

From Data to Dialogue:

Youth Perspectives on Child Sexual Abuse in the Digital Sphere

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2024

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Child sexual abuse is a topic that concerns everyone in our society. Any child could fall prey to these horrific experiences. These crimes are happening every single day, all around the world. And they leave a scar that stays for decades.

What helped me as a survivor was the voices of the survivors before me. I understood that there was hope to survive this immense pain and turn it into a passion for change.

This report brings a voice to these issues. And with that voice comes hope. And with hope we are inspired to create change. That is why it is so important to speak, and read the following words with intention to hear them.

”

Scharliina Eräpuro
child sexual abuse survivor

Foreword

This report comes at an unprecedented moment in human history with the safety of millions of children under a new threat of severe harm. During the past few years, online child sexual abuse has been increasing exponentially at record levels in terms of severity, obscenity and at an immense scale, accelerated by an unregulated internet and technology developments such as artificial intelligence. Tech companies are enabling and fueling the problem, prioritizing profit margins over child safety. Governments are failing to hold them accountable. Leading child rights experts around the world are united in declaring this a Child Sex Abuse Crisis that requires urgent action.

If you have not heard about this crisis, there may be a few reasons why: opponents to regulating the internet and new technology where child sexual abuse occurs every second have dominated the debates. The technology industry, particularly the large service providers of leading social media platforms, have significantly more funding, lobbying representation and resources than child rights advocates, survivors and youth do. The conversation has been strategically shifted by those opposing regulation efforts from child safety to focus instead on criticisms of government institutions and fear mongering about the solutions proposed. Misinformation and disinformation have spread like wildfire, especially across the very social media platforms child rights advocates seek to regulate to protect children.

Add to this, the debates are led by adults from generations who did not grow up with social media at their fingertips. It is difficult to truly understand the experiences of today's youth who have experienced childhood like never before. Their voices and insights are therefore necessary to rebalance this conversation and better understand what is at stake. That is why this report is essential. We have gathered youth from across Europe, young people who understand this crisis from personal lived experiences and who are rising experts in this space. The following pages are entirely researched and written by these youth voices: they have designed an excellent, thorough and balanced overview of the ongoing regulatory debate in Europe from their needed perspectives.

Together we can protect children from abuse and end this crisis by calling on our leaders to regulate technology companies. Listening to the voices of the youth experts and young survivors who have been the most impacted by the Child Sex Abuse Crisis is a crucial first step.

Daniela Ligiero

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Cite this report as:

Tercova, N., Kaymakci, S., Hunfeld, M. (2024). *From Data to Dialogue: Youth Perspectives on Child Sexual Abuse in the Digital Sphere*. [Report].

Acknowledgment:

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this report. We greatly appreciate the collaborating organisations, experts, youth worldwide, and especially the survivors themselves.

Overview

This report offers a comprehensive exploration of child sexual abuse (CSA) and child sexual abuse material (CSAM) that goes beyond mere statistics. Apart from covering the prevalence of the issues and the existing legislative frameworks, it also delves into the profound psychological impacts on the victims and the barriers to seeking support. Moreover, it integrates the voices of its primary audience, the youth, by aligning cutting-edge insights with their viewpoints. Additionally, the report incorporates invaluable perspectives from young experts across various domains, including law, media, and psychology, as well as survivors themselves.

CSA refers to the coercion or force compelling a child to engage in sexual activities, encompassing both physical and non-contact acts, occurring either online or offline (Department for Education, 2023; Department of Health, 2017; Scottish Government, 2023; Wales Safeguarding Procedures Project Board, 2020). This includes behaviours such as exhibitionism, exposure to pornography, voyeurism, and engaging in sexually suggestive communication via phone or online (Darkness2Light In Miller et al., 2007). It is important to note that children and adolescents may not always recognize that they are being sexually abused.

The creation, use, and distribution of CSAM is an urgent public health and human rights crisis (Insoll et al., 2022). CSAM encompasses any depiction, whether via publication, display, film, electronic media, or any other medium, of a child or an individual portrayed as a child involved in actual or simulated explicit sexual conduct or any portrayal of a child's sexual anatomy for predominantly sexual objectives (LawInsider, 2024). The unsettling truth is that the internet plat-

forms we utilise regularly for communication and information sharing, such as social media, online gaming, and email, are now being exploited for the dissemination and collection of CSAM. CSAM thus pervades virtually every corner of the online world (NCMEC, 2024).

The research indicates that individuals who have been victims of CSA face an elevated risk of negative consequences across various aspects of their lives (Fisher et al., 2017; Maniglio, 2009). Furthermore, longitudinal studies suggest that these detrimental outcomes are not confined to the short and medium term after the abuse, but may persist throughout the victim's lifetime (Fisher et al., 2017). In terms of CSAM, the negative consequences are compounded each time the material is shared and viewed, potentially exacerbating the victim's trauma.

A distinctive feature of this report is the intentional intertwining of hard data with the lived experiences of the target group. This approach contributes to a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the issues. By combining quantitative information with qualitative narratives, it not only elevates the depth of its analysis but also ensures that it resonates with the lived realities faced by young people in the digital age.

01

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a problem of epidemic proportions, affecting children of all ages, socioeconomic levels, and cultural backgrounds (Modelli, Galvão & Pratesi, 2012). It involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities (Fisher et al., 2017), such as unwanted and inappropriate sexual molestation or exposure of a child; touching or fondling of the genitals; or penetration in the sense of oral, anal or vaginal intercourse or attempted intercourse (Andrews et al., 2004). CSA further includes **contact and non-contact abuse, child sexual exploitation (CSE), and grooming** of a child in preparation for abuse. CSA is a hidden crime characterised by substantial underreporting (Fisher et al., 2017). It often occurs in conjunction with other types

of abuse or maltreatment as well as other life circumstances (e.g., unstable family life) that may result in longer-term negative consequences (Fisher et al., 2017).

CSA encompasses the sexual abuse of children, along with the creation and dissemination of explicit images depicting such abuse, particularly through online platforms. The occurrence of generating, disseminating, and utilizing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) has seen a significant rise in recent years (Insoll et al., 2022). CSAM includes any portrayal, whether published, displayed, filmed, through electronic media, or any other means, depicting a child or someone depicted as a child engaged in real or simulated explicit

grooming of a child

Grooming of a child is the most commonly recognized form of sexual grooming. It involves the gradual befriending of a child by a potential abuser, aiming to cultivate the child's confidence and trust. This strategic approach allows the abuser to manipulate the child into consenting to abusive activities and is often a prerequisite for the abuser to gain access to the child.

(Craven, Brown & Gilchrist, 2006; Gillespie, 2002)

sexual activities, or any depiction of a child's sexual anatomy primarily for sexual purposes (LawInsider, 2024). Owing to rapid technological advancements, instances of online CSA are escalating in both magnitude and intricacy (Justice, 2023). Perpetrators aiming to exploit children via CSAM can operate from any location worldwide using digital devices and the internet. Modern smartphones serve as the quintessential

tool for child exploitation offenders, facilitating tasks such as photographing, recording, or streaming live child sexual abuse; storing CSAM locally or remotely; communicating with victims and other offenders; and distributing and receiving CSAM through diverse applications (Justice, 2023). Moreover, encryption features of both the device and applications frequently obscure such illicit activities.

Alarming statistics from INHOPE, the EU network of hotlines, highlight the severity of the problem, as global instances of suspected CSA nearly doubled between 2017 and 2019 (INHOPE, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these risks as lockdown measures increased children's online activity and provided for an increase of opportunities for exploitation (European Commission, 2022). As a result, reports of online sexual exploitation from the public further doubled from 2019 to 2020 (NCMEC, 2021). In 2021, the Child Sexual Exploitation database of Interpol thus contained more than 2.7 million individual images and videos depicting CSA. In 2022, the Internet Watch Foundation assessed a total of 375 230 reports, reflecting an additional 4% increase compared to 2021 (IWF, 2022). The way the issues of CSA and CSAM distribution are handled from the legislative point of view is discussed in depth in the following chapter.

02

EU Legislation and Perspectives

The expanding digital landscape poses significant risks to children, from exposure to harmful content to the serious issue of CSA. Despite longstanding efforts by the European Union (EU) to safeguard children online, challenges persist, particularly with the rise of online platforms facilitating the circulation of CSAM and the grooming of children for exploitation.

The EU has become a major host of CSAM globally, hosting over 60% of the reported CSAM in the world, with technological advancements like end-to-end encryption complicating efforts to identify and prosecute perpetrators. Despite existing legislation such as the 2011 Child Sexual Abuse Directive, challenges remain in effectively protecting children online.

encryption

Encryption is the process of changing electronic information or signals into a secret code (= system of letters, numbers, or symbols) that people cannot understand or use without special equipment.

end-to-end encryption

End-to-end encryption is an encryption architecture that encrypts the information on the source device (the sender) and keeps it encrypted until it reaches its intended recipient.

The European Commission's proposed regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat CSA from May 2022 aims to address these challenges by imposing obligations on online service providers to detect and remove CSAM. However, debates over privacy and

freedom of expression complicate the implementation of such measures.

While there is widespread support for prioritising child protection, concerns persist regarding potential infringements on privacy rights. The proposed regulation seeks to strike a balance between these conflicting interests by leveraging technology and human moderation to combat online CSA effectively.

In addition to these challenges, harmonising national laws and overcoming fragmentation in the EU's digital single market present further obstacles. Despite these complexities, the proposed regulation represents a crucial step towards establishing a cohesive framework to protect children online, highlighting the need for careful consideration of competing interests and the preservation of both child rights and fundamental freedoms.

2.1 Legislative Evolution in the European Union on the Issue of CSA

The European Commission has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to combating CSA, recognizing it as a grave violation of children's rights and a significant societal challenge (European Commission, 2020). The EU's legislative endeavours align with international conventions and agreements aimed at protecting children from CSE and CSA, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Lanzarote Convention. In the last 20 years, the EU has implemented a series of legislative measures to address this issue, evolving alongside the changing landscape of digital technology and online platforms. The following examines key documents in the legislative evolution within the EU concerning CSAM and related offences, highlighting key initiatives and developments.

2.1.1 EU Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA of 22 December 2003 on combating the sexual exploitation of children and child pornography

Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA, adopted on 22 December 2003, aimed to combat sexual exploitation of children and child pornography within the European Union. It provides definitions for terms like "child" and "child pornography" and mandates Member States to criminalise various offences related to sexual exploitation of children and child

pornography, including coercion into prostitution, production, distribution, and possession of child pornography (European Union, 2004). The decision required Member States to impose criminal penalties, with specified minimum sentences, and hold legal entities liable for offences committed for their benefit. It establishes jurisdiction over these crimes, even if committed outside a Member State's territory, and emphasises the protection and assistance of victims, ensuring investigations and prosecutions are not dependent solely on victim reports (European Union, 2004). While it marked an important step towards the harmonisation and criminalisation of CSA online, as per Article 34 of the Treaty on the European Union, the decision was legally binding only in terms of its intended outcome. National authorities were granted discretion in determining the appropriate forms and methods. Although Member States were obligated to incorporate its provisions into national legislation within specified timelines, the tangible impact of this decision has varied.

2.1.2 Child Sexual Abuse Directive (2011/93/EU)

The cornerstone of EU legislation in the area of CSA is the Child Sexual Abuse Directive, which was adopted in 2011 and replaced the Council Framework Decision. This Directive marked a significant milestone

in establishing minimum rules regarding the definition of criminal offences and sanctions related to the CSA and CSE of children. It aimed to harmonise legal frameworks across Member States, emphasising the importance of prevention, investigation, prosecution, and victim assistance. However, Member States' implementation of this Directive has been slow, with the European Commission initiating enforcement measures, including infringement procedures where necessary (European Commission, 2020).

In 2022 the Commission started an evaluation process to consider the level of implementation of the Directive in the EU (European Commission, 2024). This assessment analysed possible legislative gaps, best practices and priority actions in the area of CSA. The study exposed that the Directive in its current form leaves room for various amendments: ambiguous definitions, as well as remaining challenges concerning the investigation and prosecution of offenders in Member States are in dire need of review and possibly redrafting (European Commission, 2024). In addition, the evaluation highlighted concerns related to the exponential growth of online sharing of CSAM as well as the increased possibilities for perpetrators to shield their identity (European Commission, 2024). Especially online, perpetrators of CSA are able to conceal their illegal activities which enables them to increasingly evade investigation and prosecution by law enforcement authorities (European Commission, 2024). Overall, the Commission's assessment concluded that the increased online presence of children as well as the latest technological developments culminated in new challenges for law enforcement authorities and created new opportunities for CSA which are not yet covered by the current provisions in the Directive (European Commission, 2024).

The evaluation showed clearly that **a renewed legislative framework is needed at EU level**, all the more so given that even full and conforming transposition of the current Directive could not sufficiently address the challenges linked to the reporting, investigation and prosecution of CSA and CSE offences nor lead to the adoption throughout the EU of sufficiently sound measures in relation to prevention and assistance to victims.

Moreover, according to the study's findings, the diverse legislative frameworks found in EU Member States concerning the investigation and prosecution of CSAM do not allow for an effective fight against CSA and CSE in the EU, especially because of the insufficient criminalisation of child CSA and CSE offences committed through the use of new and emerging technologies, such as end-to-end encryption (European Commission, 2024). Finally, the study showcased that Member State abilities in the prevention of CSA and victim assistance are insufficient and lack coordination, ultimately questioning their effectiveness (European Commission, 2024).

Accordingly, the Commission submitted a proposal for a recast of the Directive in February 2024. The intended changes to the articles of the existing directive as suggested in the new proposal by Commission aim to address key shortcomings identified in the implementation and evaluation of the directive. They include adapting the definitions of offences at the EU level to effectively tackle cross-border CSA and CSE by improving definitions of offences, enhancing prevention measures, strengthening coordination and cooperation, and providing better support to victims (European Commission, 2024). Additionally, there are amendments related to **prevention, assistance to victims, investigations, and prosecutions**, which respond to the specific gaps and challenges that have emerged during the evaluation and monitoring of the implementation of the directive over the past decade, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the directive in combating the CSA and CSE, as well as CSAM (European Commission, 2024).

Notably, proposed Articles 2 and 16 provide for much needed updates to the original drafting of the Directive: Art. 2 recognises that accessing CSAM is often the first step towards hands-on abuse, leaving the depiction of real or realistic abuse and exploitation irrelevant (European Commission, 2024). The emergence of augmented, extended, and virtual reality environments, coupled with the potential misuse of artificial intelligence to create realistic "deepfakes" depicting CSAM, has expanded the traditional understanding of an "image." (European Commission, 2024). Additionally, perpetrators circulate manuals offering guidance on locating, grooming, and exploiting children, as well as evading identification, investigation, and prosecution, and concealing materials (European Commission, 2024). Termed "paedophile handbooks," these manuals lower barriers and provide necessary expertise, thereby encouraging offenders and facilitating the perpetration of sexual abuse, warranting their criminalization (European Commission, 2024).

Accordingly, amendments to Article 2(3)(d) aim to ensure that the definition of CSAM encompasses these technological innovations in a future-proof and technology-neutral manner (European Commission, 2024).

Similarly, the proposal for Article 16 responds to the years-long fight against statutes of limitations concerning CSA offences: The revisions to Article 16(2) aim to ensure that the commencement of statutes of limitations is postponed until the victim reaches the age of majority (e.g., 18 years old), and to establish minimum limitations to enable victims to pursue justice effectively (European Commission, 2024). These amendments establish baseline standards regarding the duration of limitations periods (European Commission, 2024). Presently, there is significant disparity in statutes of limitations among EU Member States (McVarish, Hamilton & Hurtado, 2023). Some have completely abolished criminal statutes of limitations for most or all offences outlined in the Directive (McVarish, Hamilton, & Hurtado, 2023). Others have very brief limitations and expire before victims reach the age of 40 for most or all covered offences (European Commission, 2024). Meanwhile, another set of Member States retains limitations expiring after victims turn 40 for most or all covered offences (European Commission, 2024). These variations result in unequal access to justice for victims across the EU, impacting their ability to see relevant offences prosecuted and obtain compensation (European Commission, 2024). Furthermore, perpetrators may exploit these differences to evade prosecution by relocating to jurisdictions with shorter, expired limitations periods (European Commission, 2024). This situation heightens the risk of potential offenders evading justice and continuing to pose a threat to children over several decades (European Commission, 2024).

In light of these circumstances, it becomes apparent that ensuring effective investigation and prosecution of CSA and CSE crimes, along with providing appropriate victim assistance and support, hinges on statutes of limitations permitting victims to report crimes without encountering barriers that may arise later in life (European Commission, 2024).

2.1.3 EU Strategy for a More Effective Fight Against Child Sexual Abuse (2020)

In response to the evolving nature of CSA, both offline and online, the EU adopted a comprehensive strategy in 2020. This strategy represented a holistic approach to combating CSA, focusing on preven-

tion, investigation, and victim support (European Commission, 2020). Importantly, it recognized the increasing prevalence of online exploitation and called for tailored responses to address digital threats (European Commission, 2020). In furtherance of these calls, the Commission outlined eight key actions to address CSA online (European Commission, 2020). Most importantly, the Commission vowed to propose necessary legislation to ensure that providers of electronic communications services could continue their voluntary practices to detect CSA after December 2020 (European Commission, 2020). In a second stage, the Commission would propose legislation that ought to require relevant online service providers to detect known CSAM and report it to public authorities (European Commission, 2020). This would help in effectively tackling CSA online. The Commission also presented a plan to identify current legislative gaps, best practices, and priority actions in the fight against CSA online and offline (European Commission, 2020). Putting these plans into practice, the Commission launched the previously mentioned extensive study into such gaps and practices by the end of 2020 which mounted in the proposal for a recast of the Child Sexual Abuse Directive published in February 2024. Furthermore, the Commission promised to work towards the creation of a European Centre to Prevent and Counter Child Sexual Abuse (European Commission, 2020). This centre would enable a comprehensive and effective EU response against CSA online and offline. Lastly, the European Commission published the newest version of its new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+) in 2022, aiming “to complement and support the practical implementation of the existing measures to protect children online, develop children’s skills and empower them to safely enjoy and shape their life online” (European Commission, 2022).

2.1.4 The Digital Services Act (DSA) and the ePrivacy Directive 2002/58/EC

The Digital Services Act, applicable in the EU since February 2024, is not specifically drafted to address the issue of CSAM (Buri et al., 2023). Instead, its primary aim is to modernise the overarching regulatory structure governing online platforms (Buri et al., 2023). The newly proposed CSAM Regulation complements the broader framework outlined in the DSA, serving as a specialised legal framework (Buri et al., 2023). While the DSA offers a framework for combating illegal content online in a general sense, the CSAM Regulation introduces more precise

regulations specifically targeting the eradication of a particular type of illegal content (Buri et al., 2023). Consequently, providers would be subject to a broad systemic risk assessment requirement under the DSA, alongside a more focused obligation under the CSAM Regulation (Buri et al., 2023). The political consensus on the DSA shows that the protection of children is one of the hallmarks of the new rules as it obliges companies to put the interests of children at the forefront of their considerations and compels all online platforms to design their systems with attention for the rights of child users (European Commission, 2022). As per the updated regulations, online platforms catering to children are required to prioritise their privacy, security, and overall well-being (European Commission, 2022). This includes implementing specialised default privacy and security settings (European Commission, 2022). Platforms are also permitted to establish age verification procedures to restrict access, offer parental controls to empower parents and guardians in shielding children from potentially harmful content, and provide tools for users to report abuse or seek assistance (European Commission, 2022).

Initiatives have already been launched by companies like TikTok and YouTube, which, among other measures, have **prohibited targeted advertisements for minors and automatically set minor profiles to private**, ensuring that uploaded videos can only be viewed by approved individuals (The Impact of the Digital Services Act on Digital Platforms, 2023).

Lastly, the ePrivacy Directive harmonises the laws of the Member States relating to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, and in particular the right to privacy concerning the processing of personal data in the electronic communication sector (European Union, 2002). Moreover, it ensures the free movement of such personal data and of electronic communication tools and services in the Community (European Union, 2002). It applies to the processing of personal data when dealing with the provision of publicly available electronic communications networks, such as social media, in

the EU (European Union, 2002). For the purposes of this report, Articles 5(1) and 6 of the directive are especially relevant as they concern the confidentiality of communications and traffic data in the electronic communications sector (European Union, 2002). Article 5(1) of the directive establishes the obligation for providers of electronic communications services to respect the confidentiality of communications (European Union, 2002). This means that providers must ensure the privacy and security of the communications transmitted through their services. Article 6 of the directive addresses the processing of traffic data. It sets out the conditions under which providers of electronic communications services can process traffic data, which includes information such as the source, destination, duration, and type of communication (European Union, 2002). The article establishes that such traffic data should be erased or made anonymous when it is no longer needed for the purpose of the transmission of a communication (European Union, 2002). These articles aim to protect the privacy and confidentiality of electronic communications and ensure that individuals' communications are not unlawfully intercepted or accessed without their consent, thereby acting as safeguards to protect personal data and ensuring the security of electronic communications.

2.2 Overview on the State of Play: The Interim Regulation and the New Proposal

After assessing the legislative evolution of various EU acts at the crossroads of child protection and digital and privacy rights, it shall become evident that the

EU's targeted CSAM legislation aspires to balance competing interests.

The Regulation on a temporary derogation from certain provisions of Directive 2002/58/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards the use of technologies by number-independent interpersonal communications service providers for the processing of personal and other data for the purpose of combating CSA online ('Interim Regulation')

In presenting its 2020 EU strategy for a more effective fight against CSA, the European Commission promised more robust legislation in the area of CSA online (European Commission, 2020). Concretely, it followed up with the narrow and targeted legislative interim solution which aimed to create a temporary and strictly limited derogation from the applicability of Articles 5(1) and 6 of the ePrivacy Directive (European Union, 2021). The Interim Regulation respects the fundamental rights, including the **rights to privacy and protection of personal data**, while enabling providers of number-independent interpersonal communications services to use specific technologies and continue their voluntary activities to the extent necessary to detect and report CSA online and remove CSAM on their services, as long as the adoption of an announced long-term legislation is pending (European Union, 2021). The regulation stresses the importance of employing the least intrusive privacy technologies feasible to combat online CSA (European Union, 2021). Additionally, **providers must annually disclose details of their processing activities** under the exception, covering data volumes, identified cases, error rates, data retention policies, and data protection measures (European Union, 2021). Voluntary efforts to detect solicitation of children for sexual purposes ("grooming") also must be limited to the use of existing, state-of-the-art technology that corresponds to the safeguards set out in the interim regulation (European Union, 2021). This Regulation was meant to cease to apply and be replaced by the final Regulation in December 2025, however, as the announced long-term legislation has yet to be adopted, the Interim Regulation's application was extended until 3 May 2025 (European Parliament, 2024). The extension came alongside new more stringent provisions concerning the annual transparency reporting obligations (European Parliament, 2024). Importantly, the European Parliament indicated that **it will not be prepared to endorse any further extensions to the Interim Regulation**, making the adoption of the proposed new Regulation all the more pertinent (Wiggin LLP, 2024).

The ‘New Regulation’: The Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down rules to prevent and combat CSA

Up to 95% of all reports of CSA received in 2020 came from one company, despite clear evidence that the problem does not only exist on one platform (European Commission, 2022). Evidently, the current system based on voluntary detection and reporting by companies has proven to be insufficient to adequately protect children and, in any case, will no longer be possible once the Interim Regulation currently in place expires (European Commission, 2022). This truth was echoed by the Court of Justice of the EU in 2020 (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2020, para. 126). In connection to combating criminal offences against minors, the Court noted that some of the fundamental rights at issue, can give rise to positive obligations of the relevant public authorities, including the EU legislature (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2020, para. 126). For example, children’s rights to respect for private and family life and to protection of personal data are affected by the types of CSA concerned, (i.e., the exchange of photos or videos depicting such abuse). The legal obligation to protect these rights could amount to positive obligations on the part of relevant public authorities, including the EU legislature, and require them to adopt legal measures to protect the rights in question (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2020, para. 126).

Accordingly, the European Commission presented its proposal for the New Regulation in May 2022. The general objective of the proposal is to improve and harmonise the functioning of the internal market, citing Art 114 TFEU as its legal basis (European Commission, 2022). By introducing consistent mandatory EU rules to prevent and combat CSA online, the New Regulation covers, already existing, new and future CSAM, as well as grooming (European Commission, 2022). The proposed Regulation relies on the previously mentioned Child Sexual Abuse Directive for the definition of criminal offences and what constitutes CSAM and solicitation (European Commission, 2022). The Directive constitutes the criminal law pillar upon which the proposed Regulation stands (European Commission, 2022). Whereas the European Parliament has since reviewed and amended the Commission’s proposal, the Parliament’s Version is largely seen as a step backwards from a child rights and survivors’ point of view as it excludes grooming from the Regulation’s scope of detection orders and omits a legal basis for providers to voluntarily detect and keep their platforms free of CSAM and grooming (Internet Watch Foundation, 2023). For this reason, this chapter will focus on the original proposal from the European Commission, hoping that the arguments provided will sway the debate to return to stronger language and solid rules protecting children online.

The European Commission’s proposed Regulation consists of two main building blocks:

- 1.** The first block imposes on providers (mainly providers of hosting services, i.e., social media, and providers of interpersonal communication services, i.e. messaging services, both referred to as ‘providers’ in the Interim Regulation) **detection, reporting, removal and blocking** obligations of known and new CSAM, as well as the solicitation of children, regardless of the technology used in the online exchanges (European Commission, 2022).
- 2.** The second building block establishes the ***EU Centre on Child Sexual Abuse (EU Centre)*** as a decentralised EU agency to facilitate the implementation of the new Regulation (European Commission, 2022).

The rules apply irrespective of the provider's place of establishment so long as it offers services in the EU (European Commission, 2022). The three specific objectives of the proposal are to ensure the effective detection, reporting and removal of online CSAM; this includes the dissemination of known or new CSAM and the grooming of a child; improve legal certainty, transparency and accountability and ensure protection of fundamental rights; and to reduce the proliferation and effects of CSA through harmonisation of the rules and increased coordination of efforts (European Commission, 2022).

The proposed regulation puts forth comprehensive measures with clear rules, robust conditions, and safeguards and mandates online service providers to take proactive steps in detecting, reporting, and removing CSAM from their platforms (European Commission, 2022). Providers are required to conduct thorough risk assessments of their services to identify potential misuse and implement appropriate mitigation measures, as to ensure proportionality in their responses (European Commission, 2022). Central to the enforcement and facilitation of these obligations will be the establishment of the independent EU CSA, which acts as a central repository of expertise and support (European Commission, 2022). The EU Centre's functions are multifaceted: it serves as a reliable source of information on identified abusive content, analyses reports from providers to filter out erroneous submissions to law enforcement, and provides vital support services to victims (European Commission, 2022).

The regulatory framework encompasses a range of measures aimed at rescuing children from further harm, preventing the re-circulation of abusive material, and holding offenders accountable (European Commission, 2022). Therefore, next to the mandatory risk assessments and mitigation measures for service providers, targeted detection obligations based on court-issued detection orders will ensure such accountability (European Commission, 2022). Nonetheless, stringent safeguards are put in place to minimise the risk of false positives in detection technologies (European Commission, 2022). Providers are also obligated to promptly report instances of online CSA to the EU Centre, enabling swift action by national authorities, including the issuance of removal orders for non-compliant content (European Commission, 2022).

Furthermore, the regulation focuses on reducing children's exposure to grooming behaviours by imposing requirements on app stores to restrict

access to potentially harmful applications (European Commission, 2022). Strong oversight mechanisms, coupled with judicial redress avenues, ensure accountability and fairness in the implementation of these regulations (European Commission, 2022).

The EU Centre plays a pivotal role in **verifying reports of potential abuse** made by providers before sharing them with law enforcement authorities and Europol, which will serve to **minimise the risk of erroneous detection and reporting** (European Commission, 2022).

Concretely, in addition to supporting online service providers in compliance efforts, the EU Centre collaborates closely with national law enforcement agencies and Europol to expedite the rescue of abused children and apprehend perpetrators (European Commission, 2022). It also serves as a knowledge hub for disseminating best practices on prevention and victim assistance among Member States (European Commission, 2022). In this way, the proposed regulation aligns with the Commission's broader strategy for creating a safer online environment for children (European Commission, 2022). By offering support to victims in taking down abusive materials and advocating for their rights, the EU Centre emerges as an essential institution, which will promote a proactive stance in addressing the scourge of online CSA and fostering a safer digital environment for all (European Commission, 2022).

2.3 Balancing Digital Rights with Children’s Rights

2.3.1 Digital Rights and Privacy Concerns

The proposed regulation aimed at combating online CSA has triggered a multifaceted debate, seeing various stakeholders expressing divergent views on the potential implications of the proposed measures. Critics of the proposed Regulation against online CSA raise significant concerns regarding privacy infringement, proportionality, freedom of expression, and the practical challenges of the regulation’s implementation. These voices underscore the importance of carefully balancing the imperative to combat online abuse with the protection of fundamental rights and the need for clear and precise regulatory measures.

Critics of the regulation, including the European Data Protection Board (EDPB) and the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS), raise significant concerns regarding the potential infringement on users’ privacy rights (EDPB-EDPS, 2022). They argue that the mandatory processing of personal data for detecting and reporting online CSA could lead to unwarranted surveillance and the possible misuse of sensitive personal information by private operators, given that social media companies would be ultimately in charge of implementing the new rules (EDPB-EDPS, 2022). Moreover, the EDPB and EDPS highlight the lack of clarity in key elements of the proposal, such as the definition of a “significant risk” and the broad discretion granted to private operators and authorities in applying safeguards and detection technologies, which may result in legal uncertainty and potential abuse of power (EDPB-EDPS, 2022).

Additionally, there are concerns raised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) about the proportionality of the measures proposed in the regulation (EESC, 2024). The EESC acknowledges the importance of addressing online CSA but warns against measures that could disproportionately infringe on fundamental rights, including privacy and the presumption of innocence (EESC, 2024). Similarly, the European Digital Rights Association (EDRI) emphasises the potential impact on freedom of expression, cautioning that potential automated scanning and chat controls could lead to censorship and harm the freedom of legitimate speech (Negreiro, 2022).

Practical challenges associated with the implementation of the regulations are also highlighted by Cloudflare and the Interactive Software Federation

of Europe (ISFE). They argue that the technology required to effectively detect and remove new CSAM may not be sufficiently developed yet, leading to disproportionately high inaccuracies and false positives (Negreiro, 2022). Moreover, the Belgian App Association voices concerns about the feasibility of compliance for small businesses, particularly regarding the collection and management of user data, which could pose significant risks without a clear purpose or necessity (Negreiro, 2022).

Lastly, legal experts, including the German Lawyers’ Association, stress the potential harm to fundamental rights posed by the proposed regulations (German Bar Association, Committee on Surveillance and Information Technology, 2021). They argue that the broad scope and intrusive nature of the measures, particularly regarding the scanning of audio communications and the current technologies’ lack of context sensitivity, could undermine privacy and the presumption of innocence.

2.3.2 Youth Perspective: Children’s Rights and Survivors Voices

Despite some of the valid concerns cited by the stakeholders above, the arguments in favour of the new regulation to combat online CSA highlight several crucial points that arguably outweigh the concerns raised by its critics. Firstly, protecting children from the grave harm caused by online sexual exploitation is of paramount importance. By obliging service providers to detect, report, and remove such abusive material, the regulation aims to prevent harm and ensure the safety of vulnerable children. The rights to safety from serious harm for children and survivors take priority over users’ right to privacy, which ultimately is limited and not an absolute right under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Per Article 52(1) of the EU Charter, it can be limited under certain circumstances (Lenaerts, 2019). Children have suffered violations of their rights in the digital realm for decades and deserve that their protection does not come in as a secondary consideration in the present debate. Further, the privacy of children in digital spaces is significantly violated in many instances of CSA online.

Nevertheless, safeguards for privacy are integrated into the regulation to address concerns about potential privacy infringements. The regulation emphasises the need for targeted obligations and

A key risk is that stakeholders accept the current state of child sexual abuse online as the status quo rather than as years-long mismanagement and the result of missed opportunities to legislate appropriately at the time when the issue first became prevalent at a large scale.

robust safeguards to minimise the impact on users' privacy while still effectively addressing the issue of online CSA (Negreiro, 2022). At this point, it is important to remember that technologies such as end-to-end encryption are not a right or fundamental good in and of themselves but rather a means to an end. However, should time prove that the mean is disproportionate to the result to be achieved, technologies need to be reassessed, and other solutions must be found. To illustrate this, critics should try to change their perspective and assess the proportionality of end-to-end encryption in relation to children's and survivors' rights instead of assessing the proportionality of the proposed detection measures in relation to privacy rights. Arguably, had this debate been fought more prominently when end-to-end encryption was implemented, our current views on technology would be filtered through the lens of children's rights rather than through privacy concerns.

Children and survivors' rights should be recognised as absolute, as they're fundamental to the general well-being of the victims and their inclusion in society. Moreover, their violation in the digital realm can lead to real-life consequences. That's why I believe privacy measures must be adapted and harmonised with the rights of children to have a safe virtual experience, and I believe that's exactly the aim of Law: to reconcile different situations

Girl, 21 years old, Italy

Another significant aspect highlighted by proponents is the necessity to strike a fair balance between conflicting fundamental rights (Negreiro, 2022). While acknowledging the importance of combating online CSA, the proposed regulation also considers the potential impact on other fundamental rights, such as the freedom to conduct a business, the right to private life, and the protection of personal data (Negreiro, 2022). For exactly these purposes, the establishment of the EU Centre is seen as a crucial facilitator for the implementation of the regulation. This centre, a hub of expertise, will provide support to service providers, law enforcement, and victims (Negreiro, 2022). It ensures the availability of reliable detection technologies, offers assistance in risk assessments and facilitates communication with relevant authorities (Negreiro, 2022).

With the ever-changing and fast-paced world in which AI and tech companies operate, it's necessary to implement strict rules and measures to protect the children. It should be a high priority for all involved parties to create a safe environment for everybody, to use these powerful tools without worry about any backfire or harm.

Boy, 28 years old, Slovakia

Furthermore, the regulation includes stringent measures to ensure that detection technologies used by service providers comply with privacy standards and are deployed responsibly (Negreiro, 2022). By limiting the preservation of removed material and related data to what is strictly necessary, the regulations mitigate interference with users' rights to personal data protection and confidentiality of communications. Despite concerns about the potential repurposing of detection technologies, it can be argued that the risk is low and can be mitigated through transparency reports and random audits (Negreiro, 2022). Additionally, the regulation aims to be technology-neutral, allowing for flexibility in compliance while ensuring the effectiveness of detection measures (Negreiro, 2022).

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In addressing the issue of CSAM, policymakers and tech companies face the challenge of striking a delicate balance between safeguarding privacy rights and ensuring effective measures to combat online child exploitation. While acknowledging the importance of privacy in digital spaces, I believe that there is a growing necessity of robust measures to detect and remove CSAM to protect vulnerable children from harm.

Girl, 23 years old, Italy

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Overall, the arguments in favour of the new regulation underscore the urgent need to address online CSA while balancing the protection of fundamental rights. By implementing targeted obligations, robust safeguards, and support mechanisms, the regulation aims to create a safer online environment for children without unduly compromising the rights to privacy or freedom of expression.

2.4 An overview of national laws on CSAM in selected European Union Member States

To further illustrate the need for harmonisation of national laws on CSAM in the EU, the following insights will develop on selected member states' different levels of criminalisation of CSAM. The New Regulation would have direct effect in Member States and could counter the current diversification of national laws on the treatment of CSAM and propel the equality of protection for children and survivors across the Union, as opposed to the bindingness 'as to the result to be achieved' of the Child Sexual Abuse Directive, (European Union, n.d.).

Czechia

In Czech legislation concerning CSA, various forms of content are deemed illegal, such as drawings, manga, or artistic interpretations of CSAM, as well as digitally generated or realistic images depicting minors engaged in sexually explicit conduct (INHOPE, 2022). Additionally, actions like child grooming, sexual extortion of children, and the solicitation of children for sexual purposes are strictly prohibited (INHOPE, 2022). However, the legal status of certain materials, such as apparent self-generated sexual material, depends on context and intention, with notifications to law enforcement authorities (LEA) and hosting providers (HPs) being necessary (INHOPE, 2022). Similarly, the legality of text depictions, fictional

depictions of CSAM, and the praise of pedophilia or CSA depend on context and intent (INHOPE, 2022). Moreover, the location and accessibility of such content are considered in the law, with different actions required based on the platform, ranging from private sites to social media accounts and messengers (INHOPE, 2022). While some activities are not explicitly illegal, like non-explicit images in a series containing CSAM or images in a medical context, others, such as non-explicit images with sexual comments attached, are deemed illegal and mandate notifications to LEA and HPs (INHOPE, 2022).

Germany

In Germany, the legal framework concerning CSAM encompasses various content types and contexts, each with distinct legal statuses and corresponding actions. Drawings, manga, or artistic interpretations depicting CSAM are deemed illegal and prompt notices to LEA and HPs for necessary action (INHOPE, 2022). Similarly, digitally generated or realistic images portraying minors engaged in sexually explicit conduct fall under illegal categorization and necessitate intervention (INHOPE, 2022). Importantly, the portrayal of adults appearing as minors engaged in such conduct is also considered illegal, albeit

such illegality is context-dependent (INHOPE, 2022). Notably, the dissemination of apparent self-generated sexual material is generally illegal, especially if shared online and involving individuals appearing as minors (INHOPE, 2022). Additionally, Germany's legal stance extends to sexualized modelling or posing by children, with emphasis on identifying unnatural or provocative portrayals, in accordance with Sections 184b and 184c of the Criminal Code (StGB) (INHOPE, 2022). Furthermore, text depictions, fictional narratives, or manuals related to CSAM or CSA are subject to legal scrutiny and warrant notices to LEA and HPs as necessary (INHOPE, 2022). However, non-explicit medical images or non-explicit content within a series lacking sexual commentary are not deemed illegal (INHOPE, 2022). In terms of accessibility and actions taken, Germany allows hotlines access to private sites but mandates notices to LEA and HPs for necessary intervention (INHOPE, 2022). Similarly, live-streamed CSE/CSA incidents or activities on social media platforms require notifications to relevant authorities (INHOPE, 2022).

Spain

In Spain, the legal framework surrounding CSAM encompasses various content types and contexts, each governed by specific legal statuses and corresponding actions. Drawings, manga, or artistic interpretations depicting CSAM are generally illegal, as the law refers to virtual pornography in cases where minors are depicted artificially but realistically, which leads to notifications to LEA for judicial processing and content removal by HPs (INHOPE, 2022). Similarly, digitally generated or realistic images portraying minors engaged in sexually explicit conduct are deemed illegal and require similar actions by LEA and HPs (INHOPE, 2022). Additionally, situations involving minors appearing to be adults or adults appearing as minors engaged in sexually explicit conduct are considered illegal under specific legal provisions, prompting notifications to LEA for necessary intervention (INHOPE, 2022). Child grooming and sexual extortion of children are also illegal (INHOPE, 2022). Here, LEA involvement in judicial processing and content removal by HPs is determined by court orders (INHOPE, 2022). However, the self-generation of sexual material is not explicitly illegal but becomes so when shared without consent, especially involving minors, and leads to notifications to LEA and content removal by HPs (INHOPE, 2022). Furthermore, Spain prohibits sexualized modelling or posing by children and sexualized images of children,

as Spanish legal provisions mandate LEA notifications and content removal by HPs (INHOPE, 2022). Despite these stringent measures, text depictions of CSAM or fictional narratives are not illegal under Spanish law (INHOPE, 2022).

France

In France, the legal framework regarding CSAM delineates specific content types and contexts as illegal, necessitating distinct actions. Drawings, manga, or artistic renditions depicting CSAM are deemed illegal, leading to notifications to LEA and HPs for appropriate measures (INHOPE, 2022). Likewise, digitally generated or realistic images portraying minors in sexually explicit scenarios are considered illegal under French law, prompting similar notifications and actions by LEA and HPs (INHOPE, 2022). Context plays a crucial role in determining the legality of depictions where minors appear as adults or adults appear as minors engaged in sexually explicit conduct (INHOPE, 2022). If evidence suggests the depicted person is a minor, such content is treated as CSAM, leading to notifications to LEA and HPs (INHOPE, 2022). Child grooming, defined by various articles of the French criminal code, triggers LEA involvement upon reports from victims or their guardians, facilitating further investigation and intervention (INHOPE, 2022). Similarly, the solicitation of children for sexual purposes or their sexual extortion is illegal, prompting notifications to LEA and HPs for appropriate action (INHOPE, 2022). France prohibits apparent self-generated sexual material and sexualized modelling or posing by children, which mandates LEA notifications and content removal by HPs (INHOPE, 2022). Moreover, sexualized images of children are treated as CSAM and require notification and removal. Text depictions of CSAM or fictional narratives are illegal only if they contain pornographic or violent content accessible to minors, in which case they warrant LEA notifications and actions by HPs (INHOPE, 2022).

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter evaluated the EU's commitment to combating CSA by assessing the various legislative acts aimed at harmonising legal frameworks, enhancing victim assistance, and improving coordination among Member States. The debate surrounding the proposed regulation to combat online CSA highlights the need to strike a balance between protecting children and respecting fundamental rights, including privacy and freedom of expression. Looking ahead, the proposed regulation offers comprehensive measures to prevent and combat online CSA, including mandatory detection and reporting obligations for service providers and the establishment of the EU Centre. By fostering cooperation among stakeholders and lever-

aging technology responsibly, the EU aims to create a safer online environment for children while upholding fundamental rights. The overview of national laws on CSA in selected EU Member States underscores the importance of harmonisation and cooperation at the EU level to effectively combat this pervasive issue across national borders. The following chapter will dive into the complexities and intersection of technology and CSAM. It will examine the dual role of technology in both mitigating and exacerbating the spread of CSAM across various channels, offering a comprehensive analysis of the current landscape.

03

Technological Facets of CSA

3.1 Encryption and Anonymity

End-to-end encryption, while highly effective for privacy, poses significant challenges in combating CSAM. This encryption method prevents third-party users from viewing messages, hindering efforts to detect and report CSAM. For instance, in 2021 (before the implementation of end-to-end encryption by Meta), Facebook submitted 22.1 million reports to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) through the use of perceptual hashing technology, such as PhotoDNA, which has proven to be highly successful in identifying and combating CSAM (Draper, 2022). Hashing is the fundamental

method for identifying potentially dangerous media. It works by automatically identifying offensive content by comparing a hash—a character string—that is algorithmically derived from a media file from a database of proven CSAM. However, in recent years due to increased easy by-passing of the system, perceptual hashing started being used, as it allows to detect media modifications while still matching images to the database (Bernard, 2023).

However, the proliferation of end-to-end encryption apps, including Meta's recent implementation in 2023, is expected to lead to a decrease in CSAM reporting

to NCMEC. Perceptual hashing techniques employed in these encrypted platforms make it difficult for Electronic Service Providers (ESPs) to detect and report CSAM effectively (Draper, 2022). Once an offender uploads and shares CSAM content law enforcement needs to find, identify, and physically access the device in order to access an end-to-end encrypted conversation. If a gadget is locked, law enforcement has limited access to its contents (NPSCC, 2021).

While some communication technologies with end-to-end encryption utilise signals and indicators to identify CSAM, these indicators are often insufficient for law enforcement to obtain search warrants for the suspect's home or electronic devices, rendering the process ineffective (Draper, 2022). Consequently, law enforcement agencies are left with limited options, primarily focusing on apprehending offenders before CSAM dissemination on these encrypted platforms, which presents significant challenges in detecting and preventing such crimes (Draper, 2022).

End-to-end encryption also makes it more accessible for perpetrators to share CSAM without needing to understand the complex technicalities of the dark web while giving them the same level of security (Draper, 2022). This ease of sharing exacerbates the proliferation of CSAM, posing a significant challenge to law enforcement efforts to combat online child exploitation. In the research done by Suojellaan Lapsia Protect Children, 37% of participants revealed

that they made their initial communication with a child over a messenger, primarily using the end-to-end encrypted apps Telegram (45%) and WhatsApp (41%), Signal (28%), WickrMe (25%), Session (21%), Viber (16%), and Wire (12%) (Insoll et al., 2024). Offenders can also make children switch platforms, which is called "off-platforming" due to the different security levels and functionalities of messaging platforms (Insoll et al., 2024).

dark web

The **dark web** refers to content on the World Wide Web that resides within dark-nets—overlay networks necessitating specific software, configurations, or authorization for access. Operating on the dark web allows private computer networks to interact and transact anonymously, safeguarding users' identities and locations. It constitutes a fraction of the **deep web**, encompassing web content not indexed by standard search engines.

3.2 Emerging Technologies

3.2.1 Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence can misuse CSAM in two significant ways: either by generating such material itself or by identifying existing CSAM. The distinction of AI-generated material from others lies in its capacity for rapid proliferation, as noted by the Internet Watch Foundation (2023).

Recent research conducted by the Internet Watch Foundation in 2023 revealed a concerning trend: AI-generated CSAM images flooded a dark web platform within just a month, encompassing two distinct forms of AI-generated CSAM. The first category comprises deepfakes featuring real individuals, including the disturbing creation of deepfake pornography involving real images of children (Atherton, 2024). This usage of AI exacerbates the risk of re-victimization for survivors of CSA (Internet Watch Foundation,

2023). Additionally, the second type of AI-generated CSAM includes deepfakes that exhibit both high fidelity and realism, blurring the lines between authentic and fabricated content (Atherton, 2024). Alarming, the majority of AI-generated CSAM discovered thus far possesses such convincing realism that it is indistinguishable from non-AI-generated CSAM (Internet Watch Foundation, 2023).

The utilisation of CSAM materials in training AI models for image creation presents further challenges. Publicly distributed datasets, which are widely dispersed, make it challenging to halt their circulation (Thiel, 2023). However, implementing free detection methods in future datasets could prevent the inclusion of known CSAM, thereby ensuring that AI is not trained on such objectionable content, as suggested by Thiel (2023).

3.2.2 Commercial Child Sexual Exploitation

Additionally, there is evidence that the quantity of CSAM that is available online is being driven by commercial child sexual exploitation practices, including on-demand live broadcasting of abuse - often done by Westerners' request (EUROPOL, 2022). Drejer et al. (2023) found that perpetrators keep using "outdated" technology (Facebook Live, Skype, Yahoo Messenger), highlighting the lack of difference in apps used between 2013 and 2021. Many of these platforms have the same functionalities, such as end-to-end encryption and private break-out rooms, contributing to the persistence of these exploitative practices and the ease of usage (Drejer et al., 2023). The "old-school" method also prevails when it comes to payment methods for CSAM: the data found that the most used were Western Union, Paypal, and WorldRemit-which do not necessarily conceal the identities of offenders (Drejer et al., 2023). However, as highlighted by Europol (2021), cryptocurrency is increasingly em-

ployed as a means to hide identity in these transactions (Drejer et al., 2023).

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Considering the alarming situation, I believe it would be advisable to establish standard security parameters that must be respected by any social media in order to function. Outdated or obsolete applications shouldn't become a forgotten and lawless place that ill-intentioned people can exploit.”

Girl, 21 years old, Italy

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3.3 Online Platforms as Arenas of Vulnerability

According to recent research done by Suojellaan Lapsia Protect Children, 77% of respondents have seen CSAM on the surface web such as on pornographic sites or social media (Insoll et al., 2024). Given this widespread accessibility of CSAM online, there exists a heightened risk of unwanted exposure, particularly for children and teenagers, which can pose significant dangers (Insoll et al., 2024).

32% of participants said they had first seen CSAM on a pornographic website, making it the most often-used platform among different apps and websites. The most popular website was Pornhub, in particular (Insoll et al., 2024). Despite the fact that these sites have safety precautions in place, a recent example revealed that a video submitted to Pornhub needed to be reported 15 times before it could be assessed, indicating a strong lack of precautions (Insoll et al., 2024).

The same study by Suojellaan Lapsia (Insoll et al., 2024) reported that social media was the second most utilised platform for CSAM. The network of users involved in distributing CSAM on social media is most prevalent in English-speaking communities, primarily active on Instagram and Twitter, with TikTok being the least utilised among all social networks. Despite the carefully selected keywords

to evade platform flagging, the primary challenge in reinforcing networks of CSAM resides in the recommendation algorithms. These algorithms inadvertently strengthen the network by suggesting additional sellers to those already being followed (Thiel, DiResta & Stamos, 2023). This phenomenon, often seen in various online platforms, reflects a broader issue with recommendation algorithms: their tendency to amplify existing behaviour patterns. The most frequent social networks to search, view, and share CSAM are as follows according to the order: Instagram (29%), Twitter X (26%), Discord (23%), Tiktok (21%), Facebook (20%), Youtube (18%), Reddit (17%), Snapchat (10%) (Insoll et al., 2024).

Instagram stands out as the primary platform for content discovery owing to its extensive usage of hashtags, the relatively longer lifespan of seller profiles, and, most significantly, its recommendation system (Thiel, DiResta & Stamos, 2023). Seller accounts often feature minimal or no real posts; instead, they frequently utilise stories containing content menus, promotions, or cross-site links (Thiel, DiResta & Stamos, 2023). This phenomenon underscores the significant impact of recommendation systems in shaping user experiences and content consumption patterns on Instagram.

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Social media platforms should be safe and create a trusted environment. Most of us young people want to be able to trust the other users and the content we see; however, this is increasingly difficult.

Boy, 22 years old, Germany

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On the contrary, TikTok does not seem to serve as a platform for the distribution of CSAM due to its enforcement of content rules, which starkly contrasts with Instagram. Even well-known “sellers” with significant followings on Twitter and Instagram typically lack any public material on TikTok, making it a surprisingly safer platform in terms of CSAM dissemination for public accounts only (Thiel, DiResta & Stamos, 2023).

However, much of the CSAM content is present in private accounts: offenders post CSAM on private accounts, and then they provide other criminals access to their account credentials (Insoll et al., 2024). A recent study found that TikTok had an 86% increase in reporting CSAM content compared to the previous year, highlighting the ever-changing dynamics of platforms and the need to react quickly to changes in the behaviour of perpetrators.

While X (formerly Twitter) was reported to be the second most frequent platform to search, view, and share CSAM (Insoll et al., 2024), the UK Online CSEA Covert Intelligence Team has found that offenders frequently use this platform to share links to access CSAM and to connect with the CSAM offender community. However, according to the same study, Discord seems to have a wider community reach when it comes to the connection of offenders- making it the biggest after the dark web (Insoll et al., 2024).

3.4 Technology-Facilitated Grooming: The Human Side of Exploitation

According to a recent research by Thorn (2024), 40% of children had been contacted online by someone they believed was trying to “befriend and manipulate” them. A key element of predators’ grooming techniques is the use of internet sites that offer information about young people to establish a personal bond and start communication. Predators most frequently utilize search engines to obtain publicly available information about the child or look up personal profiles on social media (Choo, 2009). These platforms provide anonymity to predators who often cultivate emotional dependency and trust, sometimes masquerading as peers or trustworthy adults, employing phrases such as “I am special to you” or “I am the only one who can understand you” (ECPAT, 2014).

Even though grooming happens mostly online, the danger transcends virtual spaces and includes a multimodal approach to child sexual offences that combines online and offline components. The study of Jeglic and Winters (2023) indicated that only less than 10% of victims met the perpetrator through online means. This finding is reinforced by Shannon’s study (2008), which observed that offenders who initially interacted with victims online but committed crimes offline were implicated in 22% of Swedish police com-

plaints regarding online sexual assault (Jeglic & Winters, 2023). However, a more recent study from 2015 indicates that 60% of offenders wanted to encourage children to produce CSAM rather than meeting to commit sexual abuse in person.

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In my opinion, unrestricted internet access for children is a major issue. The Internet is a dangerous place, and children are very gullible. Children in their early teen years, especially those going through a rebellious phase, tend to disregard their parents and seek out understanding from older people. This makes them a very vulnerable target for grooming. Even in the early 2000s era, this was an issue, and now, with fully anonymous platforms like Discord, the issue of grooming is spreading like a plague.

Boy, 26 years old, Czechia

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Growing evidence suggests that a considerable percentage of sexual offences committed against minors are carried out by other minors, with estimates ranging from 30% to 50% of all incidents of CSA involving individuals under 18 (Finkelhor et al., 2021) exposing the disturbing truth that young people commit these kinds of acts. According to the Multidimensional Online Grooming Questionnaire, a survey of 1,704 minors in Spain (12–15 years old) revealed that between 7% and 18% supported different online grooming techniques (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2021). This indicates the necessity for adequate education on the ethics of online behaviour and fostering digital liter-

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Easy access to the internet and unsupervised browsing, might give a feeling of freedom to underage youth, but it simultaneously puts them in harm's way. Unregulated/unverified social networks can connect them to people virtually anywhere in the world, who might take advantage of their vulnerability and inexperience, pretending to care for the victims with their own benefit in mind. Especially huge communities targeted at children, built around their interest (e.g. gaming, streaming, influencers) can be an easy way for predators to get in contact with kids.

Boy, 28 years old, Slovakia

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3.5 Youth Perspective

Undoubtedly, introducing new technologies has made it more difficult to identify and stop CSAM. This topic, despite the significant consequences for children's safety and welfare, has sadly not received the necessary attention that it clearly deserves, which has kept it on the sidelines of conversations about online child protection. It is absolutely imperative that funds and incentives be directed towards new innovation and the creation of cutting-edge technological solutions designed expressly to counteract the spread of CSAM, especially given the increasing prevalence of

acy among youth to prevent such occurrences. What is also noteworthy is that young people who are part of a sexual minority may be more susceptible to online grooming due to an increased usage of internet sites to find sexual interactions (Turner, Finkelhor & Colburn, 2023).

Recognizing grooming practices can prove challenging compared to identifying other forms of CSAM; the problem lies in the fact that grooming behaviours may not appear overtly sexual or illegal, often heavily reliant on contextual cues for detection (also seen in the legislations of countries that have different definitions of grooming as well as heavily rely on context when dealing with complaints). Some argue that it's easier to identify grooming retrospectively after a sexual assault has occurred rather than preemptively before the assault takes place (Johnson, 2023). However, there are some attempts by the industry to use the “regular expression rules” technology to detect grooming practices, using specific words and expressions that are then flagged. However, there is also new technology that THORN is developing, which combines this technology with a Text classifier to develop a new “grooming classifier” (Thorn, 2022).

A brand-new initiative named CESAGRAM will map out current studies, legal frameworks, and policy frameworks on tech-facilitated grooming at the EU level, highlighting successful initiatives and possible roadblocks (Team, 2024). The initiative is focused on instances of CSA and internet grooming that can result in missing persons and are, to the greatest extent feasible, prevented (Team, 2024).

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CSAM identification is a key topic for youth. The technologies for better detection need to be developed and implemented - not only but especially - for our safety. It goes without saying that the enforcement of existing rules is important, but they need to evolve dynamically as the digital environment does.

Boy, 22 years old, Germany

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Another often-overlooked aspect is the **importance of teaching digital literacy skills** to children, particularly in mitigating risks such as technology-facilitated grooming. While ethics education is commonly integrated into offline curriculums, there exists a conspicuous absence of comparable emphasis on a certain kind of ethics education applicable to the digital world. Unfortunately, young people are not naturally adept at navigating the complexities of digital ethics and also do not often make the connection of “what ethical rules apply offline, also apply online”. Despite

the implementation of digital literacy education initiatives in numerous countries, there remains a notable deficiency in education regarding the responsible consumption and interaction with sexual material online.

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The Internet is a highly unregulated place despite some people thinking otherwise. It is absolutely necessary to teach children about the dangers of the internet and how to behave online. The same way of teaching children not to talk to strangers in the real world and not to take things from them should be applied to online communications. It is absolutely laughably easy to groom a child online, and it is a disgusting practice that needs to be stopped as soon as possible.

Boy, 26 years old, Czechia

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3.6 Chapter Conclusion

From encryption to creating harmful content using new artificial technologies, this chapter has addressed the technological challenges that can be significantly linked to CSAM. As technology advances, so do the processes used to produce, disseminate, and consume CSAM. The intersection of technological advancement and illicit exploitation highlights the pressing requirement for complete approaches that tackle the technical obstacles and the societal aspects of countering CSAM. When talking about the technical capabilities of modifying or directly generating CSAM, it is also essential to mention the issue of sharing content about the child that can serve as the basis for these forms of abuse. The issue of so-called sharenting will be further discussed in the following chapter.

04

Sharenting: Unveiling the Unintended Risks

The viewing and dissemination of CSAM may not always be intentional; it can also arise from seemingly innocent content shared without malicious intent. Specifically, in the context of children, this may involve the inadvertent sharing of personal information

by parents, caregivers, or close family members, a phenomenon commonly referred to as “sharenting” (a portmanteau of “sharing” and “parenting”).

4.1 What is Sharenting?

Sharenting is a current issue in which, on the one hand, the child's right to privacy and protection (independent of the parents' will) and, on the other hand, the parents' right to share information about their children's lives with the public, collide (Kopecký, 2019).

Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015) point out that parents most often share three types of content of their children online, namely:

- Photographs of important milestones in their children's lives;
- Photographs with family or friends;
- Photographs that they find cute or humorous.

Research findings show that about three-quarters of parents who use the Internet share photos or videos of their children at least once a month, with 56% of mothers and 34% of fathers sharing inappropriate and embarrassing photos, as well as other sensitive information about their children, on online social networking sites (Brosch, 2016; Davis, 2015; Kopecky et al., 2020). More than 70% of parents also admit to knowing other parents who regularly share informa-

tion that could harm or humiliate their child in some way (Davis, 2015). Yet, only 15% of parents are concerned about their children's reaction to this in the future, i.e., once they grow up (Kopecky et al., 2020).

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My father used to post a lot of family photos on Facebook. They often included me and showed me in unflattering angles, obviously not knowing I was being photographed. Plus, like any girl at that age, I struggled with my own body image, and this only made it worse... Even though I was often angry with him, he never deleted the photos.

Girl, 26 years old, Czechia

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4.2 Risks of Sharenting

Šmahel and colleagues (2020, p.125) point out that it is “always the parent's responsibility to carefully consider what content might be potentially harmful or which the child might find unwanted or inappropriate later in life.” Plunkett (2019) defines three areas of sharenting risk: privacy concerns, opportunities, and a ‘sense of self.’ These categories are as follows:

1. Criminal, illegal, or dangerous consequences
2. Legal, invasive consequences
3. Consequences in the area of self-identity formation

4.2.1 Criminal, illegal, or dangerous consequences

Digital transmission of sensitive information through sharenting, which includes, but is not limited to, the child's geographic location, identifying information (full name, date and place of birth, home address, etc.), and preferences (what children like, dislike, de-

sire, and fear), put children at risk of misuse of this information by targeted recipients or by unintended third parties who intercept the information (Plunkett, 2019). Misuse of this sensitive information can lead to endangerment, stalking, or other inappropriate treatment of the child. For example, contact information can be misused by an anonymous aggressor for the purposes of blackmail or threats (Ševčíková et al., 2012).

4.2.2 Legal, invasive consequences

In sharenting, the institutions and individuals legally receiving the shared information have relatively no restrictions. This means they can legally manipulate, store, download, or further reproduce it. Some of the ways in which technology providers, third parties, and other actors handle information obtained through sharenting include:

- Profiling children for advertising and marketing purposes
- Use of children's data for relevant product development purposes;
- Providing information about children to relevant legal authorities in the event that they engage in delinquent activity;
- Tracking families for immigration enforcement action;
- Engaging in predictive decision-making about a child's academic progress;
- Assessing a child's application for school or other selective action, provided that gate-keepers have that authority and decision-making power;
- Assisting law enforcement in criminal based on the experiences of individual children

(Plunkett, 2019, p. 469-470)

4.2.3 Implications in the area of self-identity formation

Sharenting can significantly affect children's life experiences and opportunities, both at a young age and in adulthood. Both legal and social studies scholars recognize that children need privacy to develop a sense of independence, autonomy, and individuality (Shmueli & Blecher-Prigat, 2011).

The individuals that children come into contact with today often shape their opinions and attitudes based on the information shared through sharenting (Terčová, 2021). Children have no legal right to consent (or not) to sharenting and, therefore, no direct right to regulate what is disseminated about them. Moreover, they often do not even need to know about sharing sensitive information, which can expose them to unwanted and uncomfortable situations. For example, disclosing stigmatised behaviours such as mental health issues can compromise a child's identity and privacy (Ammari et al., 2015).

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My research on adolescents' attitudes towards sharenting indicated that youth perceive shared pictures as well as videos and written information about them rather negatively. In particular, adolescents fear being misused by other parties, but they also consider such sharing unfair treatment of their personal data and privacy. I personally believe it's essential to thoughtfully consider the implications of sharing such information and whether it's truly necessary. Leaving a digital footprint is a significant issue. Before we share someone's personal information, we should reflect on how we would feel if someone shared similar content about us.

Natálie Terčová
26 years old
media psychology researcher

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This is a difficult issue to address. Parents of the early Gen Z children were raised in an environment where there was no platform to share photos of their children and other important things in their lives. With the introduction of the internet, those same parents hardly recognize the difference between having a private physical photo album that you can use to share embarrassing moments at a family reunion and sharing photos online and uploading sensitive photos to a social media site. However, there is no easy way to explain to the older generations the dangers of the internet and how someone might exploit the content they share within it.

Boy, 26 years old, Czechia

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4.3 Sharenting and CSAM

Sharing seemingly innocent photos and videos of children online introduces a heightened level of risk, especially when considering potential abuse. Once uploaded, these contents may reach a wider audience, paving the way for concerning scenarios. Online predators may actively search social media platforms for content featuring children, exploiting it for their deviant purposes. Further, they may easily employ images of children to produce CSAM, which they then distribute on publicly accessible websites (Joseph, 2023).

Offenders can utilise various forms of technology to manipulate innocent images, creating inappropriate or sexually suggestive content. In today's era, where even artificial intelligence is harnessed for generating

such illicit content, this reality is sadly unsurprising (Joseph, 2023). The rise of AI-driven deepfake technology further amplifies the risks, allowing offenders to superimpose faces onto different bodies or scenes. Sharenting content becomes vulnerable as source material for creating deceptive and harmful deepfakes, posing threats to both privacy and the potential generation of explicit or misleading material. Open-source AI tools like Stable Diffusion operate without restrictions, enabling anyone to create such material without oversight. Although the tool's open-source licence encourages safe usage, its safety measures can be circumvented with minimal effort by users through simple modifications to its code (Joseph, 2023).

4.4 Youth Perspective

Sharenting poses a significant concern, even though some parents may not perceive it as such. The rapid integration of technology into our daily lives often leads us to overlook the need for critical reflection on our actions. It's crucial to question whether our choices stem from a genuine understanding or merely because everyone does it.

The extent of our digital footprint remains an unforeseeable concept. The pace of technological advancements makes it challenging to predict the future landscape accurately. Nevertheless, the prevalent practice of sharing moments and information online, whether personal achievements or familial experiences, is deeply ingrained.

It is vital to acknowledge that once something is on the internet, it loses its private nature. Our digital content's potential reach and impact, whether positive or negative, extend beyond our immediate control. Social scenarios, such as job interviews, are increasingly influenced by online presence, emphasising the need for caution. In today's environment, phrases like "Look at this guy, he's cute!" followed by "Wait, I'll find his Instagram" have become commonplace. This behaviour extends beyond casual conversations, infiltrating various life situations.

Consequently, it is prudent for everyone, not just parents, to be mindful of sharing only content they would comfortably showcase publicly. Anticipating

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I personally really dislike the idea of being findable online so easily. I try to take various precautions, such as not linking my accounts among various social media, using slightly altered names (such as using v instead of u), and generally, trying not to post too much personal content. I find the idea of someone checking my background via these means very offensive, and it is a practice that should be rooted out as soon as possible. Personal life and work life should be separated, and while any employer is fully within their rights to do a background check, I think that is sufficient.

Boy, 26 years old, Czechia

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potential repercussions and evaluating whether the shared information could lead to adverse outcomes is advisable. Moreover, taking proactive steps, such as checking and adjusting privacy settings, can offer some semblance of control over the audience that engages with our shared content.

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It is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate privacy within the first generation of digital natives. The feeling of isolation can contribute to a sense of vulnerability and the desire for connection, often leading to oversharing online. In this landscape, sharenting becomes not just a casual habit but a coping mechanism for staying connected and validated in a rapidly changing world. This is important to note when discussing strategies to ensure parents understand the risks and potential harms of sharing their children online.

Girl, 23 years old, USA

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As children grow older, it becomes essential to have open conversations about online posting guidelines. Including the child in discussions about what can or cannot be posted and why fosters a sense of awareness. However, it's important to remember that children may not fully grasp the potential outcomes, **making parents and caregivers the primary mindful gatekeepers**. Additionally, if children haven't reached an age or stage of development where they can fully comprehend the potential impacts, their consent holds no genuine meaning. As responsible digital citizens, we must anticipate potential repercussions and evaluate whether shared information could lead to adverse outcomes, ensuring a more thoughtful and considerate online presence for ourselves and our families.

4.5 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter looked at sharenting and the associated risks that can arise from the seemingly innocent sharing of a child's personal information. However, it is equally important to note that unintended harmful content may not only originate from parents, caregivers, and the child's close circle in the form of sharenting but may be created by the child themselves. The rise in smartphone ownership among children and teenagers has led to an increase in online solicitation and sexual extortion (EUROPOL, 2022). The creation of self-generated explicit content, initially shared with harmless intentions, frequently falls into the hands

of "collectors" who may exploit the victim, especially through extortion (EUROPOL, 2022). However, the abuse extends beyond the explicit content. Offenders may weaponize the material for online harassment and bullying, targeting the child or their family. This malicious behavior can lead to emotional distress, causing long-term psychological effects on the victim. The forthcoming chapter will delve into these psychological outcomes, shedding light on the impact of CSA on the well-being of the individuals involved.

05

Beyond the Screen: Psychological Consequences

CSA significantly affects both short-term and long-term mental and physical well-being, along with various aspects of life such as family and intimate relationships, faith, and educational and career paths (Johnson, 2004). Mental health repercussions or internalizing behaviors linked to CSA encompass depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm, suicide, and a variety of other mental health conditions (Maniglio, 2009).

Among victims and survivors of CSE, 37% experienced generalised anxiety disorder, 58% faced sepa-

ration anxiety disorder, and a significant 73% were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (Health Working Group on Child Sexual Exploitation, 2014). The impact of CSA extends to general emotional well-being, resulting in diminished self-esteem and a loss of confidence (Nelson, 2009). The classification of outcomes can be found in **Figure 1**.

post-traumatic stress disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that some people develop after witnessing or living through a terrifying experience. The symptoms of PTSD can impact children and young people in the short and long-term, depending on the support and treatment they receive.

Depression has been identified in 57% of young individuals who have experienced CSE (Health Working Group on Child Sexual Exploitation, 2014). Research indicates that the probability of developing major depression is two times higher in young adults with a history of CSA (Mills et al., 2016) and nearly two times higher likelihood in women victims and survivors compared to control groups (Kendler & Aggen, 2014).

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When I experienced sexual violence most of my childhood I lost pieces of myself that felt impossible to find. I got sick with an eating disorder at age 14 and I wanted to die. I felt so unworthy of living so I hated myself, I hated my body, I hated my life, because of the crimes of one man.

Girl, CSA survivor, 24 years old, Sweden-Finland

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CSA victims and survivors face a suicide attempt risk that can be up to six times higher than that of the general population (McCarthy-Jones & McCarthy-Jones, 2014). Among adult survivors in treatment, rates of self-harm have been documented as high as 49% (Bolen et al., 2013). For victims and survivors of CSE, the rate is reported to be 32% (Health Working Group on Child Sexual Exploitation, 2014).

Children depicted in CSAM endure double victimization: initially by the perpetrator of sexual abuse and subsequently by those who consume such material.

Moreover, individuals who have experienced CSA are at an increased risk, ranging from two to four times, of becoming victims once more, whether it be sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, throughout their lives (Fisher et al., 2017). Similarly, children portrayed in CSAM endure profound and enduring negative consequences throughout their lives, coupled with persistent re-victimization each time the material is distributed and viewed (C3P, 2017). Survivors who discover that their images and videos have been circulated online often describe experiencing persistent feelings of being threatened (Hanson, 2017).

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One of the worst feelings one can experience as a young person is being exposed without consent. This feeling of having pictures of yourself being shared by someone you don't know is deeply scary, and one cannot imagine the shame experienced.

Boy, 22 years old, Germany

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In a survey involving survivors of CSA, numerous respondents conveyed that the dissemination of their images distinctly affected them compared to the hands-on abuse they experienced - this distinction lies in the fact that, unlike the concluded hands-on abuse, the images and recordings represent a permanent record of the abuse (C3P, 2017).

Figure 1. CSA victim and survivor outcome areas with example outcomes.

Source: Fisher et al. (2017)

Physical health	Emotional wellbeing & mental health	Externalising behavior	Interpersonal relationships	Socio-economic	Religious and spiritual belief	Vulnerability to revictimization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Physical injuries - High BMI - Problems related to childbirth - Unexplained medical problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emotional distress - Trauma/ PTSD - Anxiety - Depression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Substance misuse - Risky and inappropriate sexual behaviors - Offending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduced relationship satisfaction and stability - Issues with intimacy and parent-child relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lower educational attainment - Higher unemployment - Financial instability - Homelessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disillusionment with religion - Faith as a coping mechanism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sexual revictimization in childhood and adulthood - Other types of victimization

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CSAM is harmful to individuals' well-being in many ways - in that they are very similar to the effects of revenge pornography, i.e., the circulation of intimate images and videos without the depicted person's consent. There are three important things to consider:

- (1) revenge pornography seriously affects psychological and social well-being, ranging from immediate impairment to trauma over several years.
- (2) Such impacts are comparable to rape, and thus, CSAM and revenge porn need to be taken seriously. We need to move on from blaming the victim and shift the focus to the culpability of the abuser for spreading the intimate materials. And
- (3) CSAM and revenge porn are especially dangerous because it is very hard to make them go away. Unfortunately, such materials can resurface at any time, and thus, survivors of online sexual violence may live in constant fear and threat to their well-being.

Michaela Lebedíková

27 years old

pornography and sexting effects researcher

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5.1 Youth Perspective

Some wounds cannot be seen. When it comes to addressing the aftermath of CSA, it is crucial to tread carefully, considering the profound impact it can have on survivors' mental state and emotional well-being. It's important to recognize that the effects of abuse vary greatly from person to person, both in terms of intensity and duration.

Moreover, the challenge of controlling the distribution and alteration of CSA-related content, especially in the realm of CSAM, exacerbates the situation. Continuously circulating and displaying CSAM not only intensifies survivors' trauma but also re-traumatizes

them, prolonging their suffering and impeding their healing journey.

Young people emphasise the importance of validating mental health in society, urging its recognition on par with physical health. Despite progress, stigma and misunderstanding, especially from older generations, persist. It's crucial to understand that addressing mental health is not a sign of weakness but rather a testament to resilience and strength.

5.2 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter delved into the profound impact of CSA and CSAM on survivors' psychological well-being, shedding light on the various forms of consequences they may face, their prevalence, and the firsthand experiences shared by survivors and youth. It underscores the critical importance of acknowledging and addressing the psychological ramifications seriously, emphasising the necessity of seeking professional assistance. Nevertheless, while recognizing the im-

portance of seeking help, the subsequent chapter will explore the potential obstacles that survivors may encounter on this path.

06

Barriers to Healing: The Challenges of Seeking Help

6.1 The Unreported Reality of CSA(M)

Available data reveals that survivors of CSA typically take between 17.2 and 21.4 years on average before disclosing their experiences to someone (European Commission, 2024). A substantial portion, around 60-70%, of survivors choose not to disclose until adulthood, with 27.8% never disclosing to anyone. According to a recent study (Justice Unleashed, 2023), the average age of first disclosure of CSA is 50 years old.

Moreover, age and gender significantly influence the timing of disclosure, with younger children and boys demonstrating lower rates of disclosure (European Commission, 2024).

Silence is, unfortunately, a hallmark of domestic violence against children and adolescents.

Modelli, Galvão & Pratesi, 2012

There are a variety of reasons why victims can be reluctant to disclose and get treatment. Therapists may be partially to blame for these obstacles (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2022). Many survivors have voiced concerns that therapists often lump them into a generalized category of sexual abuse survivors without recognizing the nuances of their experience, for instance, as online sexual abuse survivors. This oversight fails to address the complexities of navigating abuse within an online environment. Thus, therapists specialising in treating complex trauma and adopting a comprehensive approach to patient care are indispensable for survivors (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2022).

Furthermore, survivors frequently struggle with establishing trust in therapists. They harbour fears that past mistakes may lead to judgement, and some even perceive therapists as friends, hindering their willingness to disclose certain information out of concern for jeopardising the relationship (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2022). What also complicates matters with trust is the lack of therapists present in countries: a heavy caseload of a therapist does not provide survivors with sufficient time and attention for treatment. Additionally, survivors feel uneasy when therapists need to refresh their understanding of the case, further eroding trust (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2022).

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Complex trauma requires complex care. We survivors often have a combination of different problems and are, therefore, shuffled around between care units. We have difficulty finding places that can treat all our problems at the same time. Not least in child psychiatry. We need to get correct information about where we can find support and what rights we have, and we need this to happen quickly. We don't want to wait ten years until we are adults in queues, waiting. We need competent units that give us the right help right away.

Girl, online CSA survivor, 29 years old, Sweden

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On a psychological level, many survivors live in a state of constant fear due to their lack of control over the

online distribution of abusive material. They grapple with the perpetual worry of being recognized in public, uncertain about who may have viewed their images or videos online. This pervasive fear permeates various aspects of their lives, hindering their ability to seek support. Some survivors also struggle to articulate their experiences adequately, feeling as though they lack the vocabulary to express their trauma (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2022).

The enduring challenge of confronting trauma while being re-exposed to abusive imagery remains a significant concern. In efforts to gain information about the crime, law enforcement officials and forensic interviewers often resort to displaying the original imagery during victim interviews or legal proceedings. The knowledge of this may prevent victims from seeking help as they know they will have to face their trauma all over again (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2022).

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There are many reasons why it can be so difficult to confide. In my practice, I encounter clients' fears that the situation will be resolved against their will. This may involve, among other things, fear of interrogations and other necessary steps that will follow or that those close to the clients will find out about what has happened. This is indeed a very sensitive issue, especially in cases where the perpetrator of sexual violence is someone close to the client (e.g., a family member). Another obstacle can be, as my experience also confirms, the psychological consequences of experiencing sexual violence.

Michaela Smejkalová

*25 years old
school psychologist and crisis interventionist*

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The challenges associated with non-reporting of abuse are also noticeable in cases where children are abused by parents and family members. Although victims of parental abuse are notably reluctant to disclose their experiences (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), the victimisation associated with CSAM poses an extra obstacle to disclosure. This is because it

frequently exacerbates feelings of shame, self-blame, and confusion (CCCP, 2017).

Furthermore, instances of online sexual abuse and the circulation of CSAM are typically uncovered through law enforcement investigations rather than victims coming forward voluntarily (e.g., Svedin and Back, 2011; Martin, 2015). Victims of online grooming often hesitate to disclose their abuse because of fears

that the perpetrator might retaliate or track them down or due to feelings of shame that silence them (Martin & Slane, 2015). Additionally, some victims may not perceive their experiences as severe enough or even realise that they are being subjected to abuse if there is no physical or offline aspect involved (Quayle et al., 2012).

6.2 Challenges in Prevention

Addressing challenges in prevention involves considering how children can be educated to identify and report abuse, especially when the perpetrators may be trusted caretakers. These trusted individuals include parents (Johnson, 2004), priests (Tieman, 2002), aid workers (Moszynski, 2002), hospital staff (Feldman, Mason & Shugerman, 2001), and educators (Benbenishty, Zeira & Astor, 2002; UNICEF, 2023).

Studies indicate that a considerable portion of CSAM is created and circulated by parents who exploit their own children (CCCP, 2017). An online survey involving 150 adult CSAM survivors revealed that among those abused by a single perpetrator, 42% pointed to their biological or adoptive father or stepfather as the culprit. Among those abused by multiple perpetrators, 67% identified their biological or adoptive parents or step-parents as the primary offenders (CCCP, 2017). Another online survey, this time with 133 adult CSAM survivors, found that 52% of the perpetrators were family members (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018). Furthermore, examining CSAM images and videos indicates that more than two-thirds come from domestic environments (CCCP, 2016).

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We must ensure the families are not a place of danger without creating an environment of mistrust among family members; to square the circle in this way is perhaps one of the greatest challenges of our digital age.

Boy, 22 years old, Germany

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Salter et al. (2021) recommend that sexual abuse and online safety education programs should incorporate sensitive messages aimed at children. These messages should educate children about the potential for image-making by family members and relatives, as well as provide guidance on where and how to seek help if they need to disclose such experiences.

6.3 Youth Perspective

An increasingly recognized reality among today's youth is the alarming scarcity of accessible psychologists and psychiatrists within healthcare systems. Regrettably, the shortage of mental health professionals exacerbates the already daunting task of addressing the psychological trauma inflicted by CSA incidents. Consequently, many victims find themselves unable to access the necessary therapeutic interventions when they need them most, perpetuating cycles of distress and hindering their path to recovery. This

systemic inadequacy underscores the urgent need for concerted efforts to **improve the availability of mental health services**, ensuring that **survivors receive the support and care they deserve without undue delay**.

An unfortunate reality further compounds the challenge of preventing CSAM: the pervasive lack of digital literacy among those who surround children, spanning from families to educators. This deficiency in

understanding the intricacies of the digital landscape not only hampers the ability of parents, guardians, and teachers to effectively monitor and guide children's online activities but also leaves them ill-equipped to recognize and respond to CSAM. Families and teachers play a crucial role in shaping children's attitudes and behaviours toward technology, yet many parents

and guardians struggle to keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital landscape. Moreover, fostering open communication channels within the families and classrooms facilitates discussions about online safety and equips children with the knowledge and skills to navigate potential threats, including CSAM.

6.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter explored the factors that may impair reporting of experiencing CSA or related forms of abuse. It also highlighted prevention and its shortcomings, along with suggestions for potential improvements. These are the crucial insights that conclude the overall problem of CSA and CSAM, where the greatest need is to be able to prevent these situations from occurring in the first place and to intervene effectively if the damage has already been done.

Conclusion

This comprehensive report focused on the multifaceted issue of child sexual abuse and the associated child sexual abuse material. It presented data on prevalence rates, the current state of legislation, and proposed available enhancements to existing laws. Moreover, the report scrutinised the technological dimensions of these challenges, including the inadvertent dissemination of sensitive and potentially harmful material in previously existing and new technologies. It also underscored the psychological ramifications of child sexual abuse and child sexual abuse material, as well as the potential barriers hindering both seeking help and preventing child sexual abuse incidents. Importantly, the report incorporated not only empirical

data but also insights from youth, as well as young experts across various fields, and crucially, the survivors themselves.

With this report, we encourage other authors and experts to incorporate youth voices into their work. By including the perspectives of young people, we enrich discussions on topics closely related to their experiences, concerns, and aspirations in the rapidly evolving digital world. Collaborating in this manner ensures a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by the younger generation and enhances our collective efforts to create a **safer**, more **empathetic**, and **supportive future for all**.

Helplines and Support Organizations

We want to extend a sincere message to those who may be navigating the profound and delicate challenges surrounding child sexual abuse. Whether you consider yourself a survivor, someone courageously working through the aftermath, or someone needing understanding, it is essential to know that **you are not alone** in this journey.

Please keep in mind that you are not to blame for what has happened. The pain and difficulty you may be experiencing are valid, and seeking support is an empowering choice on the path to healing. Within this chapter, we provide contact details for support

organizations and helplines that specialize in assisting survivors of child sexual abuse, as well as platforms where you can report harmful content.

In recognizing the sensitivity of this topic, we want to assure you that there are caring professionals and organisations ready to listen, support, and guide you through this process. Your well-being matters, and by reaching out, you take a courageous step toward embracing the support and understanding you deserve.

Location	Name	Area of work	Contact
Belgium	SOS VIOL asbl	Crisis center, helpline	www.sosviol.be
Czechia	Elektra	Support Centre for Child Sexual Abuse Women Survivors	www.centrumelektra.cz
	proFem	Crisis center, helpline for victims of sexual violence.	www.profem.cz
England and Wales	Rape Crisis England and Wales	The national umbrella organization for rape crisis centers in England and Wales	www.rapecrisis.org.uk
Finland	Rape Crisis Center Tukinainen	Crisis center, helpline	www.tukinainen.fi
France	Viols-Femmes-Informations	Support to female survivors of sexual violence	www.cfcv.asso.fr
Ireland	Rape Crisis Network Ireland	Crisis center	www.rcni.ie
Italy	Artemisia Onlus	Counseling and psychological support	www.artemisiacentroantiviolenza.it
Netherlands	Centrum Seksueel Geweld (Centre Sexual Violence)	Medical, forensic and psychological help to everyone who has recently experienced an assault or rape in the province of Utrecht	www.centrumseksueelgeweld.nl
Poland	Fundacja Feminoteka	Helpline for women victims of all kinds of violence: psychological, economical, physical and sexual. Free legal and psychological support for victims.	www.feminoteka.pl
Portugal	APAV, Victim Support Portugal	Crisis center for all types of victims, including sexual violence victims.	www.apav.pt
Slovakia	nemlcme.sk	Online community for survivors of sexual violence and their friends or relatives	www.nemlcme.sk
Spain	El Centro de Asistencia a Víctimas de Agresiones Sexuales (C.A.V.A.S)	Crisis center	www.violacion.org
Sweden	Stödcentrum Humlegården	Crisis center, drop-in support groups	www.stodcentrumhumlegarden.se

In each EU Member State, there is an internet hotline specifically aimed at combating CSAM online (INHOPE EU, 2022). The establishment of these hotlines has

been promoted by the EU under Directive 2011/93/EU and the EU's strategy for a more robust approach to combating CSA.

Content reporting

Location	Name	Contact
Belgium	Child Focus	https://www.childfocus.be/en-be/Sexual-Exploitation/abuseimages
Poland	Dyzurnet	www.dyzurnet.pl
UK	IWF Hotline	report.iwf.org.uk
Czechia	Stoponline.cz	www.stoponline.cz
Germany	Eco	https://www.eco.de/
France	Point de Contact	https://www.pointdecontact.net/
Austria	Stopline	https://www.stopline.at/de/home
Italy	Save The Children	https://stop-it.savethechildren.it/
Spain	Incibe	https://www.incibe.es/incibe-cert
Finland	Save the Children	https://vihje.pelastakaalapset.fi/
Sweden	Ecpat	https://ecpat.se/hotline/

Resources

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