[...] it is sporadic. It depends on the year. Through projects [...] This year, for example, we had [...] sex education. [...] Otherwise, for cyberbullying, every year we've had sessions from OSCE, because it's a safe school. We were within that framework of safe schools. (FW)

”

She further emphasized that while policy frameworks establish prevention as a requirement in schools, they provide limited guidance on how to implement it.

Other professionals shared how education initiatives in schools are mainly delivered after an incident has occurred, making them reactive rather than embedded within the school curricula.

Awareness-raising and educational initiatives aimed at children

Many of the school prevention activities mentioned by professionals seem centred on awareness-raising for children on what (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse is. While interventions that help children recognize and report abuse are important, they are not sufficient prevention strategies on their own. Without also addressing systemic factors and equipping adults to respond, these initiatives may inadvertently place responsibility on children to prevent abuse.

One approach that may prove effective is to focus on addressing underlying issues, such as stigma and shame around sex and sexual violence, and harmful gender norms. In their interviews a few of the young women who were exploited and abused during childhood reflected on the need for more education around sexuality and relationships. One of the young women raised the value of open discussions and the need to “make this topic not

¹¹¹ Guidebook on the procedure for reporting and protecting student-victims of violence, abuse, or neglect (primary schools) (18-6570/1 from 2020). Available at: <https://bit.ly/4rwiXtS>; Regulation on the procedure to report and protect student-victims of violence, abuse, or neglect (secondary schools) (18-10074/2 from 2025). Available at: <https://dspdp.com.mk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/pravilnik-nacinot-za-prijavuvanje-zastita-na-u-enik-zrtva-na-koja-bilo-od-formite-na-nasilstvo-zloupotreba-zanemaruvanje.pdf>.

so shameful.” (YP) Another highlighted the need for an approach that reflects the uncertainty and emotional complexity of navigating relationships and digital life. Their reflections also included the importance of providing practical digital literacy but stressed that individual caution cannot substitute for adult and institutional responsibility.

Comprehensive sexuality and relationship education can contribute to building children's knowledge and awareness about their rights, healthy relationships, consent and can support children in setting boundaries. Yet and as discussed previously, professionals reflected on a lack of comprehensive sexuality and relationship education. The limited access to the latter was supported by the survey data, which show that only 19 per cent of 12–17-year-old internet-using children in North Macedonia received sex education,¹¹² either formal or informal.

Professionals described challenges with initiatives or programmes relating to sex and sexuality. They noted that taboos and prejudices often limit open discussions around these topics, as reflected by one school psychologist:

“

And generally speaking, conversations about sexuality, about sexual harassment, are still somewhat taboo topics here. We first need to clear up our own prejudices, as adults, in general, and among the teaching staff, before we can pass this on to the children. (FW)

”

A psychotherapist also explained how school staff may inadvertently reinforce harmful social and gender norms:

“

The shaming is also done by teachers. So, suddenly you'll see a teacher being surprised by someone's appearance. They start introducing dress codes that which, right... you have to cover yourself. You must not... provoke [...] The girls are the ones who more, right, in some way should not be showing... (FW)

”

While comprehensive sexuality and relationship education alone cannot prevent child sexual exploitation and abuse, it can help children navigate relationships, recognize harmful behaviour and seek help when needed. It can also challenge harmful social and gender norms that excuse coercion and control. To be effective, school staff need proper training and resources, and these efforts must be part of a broader, coordinated strategy to prevent violence against children.

Overall, the young women subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse spoke about prevention less in terms of rules, protocols or awareness campaigns, and instead stressed the importance of emotional safety, trust and relational support. From this perspective, prevention was framed as an ongoing, relational process in which adults remain emotionally available, attentive and curious. In relation to prevention messaging, one of the young women advised against the use of adult-led awareness campaigns and generic safety messaging. She described a sense of distance from prevention initiatives that rely on warnings or abstract risk narratives, noting how such approaches often fail to resonate with children:

¹¹² This term is used to mirror the term used in the survey.

6.3 PREVENTION EFFORTS IN SCHOOLS

“

No matter how many posters or infographics are made on Instagram and things like that about cyberbullying or any ‘cyber’ issue, or even things that happen in person, there’s always that moment when young people go: ‘Okay, what do these adults know? [...] This wouldn’t happen to me. And why should I listen to you? I’ll use my phone how I want; I’ll go online how I want’. (YP)

”

The young women called for prevention efforts that acknowledge their agency, reflect children’s everyday lives and experiences and create space for open conversations with supportive adults; in their view, such prevention interventions were more likely to be effective.

Overall, the young women subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse spoke about prevention less in terms of rules, protocols or awareness campaigns, and instead stressed the importance of emotional safety, trust and relational support. From this perspective, prevention was framed as an ongoing, relational process in which adults remain emotionally available, attentive and curious.

7. CONCLUSION



7. CONCLUSION

Ten per cent of children aged 12–17 in North Macedonia were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, with no significant differences in age or gender, in only a one-year period. In a majority of instances (78 per cent) this was perpetrated by someone already known to the child, highlighting the need to consider relational dynamics and contexts for detection, prevention and response strategies.

While national legislation includes several provisions criminalizing forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse – with recent amendments strengthening legislation further – some gaps still remain, including protections not applying consistently across all age groups.

Although a majority of children (88 per cent) disclosed the exploitation or abuse that they were subjected to in the year after being surveyed, the findings demonstrate that disclosure should not be understood as straightforward or immediate. Children still face significant barriers to disclosure including shame, stigma and self-blame, compounded by silence around sex and sexuality, and fear of judgment and social repercussions. The qualitative data reiterate that children must feel heard, protected and free from judgment in order to disclose.

The data further indicate that children very rarely reported the abuse or exploitation to which they were subjected to the police, or sought formal support via social workers or helplines. This can delay or prevent access to professional support and services and justice.

Effective provision of services, including psychosocial support, was seen to be impacted by resource constraints, high workloads, challenges in multisectoral coordination and gaps in end-to-end support. While current legislation outlines a wide range of safeguards, there is a need to strengthen the implementation of child-centred justice in practice.

Addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in North Macedonia requires a comprehensive, multisectoral and system-based approach that addresses the underlying factors that perpetuate tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and allow it to continue. This report concludes with evidence-based recommendations, developed in consultation with national stakeholders, to strengthen prevention, improve child-centred responses and ensure that children in North Macedonia are better supported to seek and obtain protection, care and justice.



8. RECOMMENDATIONS



8. RECOMMENDATIONS

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 detailed recommendations for action in North Macedonia are clustered under six 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

Ten per cent of internet-using children aged 12–17 in North Macedonia were subjected to at least one form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured by the survey in the year prior to being surveyed, with similar rates across ages and for boys and girls. The findings show that children face multiple, often overlapping forms of abuse online, including exposure to sexual content, unwanted sexual requests, grooming and sexual extortion. While some forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are criminalized in North Macedonia, legal gaps remain and protections are not applied consistently across all age groups.

Relevant for: Ministry of Justice and Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia (Sobranie).

1. Amend legislation to ensure that 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. As the Criminal Code is being revised as of May 2026, relevant amendments to be considered include:
 - a) Amending the Criminal Code to ensure that all offences related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse apply consistently to all children under the age of 18, without distinction. This includes removing age-based discrepancies such as the current differentiation between children under 14 and those aged 14–18 across provisions on exposure to pornographic content (Article 193(1)) and online grooming (Article 193 (b)). This would be in line with Disrupting Harm survey data showing that children aged 12–17 are subjected to these forms of abuse at similar rates regardless of their age. This amendment

would ensure that all children benefit from equal protection in line with international standards, with penalties reflecting the harm caused rather than the child's age.

- b) Amending the Criminal Code's definition of child sexual abuse material (Article 122 (24)) to explicitly include non-visual content. The revised definition should make clear that material depicting non-existent children, including digitally generated content, also qualifies as child sexual abuse material.
- c) Introducing provisions criminalizing the intentional access to or viewing of child sexual abuse material, even where no download or possession occurs, in order to close existing loopholes and reduce demand.
- d) Amending the relevant provisions of the Criminal Code to 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.¹¹³
- e) Amending the provision on online grooming (Article 193 (b)) to encompass abuse that occurs entirely online, removing the requirement of a physical meeting and extending protection to children above 14 years of age.
- f) Amending legislation to explicitly criminalize livestreaming of child sexual abuse, either through a stand-alone provision or by directly indicating that existing provisions on child sexual abuse material and/or engaging children in "*pornographic performances*" (Article 193) also apply when the abuse is livestreamed online, and materials are not downloaded or stored. Ensure that the offence covers both the use of children for such purposes and access to livestreamed abuse.
- g) Amending criminal legislation in line with the 2023 Lanzarote Committee recommendation, 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.

¹¹³ 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.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

INSIGHT 2

Girls and boys were equally likely to be subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse according to the survey data. However, certain factors, such as rigid gender norms, shame and stigma, and normalization of certain abusive behaviours – especially among peers – can enable exploitation and abuse and affect how children and those around them respond. Lack of open discussions around sex, sexuality, healthy relationships, bodily autonomy and consent may also leave children less prepared to navigate relationships, identify abuse, speak up and seek help.

Relevant for: Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth and Ministry of Health.

1. Develop, strengthen and integrate evidence-based, age-appropriate education on relationships, boundaries and consent (including in the digital environment) into the national school curriculum. The content should:
 - a) Address topics such as consent, bodily autonomy, healthy boundaries, sex and sexuality, and sexual violence, within both intimate and friendly peer relationships.
 - b) Explain the rights that children have under international and national laws, including protection from violence and how various forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are a violation of children's rights.
 - c) Highlight and challenge harmful gender stereotypes and victim-blaming attitudes.
 - d) Raise awareness that sexual exploitation and abuse is more likely to be perpetrated by people the child knows, including other children.
 - e) Be developed in consultation with children.

To support effective delivery of this curriculum:

- f) Develop accredited training for school staff on how to deliver this content sensitively and how to handle disclosures.

- g) Develop the design and delivery of the curriculum in collaboration with children to reflect their realities.
 - h) Develop strategies for reaching children with special needs and outside of the education system, considering already available initiatives.
2. Develop and deliver parenting and caregiver education and programmes that:
 - a) Build the capacity of parents and caregivers to approach and discuss sensitive topics such as sexuality, relationships, consent, and exploitation and abuse (online and in person) in age-appropriate and supportive ways.
 - b) Challenge knowledge and attitudes that lead to, or stem from, shame and stigma around sexual exploitation and abuse, and victim-blaming, re framing all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse as rights violations.
 - c) Strengthen parents' and caregivers' understanding of digital technologies, children's digital realities and potential harms.
 - d) Promote open communication and trust between children and caregivers, including about children's digital use.
 - e) Ensure parents are aware of the help-seeking and reporting channels available to them and what to expect.
 3. Support the recommendations above by raising awareness around (tech-facilitated) sexual violence, its various manifestations and how it is criminalized. Engage with actors at various levels, from State to grass-roots movements to ensure this is supported from national to community level. This can include schools, youth clubs, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, community centres and communities of practice across related areas, such as violence against women and girls. Instead of allocating resources to new initiatives, consider integrating these campaigns into existing child protection, digital safety and school-based initiatives, including: parent meetings in schools, extracurricular and awareness-raising activities, existing school professional support services, existing child protection and referral mechanisms through Centres for Social Work, and digital literacy and ICT-related education.

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4. Implement sustained public awareness programmes and campaigns:
- a) Develop and implement long-term programmes and public awareness campaigns that challenge social norms that facilitate and perpetuate sexual exploitation and abuse, focusing on reducing stigma and shame, and framing exploitation and abuse as rights violations.
 - b) Ensure consultations with children in the development of programmes and campaigns.
 - c) Invest in trauma-informed, child-centred research around how tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse affects children of different genders to ensure that data are available for and integrated into the development of programming and service delivery.
 - d) Leverage organizations with influence at national, regional and community levels to co-develop, adapt, disseminate and champion these campaigns and programmes. This can include media institutions, civil society organizations, youth organizations and leaders, among others.

INSIGHT 3

Online platforms, especially social media and gaming platforms, are used to facilitate sexual violence against children. However, the current legal framework in North Macedonia imposes limited obligations on online platforms to protect children. Strengthening national legal and regulatory frameworks is an opportunity for stronger engagement with service providers as key partners in prevention and response.

Relevant for: Ministry of Digital Transformation, Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia (Sobranie) and Ministry of Justice.

1. Establish formal mechanisms for ongoing dialogue, cooperation and collaboration between government, regulators, law enforcement, and major platforms and service providers operating in North Macedonia. These mechanisms should go beyond case-based information-sharing to support joint prevention efforts and enable coordinated responses to emerging online risks affecting children.
2. Legally mandate platforms that provide services in North Macedonia to prioritize safety-by-design that creates barriers for perpetrators and provides better protection for children. Any such features should be developed in consultation with children and should be evaluated. These may include:
 - a) Privacy-by-default settings for all child users, limiting public visibility and unwanted contact.
 - b) Restrictions on unsolicited messaging from unknown accounts to children.
 - c) Stronger controls on content recommendation systems to reduce exposure to sexualized and exploitative material.
 - d) Clear and accessible reporting features with explanations of processing times and what children should expect after they make a report.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Require proactive detection and rapid removal of child sexual abuse material within the legal framework. Current gaps in early detection and blocking, including the absence within the Law on Electronic Commerce of any obligation on internet service providers and online platforms to monitor or investigate potentially unlawful activity, highlight the need for clearer and more effective duties of care.

North Macedonia should strengthen legal requirements for providers to:

- a) Detect, flag and rapidly remove child sexual abuse material, in line with international standards.
 - b) Ensure that removal procedures are timely and transparent, recognizing the severe and lasting harm caused by continued circulation of abusive material.
 - c) Introduce proportionate obligations to identify, detect and address child sexual abuse material and related conduct on their services, including in situations where providers would otherwise have no general duty to monitor, while ensuring safeguards for privacy and fundamental rights.
 - d) Prevent the re-uploading of known harmful content through the use of appropriate technologies, such as hash-matching, to limit the repeated dissemination of previously identified material.
 - e) Clarify the intermediary liability framework by making liability exemptions conditional on compliance with defined due diligence obligations, including proactive detection, removal and cooperation with authorities.
4. Strengthen the implementation of the above recommendations by putting in place oversight and accountability measures. This includes regular transparency reports for North Macedonia, including the number of violations detected and reported to local authorities, having a dedicated and independent oversight board, and ensuring the consistent and effective enforcement of penalties and other accountability measures for non-compliance.

INSIGHT 4

According to the survey, in most cases (88 per cent) children subjected tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse disclosed to someone. Mothers, friends and siblings emerged as the most common confidants for children. However, significant barriers, such as embarrassment, shame, fear of judgment and normalization of certain types of abusive behaviours still exist and must be addressed to enable early detection and limit harm.

Relevant for: Ministry of Social Policy, Demographics and Youth and Centres for Social Work, Ministry of Education and Science and civil society organizations.

1. Expand the availability of trusted adults where children can seek advice and help at home, in schools and in the wider community by:
 - a) Building the capacity of teachers, school psychologists and other adults frequently interacting with children to act as safe and trusted points for disclosure and help-seeking.
 - b) Integrating clear referral protocols so that trusted adults know how to connect children to psychosocial support, protection services and law enforcement, as appropriate, ensuring that they have a framework for how to assess a child's best interests and what kind of support would be most suitable for their situation.
2. Expand child-friendly and predictable help-seeking and reporting pathways for children and families. A prerequisite to this recommendation is ensuring that dedicated helplines are well resourced, free of charge and accessible to children and families, and that staff are trained in trauma-informed, child-centred and gender-transformative approaches. Enacting this recommendation could be supported by:

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- a) Increasing the visibility of existing helplines, reporting mechanisms and support services through schools, youth and community spaces, media and online.
 - b) Developing multiple and diverse entry points for help-seeking and reporting online and in person, including through schools and youth-friendly community services. It is important that all reporting channels feed into one coordinated system to avoid fragmentation, strengthen monitoring and support a timely and coordinated institutional response.
 - c) Ensuring that reporting pathways are confidential (with any limitations clearly explained in child-friendly ways) and designed around children's needs and realities.
 - d) Providing anonymous reporting options for children, staffed by specialists who can work with the child to assess why they wish to remain anonymous and if they can support them – in a child-friendly and trauma-informed manner – to seek further support from professionals or from trusted individuals in their network.
3. Consolidate existing sectoral procedures into one clear national protocol for reporting and response, accompanied by child-friendly guidance explaining the reporting process and available support services. Existing awareness campaigns and digital safety initiatives could also be leveraged to promote reporting channels and reduce stigma.
 4. Conduct further research that centres on caregiver and family experiences to better understand what facilitates reporting, the challenges faced in responding to disclosures, and decision-making around help-seeking and reporting.
 5. Develop targeted support measures for children who may be receiving disclosures of sexual exploitation and abuse from their peers. More research with this population is needed to understand more about their experiences and how they could be better supported. Possible avenues of support could include:
 - a) Building children's and young people's capacities and understanding of what disclosures are and how to handle them in a way that is sensitive and safe for all children involved. This includes understanding the limits of the support they can provide and knowing when to seek help from trusted adults within the community and/or support services.
 - b) Equipping teachers, school counsellors and other staff in contact with children to support those who have received disclosures from their peers, recognizing the emotional impact this can have.
 - c) Ensuring children are aware of and have trust in formal support services, including through outreach programmes and events.
- Relevant for: Ministry of Education and Science.**
6. Support schools to implement child-centred protocols around the identification of (tech-facilitated) exploitation and abuse, how to support disclosure and supporting children after disclosure, assessing a child's best interests, and reporting requirements and pathways.
 7. Train all staff members on how to respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in supportive and appropriate ways and to whom to refer cases within the school. Part of this response should include how to support children who have received disclosures of exploitation and abuse from their friends and to assess whether they require further support or referral to services.
 8. School counsellors and psychologists should attend additional training to understand how to provide initial support and referral to children, mandatory reporting requirements and how to assess a child's best interests.
- Relevant for: Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Digital Transformation.**
9. Revise procedures to ensure that children's formal reports to the police can progress through the system even without parental involvement. Children reporting independently

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

to law enforcement should be referred immediately to trained social workers or psychologists to assess their needs and best interests, and to support them in disclosing to trusted adults, if appropriate for their situation.

10. Review and amend the statutes of limitations currently provided under the Criminal Code to abolish or extend them for sexual offences against children. This would ensure that delayed disclosure and reporting do 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.

Relevant for: Ministry of Social Policy, Demographics and Youth and Centres for Social Work, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Digital Transformation and civil society organizations.

11. Invest in strengthening trust in institutions by:
 - a) Investing in resources and continuous capacity-building and training of professionals working with children. This can help to ensure that children and families seeking services or reporting are met by staff with special training in child rights and child development, (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse, trauma-informed approaches and gender-transformative practices.
 - b) Developing information campaigns and outreach programmes involving child protection services, psychosocial services, law enforcement and the justice system to provide information about the work and services of these institutions and their processes to increase understanding among children, families and the wider community, and build trust.

INSIGHT 5

Legislation in North Macedonia requires the State to support the recovery and reintegration of children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse. However, professionals reported that service delivery is hindered by limited resources, heavy workloads, coordination challenges and gaps in support services.

Relevant for: Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, Ministry of Education and Science and Ministry of Interior.

1. Update and strengthen multisectoral protocols for handling cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (across Centres for Social Work, schools, health services and the police).
2. Establish pre- and in-service training on the implementation of these protocols, including multisectoral training focused on building practical skills and cooperation across institutions. Training provision should be regulated to ensure that only practitioners and experts can offer these types of training.
3. Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration by:
 - a) Establishing clear and formalized standard operating procedures, and communication and referral channels between institutions such as Centres for Social Work, health services, schools and specialized service providers. This includes assigning designated contact persons within each institution, who are clearly stated. This could be part of the protocols and standard operating procedures (mentioned under recommendation 1), but could also include establishing multisectoral teams for child sexual exploitation and abuse.
 - b) Reviewing case management systems and intersectoral information-sharing to ensure that knowledge is shared between institutions as needed and contains the details required to handle cases effectively and provide the support needed.

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4. Develop stronger local-level capacities by providing adequate financial and human resourcing to Centres for Social Work, as well as decentralized support services.

Relevant for: Ministry of Education and Science.

5. Integrate tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse into existing training and capacity-building for school staff, in school protocols on identifying and addressing violence and abuse, and in guidance on the practical implementation of these protocols, such as how to identify abuse, limitations of protocols, steps to take, when and how to refer, etc.

Relevant for: Ministry of Health.

6. Invest in specialized psychosocial support for children and ensure that it is accessible for children in all parts of the country, including through the provision of free transportation if needed. Extend existing services that make specialized services available free of charge. This could include arrangements with private practitioners.

INSIGHT 6

Despite a relatively protective legal framework, structural and systemic challenges exist and can undermine access to child-centred justice in North Macedonia. Some challenges shared by justice professionals included handling a broad range of cases, which limited their ability to build specialization; understaffing; and resource constraints.

Relevant for: Ministry of Justice, Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia (Sobranie) and Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors, the Judicial and Public Prosecutor's Office, the Judicial Budget, the Ministry of Finance, the State Council for Prevention and Justice for Children, Centres for Social Work, and social protection, health and other institutions.

1. Allocate adequate and sustained public resources to strengthen the human and technical capacity of the justice system, including by increasing staffing levels among judges, prosecutors and support services to reduce caseload pressures, prevent delays and ensure timely and effective case handling.
2. Adopt comprehensive measures to address the lack of specialization among justice professionals in cases involving child victims of crime, including (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse. This should include integrating specialized, child-centred and trauma-informed multisectoral training into the curricula of the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors, the Police Training Centre, the Bar Association and other relevant institutions. This training should be mandatory for judges, prosecutors, police officers and other justice professionals involved in proceedings concerning children, and provided both pre-service and in-service. A structured framework should also be established to enable the progressive development of specialized expertise in such cases through targeted training, supervised practice and continuous professional development to support the effective implementation of the 10-year experience requirement for justice professionals.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Adopt dedicated legal provisions to require that forensic interviews of children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse be conducted exclusively by specially trained professionals, including forensic experts and forensic psychiatrists. This should be supported by the development of standardized interview protocols for cases of sexual violence against children, alongside continued investment in training and capacity-building to ensure their consistent application.
4. Consider piloting the Barnahus model to ensure a coordinated, child-centred and trauma-informed response to children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, including technology-facilitated cases. Such a model would bring together all relevant entities and services – law enforcement, prosecution, child protection, health and psychosocial support – under one roof to reduce secondary victimization, improve inter-agency coordination and ensure that children are interviewed in a safe environment by specially trained professionals, with forensic interviews conducted in line with evidentiary standards and the child's best interests, needs and individual preferences.
5. Amend the Law on Justice for Children to strengthen the existing requirement to proceed with urgency in cases involving child victims of crime by introducing binding, clearly defined timelines for the investigation, adjudication and appeal. The reform should also introduce implementation and accountability mechanisms to monitor compliance with these deadlines, including systematic oversight and automatic referral to higher courts or supervisory bodies for review and remedial action in case of delays.
6. Amend the Criminal Procedure Law to guarantee unconditional and systematic access to free legal representation for all children subjected to sexual offences, including (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse, regardless of their financial situation from the moment a complaint is submitted, including throughout the investigation and all subsequent stages of the criminal process. In addition, develop adequate procedures and mechanisms to ensure that specially trained lawyers are promptly assigned in such cases and adequately remunerated.
7. Adopt targeted measures to ensure the consistent awarding of compensation to children subjected to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse within criminal proceedings, including by strengthening awareness initiatives and training for judges on damage assessment and the importance of timely financial redress in such cases.

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10. ANNEX: DEFINITIONS 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.¹¹⁴

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.¹¹⁵

Child sexual abuse material, including artificially intelligence- generated child sexual abuse material: Photos, videos, audios or other recordings, or any other representation of real or digitally generated (including generated through/by artificial intelligence) child sexual abuse or sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.¹¹⁶

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.¹¹⁷

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.¹¹⁸

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.¹¹⁹

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.¹²⁰

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.¹²¹

For further guidance on terminology and key considerations, refer to the [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#).¹²²

¹¹⁴ 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.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 39–44.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 97–98.

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 36–38.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 160.

¹²² 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.

