DATA INSIGHT NO 16

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED AND IN-PERSON CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



DISRUPTING HARM

Funded by | Safe Online

Implemented by | ECPAT | INTERPOL | unicef for every child

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse do not occur separately from the broader contexts in which children are subjected to sexual violence. Children's online and in-person lives are closely connected, and the relationships, environments and circumstances that shape child sexual exploitation and perpetrators' behaviour in one setting can also create opportunities for abuse in another.

Technologies can create new ways for perpetrators to contact, target and exploit children, including through interactions with people they have never met. At the same time, technology is often embedded within relationships and social environments that already form part of children's lives. Abuse may therefore move between or occur across online and in-person settings, with experiences in one context sometimes creating opportunities for harm in another. Understanding tech-facilitated forms of sexual exploitation and abuse consequently require considering sexual violence against children more broadly, including sexual abuse that occurs in-person.

Examining the relationship between these forms of violence helps clarify that digital forms of sexual exploitation and abuse are not an entirely distinct risk but can be connected to broader patterns of violence. Children who are subjected to sexual abuse in person may also be at greater risk of being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Evidence also shows that online experiences can also intersect with or contribute to harmful experiences in children's in-person lives. At the same time, some forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse may involve risks that arise primarily through digital environments, such as contact initiated by strangers online.

The Disrupting Harm research provides an opportunity to examine these relationships using nationally representative survey data from children aged 12–17. By considering children's experiences across both digital and in-person contexts, the analysis provides a more comprehensive picture of how different forms of sexual violence may intersect in children's lives.

DEFINING 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 preferred 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.

The Disrupting Harm survey in the first round of studies measured seven different indicators related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Two additional measures were added in the second round of studies (see Table 1). Although this is not an exhaustive list of all the ways that digital technologies can facilitate sexual violence against children, it offers data on a range of abusive behaviours, from exposure to sexual content to sexual extortion and image-based abuse.

Evidence also shows that online experiences can also intersect with or contribute to **harmful experiences in children's in-person lives.**



Children who are subjected to **sexual abuse in person** may also be at greater risk of being subjected to **tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.**



TABLE 1. SURVEY QUESTIONS USED TO MEASURE TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

DISRUPTING HARM 2020-2021		DISRUPTING HARM 2024-2025
Someone sent me sexual images I did not want		Someone sent me sexual images or videos I did not want
I have been asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone when I did not want to		I have been asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone when I did not want to
I have been asked for a photo or video showing my private parts when I did not want to		I have been asked to share a photo or video showing my private parts when I did not want to
Someone shared sexual images of me without my consent		Someone shared sexual images of me without my permission
Someone offered me money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of myself		Someone offered me money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of myself
Someone offered me money or gifts to meet them in person to do something sexual		Someone offered me money or gifts to meet them in person to do something sexual
Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities		Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities
-		Someone used artificial intelligence (AI) to create fake sexual images or videos of me
-		Someone threatened to share sexual images or videos of me

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The aim of this brief is to update findings around children's disclosures from the first round of Disrupting Harm studies. The data presented in this brief come from the primary data collection undertaken for Disrupting Harm during two research cycles, the first from 2020 to 2021 in 13 countries and the second from 2024 to 2025 in another 10 countries.[1] This includes interviews with children and young people (aged 16–24) who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse at some point when they were under the age of 18. The experiences and perspectives of professionals who supported children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are also presented in this Data Insight. Nationally representative household surveys were also conducted, and data from around 21,000 children using the internet aged 12–17 and their caregivers across 21 countries are also presented here.[2] More details on the Disrupting Harm research methods can be found here.

This brief presents survey data from children who were subjected to the forms of tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse listed above, as well as children who were subjected to contact sexual abuse in the year prior to data collection.

1 Data for Tunisia and Morocco are not included in this brief as they were not available for public release at the time this brief was written.

2 Out of the 25 countries where the Disrupting Harm research was conducted, data from four countries – South Africa, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco – have not been included in the survey data analysis presented here. In South Africa, a different approach was used for the sample, and some changes were made to the survey questions. In Jordan, all questions related to sex and sexual violence were removed from the survey. Tunisia and Morocco are not included as data were not available for public release at the time this brief was written.

The survey data collected in the first round of studies were based on a seven-variable construct of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as listed in the box above. In the second round of studies, this construct was expanded to include two additional variables, reflecting the evolving understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and the need to capture additional forms of abuse not measured in the first round of research.

As understanding of children's experiences in digital environments has developed, the updated framework incorporates a broader range of harmful behaviours and abusive dynamics, resulting in a more comprehensive measure of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. While findings from the first and second rounds are not directly comparable, together they highlight persistent patterns and trends in tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that transcend contexts across a wide range of countries over the past seven years.

This brief also examines in-person child sexual abuse in three settings: at home, at school, or in their community. For some analyses, a binary composite indicator of in-person sexual abuse was created using three survey indicators asked in both rounds of data collection. Children were classified as having been sexually abused in-person if they reported that at least one of the following had happened to them without their consent, including sexual touching or being made to have sexual intercourse:

1. Someone in their school did something sexual to them when they didn't want them to.
2. Someone in their family did something sexual to them when they didn't want them to.
3. Someone in their community did something sexual to them when they didn't want them to.

To understand the overlap between tech-facilitated and in-person sexual abuse, children were classified into four mutually exclusive categories according to whether they reported: (1) Both tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse) and in-person contact sexual abuse; (2) in-person contact sexual abuse only; (3) tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse only; or (4) neither. In-person contact sexual abuse was defined as unwanted sexual behaviour reported at school, within the family or in the community. The "both" category indicates that a child reported experiences of both forms of abuse during the relevant reporting period; it does not indicate that the experiences occurred during the same incident, involved the same perpetrator, or were otherwise directly connected.

To examine the relationship between tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and in-person contact sexual abuse in greater detail, separate survey-weighted quasi-Poisson regression models were estimated for each country and for each setting in which in-person contact sexual abuse was reported: school, family and community. Models were adjusted for the child's age and gender. The resulting coefficients were exponentiated to produce relative risk estimates, representing the estimated risk of reporting tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse among children who reported contact sexual abuse in each setting compared with children who did not report contact sexual abuse in that setting, after accounting for age and gender. An estimate above one therefore indicates a higher estimated risk of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse among children who reported contact sexual abuse in that setting, while an estimate below one indicates a lower estimated risk.

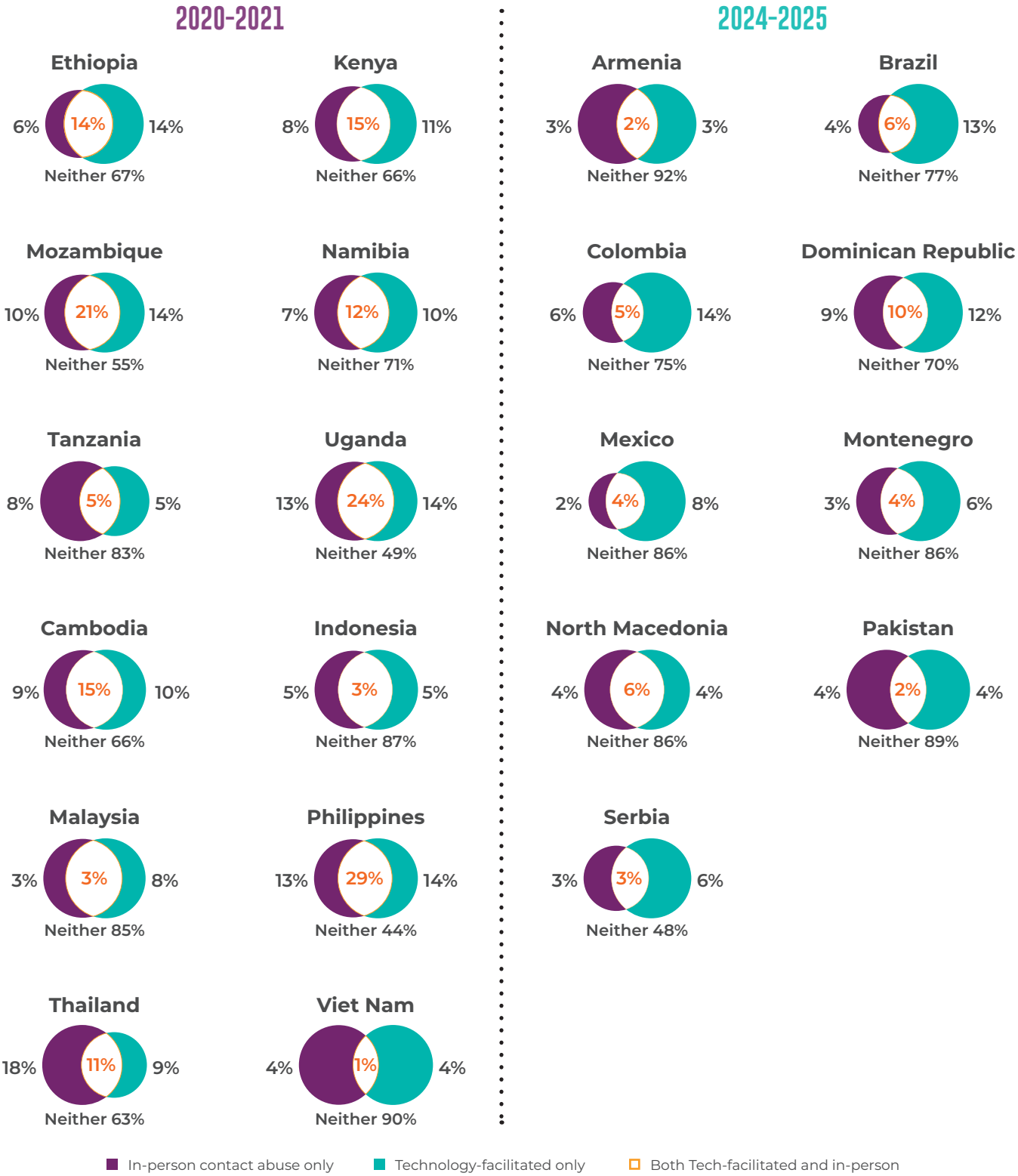
FINDINGS

Overlap between online and in-person sexual abuse

Across all 21 countries, children reported experiences across all four categories, although their distributions varied considerably by country (see Figure 1). The proportion reporting both tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and in-person contact sexual abuse ranged from one per cent in Viet Nam to the highest in the Philippines, with 29 per cent. High proportions were also observed in Uganda (24%), Mozambique (21%), Kenya (15%) and Cambodia (15%). In contrast, the proportion reporting both forms were lowest in Viet Nam (1%), Armenia (2%), Pakistan (2%), Indonesia (3%) and Serbia (3%).

The distribution of the four categories differed across countries. For example, in the Philippines, 29 per cent of children reported both forms of abuse, while 13 per cent reported in-person contact sexual abuse only and 14 per cent reported tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse only. In Viet Nam, by comparison, one per cent reported both forms, four per cent reported in-person contact sexual abuse only and four per cent reported tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse only. Across the countries, the proportion reporting neither form ranged from 44 per cent in the Philippines to 92 per cent in Armenia.

FIGURE 1. OVERLAPS BETWEEN TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE AND IN-PERSON CONTACT SEXUAL ABUSE



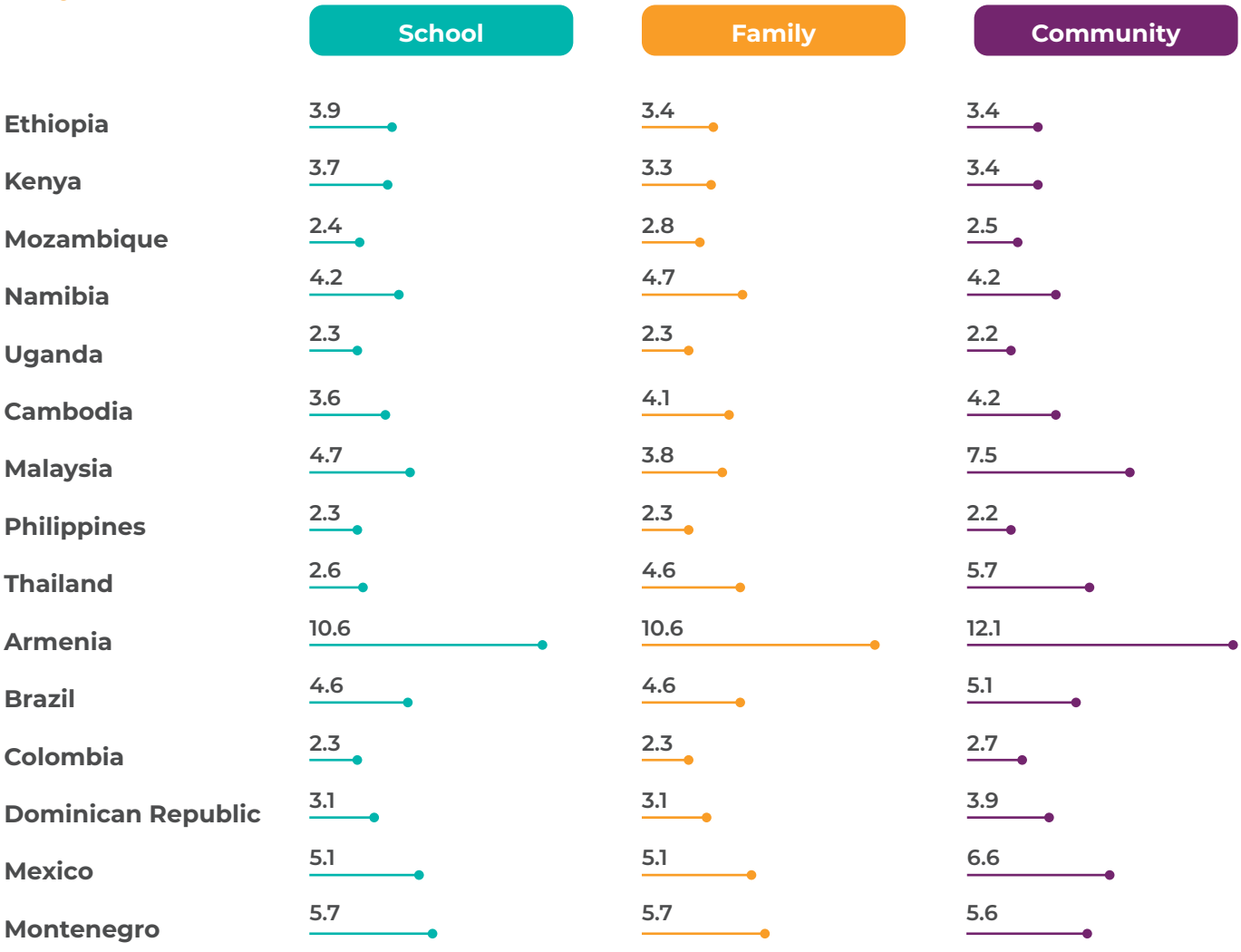
These findings show that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and in-person contact sexual abuse can co-occur within children's reported experiences, but the analysis does not establish whether the experiences were part of the same incident, involved the same perpetrator, or occurred in a particular sequence.

Relationship between tech-facilitated and in-person sexual abuse

The regression analysis results below provide further evidence of the relationship between tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, and in-person contact sexual abuse. The figure below describes the strength of the association between tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and each of the following: contact sexual abuse at school, contact sexual abuse at home, and contact sexual abuse in the community (see Figure 2). An estimate above one indicates that children who reported contact sexual abuse in the specified setting had a higher estimated risk of also being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse than children who did not, after accounting for age and gender.

Across countries, children who were sexually abused in person at school, within the family, and within the community generally had a higher risk of also being subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, even after accounting for age and gender. This ranged from 2.2 to 6.6 times.

FIGURE 2. ASSOCIATION BETWEEN IN-PERSON SEXUAL ABUSE IN THREE DIFFERENT DOMAINS (SCHOOL, FAMILY, COMMUNITY) AND TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE, CONTROLLING FOR CHILD'S AGE AND GENDER[3]



3 This table presents estimated risk ratios from regression analyses adjusting for gender and age, as described in the methodology. However, due to small sample sizes and wide confidence intervals, findings from six countries were removed from this analysis.

The strength of these associations varied considerably by country and depending on the setting in which the contact sexual abuse occurred (school, home or community). Some of the largest estimated associations were observed for sexual abuse within a community in Mexico and Thailand, where children who were subjected to contact sexual abuse in their community had an estimated 6.6- and 5.7-times higher risk, respectively, of also being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Sexual abuse in schools and families in Montenegro was also associated with an estimated 5.7 times higher risk of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

Importantly, the strength of the association varied across the three domains of in-person sexual abuse. In some countries, the estimated associations were broadly similar across school, family and community, while in others, one domain showed a substantially stronger association than the others. This variation indicates that the relationship between tech-facilitated and in-person sexual abuse is not uniform across contexts, and that sexual violence among children may intersect across different settings in various ways.

RECOMMENDATIONS



1 **Tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse should be integrated into broader child protection responses.** The findings show that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is connected to other forms of sexual abuse in children's lives and should not be treated as a separate form of harm. Children who are subjected to sexual abuse in person may also be at risk of being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and vice versa. Child protection systems should therefore consider tech-facilitated forms of abuse alongside other forms of sexual abuse when identifying risks, assessing children's experiences and planning support.



2 **Prevention and response should address the ways online and in-person sexual abuse can intersect.** The overlap between online and in-person sexual abuse suggests these harms should be addressed together, both in terms of prevention and response. This could include curricula in sexuality and relationship education as well as integrating online abuse into intake processes and case management. Further investment in research is needed to better understand the mechanisms underlying these associations. In some cases, the same factors or conditions may create opportunities for harm across both online and in-person settings, while in others, technologies may be used to initiate, facilitate or extend abuse that occurs in person.



3 **Caregivers, communities, educators and professionals need better information about tech-facilitated sexual abuse.** Those supporting children need up-to-date information on how sexual exploitation and abuse can occur through technologies and how it may intersect with abuse in other settings. This includes challenging misconceptions that online abuse is less serious than in-person abuse and supporting adults to recognise signs of tech-facilitated harm, respond appropriately to disclosures and connect children with appropriate support.

ABOUT THE *DATA INSIGHTS* SERIES FROM DISRUPTING HARM

Disrupting Harm is a research project conceived and funded by Safe Online since 2019. The project and its research methodology are designed and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti). This research generates national evidence on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

This publication is part of a series of thematic briefs that explores pressing issues emerging from the research and recommends ways for key entities and individuals to improve prevention and response. Evidence about tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was collected in 13 countries between 2020 and 2021: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam).

In 2024 and 2025, data was collected in an additional 12 countries: Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Jordan, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Serbia and Tunisia.

Since 2019, the Disrupting Harm project, together with national partners and researchers, have conducted surveys and interviews with more than 25,000 children and young people, including those who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. In addition, over 25,000 caregivers were surveyed, and 540 professionals with child protection mandates interviewed. More detailed information about the Disrupting Harm research methods can be found here.

Data collected by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti since 2019 are used as the basis for the Disrupting Harm Data Insights series. Authorship is attributed to the organization(s) that produced each brief. While the Disrupting Harm project is a close collaboration between ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the three organizations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

Suggested citation:

UNICEF, The Relationship Between Online and In-Person Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Disrupting Harm Data Insight no. 16. Safe Online, New York, 2026.

© UNICEF & Safe Online, 2026. Use of this publication is permitted provided the source is acknowledged and that the publication is not used for commercial purposes.

Funding from Safe Online does not constitute endorsement.

Acknowledgements:

This data insight was drafted by Anisha Bhargava, UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti. The data analysis that informed this data insight was prepared by Hélène Guillou. We acknowledge the contributions of UNICEF colleagues working on the Disrupting Harm project, our implementing partners at ECPAT International, INTERPOL and Safe Online, and all national partners who made this initiative possible. Full acknowledgements for the Disrupting Harm project can be found here.