

Briefing Paper

Committee: UNICEF

Topic: The Question of Preventing Sexual Exploitation of Children in Developed Nations

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Summary

It is essential that the issue of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) be addressed to ensure the genuine protection of children from this violation of human right. The professional awareness of CSEA has greatly increased over the last 150 years, however despite this has not been appropriately reflected in the development of both international and national legislature and action.

It has been observed that, in developed nations particularly, the rise of technology is deeply concerning to this issue, with NGO Childlight recently estimating that 'over 300 million children annually are subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation alone'.

Furthermore, there are particular environments within which children in developed nations are more at risk of sexual exploitation, such as in care, therefore it is imperative that appropriate protective measures are implemented for these individuals.

Currently, governmental organisations have invested in providing options for victims, however little public funding is being spent on preventative measures of child exploitation. To tackle the root cause of the issue, it is essential the UN acts to promote and protect the welfare of children.

Definition of Key Terms

Child – any person under the age of 18 (also referred to as a 'minor')

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) – any visual content depicting children in sexual acts or in a sexualised manner, including photos, videos, digital media, or computer-generated images

Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA) – considered a major global threat, taking the form of images, videos, grooming, etc.

Developed nation – a country with a high quality of life, a developed economy and advanced technological infrastructure

Sexual exploitation – actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes

Background Information

Most countries have implemented some form of criminalisation of CSEA, following the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, to varying degrees.



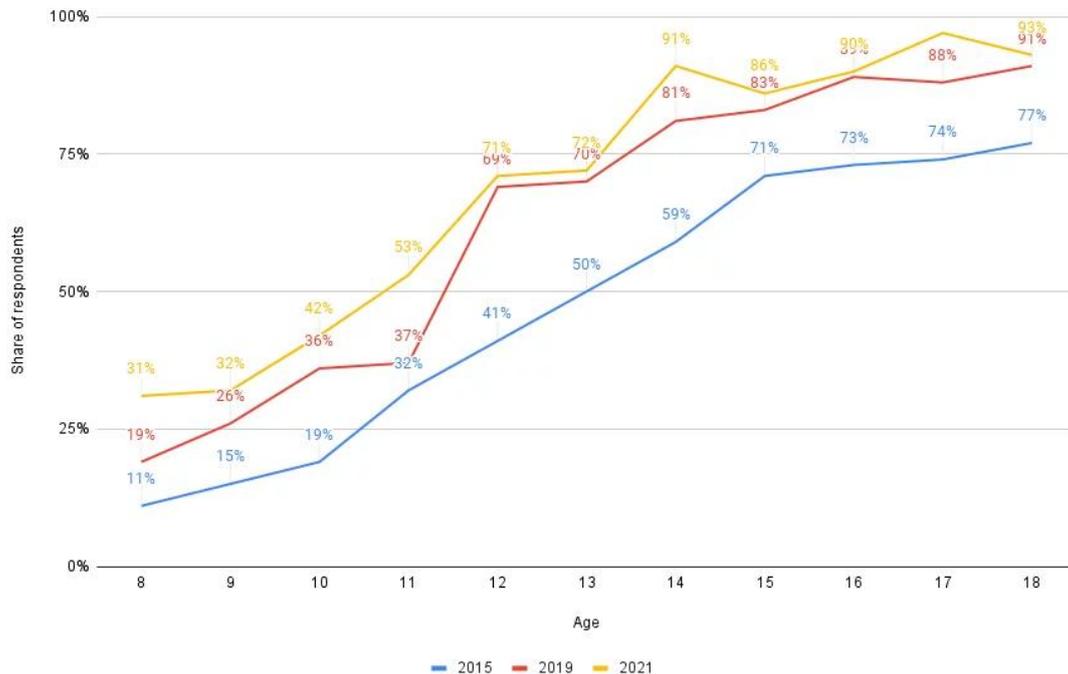
Source: International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children.

However, a common difficulty faced when tackling the issue of CSEA is its breadth: CSEA takes a plethora of forms, including images, videos, grooming, etc. as well as in-person offences. Furthermore, due to the fact that such offences involve imbalances of power (between adults and minors), it is difficult to ensure a safe and accessible method of reporting crimes. It is agreed by child health charities that, currently, the missing approach in legislature is the endeavoured prevention of CSEA offences.

In addition to these different forms, CSEA can occur through several routes, such as by organised crime gangs, or on an individual level. Even the latter of these can be facilitated by a variety of methods; family, friends, or otherwise. This makes it difficult to find the route of (and prevent further cases) CSEA offences.

With the emergence of technology, the number of cases of CSEA has rapidly accelerated. In developing countries, the age of having a smartphone with internet access has decreased over the last few decades, due to a plethora of reasons. With this, the ease with which young people can meet other individuals has increased and they are thus more susceptible to exploitation.

SHARE OF CHILDREN OWNING A SMARTPHONE IN THE UNITED STATES IN 2015, 2019 AND 2021, BY AGE



Source: SellCell.

Furthermore, it has been commented that the ‘anonymising’ effect of internet communication increases the occurrence of perpetrators.

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) has also brought new dimensions to this issue. The capacity to generate illegal content from images of children while ‘anonymous’ makes it very difficult for sources/perpetrators to be tracked and prosecuted by enforcing bodies. It is therefore logical that the online sites themselves are a responsible regulator of illegal activity however this itself is difficult to incentivise.

Children in care systems (including foster care) have been observed to be particularly at risk of CSEA. The question has arisen as to whose responsibility it is to safeguard and protect these children, if their own designated carers are the ones subjecting them to sexual exploitation in the first place.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Netherlands – Quoted by Childlight as the predominant source of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). It is followed by Slovakia, Lithuania and Luxembourg.

San Marino – Has the lowest volume of CSAM, with strong laws on the penalisation of offenders who violate sexual freedom and/or bribe minors.

United Kingdom – Invested heavily (for example, a £30 million funding boost was published in 2019) in tracking offenders operating online and safeguarding victims.

Childlight Global Child Safety Institute – Established by the Human Dignity Foundation to utilise academic research to better understand the nature and prevalence of CSEA and ultimately inform policy responses.

International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) – NGO that defends against CSEA by developing research, technologies and educational resources to recover missing and exploited children.

World Health Organisation (WHO) – UN agency working to promote health and safety, and serve the vulnerable.

Timeline of Events (Relevant UN Treaties)

1945 – UN is formed, purposed to maintain peace and security; uphold human rights; deliver humanitarian aid; support sustainability action; and uphold international law.

1946 – UNICEF founded to meet the emergency needs of children.

1990 – UN Convention on the Rights of the Child enters into force. Article 34 states that ‘Governments must protect children from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation’. The US had not ratified this as of 2022.

2003 – Sexual Offences Act 2003 passed by the UK Government, including the protection of children. This replaces the previous Sexual Offences Act 1956 (which did not protect children).

2003 – PROTECT Act is passed in the US, criminalising sexual abuse of children.

2017 – World Health Assembly declares that child sexual abuse is a public health issue.

2022 – Proposal to EU Internal Security department for regulation on preventing and combatting the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children.

2025 – Atlanta Declaration is signed asking for child exploitation and sexual abuse to be treated as a global public health emergency.

2025 – EU establishes a group of experts to act as a Network, advising the European Commission concerning all areas related to preventing CSEA both online and offline.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

As outlined above, many developed nations have introduced laws that criminalise CSEA and include penalties including imprisonment, fines, and restrictions.

In 2025, Germany adopted a new law (UBSKMG) that strengthens structures against CSEA. It covers prevention, support for survivors, and structural accountability. According to the law, two bodies will be established: a national research centre on child abuse is to be established, focusing on the scale and impact of CSEA; and a Survivors Board, aimed to share the perspectives of victims with policymakers. The legislation also mandates education on protection

concepts for youth welfare services and encourages regular reporting on institutional handling of abuse. Germany will also introduce a new medical consultation service to assess child endangerment risks. It is currently unknown as to what effect, if any, this new law has.

The UK held The Preventing Child Abuse Conference 2025 for local governments, discussing a proactive approach to safeguarding and prevention of CSEA.

The EU Child Sexual Abuse Regulation of 2022 proposes a number of measures, such as mass surveillance, to attempt to combat online CSEA. There have been several criticisms to this by various independent bodies, claiming that this initiative would infringe on privacy and fundamental rights.

Switzerland has introduced a national hotline that enables the public to anonymously report suspected illegal content. This attempts to avoid the hesitance the public may have when reporting incidents directly to the police. To date, over 7000 URLs have been reported.

Currently, no binding treaties have been pursued relating explicitly to protecting children in care. The standard DBS (in the UK; and equivalent in other countries) and safeguarding checks and training are mandatory of care-givers.

Possible Solutions

Reinforce laws regarding CSEA, to ensure a dynamic review of the volume cases and encourage reporting by victims and responsible adults.

Revise regulatory frameworks including international treaties and national laws, to account for technological advancements in AI.

Establishing oversight bodies for certain online platforms. There is potential for the use of autonomous oversight, however both these solutions harbour risks and controversies, such as the potential infringement of privacy.

Strengthen laws and regulations for online platforms, encouraging transparency and accountability when reporting the volume child abuse cases. This could aid in the identification of certain at-risk groups, together with potential perpetrators. These laws could also constitute banning or censoring of online platforms who do not comply.

Applying legal and regulatory frameworks to online platform to hasten CSAM content removal.

Implement improved education and training in care systems, primarily for caregivers such as foster parents. These programmes could also extend to teachers, to aid in the identification of at-risk and vulnerable individuals. Training of those who place children in care to ensure prospect caregivers are suitable could be a solution, as well as requiring additional or more frequent checks by authorities once a child is placed in care.

Useful Links

1. <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/research-resources/key-messages/>
2. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0mvmy3dwe1o>
4. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-sale-children-child>
5. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/network-prevention-child-sexual-abuse_en

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2. Childlight: <https://www.childlight.org/newsroom/new-report-states-that-netherlands-hosts-most-of-europes-child-sexual-abuse-material>
3. CSIS, May 2012: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/atlanta-declaration>
4. ICMEC: <https://www.icmec.org/child-pornography-model-legislation-report/>
5. In Hope, September 2022: <https://inhope.org/EN/articles/online-child-protection-in-switzerland>
6. OECD: <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/child-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse.html>
7. OHCHR: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-sale-of-children>
8. SellCell: <https://www.sellcell.com/blog/how-many-kids-have-a-mobile-phone/>
9. UNHCR UK: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/tackling-sexual-exploitation-abuse-and-harassment/defining-sexual>
10. University of Edinburgh, June 2025: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/news/experts-call-for-global-drive-to-boost-child-safety>
11. WHO: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241550147>