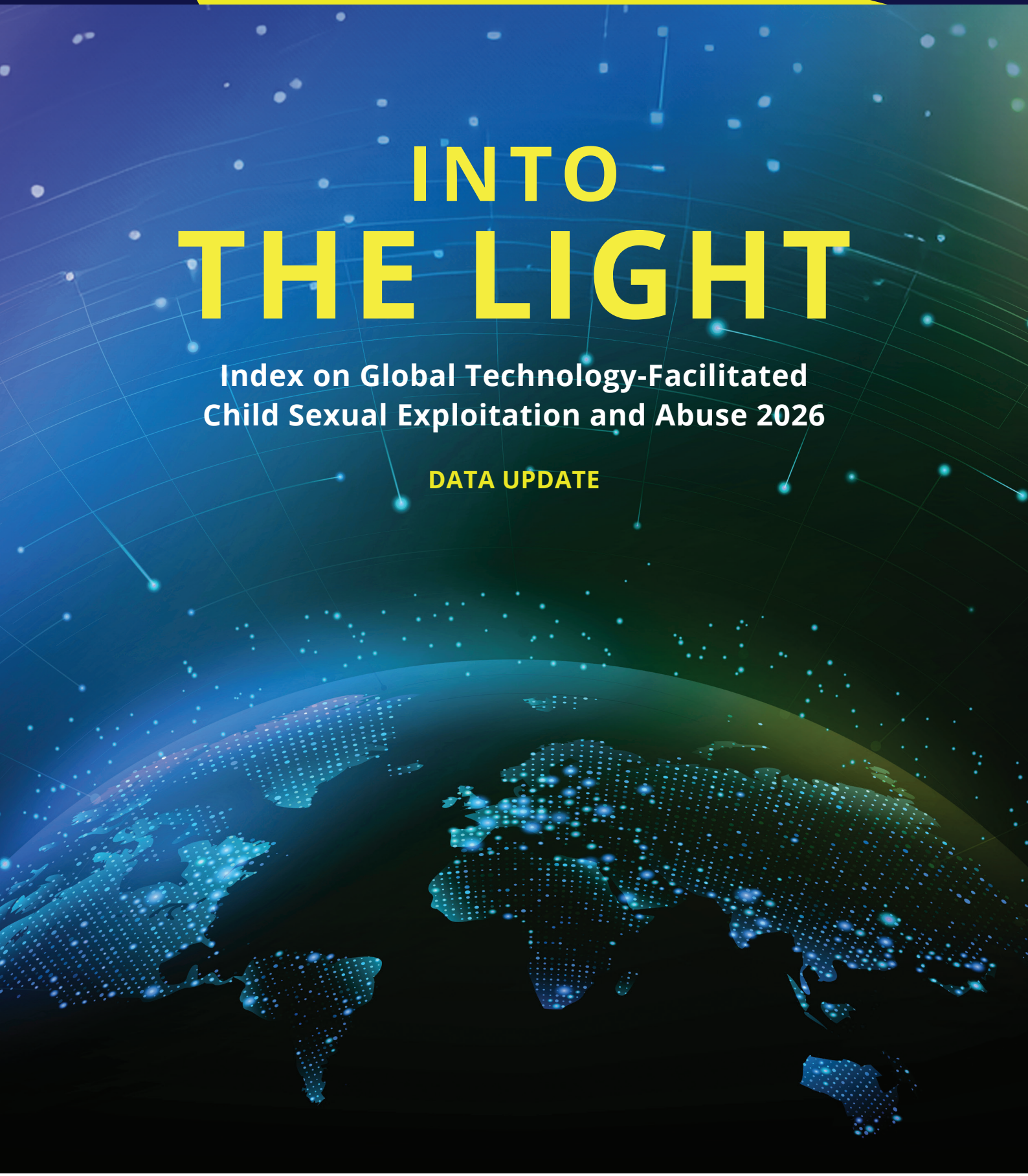
CHILDLIGHT

Global Child Safety Institute

INTO THE LIGHT

Index on Global Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse 2026

DATA UPDATE



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Get help

Behind every number is a child. If you or someone you know needs support for child sexual exploitation and abuse, or if you are concerned that you might hurt a child, please visit Child Helpline International or Brave Movement or Stop it Now.

If you see harmful imagery or content online concerning a child, please report it to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE), Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) or the Canadian Center for Child Protection (C3P).

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the report authors and of Childlight and do not necessarily represent those of our funders, partners, advisers or the University of Edinburgh.

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Artificial intelligence statement

Childlight promotes ethical and responsible use of artificial intelligence (AI). The Into the Light Index: Data Update on Global Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse 2026 is human developed and analysed. Childlight has guidelines governing best practice in the use of AI across all our programmatic areas including research. We do not use non-University AI to support the writing of research findings that have yet to be published, adhering to our data governance and protection principals for not sharing unpublished data with AI software. Any use of AI in the generation of research, such as through our methodological approach, including the use of translation support, is fully disclosed in the Technical Note.

INTO THE LIGHT

Index on Global Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse 2026

DATA UPDATE

HUMAN DIGNITY FOUNDATION

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Audit statement

I am pleased that Childlight has given me the opportunity to review this year's index update. This represents Childlight's first interim data update, revisiting previous index estimations and calculations while incorporating newly available data sources.

This year's update focuses specifically on technology facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA). It brings together two primary data streams: nationally and sub nationally representative survey data on TF-CSEA, and child sexual abuse material (CSAM) data. In addition, the index introduces a mixed methods approach to explore an emerging area relating to child abuse guidance materials, further expanding the evidence base in a rapidly developing field.

For the first time, a formal blind peer review process has been instituted. This includes reviewers from Childlight's Index Technical Subcommittee as well as independent experts in TF-CSEA from different regions. The process has been fully documented across three feedback cycles, with each cycle closed and responses recorded. This provides a transparent and auditable peer review mechanism aligned with good research governance practices.

The statistical estimates presented remain conditional on the exact definitions used, the quality of the underlying data and the analytical approaches used to produce them. Confidence in the estimates is supported by clearly articulated caveats, including where data outliers may exist. Methodological adjustments have been made and are fully explained in the Technical Note, including approaches to borrowing strength between lifetime and past year prevalence estimates for TF-CSEA.

This interim update focuses on global and regional estimates. The underlying data, Technical Note, and associated materials are made available through the Childlight index dashboard and data archive, enabling transparency and, in principle, reproducibility or alternative analyses.

The index continues to operate within an evolving conceptual landscape, particularly in relation to TF-CSEA. In particular, definitional issues which could have a material effect have been flagged for more detailed consideration in the future. As recommended by the Technical Subcommittee, Childlight aim to take on an enhanced convening role, bringing together key stakeholders to build on the learning from the Into the Light Index and to advance shared definitions, typologies, and terminology. This work recognises and builds on the substantial theoretical and academic contributions already developed across the field.

Overall, the work has been carried out to a high professional standard.

Sir Bernard Silverman FRS

Chair of the Childlight Technical Subcommittee, Emeritus Professor at the University of Oxford and former Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Home Office

Foreword

Imagine in your community a classroom of 30 children. By the end of this year, two of them will experience sexual exploitation or abuse online. By the time they leave school as young adults, that number could rise to eight. Now, imagine that repeated in classrooms across the world, millions of times over.

This is not a thought experiment. Sadly, it is the reality revealed by new evidence in this report, which estimates that 27% of children are subjected to online solicitation with around 7% facing this in the past year alone. Furthermore, nearly one in ten can expect to face sexual extortion before turning 18. If a disease were harming children on this scale, it would already be recognised as a major global health crisis.

Statistics of this magnitude can feel abstract. But behind every number is a child: a young life disrupted, a sense of safety shattered, a future placed at risk. The harms of childhood sexual abuse are not fleeting. For many victims they include trauma, anxiety, depression and self-harm that can last long into adulthood. In the most severe cases the consequences are devastating, contributing to lifelong ill health and, tragically, to hundreds of thousands of premature deaths each year.

Viewed through a public health lens, the scale of the problem becomes unmistakable. Child sexual exploitation and abuse is one of the most powerful – and most overlooked – drivers of ill health across the life course. Evidence shows it contributes more to the burden of disease among girls and women than widely recognised risk factors such as smoking, harmful alcohol use or lack of physical activity. Among boys it is a greater contributor to ill health than poor diet. It is also more prevalent than many conditions that dominate public debate about children's wellbeing, including childhood obesity, asthma and cancer.

Taken together, the evidence leads to a clear conclusion: child sexual exploitation and abuse is a worldwide health emergency. For too long it has been hiding in plain sight – fragmented across policy debates and treated primarily as a criminal justice issue. Law enforcement will always be essential, but the scale and persistence of the problem demand something more: a coordinated public health approach focused on prevention, with heath ministries playing a central, funded role as part of a multi-sectoral response.

The threat is also evolving. Technology has created extraordinary opportunities for children, yet it has opened new pathways for abuse. Criminal networks profit from the production and distribution of child sexual abuse material. Children are groomed online, manipulated and coerced into producing images of themselves, only to be blackmailed and exploited. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, are accelerating the creation and spread of abuse material in ways that were unimaginable only a few years ago – and with help from so-called 'paedophile manuals' or how to guides for perpetrators detected in more than 60 countries.

Yet this future is not inevitable. Imagine instead that same classroom where no child is subjected to sexual violence or exploitation. Where every young person is free to learn, grow and develop without fear. When children are safe, they are more likely to succeed at school, to flourish in work and to contribute positively to their communities. The benefits extend far beyond the classroom – strengthening health, prosperity and social stability for all.

This safer future, underpinned by the more complete data picture that we need globally on prevalence, drivers and solutions, is achievable. The evidence increasingly shows that prevention works, especially when embedded in maternal, child and adolescent health services – reaching children early, before harm occurs. Stronger regulation, effective education, smart legislation and technology designed with safety at its core can also help reduce and prevent harm. The question now is whether we have the collective resolve to act.

Paul Stanfield

Chief Executive Officer
Childlight – Global Child Safety Institute

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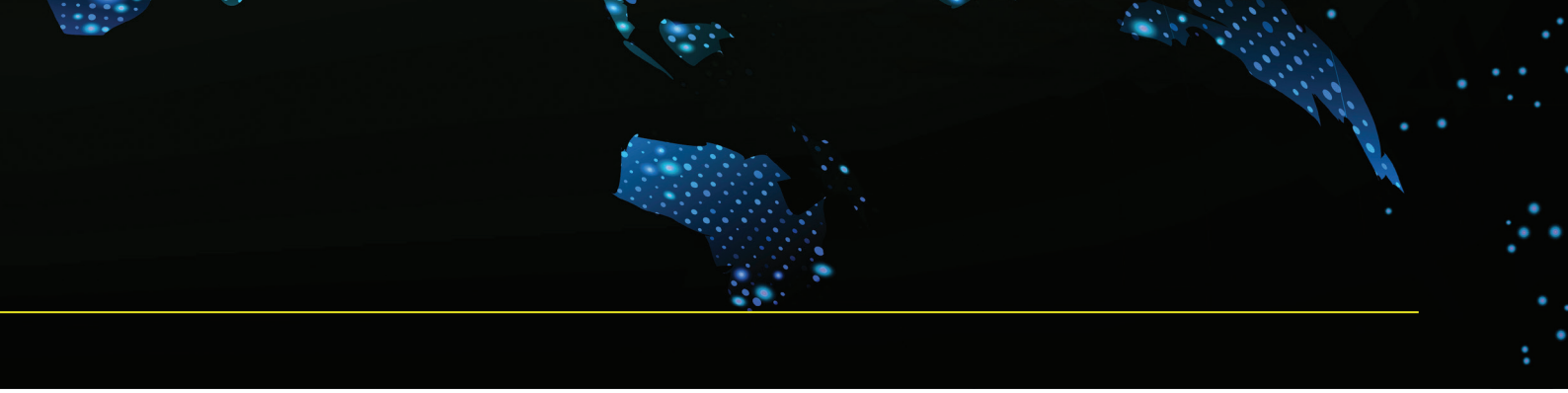

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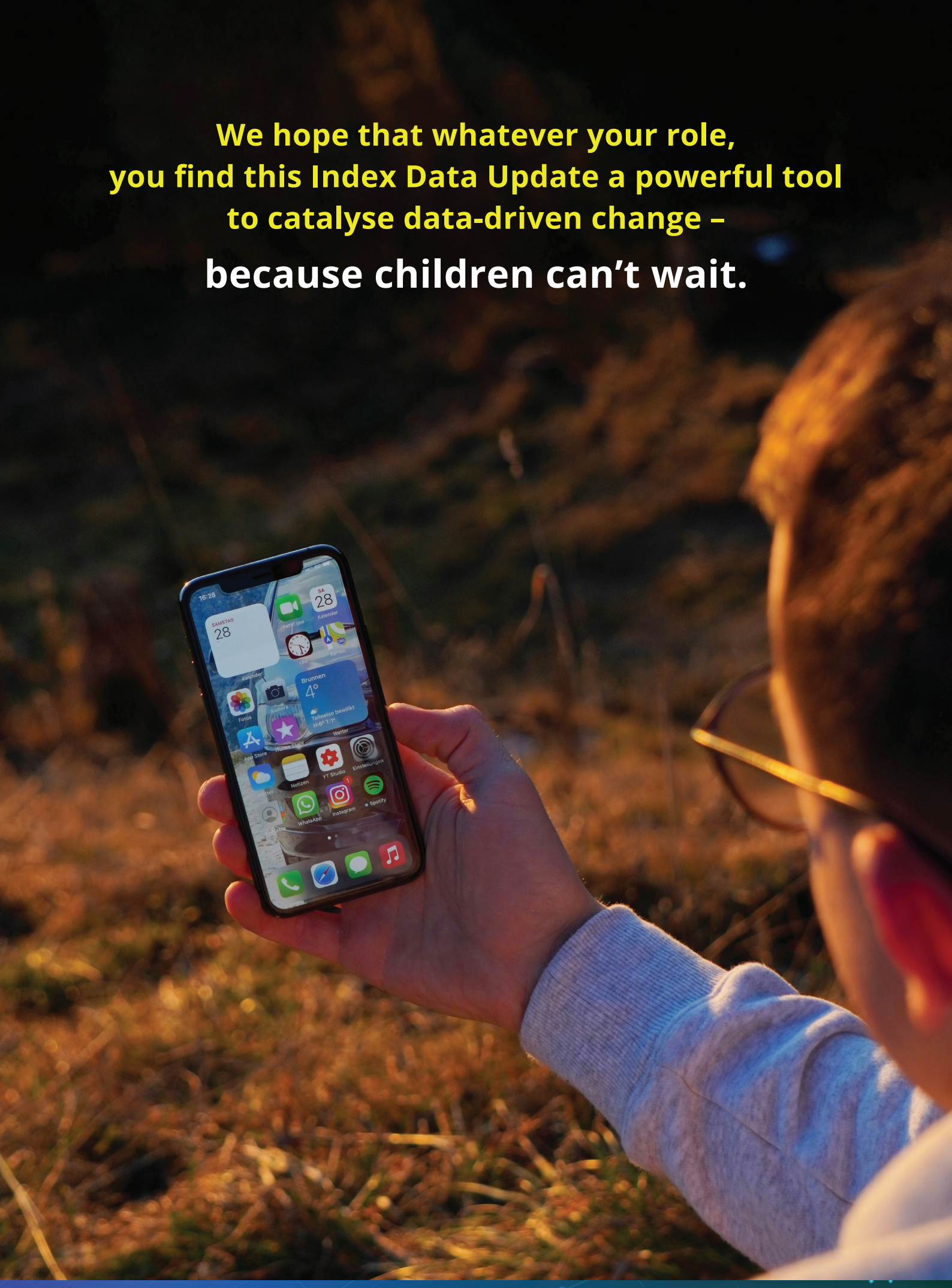
Acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
CSAM	Child sexual abuse material
CSEA	Child sexual exploitation and abuse
ESP	Electronic service platforms
IBSA	Image-based sexual abuse
ICCAM	I 'see' Child Abuse Material
INHOPE	International Association of Internet Hotlines
IWF	Internet Watch Foundation
NCMEC	National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
P2P	Peer-to-peer
TF-CSEA	Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

We hope that whatever your role, you find this Index Data Update a powerful tool to catalyse data-driven change –

because children can't wait.



Executive summary

Childlight is pleased to launch a new series of Into the Light Index data products: our data updates. These data updates provide an opportunity for us to delve deeper into emerging data, both qualitative and quantitative, that underpin our various Into the Light Index indicators around a specific thematic focus. This, our first, Into the Light Index data update focuses on new emerging data as well as updating existing global and regional prevalence and scale data on Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (TF-CSEA). TF-CSEA refers to any form of child sexual abuse or exploitation in which digital technology plays a role, including the internet, smartphones, social media, messaging apps, gaming platforms or even devices used to record or store abuse.

This report includes an update on our living systematic review of TF-CSEA victimisation prevalence across our conceptual framework of five subtypes (online solicitation, exposure to unwanted sexual content, CSAM/IBSA, online sexual exploitation, sexual extortion) of victimisation experiences, our first update since first publishing this data in 2024. This data update also introduces new, emerging data sources on child sexual abuse material (CSAM) from index data partners and for the first time, a deeper analysis on CSEA guidance materials (also referred to as 'paedophile manuals' in some circles). This update on CSAM also includes new regional updates on our key indicators in this area.

This data update provides governments, civil society and other actors with the latest emerging evidence on TF-CSEA. Over the coming years, this data update approach will be expanded to other thematic areas, with our 2027 edition set to focus on a deeper dive into our set of system strengthening indicators.

This executive summary provides an overview of these findings, which are discussed in more detail in the full report. It can be read as a standalone document, or alongside our online Interactive Index Dashboard, Technical Note and open access data for greater depth.

We hope that whatever your role, you find this Index data update a powerful tool to catalyse data-driven change – **because children can't wait**.

Key findings

Prevalence of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA)

Measuring TF-CSEA in representative surveys is a nascent but growing evidence base. We found an increase by 19 studies published between 1 October 2023 and 31 December 2024 using nationally or sub-nationally representative sampling that measure some form of TF-CSEA prevalence. The most frequently measured data is past year data on online solicitation, child sexual abuse material (CSAM)/ image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) and exposure to unwanted sexual content with good country coverage across regions. Childhood lifetime estimates (experience before the age of 18) are less frequently measured than past year estimates likely due to the changing nature of technology across time. Online sexual exploitation and online sexual extortion are captured in far fewer representative surveys, suggesting a need to enhance ways and opportunities to measure these types of potential harms. Many included studies are starting to disaggregate by sex but do not include prevalence by perpetrator type.

The most frequently occurring type of TF-CSEA captured in surveys is online solicitation which was self-reported by 26.6% of participants that they had experienced at some point in their childhood. Online solicitation covers a range of unwanted or pressured sexual interactions, which may include casual sexual inquiries via mobile phone or the internet, or long-lasting sexual conversations that can lead to the exchange of sexual texts/pictures/videos or exposure of intimate body parts. All types of online solicitation may come from peers as well as adults. Online solicitation is defined broadly and diversely here, given the infancy of the field and the various kinds of questionnaire formulations that have been used. For example, some of the surveys specify that children received unwanted sexualised messages personalised for them, but others include encountering this type of messages that may have been directed at many respondents. It is important to note that majority of the surveys did not report perpetrator type, thus all different types of online solicitation may come from peers as well as adults. The diminished capacity to identify perpetrators in the online environment results in limited data on their characteristics. Incorporating follow-up questions on the child's subjective perception of the perpetrators would allow more accurate identification and classifications of these unwanted behaviours. Once more consistent approaches to research and data collection are developed and more data are available on the impact of those behaviours, more granular and precise classifications will be possible. However, until then, the assemblage of different questionnaire items referring to this subtype of TF-CSEA identified in this research effort affords a basis for a more formal study of key definitional components.

There is an ongoing debate about how to best define online solicitation as a form of online sexual abuse and its consequences for epidemiology (Bulger et al., 2017; Finkelhor et al. 2024). Online solicitation is also increasingly illegal in national legislation and defined by major child protection bodies such as the Lanzarote Commission, UNICEF, ECPAT and Childlight as a form of TF-CSEA. In the absence of universal agreement about equating all forms of online sexual solicitation with child sexual abuse, due to variability in intent, context and harm, Childlight adopts a broader definition of TF-CESEA that includes unwanted sexual communication. This reflects emerging international frameworks and consistent evidence that such experiences can be harmful and may form part of pathways to more severe exploitation.

For past year experiences, we see unwanted exposure to sexual content (7.3%) and online solicitation (6.7%) reported by children in surveys. It is not surprising that these two types of abuse are most frequently reported as they encompass a range of potential harms, with varying protections in place for children depending on the country context.

For the smaller number of studies that disaggregate by sex, we see different types of TF-CSEA being reported by males and females. In existing representative data, we see that females report higher prevalence for online solicitation, online sexual exploitation and sexual extortion, including experiences both during childhood and in the past year. Whereas, males report more unwanted exposure to sexual content and CSAM/IBSA in the past year and more unwanted exposure to sexual content during their childhood compared to females.

There is variable coverage by UNICEF regions on the number of representative surveys exploring different subtypes. The more frequently measured subtypes include online solicitation, CSAM/IBSA and exposure to unwanted sexual content. **East and Southern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Europe are regions that report higher prevalence of online solicitation (past year recall), while Eastern Europe and Central Asia and Western Europe show higher prevalence for past year exposure to unwanted sexual content.**

Regional variation in reported online sexual solicitation and unwanted sexual exposure likely reflects a combination of differences in children's digital access, platform use and risk environments, rather than purely underlying differences in victimisation. For example, higher levels of unwanted sexual exposure in some regions may be associated with earlier and more widespread digital access, as well as platform ecologies characterised by high use of large-scale social media, video-sharing, and image-based platforms, which increase the likelihood of encountering sexualised content. These patterns may also reflect higher disclosure rates and greater awareness of online risks, rather than exposure alone. However, there remains much to be understood about regional variation, including how technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is experienced, interpreted and captured in both child and retrospective adult survey data.

South Asia, West and Central Africa and Middle East and North Africa regions are lacking in representative survey data. This limits data insights on TF-CSEA to CSAM data only with two of these regions showing high CSAM volume and rates (see section Regional analysis: the what, where and how of CSAM data). However, more population-level measurement on victimisation experiences during childhood is needed to more fully understand and prevent TF-CSEA.

Scale and nature of child sexual abuse material (CSAM)

Child sexual abuse material data, collected from a few of the major CSAM tracking and analysis organisations globally, can provide insight into both the scale of its availability and the changes in its nature. By bringing the data generated and reported on from each organisation together it can help to provide the global picture of CSAM. Despite many limitations, the data continue to show that there is value in examining the similarities and differences between organisations, without which we would have less knowledge as to the perpetration and offending against children associated with CSAM availability.

CSAM rates, defined as the number of child sexual abuse images and videos per country proportionate to population size, remain high year-on-year in North America and Western Europe. The child sexual abuse material (CSAM) rate calculated by Childlight combines both hosting and reporting data and standardises these using total country population. Using total population, rather than child population alone accounts for CSAM involving broader systems and actors beyond children themselves. This is also a commonly considered factor in epidemiology, which, until we have stronger evidence of the multiple influences on CSAM availability, has been used to provide global comparability.

Using this approach, high-income regions such as North America and Western Europe show increasing CSAM rates relative to population, compared to declining trends in other regions. These patterns may reflect differences in technological access, detection capacity and reporting practices, but may also indicate a higher relative burden on public sector and regulatory systems.

Our report is one of the first studies to include new global data as well as frontline sector insights into CSEA Guidance Materials and the instructional, justifying and normative influencing nature of this content. These materials, commonly referred to as 'paedophile manuals', though more accurately described as child abuse guidance materials, are poorly defined in law and underexamined in research, despite their recognised role in offender behaviour and their inclusion in legislation in several jurisdictions. Global data specifically from peer-to-peer file sharing networks highlight that this material is circulating across at least 61 countries. In-depth discussion with experts in identifying and addressing this material highlights that these guidance materials are classified by their instructional nature, their justifications for legitimising CSEA and their creation of normative communities that perpetrate CSEA. It is important to note that these guidance materials can be used

by children and adults against children, known or unknown; with experts highlighting that possession of this guidance material often coincides with possession of CSAM and/or contact offending against children suggesting this is an important area for policy and prevention consideration by countries.

Commercial CSAM tags show higher than average tags across the content hosted in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. Across 2023 and 2024, Eastern Europe and Central Asia exhibited consistently higher than average levels of tagged commercial CSAM (images/videos which are associated with commercial exploitation or trade), with 6.4% of all identified CSAM from one data source classified as commercial in 2023, decreasing to 2.5% in 2024. Beyond these elevated proportions, the region also recorded the highest absolute volume of commercial abusive content within the data, exceeding other regions by more than 1,000 images per year. Further research could explore this more to understand the underlying drivers of this finding and why it is hosted more often in this region.

There is an increase in the proportion of CSAM images and videos that is being tagged by analysts as 'self-generated' content. 'Self-generated' CSAM is a type of media showing individuals who have physical control of their recording device (i.e., selfies, self-recordings from their computers, etc.), which may have been shared directly or captured indirectly by other means. This can be created due to the grooming, deception or extortion of a child by an offender which can also be another child or an adult. It may also stem from a consensual correspondence between peers or coercive communication that becomes nonconsensual in its sharing or continued possession. Due to lack of agreement on preferred terminology, we have used single quotes throughout the document to note the limitations of this terminology.

Looking at one data source across several countries, we see an increase by 40-65% of 'self-generated' content that was tagged from 2023 to 2024. This highlights that this type of content is increasingly being recognised within content analysis, which is important. It also highlights the need for increasing access to report-and-remove type services such as Take It Down operated by the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), Report Remove operated by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) among others, which allows children and young people to report content they think is circulating online for removal.

We continue to see content tagged as AI-generated or virtual CSAM. From one new data source, we can see what is echoed in other data sources and that is the continued emergence of the virtual or AI-generated content. This is increasingly being tagged by analysts, particularly in North America. As with other tagging data, it may be that those assessing the content are getting better at identifying and documenting the content as opposed to increases in exposure alone. But what we know is that analysts and those at the frontline are increasingly seeing this content which translates to a myriad of challenges and efforts to address this emerging type of content, including curating AI-CSAM specific hash sets, though this may not be sustainable given the high volume of CSAM AI can help produce.

Turning data to action

Childlight is, at its core, a data institute. However, our purpose extends beyond measurement alone. We are committed to using data as a tool for the safeguarding of children, ensuring that emerging evidence is not only documented but meaningfully translated into action. Based on the evidence from this report, we are recommending the following actions:

1 Establish and enforce comprehensive national and regional legislative and regulatory frameworks that enable a population-level approach to preventing TF-CSEA, with clear accountability and consequences for non-compliance

- **We ask** that governments develop, implement and enforce national and regional legislative and regulatory frameworks that establish clear duties of care across relevant actors (including platforms and service providers), enable cross-sectoral coordinated responses and include proportionate but enforceable mechanisms for accountability and compliance. This draws on decades of public health experience in utilising regulation as a mechanism to enable population-level prevention, especially where industry is involved in health and well-being risks.
- **Childlight will** focus on two main areas: 1) supporting evidence-based legislative and regulatory development at global, regional and national levels, drawing on the best available data on the prevalence and nature of CSEA including TF-CSEA, 2) committing to evaluating the implementation and outcomes of legislative and regulatory approaches, including their effectiveness in preventing harm, improving responses and strengthening child protection systems.

2 Support the legal basis for CSAM detection, removal of content and safeguarding of children.

- **We ask** that governments introduce and maintain a clear legal basis that permits and requires electronic service providers to detect CSAM on their platforms using appropriate technologies. Enable and mandate reporting pathways to law enforcement and relevant authorities, ensuring that detection leads to investigation, victim identification and perpetrator accountability. Ensure that legislative frameworks explicitly address impunity, recognising that the absence of a legal basis for detection and reporting limits enforcement and accountability which allows abuse to persist.

- **Childlight will** continue to analyse and report on trends in CSAM data, tracking and reflecting changes in the CSAM landscape through our Into the Light Index on Global CSEA. Through our Childlight Technical Advisory Programme (C-TAP), we will support system strengthening efforts to address impunity as a key driver of CSEA.

3 Improve efforts for enhancing TF-CSEA data completeness and quality

- **We ask** that every country fund and implement a representative victimisation survey, to fill existing data gaps. Specifically, we ask for greater data collection in Middle East and North Africa, where there is very little CSEA victimisation data. This should include a common approach to typologies, methods and implementation to capture both in-person and technology-facilitated CSEA.
- **Childlight will** support work to improve data standards, TF-CSEA conceptualisation and survey instrument refinement and design enhancing efforts already underway in the field and building on evidence from our Into the Light Index on Global CSEA.

4 Address legislative loopholes around AI-generated or virtual CSAM

- **We ask** that governments and policy makers review their legislation to ensure it is appropriate to address the rising number of AI-generated or virtual CSAM reports so perpetrators cannot exploit loopholes and can be brought to justice.
- **Childlight will** make methods and how to guides for conducting legislative review on AI related harms to children publicly available and continue supporting evidence-based reviews of this nature at country and regional levels.

5 Promote investment in national CSAM hotlines

- **We ask** that countries and governments invest further into hotline analysis and capacity. We have seen that when hotlines are encouraged to conduct proactive detection and are supported, they can safeguard more children, which includes the discovery and removal of their sexual abuse content.
- **Childlight will** continue to analyse CSAM hotline data and make results available via our Into the Light Index on Global CSEA.

6 Encourage more community and survivor-led online reporting tools

- **We ask** that more online reporting portals for expedited image removal are developed globally to support children and youth in every region. Additionally, we encourage more platforms to work with services like Take it Down and Report Remove to support streamlined image based sexual abuse removal. The data show that services are increasingly being used over time, however, are geographically limited to North America and Western Europe.
- **Childlight will** continue to include data on report and remove type services within our Into the Light Global Index.

7 Address child abuse guidance materials within legislation and continue research into this area

- **We ask** that the conceptual understanding presented by Childlight on 'paedophile manuals' is accepted. This means that frontline practitioners consider these files as a part of risk assessment of potential perpetrators and that policymakers ensure legislation covers the impermissibility of the creation, possession and dissemination of these files.
- **Childlight will** continue to analyse existing qualitative and quantitative data and publish in this area.

Together, these actions allow us to move from evidence to real-world impact for children.

Introduction

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA) refers to a range of sexually harmful acts and behaviours — occurring online or through the use of information and communication technologies — that have been increasingly identified in research and epidemiological reports (e.g., Finkelhor et al., 2022; Fry et al., 2025; WHO, 2022). Its dynamics are closely shaped by developments in digital technologies. In its 2025 edition of the Into the Light Index, Childlight documented the emergence of artificially generated and manipulated child sexual abuse material (CSAM), illustrating how technological change can create new forms of potential harm and, as a result, new challenges for detection (Childlight, 2025). This is just one example of the way in which data are captured and collected providing evidence of more pronounced harms to children globally. The Into the Light Index highlights several forms of nuanced or limited data that are captured internationally, and shows how, when considered alongside more established indicators, these data help shed a light on both evolving patterns of harm and the structural conditions that enable them.

This report offers analysis that builds on Childlight's previous global studies of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) (Fry et al., 2025; Childlight,2024; Stevenson et al., 2024; McFeeters et al. 2025). It extends the evidence base by examining regional-level data and by incorporating an evolving typology of TF-CSEA against children. It also provides space for a more detailed discussion of global data from the International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE). Working with 57 hotlines, INHOPE has established a widely used standard to classify and analyse child sexual abuse material. These data make it possible to explore regional and, in some cases, national differences in the types of CSAM reported or identified.

This nascent evidence, including incremental changes over time, points to similarly concerning trends, such as the rise of child sexual abuse material created by artificial intelligence (AI). It also supports the identification of areas where targeted intervention may be required, whether through policy, legislation, or technological measures. The data presented here illustrate the extent to which CSEA has become embedded within wider systems: it intersects with economic structures, sociopolitical dynamics, and patterns of interaction both online and offline. Importantly, this ubiquity is not geographically isolated; every world region (as classified by UNICEF) reports data relating to at least one of the child sexual victimisation outcomes measured.

TF-CSEA persists because current technological, regulatory, and commercial environments allow it to do so. Its entanglement with the functioning of many digital platforms complicates efforts to address it without significant operational or financial disruption. Achieving real and lasting change will therefore require a willingness to reconsider existing systems and practices, and to prioritise the safety and protection of children — even when doing so demands substantial structural adjustment.

At the time of publication, two complementary global indexes on child sexual abuse and exploitation have been produced, covering measurement and response. Childlight's Into the Light Index, which estimates the prevalence and distribution of child sexual exploitation and abuse around the world, can be read in conjunction with the Out of the Shadows Index, which provides a global benchmark of national governments' efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence against children and adolescents. The Out of the Shadows Index (researched and developed by Economist Impact, with Together for Girls leading advocacy and engagement efforts), scores countries across 23 indicators, covering laws, policies, programs and services that a government should have in place to end sexual violence against children and adolescents.

Methodology and data analysis

This report brings together important data sources which each seek to measure a form of technology-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation. This chapter sets out the differing methodological approaches to data synthesis and analysis. While greater detail into the specific calculations and approaches is contained within the Technical Note, it is important to note some of the most important methodological decisions prior to presenting the findings.

Victimisation survey data: Systematic review and meta analysis

Data sources

This review aimed to update the recent systematic review and meta-analysis on global prevalence of TF-CSEA (Fry et al., 2024, 2025) with new studies published between October 1, 2023 and December 31, 2024, as well as additional sources that have not been identified in the previous searches. Studies were evaluated independently by two reviewers for inclusion according to eligibility criteria. Eligible studies included children younger than 18 years or adults retrospectively reporting different types of TF-CSEA. All eligible studies used general population samples, representative at the national and sub-national level. For more details on methodology and the list of included studies see the accompanying Technical Note.

Data analysis

A random-effects model was used for meta-analysis of studies to calculate the pooled prevalence estimates with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for past year recall and lifetime recall of five TF-CSEA subtypes. The lifetime prevalence of different subtypes of TF-CSEA was defined as the proportion of adults aged 18 years or older who

reported experiencing those harms at any point before the age of 18. The past-year prevalence was defined as the proportion of children under 18 years who experienced TF-CSEA within the past 12 months. This recall-based breakdown was used to produce prevalence estimate for the total sample, as well as for males and females.

For regional prevalence estimates, the UNICEF regional classification (UNICEF, 2023) by nine regions was used (see Appendix 2 for a list of countries contained in each region). To combine prevalence estimates between countries within a region defined by each of the nine region classifications, each country estimate in that region was synthesised into an average. Those were further synthesised into an average for a region. Separate analyses were run for each of the subtypes, disaggregated by the recall period and region, if the threshold of four studies was met. Additionally, for studies that reported sex breakdown and sufficient data (≥4 studies) for conducting the analysis, prevalence for each outcome, recall period, and region were also estimated.

Sensitivity analyses were conducted by removing studies with duplicate cohorts or those that did not report their analytical sample size, before confirming the final list of studies for meta-analysis. Since our first Into the Light index, we have refined how results are reported to better align data across studies and improve comparability. The previous report (Childlight, 2024) was based on observed values only and provided a robust and transparent picture of the data available. The updated analysis improves completeness but also changes the distribution of results. This can create the impression of a substantial decrease (past year recall) or increase (lifetime recall) in the scale of the issue. However, this change only reflects an update to analytical approach rather than a real-world decrease or increase (see the Technical Note for unadjusted results).

Statistical adjustments were applied to harmonise observations across recall periods to reduce recall-related bias and ensure comparability. The analysis then incorporated all available observations, thereby addressing inconsistencies in reporting TF-CSEA across different recall windows (see the Technical Note for more details). Please note, due to inconsistencies in outcomes and outcome measures used in included studies, the caution is required in comparing the findings across different recall periods.

Note, the pooled prevalence estimates were produced for individual subtypes for each region only, not for an overall prevalence of TF-CSEA. In the 2024 Into the Light Index, we calculated an overall estimate based on 15 studies that reported an overall prevalence of TF-CSEA for the past year recall, which was defined as measuring at least three of the different subtypes of TF-CSEA. This year, we have not identified any new studies that attempted to measure and calculate an overall prevalence, so we have not produced a new single global prevalence estimate of TF-CSEA.

Child sexual abuse material data

UNICEF regional CSAM data

To understand the various dynamics data on CSAM availability, data were first organised and assessed by source across four data sources. Because each source employs distinct methods for identifying content shared via technology, the data

they provide are valuable both individually and collectively. Some sources capture possession on a device, others capture hosting within national infrastructure, and others capture reports linked to a country through uploads or user activity. The data were then organised at a country level, these were grouped by their assigned UNICEF Regional classification. Where country data were presented for a country/territory which did not have a classification it was grouped as 'Not Identified'. The regional groupings of reports and notices were then converted into proportions of all the reports/notices by data source.

Additional details on analyst assessment of CSAM were also presented for the appearance of 'virtual' and 'self-generated' content. These data, such as the volume or reports/notices, were presented at a country level which was later grouped by UNICEF regional classification. These data were limited to one source of data from INHOPE, as such the values presented are proportions of the dataset calculated for the aforementioned regions.

Commerciality of child sexual abuse

In a similar manner to the analyst assessments of CSAM appearance, CSAM was analysed based on the presence of overt commerciality. This was also limited to INHOPE data and therefore presented as proportions of CSAM analysed which were assessed to be commercial. These data were complimented by data shared by INHOPE and IWF on the proportions of CSAM hosted by different type of internet-based platforms. Mirroring the data found within IWF and INHOPE's annual reports, Childlight grouped the NCMEC reporting ESPs by their main function as an online service (see the Technical Note)

The dynamics and functions of 'guidance documents'

Childlight undertook a mixed-methods study combining qualitative insights from experts with quantitative analysis of detected sharing patterns on peer-to-peer networks.

The qualitative component brought together law enforcement, academics, hotline analysts and technology specialists to develop a shared conceptual understanding of what these materials are, how they function and why they matter. Their insights illuminate the instructional, ideological and community-building roles these texts play within offender ecosystems.

The quantitative component complements this by examining how confirmed guidance materials circulate across global regions, providing empirical evidence of their distribution and highlighting the contexts in which they are most frequently detected. Together, these approaches offer a more comprehensive understanding: expert perspectives reveal what these materials do and why they matter, while quantitative data shows where they are found and how they circulate. This integrated evidence base supports the development of clearer definitions, more effective policy responses, and improved safeguarding strategies.

Technology-facilitated CSEA victimisation prevalence by region

Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (TF-CSEA) is now a well-established and consistently used term in both research and epidemiological reports, in line with the latest Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (ECPAT International, 2025). This umbrella construct refers to a range of outcomes including online solicitation, sexual extortion, online sexual exploitation, livestreaming of child sexual abuse and non-consensual image sharing, increasingly reported in survey-based research (e.g., Ali et al., 2023; Chauviré-Geib et al., 2025; Fry et al., 2025; Nielsen et al., 2024). Although this overarching term is widely accepted, agreement on the specific forms of TF-CSEA and their definitions remains limited.

This lack of consensus is one of the main challenges for synthesising and analysing the existing data on prevalence of technology-facilitated child victimisation. To address the conceptual and definitional variance, the 2024 Into the Light Index (Childlight, 2024) proposed an iterative conceptual framework for four broader TF-CSEA subtypes to ensure some degree of consistency across identified data sources. The subtypes were: (1) online solicitation, (2) non-consensual taking, sharing and exposure to sexual images and videos, (3) online sexual exploitation and (4) sexual extortion.

In 2025, this framework was revised based on recently published terminology guidelines and empirical research, as well as with consideration of selected international and national policies and legislations (Krzeczkowska et al., 2025). A key change that was implemented to the framework involved separating forced/unwanted exposure to sexually explicit materials/pornography from non-consensual taking and sharing of sexual images and videos. Additionally, five broad subtypes were defined and used to group the findings: (1) online solicitation, (2) child sexual abuse material/image-based sexual abuse (CSAM/IBSA), (3) unwanted exposure to sexual content, (4) online sexual exploitation and (5) sexual extortion (see the Technical Note for more details on how Childlight's conceptual framework was developed).

TABLE 1 Childlight technology-facilitated CSEA conceptual framework used for the Into the Light Index

Aggregated subgroup	Examples of composite TF-CSEA subtypes	Description
Online solicitation*	Online grooming, online solicitation, online sexual harassment, unwanted sexual talk, pressure to obtain sexual images, unwanted/non-consensual/pressured sexting (sending and receiving sexual messages, images, and videos), unwanted sexual talk and sexual activities on webcam (subtype informed by Finkelhor et al., 2022; ECPAT International, 2025).	This subtype covers a range of unwanted/pressured sexual interactions. Those may include casual sexual inquiries via mobile phone or internet, as well as long-lasting sexual conversations that can lead to exchange of sexual pictures/videos, or exposure of intimate body parts/engaging in cybersex (no money exchange or threats involved). It is important to note, that all different types of online solicitation often come from peers as well as adult perpetrators. This subgroup includes receiving unwanted sexually explicit text messages, emails, photos and videos, sent by peers or adults.
Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)/ Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)	Sexual images or videos taken and distributed without consent by an adult or another child (subtype informed by ECPAT International, 2025; E-Safety Commissioner, 2021; European Commission, 2024)	Non-consensual image or video taking refers to having sexual images taken when a child was unconscious, intoxicated, distracted, or unable to consent. This subtype also includes non-consensual sharing of sexual images/videos of a child via mobile phone or Internet. It could also include so-called deepfake images in which a child's head or likeness was imposed on a sexual image of someone else; as well as AI-generated images**.
Exposure to unwanted sexual content	Forced/unwanted exposure to pornographic content (adult content or child sexual abuse material) (subtype informed by E-Safety Commissioner, 2021)	This subgroup includes an unwanted exposure of a child to pornographic materials (e.g., forcing a child to watch nude videos or pictures or sending a child a link to pornographic websites). Please note that unwanted exposure to sexual content occurs frequently while surfing or scrolling through social media. This type of exposure may not be precursors to a request for reciprocity.
Online sexual exploitation	Commercial sexual talk, commercial sexual images, or other commercial sexual activity (subtype informed by Laird et al., 2022; Finkelhor et al., 2022; and ECPAT International, 2025)	Sex acts are exchanged for the provision of monetary or non-monetary resources (e.g., food, clothes, shelter, affection, protection, belonging, gifts and/or anything else of perceived value to the young person or child) on or offline.

Sexual extortion	Sextortion, sexual extortion, sexual blackmail, sexual coercion (subtype informed by E-Safety Commissioner, 2021; ECPAT International, 2025)	Sexual extortion is a form of blackmail that involves threatening to share an individual's intimate image or video online (including spam/phishing) unless they comply with certain demands such as to obtain money or gift cards/other items of monetary worth, additional pictures, or other sexual activities. This subtype also includes sexual acts on webcam coerced by perpetrator.

* This subgroup does not cover consensual sexting.

** Although the existing nationally representative surveys on TF-CSEA have not yet addressed child sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated using artificial intelligence or other extended reality technologies (Fry et al., 2025), we included those in the CSAM/IBSA subgroup to future proof the categorisation.

Data analysis

Global prevalence estimates of TF-CSEA

Our update searches retrieved 5299 records (see PRISMA flow diagram in the Technical Note). After removing duplicates, the titles and abstracts of 3902 records were screened for eligibility, 144 of which were screened at the full-text stage. Reasons for exclusion included insufficient research data (e.g., non-disaggregated results or non-representative sampling) or irrelevant study design or outcome. In total, 21 new records met all inclusion criteria and were added to the Index 2024 dataset (Fry et al., 2024) for further analysis. In total, 103 data sources reporting on 147 individual studies and 60 countries were included in this meta-analysis. Eligible records were published between 2011 and 2025 and included studies that were conducted between 2006 and 2024.

The majority of the records (n=100) reported on cross-sectional studies and the remaining three reported on longitudinal studies. In total, 73 publications used nationally representative sampling, followed by 16 sub-nationally representative, 13 city-level and one district-level representative sampling. Sixty-seven of the 103 publications reported prevalence data on TF-CSEA disaggregated by sex. Sixty-seven of the 103 publications reported prevalence data on TF-CSEA disaggregated by sex. Eighty-three data sources relied on child report and 11 on adult recall; nine publications had a combination of child and caregiver reporting and two included parent or guardian respondents.

Three TF-CSEA subtypes – online solicitation, child sexual abuse material/image based sexual abuse (CSAM/IBSA), exposure to unwanted sexual content – were the most frequently reported. These were relatively well represented by data sources and had good geographical coverage. We included prevalence estimates for studies that measured prevalence in the past year (i.e., a year preceding the survey) for children, and studies that measured prevalence retrospectively during childhood (before the age of 18) (see Table 2).

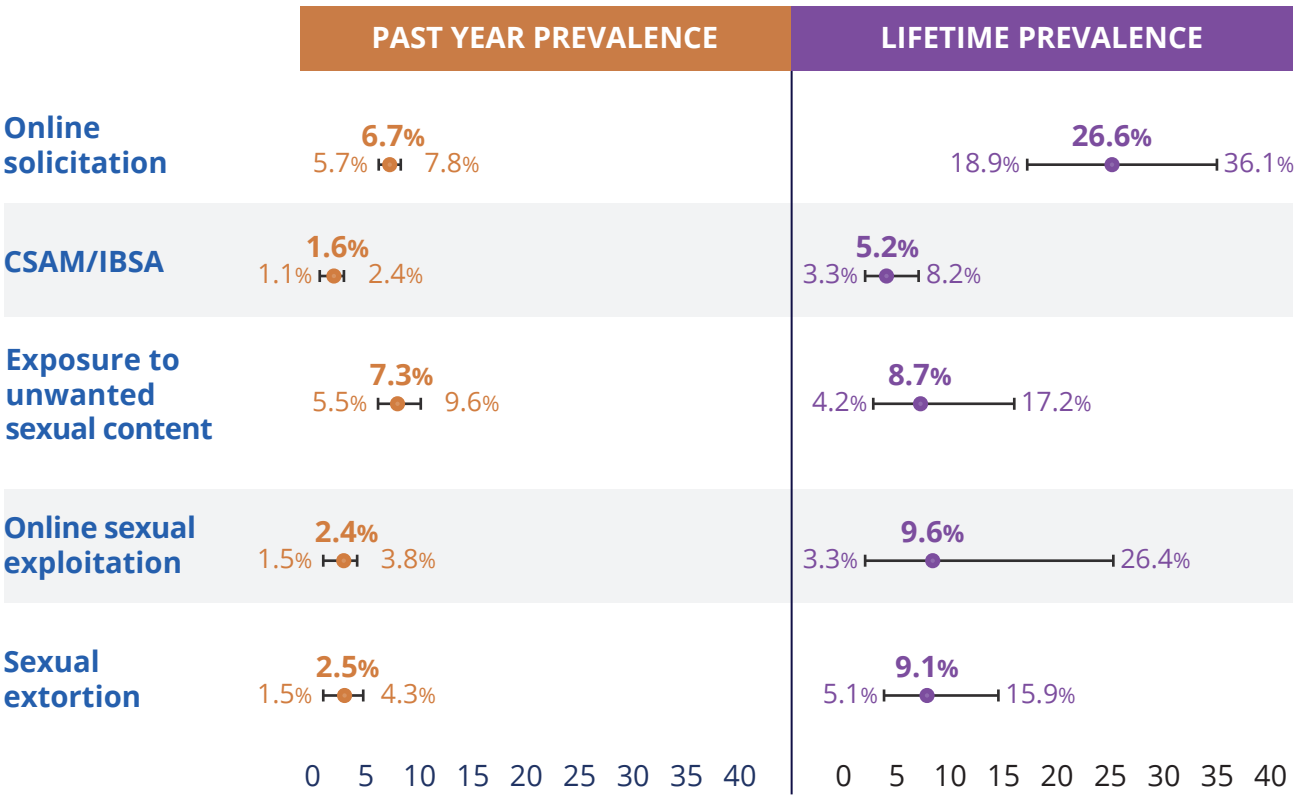
TABLE 2 Data and geographical coverage of TF-CSEA

	DATA COVERAGE		
	Data sources (n)	Regions (n)	Countries (n)
Past year recall			
Online solicitation	46 (based on 64 studies)	8	43
CSAM/IBSA	27	6	23
Exposure to unwanted sexual content	26 (based on 64 studies)	9	43
Online sexual exploitation	15	3	15
Sexual extortion	15	4	15
Lifetime recall			
Online solicitation	31	5	18
CSAM/IBSA	21	5	16
Exposure to unwanted sexual content	19	5	12
Online sexual exploitation	4	3	4
Sexual extortion	8	3	5

Source: Into the Light Index: Data Update on Global Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse 2026.

Globally, 6.7% (95% CI: 5.7-7.8) of survey respondents reported experiencing online solicitation in the past year (a year preceding the survey referred to as 'past year' throughout the report), and 26.6% (95% CI: 18.9-36.1) at least once before the age of 18 (see Figure 1). More females than males were affected by this type of TF-CSEA, in both the past year 7.4% and 5.3%, and childhood lifetime 38.6% and 19%, respectively (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1 Prevalence estimates of TF-CSEA, by subtype and recall period



The error bars ⊢⊣ show the uncertainty around each point estimate (95% confidence interval).

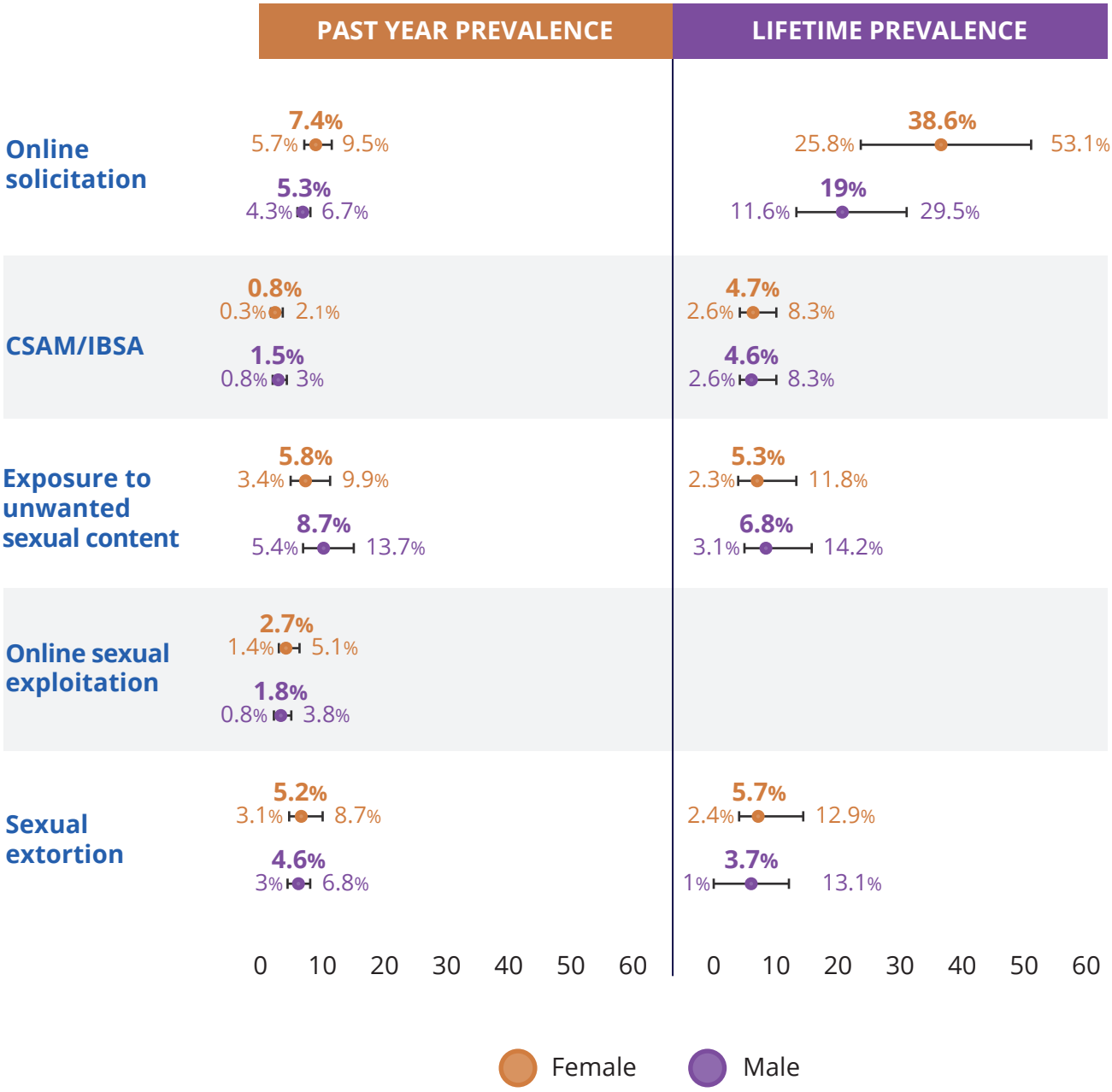
Source: Into the Light Index: Data Update on Global Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse 2026.

The global estimate for studies reporting past year experiences of **child sexual abuse material (CSAM)/image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)** was 1.6% (95% CI: 1.1-2.4]). For childhood lifetime, an average prevalence of 5.2% (95% CI: 3.3-8.2) was estimated. Past year exposure to this type of TF-CSEA was reported more frequently by males (1.5% [0.8-3]) than females (0.8% [0.3-2.1]). Mean prevalence estimates of lifetime exposure to CSAM/IBSA were very similar: 4.7% (95% CI: 2.6-8.3) for females and 4.6% (95% CI: 2.6-8.3) for males (Figure 2).

The global estimate for studies reporting past year experiences of **exposure to unwanted sexual content** was 7.3% (95% CI: 5.5-9.6). For studies reporting child lifetime exposure to this subtype, an average prevalence of 8.7% (95% CI: 4.2-17.2) was estimated. Past year exposure to this type of TF-CSEA was reported more frequently by males (8.7% [5.4-13.7]) than females (5.8% [3.4-9.9]). Mean prevalence estimates of childhood lifetime exposure to unwanted sexual content stratified by sex were 5.3% (95% CI:2.3-11.8) for females and 6.8% (95% CI: 3.1-14.2) for males (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Prevalence estimates of TF-CSEA, by subtype, sex and recall period



The error bars ⟷ show the uncertainty around each point estimate (95% confidence interval).

Source: Into the Light Index: Data Update on Global Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse 2026.

The global estimate for studies reporting past year experience of **online sexual exploitation** was 2.4% (95% CI: 1.5-3.8). For childhood lifetime exposure to this subtype, an average prevalence of 9.6% (95% CI: 3.3-26.4) was estimated. Global prevalence of online sexual exploitation disaggregated by sex was estimated at 2.7% (95% CI: 1.4-5.1) and 1.8% (95% CI: 0.8-3.8) for females and males, respectively. Those estimates were only possible for the past year recall and were based on four studies identified across three regions. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, given the narrow evidence base and the limited geographic coverage. For child lifetime recall, only three data sources were found for online sexual exploitation, highlighting the need for more studies to provide sex-based data disaggregation when publishing findings.

Globally, 2.5% (95% CI: 1.5-4.3) of survey respondents have experienced **sexual extortion** in the past year, and 9.1% (95% CI: 5.1-15.9) at least once before the age of 18. Estimates for experiences of sexual extortion for males and females were based on a limited number of studies (n=5) for both past year and lifetime recall. Based on this scarce evidence, females appear to be more affected than males by this type of harm (see Figure 2).

Prevalence estimates of online solicitation, by recall period and UNICEF region

For past-year exposure to **online solicitation**, the regional subgroup analysis showed a relatively large number of studies for Western Europe, East Asia and Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, and North America; with other regions less well represented (Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and Caribbean), two underrepresented (South Asia, West and Central Africa), and one not represented at all (Middle East and North Africa) (see Table 3). Eastern and Southern Africa (9.7% [7-13.3]; seven studies), Western Europe (7.4% [6.8-8.8]; 27 studies), Latin America and Caribbean (7.6% [4.7-12.2]; six studies), and East Asia and Pacific (6.8% [4.9-9.4]; 10 studies) reported relatively high prevalence, followed by Eastern Europe and Central Asia (5.2% [3.2-8.4]; four studies), and North America (4.1% [2.1-8]; seven studies).

TABLE 3 Prevalence estimates of online solicitation, by recall period and UNICEF region

	Past year prevalence				Lifetime prevalence			
UNICEF regions	Prevalence estimate (%)	Uncertainty (95% CI)	Number of countries with data	Number of sources used	Prevalence estimate (%)	Uncertainty (95% CI)	Number of countries with data	Number of sources used
East Asia & Pacific	6.8	4.9–9.4	8	10	29.1	18.4–42.7	3	4
Eastern & Southern Africa	9.7	7–13.3	7	7	†		1	1
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	5.2	3.2–8.4	4	4				
Latin America & Caribbean	7.6	4.7–12.2	3	6	29.9*	28.9–30.9	1	2
North America	4.1	2.1–8	1	7	12.9	5.6–26.8	2	10
South Asia	6.5*	1.1–8.2	2	2				
West & Central Africa	†		1	1				
Western Europe	7.4	6.3–8.8	17	27	37.4	26–50.3	11	14

† Pooled estimates not possible for a single study.

* These estimates should be considered with caution, as they are based on a very low number of data sources.

Source: Into the Light Index: Data Update on Global Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse 2026.

The regional subgroup analysis of child lifetime exposure to online solicitation was possible for Western Europe (37.4% [26-50.3]; 14 studies), East Asia and Pacific (29.1% [18.4-42.7]; four studies) and North America (12.9% [5.6%-26.8]; 10 studies), that were sufficiently covered by data, whereas estimates for other regions (Eastern and Southern Africa, Latin America and Caribbean) were based on a very low number of studies (i.e., did not meet the threshold of ≥4 studies).

Past year estimates for this subtype of TF-CSEA stratified by sex were sufficiently covered by data in four regions: East Asia and Pacific (n=4), Eastern Europe and Central Asia (n=4), North America (n=5), and Western Europe (n=25), with other regions (Eastern and Southern Africa, Latin America and Caribbean, South Asia, West and Central Africa) underrepresented by data sources (i.e., less than four studies).

In three of four regions with the sufficient data coverage, prevalence of online solicitation was consistently higher among females than males, whereas one region (East Asia and Pacific) showed similar level of exposure. The largest sex differences were observed in Western Europe (9.8 % [7.9-12.1] and 6% [4.6-7.8] for females and males, respectively) and North America (6.1% [2.8-12.8] and 2.8% [0.9-8.1] for females and males, respectively), followed by Eastern Europe and Central Asia (6.7% [4.3-10.5] and 6.3% [4.1-9.6] for females and males, respectively).

For lifetime exposure to online solicitation disaggregated by sex, four regions (East Asia and Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean, North America, Western Europe) were represented, but only North America (n=6) and Western Europe (n=10) were reasonably covered by data sources. Consistent with the estimates for the past year recall, the regional subgroup analysis of sex-based differences in experiences of online solicitation showed that females appear to be more affected than males by this type of TF-CSEA. Those differences were particularly pronounced for this recall period, in both North America (19.2% [8.4-38] and 9% [2.8-27] for females and males, respectively) and Western Europe (50.1% [27.9-72.3] and 25.9% [13.2-44.5]) for females and males, respectively). For more detail see the Technical Note.

Prevalence estimates of exposure to unwanted sexual content, by recall period and UNICEF region

For studies reporting the past-year mean prevalence of **exposure to unwanted sexual content**, three of the nine regional estimates (East Asia and Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and Western Europe) were relatively well represented (8–35 data sources); with the highest mean prevalence found in Western Europe (11% [8.8-13.6]; 35 studies) and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (10% [5.0-18.9]; eight studies), followed by East Asia and Pacific (1.4% [0.5-4.4]; nine studies) (see Table 4). The lifetime prevalence of exposure to this subtype of TF-CSEA was reported in five geographical regions, but only East Asia and Pacific (3.6% [0.9-13.1]; five studies), and Western Europe (14.6% [5.1-35.4]; 10 studies) were relatively well covered by data.

TABLE 4 Prevalence estimates of exposure to unwanted sexual content, by recall period and UNICEF region

	Past year prevalence				Lifetime prevalence			
UNICEF regions	Prevalence estimate (%)	Uncertainty (95% CI)	Number of countries with data	Number of sources used	Prevalence estimate (%)	Uncertainty (95% CI)	Number of countries with data	Number of sources used
East Asia & Pacific	1.4	0.5–4.4	3	9	3.6	0.9–13.1	2	5
Eastern & Southern Africa	3.3*	0.6–16.2	2	3	5.1*	4.1–6.3	1	2
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	10	5–18.9	6	8	†		1	1
Latin America & Caribbean	9*	3.2–22.6	3	3				
Middle East & North Africa	†		1	1				
North America	9.6*	6.4–14.2	1	2	†		1	1
South Asia	2.7*	1.2–6.1	1	2				
West & Central Africa	†		1	1				
Western Europe	11	8.8–13.6	25	35	14.6	5.1–35.4	7	10

† Pooled estimates not possible for a single study.

*These estimates should be considered with caution, as they are based on a very low number of data sources.

Source: Into the Light Index: Data Update on Global Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse 2026.

Estimates for exposure to unwanted sexual content stratified by sex were sufficiently covered by data in three regions: East Asia and Pacific (n=5), Eastern Europe and Central Europe (n=4), and Western Europe (n=13) for past year recall, with other regions (Eastern and Southern Africa, North America, South Asia, West and Central Africa) underrepresented by data sources (i.e., less than four studies). In all three regions with the sufficient data coverage, prevalence of exposure to unwanted sexual content was consistently higher among males than females. In East Asia and Pacific, prevalence was 1.2% (95% CI: 0.3-5.3) among females compared with 1.9% (95% CI: 04-7.5) among males, whereas in Western Europe the corresponding estimates were 12.2% (95% CI: 7.6-18.9) and 15.9% (95% CI: 10.4-23.5).

The largest sex difference was observed in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, with prevalence estimates of 16.8% (95% CI: 13-21.5) and 21.4% (95% CI: 16.8-26.9) for females and males, respectively.

For child lifetime exposure to unwanted sexual content disaggregated by sex, four regions (East Asia and Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, South Asia, Western Europe) were represented, but only East Asia and Pacific (n=5), and Western Europe (n=14) were reasonably covered by data sources. In East Asia and Pacific, the regional subgroup analysis showed that males (4.9% [1.1-19.2]) appear to be more affected than females (2.9% [2.5-3.5]) by this type of TF-CSEA, which is consistent with the past year estimates. A different pattern was observed in Western Europe where more females (10.3% [2.6-33.1]) than males (8.2% [2.5-23.6]) reported exposure to unwanted sexual content (see the Technical Note for more details). The observed discrepancy may reflect measurement limitations, including differences in how child lifetime and past-year exposure were operationalised.

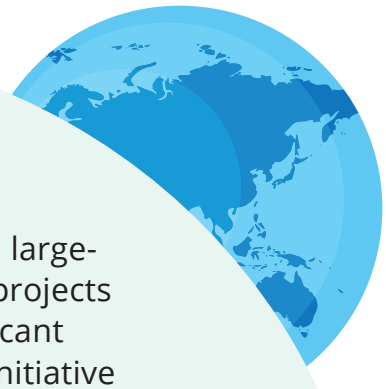
Prevalence estimates of CSAM/IBSA, by recall period and UNICEF region

For **child sexual abuse material (CSAM)/image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)**, past year prevalence estimates were reasonably represented by data in three regions: East Asia and Pacific (2.4% [1.2-4.8]; 10 studies), Eastern and Southern Africa (5.4% [4.0-7.4]; seven studies), and Western Europe (2.2% [0.7-6.4]; five studies). Mean prevalence for child lifetime exposure to CSAM/IBSA was sufficiently supported by data sources only in two regions: East Asia and Pacific (1.4% [0.5-3.6]; five studies) and Western Europe (2.5 [1.5-3.9]; 12 studies).

Estimates for this subtype of TF-CSEA as stratified by sex were sufficiently covered by data in only one region for past year (Western Europe) and two for lifetime (East Asia and Pacific, Western Europe). Sex-based differences in experience of CSAM/IBSA were relatively small, both in lifetime (before the age of 18) and past year. However, females appear to be more affected than males by this type of harm in Western Europe: 1.2% (95% CI: 0.3-4.3; five studies) and 0.8% (95% CI: 0.2-3.9; five studies) in the past year; and 4.8% (95% CI: 2.9-7.9; 10 studies) and 4.0% (95% CI: 1.7-9.0; nine studies) in lifetime, respectively. In East Asia and Pacific, more males than females reported CSAM/IBSA: 2.7% (95% CI: 1.5-4.7; five studies) and 1.7% (95% CI: 0.5-5.9; five studies), respectively. Due to limited regional data coverage for this subtype, figures are not included in the main body of the report. For more details on the regional breakdown see the Technical Note.

Prevalence estimates of online sexual exploitation, by recall period and UNICEF region

A limited number of studies reported prevalence estimates of **online sexual exploitation**. Only estimates for East Asia & Pacific (1.4% [0.5-4.0]; six studies), and Eastern and Southern Africa (3.9% [2.9-5.1]; six studies) for the past year recall were relatively well supported by data. Those estimates were based solely on findings from the Disrupting Harm surveys conducted in those regions.



Data beacons: Disrupting Harm surveys

Although the data on TF-CSEA are relatively limited and large-scale surveys still in a nascent stage, there are several projects generating multi-country evidence. For example, significant efforts have been made through the Disrupting Harm initiative led by Safe Online and conducted jointly with UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, ECPAT and INTERPOL to increase the number of representative studies of TF-CSEA in regions like Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia.

Widely recognised as the first TF-CSEA focused multi-country survey initiative, these studies have reported victimisation prevalence of a range of technology-facilitated child sexual victimisation, including sexual blackmail, online sexual exploitation, non-consensual sharing of sexual content, online solicitation and sexual harassment, contributing to more comprehensive understanding of children's experiences online, as well as effective prevention, interventions, and changes of legislation and policy at national level (UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2022). Disrupting Harm has now expanded to 12 more countries across Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia. By 2026, the Disrupting Harm initiative will have generated national data in 25 countries across six regions, strengthening the existing evidence and providing recommendations for individual countries tailored to the technology-facilitated risks they are facing.

Prevalence estimates of sexual extortion, by recall period and UNICEF region

A limited number of studies reported prevalence estimates of **sexual extortion** for child lifetime recall. Only one region – North America – was sufficiently represented by data and an average prevalence of 10.5% (95% CI: 10.0-11.0; four studies) was estimated. Estimates for the past year recall were relatively well supported by data, specifically for East Asia and Pacific (1.2% [0.4-3.8]; six studies), and Eastern and Southern Africa (3.1% [2.2-4.2]; six studies).

A limited number of studies reported prevalence estimates of online sexual exploitation and sexual extortion by sex breakdown and the regional subgroup analysis further increased the uncertainty around estimate quality. Therefore, those figures are not reported in this study.

Our analyses suggest a high degree of heterogeneity in estimates provided, even when estimates were disaggregated by sex, subtype of TF-CSEA, and world region. This high variability in meta-analysed estimates potentially limits the reliability and accuracy of the pooled estimates. This heterogeneity may reflect contextual, methodological, and conceptual inconsistencies.

Regional analysis: the what, where and how of child sexual abuse material

Measurement of CSAM availability does not reflect the full scale of abuse within a country, but it does offer an understanding of how abuse is captured, surfaced, and mediated through digital systems. The patterns that appear in CSAM data tend to reflect forms of abuse that are more likely to be recorded, shared, or detected, such as abuse of very young children, abuse occurring in domestic or familial settings, and abuse facilitated by technology. These signals can reveal aspects of the phenomenon that population-level prevalence studies may not capture, particularly in the earliest years of a child's life when disclosure is rare, and detection depends heavily on third-party reporting or digital traces.

CSAM availability is measured across data sources according to the amount of child sexual abuse material hosted or possessed within a country, as well as the number of reports submitted to NCMEC that relate to material disseminating from that country. Importantly, the availability of CSAM in a given country does **not** directly reflect the level of abuse occurring there; rather, it may indicate systemic challenges in detection, reporting, triage and child safeguarding. High volumes of detected CSAM may reflect stronger detection infrastructure, more active reporting mechanisms or more robust participation in global child protection networks, rather than higher underlying rates of abuse. As such CSAM is not a suitable proxy measure for crimes committed but more an indication of system functioning depending on the context or presence of safeguards.

Examining these sources together allows for a more nuanced understanding of how CSAM circulates, how it is detected and where systematic vulnerabilities may lie. This multi-source approach does not measure prevalence, but explores patterns of exposure, detection and technological facilitation that are essential for understanding the broader phenomenon of CSAM in the digital age.

TABLE 5 Key terms used in CSAM data

Data location	The measurement of child sexual abuse material is influenced by the way in which data are received by the various hotlines or data sources in addition to how it is then subsequently used. This extends to the geographical location assigned to each report or sighting of sexual abuse imagery. As such, when discussing geographical location, the data must first be grouped by the location or source within the online infrastructure.
Hosting	Hosting of child sexual abuse material is a very common method of determining its location as every bit of information that is being stored online can be tracked. It is also the information required to locate and ensure that material is removed from the source. This is why it is used as a measure for many of the global hotlines as this is one of their main purposes. Data hosting location is not the same as upload or possession location; as such, it requires its own interpretation. Hosting data point to the technological elements which are being misused to abuse children and require a technological sector response alongside guidance from oversight bodies, including legislators, regulators and trust and safety. Though hosting data do not point to the location of abuse or even the location of those attempting to access the recorded content, they can suggest where systems are more vulnerable to perpetuating child sexual abuse material availability.
Electronic service provider (ESP) reporting	More unique in the assignment of location is having platforms or electronic service providers (ESPs) responsible for determining the location of the reported material from their internal systems. This information is determined based on the location of the suspected sexual abuse or abuser as well as upload of sexual abuse that has occurred. This level of reporting is done in compliance with mandates in the United States for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. As a result, these reports are often forwarded directly on to countries for response, based on the determination by the reporting platform. These data more often concern the location of the abusive individual or the person uploading the material to a platform.
Possession on peer-to-peer	Peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing operate in closed online environments, requiring users to intentionally access it. These networks operate more efficiently when many users are sharing the same material, because a larger pool of contributors increases download speed and reliability. For this reason, P2P systems are designed to encourage users to share as many files as possible, creating a mutually reinforcing network where access improves as participation grows. Due to these factors, it is more straight forward to associate child sexual abuse material in this system with specific users/devices. This means that once files of abuse content are located in this environment, it can be associated with specific device(s) that are in possession and, most importantly, where those devices are accessing the network from. This can be used to help guide law enforcement and other safeguarding responses to the possession of illegal material.

Note: Please see the glossary appendix for other key terms used in this report.

CSAM in peer-to-peer file sharing network environments

New data from the Child Rescue Coalition, a non-governmental organisation which tracks both newly detected and previously identified abuse files circulating across a range of peer-to-peer networks, enabled Childlight to conduct a regional proportional analysis covering the years 2020–2024. The analysis shows striking year-on-year consistency in regional proportions despite fluctuations in the overall volume of child sexual abuse material observed during the period. Across the five years, between 46.5% and 48.2% of identified material was associated with devices located in Western Europe. This region also accounted for 35 of the 189 countries included in the dataset, the second-largest number of countries represented.

In contrast, Latin America and the Caribbean, while comprising the highest number of countries in the dataset, accounted for only 10.3% to 12.0% of the total proportion of CSAM circulating on peer-to-peer networks. The second-largest regional proportion was found in East Asia and the Pacific, where 16.5% to 18.1% of the material was associated with devices in that region.

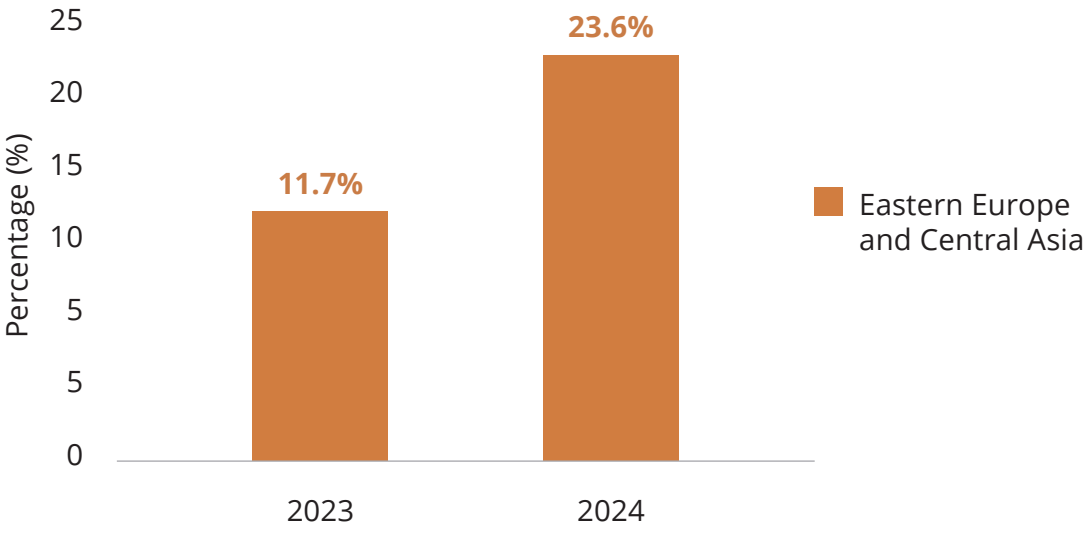
To put this data into context of the number of individual devices shown to possess CSAM on peer-to-peer file sharing, Western Europe had over 317,000 devices associated with countries from the region in 2024. The only other region to eclipse 100,000 devices in that same period was East Asia and the Pacific.

CSAM hosting

These patterns align with findings from analyses of CSAM hosting, which similarly identify substantial concentrations of hosted material in both Western Europe and East Asia and the Pacific. However, unlike hosting data, which frequently highlight North American countries as major locations, peer-to-peer file-sharing data show North America accounting for only 5.4% to 5.8% of the total proportion.

INHOPE and Internet Watch Foundation which collect data on hosting globally, provide the location where child sexual abuse material is electronically held and retrieved (See Table 6 for more detail). Across the past three years of analysis, the data have consistently shown Western Europe and North America account for the largest proportion of CSAM hosting. Earlier reports have suggested that these patterns may be influenced by several contextual factors, including higher levels of internet connectivity, the concentration of data centres in these regions, and the location of the data owners themselves. In the most recent analysis, however, an outlier appeared: the IWF reported a 10% increase in the amount of CSAM hosted by Eastern European and Central Asian countries. Notably, this trend was not reflected in the INHOPE dataset, which includes CSAM hosting information from hotlines operating within the same regions and did not identify a comparable rise.

FIGURE 3 2023–2024 proportion of IWF reports



Data source: IWF Annual Report (2023, 2024).

TABLE 6 Calculated proportions of UNICEF regional CSAM by data source for 2024

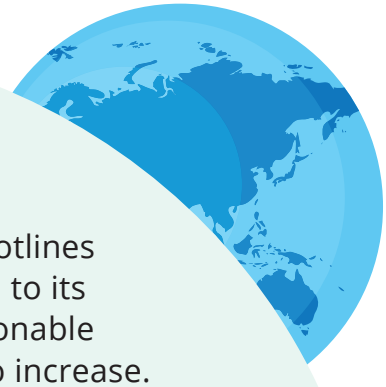
UNICEF regional classification	INHOPE CSAM hosting	NCMEC CSAM reports	IWF CSAM hosting
East Asia and Pacific	5.6%	21.3%	14.3%
Eastern and Southern Africa	0.1%	1.3%	0.0%
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	6.5%	6.1%	23.6%
Latin America and Caribbean	0.6%	10.0%	0.7%
Middle East and North Africa	0.0%	13.5%	0.0%
North America	13.5%	6.0%	14.1%
Not identified	0.0%	10.2%	0.2%
South Asia	0.0%	22.0%	0.0%
West and Central Africa	0.0%	2.6%	0.0%
Western Europe	73.7%	6.8%	47.0%

Not identified: CSAM data without an identified country location (i.e., no location, proxy, TOR).
Data Source: IWF Annual Report (2023, 2024), INHOPE Annual Report (2023, 2024), NCMEC Cybertipline Report (2023, 2024).

Across 2022 and 2023, data on the report location of child sexual abuse material—as identified and submitted by electronic service providers - showed that countries in South Asia received by far the largest share of reports, accounting for 33% and 38% respectively. In 2024, however, this gap narrowed substantially, with East Asia and the Pacific receiving nearly identical proportions of reports (21.4% and 22%) submitted to NCMEC. At a data source level, the processing and capacity has remained relatively similar for both 2022 and 2023. However, in 2024 simultaneous organisational, national and global decisions were put into effect which may have impacted data volumes contributing to the proportional differences.

The shift in South Asia may reflect the introduction of new legislation in the region, particularly in Pakistan and India, alongside policy changes such as Meta's bundling of reports (see Into the Light 2025, pp. 29, 52–55), which aimed to reduce the volume of CSAM reports by platforms originating from the region. India in particular has seen investment into additional services to automate the removal of content with the establishing of the Meri Trustline and the affirming of the Sahyog Portal as a resource to assist in image removal (IWF 2025, I4C, MHA). Additionally, NCMEC provided all electronic service platforms (ESPs) with the option to combine similar or the same reports to their platforms before sending to NCMEC. Together, whether intended or not, these changes can reduce the total volume of reported content.

The reduction in the proportion of reports from the South Asian region appears to be driven by an increased proportion of reports for which the location could not be determined. It is not possible to definitively determine from which region these reports switched from with the current available data. Hotlines and platforms have suggested that the implementation of default end-to-end encryption may hinder the collection of detailed information about potential harms (see Into the Light 2025, pp. 52–55). As NCMEC determined in their 2024 annual report, even accounting for the bundled reports they received nearly 7 million fewer which amounted to a 20% drop from multiple platforms. Continued monitoring of this data will be essential to assess the long-term effect of these developments. However, the 2024 data already indicate that more than 2 million reports lacked sufficient information to identify an associated country, an increase of 300,000 from 2023, despite an overall decrease of nearly 12 million reports submitted to NCMEC (NCMEC, 2024).



Data beacons: SafeNet Bulgaria

INHOPE has been steadily adding to their network of hotlines for the past three decades, growing from an initial nine to its current total of 57. As the network expanded, it is reasonable to expect that the overall reporting volumes would also increase. However, the addition of the new consortium SafeNet Bulgaria in 2024 produced an unexpected surge: INHOPE's total reports rose from 785,322 in 2023 to 2.5 million in 2024. SafeNet Bulgaria also contributed 1.6 million reports, accounting for 66.96% of the total volume.

Discussions between INHOPE and SafeNet Bulgaria indicate that several factors contributed to this dramatic rise. The first relates to targeted searching based on offender behaviours. These proactive searches led to the identification of large quantities of CSAM located on a small number of online forums. The second factor involved offenders' practice of splitting videos into individual image frames and circulating these as separate CSAM files, thereby inflating the number of unique items detected. While INHOPE notes these factors do not necessarily represent broader global trends in CSAM distribution, they do highlight the value of proactive searching and offender activity profiling, both of which allowed for previously undetected CSAM to be discovered and triaged. These developments also highlight the critical importance of sustained investment in hotline capacity and moderation infrastructure. Notably, SafeNet Bulgaria reported significant funding challenges in its 2023 annual report yet was still able to adapt its practices and contribute to safeguarding efforts at scale. The 2024 data therefore illustrate both the potential impact of well-resourced hotlines and the risks posed when such services operate under financial constraints, particularly given their central role in identifying, reporting, and facilitating the removal of CSAM.

What could all Hotlines do if they had the security of funding and the mechanisms to conduct similar detection practices?

CSAM rate

The child sexual abuse material (CSAM) rate calculated by Childlight combines hosting and reporting data and standardises these using total country population. This rate is used as a descriptive tool to enable comparison across countries, rather than to imply that population is a primary driver of CSAM. Differences in CSAM rates are likely influenced by a range of factors, including technological infrastructure, detection capacity, reporting practices, and regulatory environments. As such, these rates should be interpreted with caution, particularly in regions where data availability is limited or uneven. The increased number of notices sent by INHOPE member hotlines in 2024 contributed to a shift in the CSAM rates distribution. This shift was due to more proactive searches for CSAM content by certain hotlines, as well as the decreased volumes of reports to NCMEC detailed above. Population in these regions was updated annually based on UN data, which also has an impact on the calculation.

For the first time since the CSAM rate measurement began, Western Europe surpassed Middle East and North Africa, driven in part by the increased volume of notices directed to the Netherlands alone (see Into the Light 2025 p. 24). This measure was also influenced by the overall decline in NCMEC reporting (Childlight 2025, pp. 52-53) which historically has been to countries in South Asia and East Asia and Pacific thus impacting the overall volume of reports received by these regions over the others. Together, these two factors resulted in lower CSAM rates across those regions when adjusted for population.

Although Middle East and North Africa was no longer the highest-ranking region, it continued to record one of the highest rates globally, ranking second overall.

The narrowing gap between reporting and hosting volumes meant that, in 2024, the CSAM rate provided a more balanced representation of the two primary sources of data. While reporting information can indicate location of harm, balancing this with structural factors that facilitate hosting, help to show how a balanced and multi sectoral approach is required to address total availability. As the gap narrows between hosting and reporting, the CSAM rate will provide a better indication of countries which need to evaluate their technology sector, public health and systemic safeguards to child sexual abuse. Prior to this, the data favoured a more systemic response due to reports focussing on the suspected location of abuse or offender/victim.

TABLE 7 UNICEF regional CSAM rate per 10,000 population

UNICEF regional classification	2023 CSAM rate	2024 CSAM rate
East Asia and Pacific	27.6	19.4
Eastern and Southern Africa	6.2	4.2
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	48.4	33.8
Latin America and Caribbean	47.5	32.3
Middle East and North Africa	102.8	55.4
North America	36.6	41.6
Not identified	55.9	23.1
South Asia	71.0	23.6
West and Central Africa	8.0	8.8
Western Europe	37.5	63.5

Not identified: Countries without a UNICEF Regional Classification.

Data Sources: NCMEC Cyber Tipline Report 2023 & 2024, INHOPE Annual Report 2023 & 2024, IWF Annual Report 2023 & 2024.

Information on tagging photos: The INHOPE analyst network

Data on tags associated with child sexual abuse imagery are used throughout this report. These data are applied and assigned by analysts at various hotlines all within INHOPE's network. This is a development, in conjunction with a Universal Classification Schema, which ensure that analysts within this group are all assessing to a standard understanding. The data are then submitted into the ICCAM (I "See" Child Abuse Material) system where it can be accessed by global law enforcement.

Tags are applied based a visual assessment and any additional information associated with the material. The visual assessment pertains to what is depicted in the file and additional information is often received in the form of reports from public or in the location where the child abuse imagery is located. These two factors can influence the application of a tag for an analyst. As mentioned above, the default is no attribution or 'tag' so analysts must be sure to change this to another option.

The unified approach to analysis helps to address several challenges in comparability of child sexual abuse material globally. First, it provides a tool for the secure sharing of this analysis and material. Secondly, it streamlines work so that images do not need to be analysed each time they are located. Finally, it creates an agreed upon standard which INHOPE train staff to utilise. This training occurs bi-annually and involves a buddy system for hotline members to ensure reliability in application across the network.

In addition to the internal checks the tool is trusted and used by multiple external law enforcement bodies at a national level which includes representation by Norway, Belgium, France, Moldova and INTERPOL. This use helps to show the trust in the analysis contained within the system and the training of the analysts at member hotlines.

Profiting from harm and the roles of electronic service providers

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is often driven, directly or indirectly, by monetary gain. Online platforms and electronic services can benefit from the activity associated with the production, distribution and sale of child sexual exploitation and abuse, whether intentionally or through passive mechanisms such as increased traffic. In more explicit cases, offenders openly sell or produce recorded abuse for profit. Understanding the commercial dimension of this crime requires examining it from multiple angles, including how it appears in global reporting systems such as ICCAM and across different types of electronic service providers.

Understanding commercial CSAM in I 'see' Child Abuse Material (ICCAM)

This report highlights data collected by INHOPE through its I 'see' Child Abuse Material (ICCAM) database on commerciality. This in combination with INHOPE's Universal Classification Schema provides a global CSAM analysis dataset analysed to a standardised understanding of tags and features. ICCAM aggregates reports from over 57 member hotlines representing 52 countries. ICCAM data is organised by the hosting location of CSAM. While hosting does not indicate where the abuse occurred or where the offender is located, it does highlight regional vulnerabilities being exploited by offenders. This dataset includes information from eight of the nine UNICEF regions, with West and Central Africa being the only region not represented. In both years, Western Europe contributed the largest number of reporting countries (26 in 2023 and 25 in 2024), followed by Eastern Europe and Central Asia, with 17 countries represented each year.

Hotline analysts, trained using a shared glossary, tag each image or report with attributes of whether the material appears to have certain components. In our 2025 Into the Light Index (Childlight, 2025) the reported data focused on victim traits and categorisation of abuse type. To explore further in this edition, we are focusing on the commercial component, which is the association of CSAM with monetary gain or commercial trade. With this in mind, analysts can classify content as:

- Having a commercial component
- Not having a commercial component
- Indeterminate

This three-way classification allows analysts to avoid forced binary decisions and to reflect uncertainty where appropriate.

Across 2023 and 2024, Eastern Europe and Central Asia exhibited consistently higher than average levels of commercial CSAM, with 6.4% of all identified CSAM classified as commercial in 2023, decreasing to 2.5% in 2024. This decrease in proportionality may be due to a few factors, one of which include a higher volume of total images added to ICCAM in 2024. Beyond these elevated proportions, the region also recorded the highest absolute volume of commercial abusive content within ICCAM, exceeding other regions by more than 1,000 images per year.

A further outlier emerged was found in South Asia for 2024, where 26.7% of all CSAM hosted in the region was tagged as commercial; substantially higher than any other regional proportion. This figure, however, is based on a notably small dataset: only two countries contributed ICCAM data, totalling 348 images and videos, the smallest regional sample across both years. Overall, the proportion of commercial CSAM across regions ranged from 0.1% to 26.7%, with a two-year regional mean of 3.1%. These findings indicate that although the commercialisation of CSAM is a global phenomenon, its prevalence varies considerably depending on the hosting region.

Outside of the country assignments several CSAM files across the two years were unable to be identified to a specific hosting location due to their association with The Onion Router (TOR). In both 2023 and 2024, over 1,000 images were analysed with their location attributed to TOR, often referred to as the dark web. The proportions were well above the regional averages with 17% in 2023 and 39% in 2024 being tagged as commercial. As this is an online environment which is more difficult to track and intervene, this could present an elevated risk for the environment to be misused as a marketplace for the sexual harm of children. As proportionally this is the 'tagged' location with the highest levels of commercialised CSAM, and it constitutes a single source, there could be the opportunity to govern this space in a manner which eliminates the crimes occurring there.

An evolving threat: platforms, forums and the economics of abuse

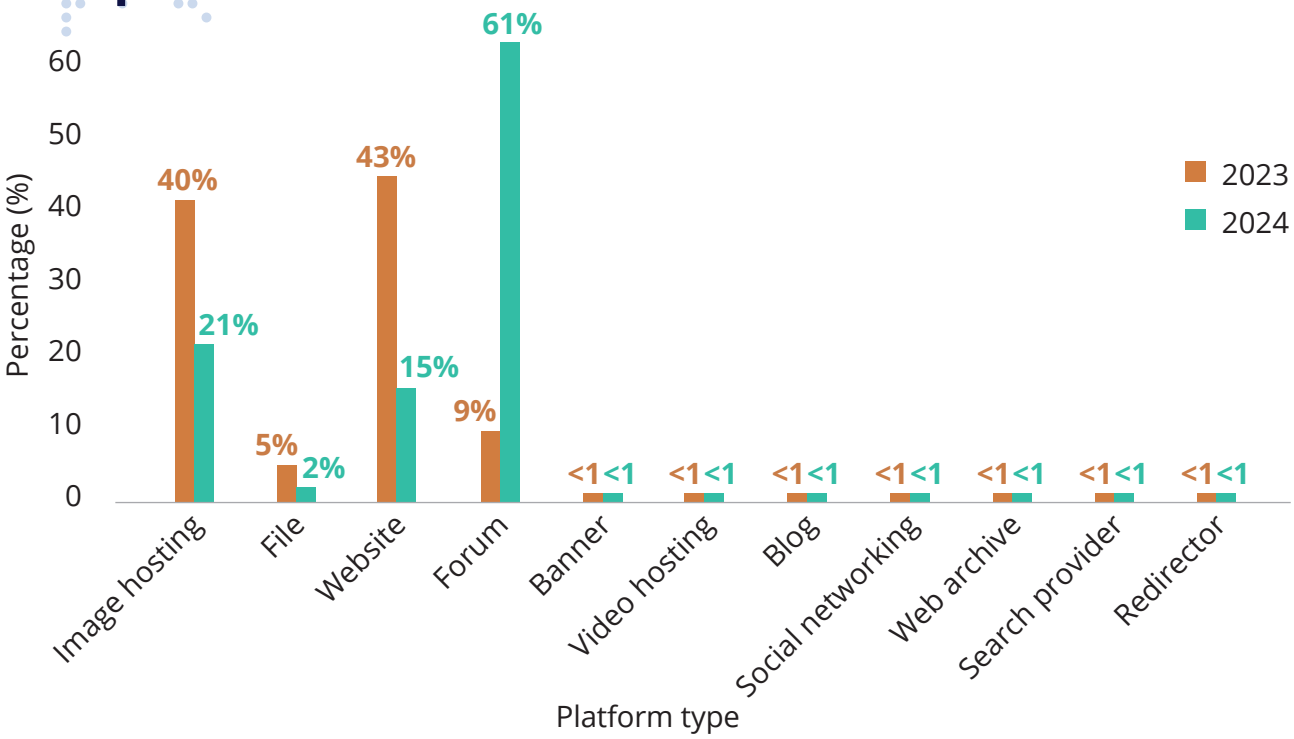
Data on commercial CSAM highlight the direct profit generated through the sexual abuse of children, but this represents only one aspect of the broader monetisation of CSEA. Despite efforts by some online platforms to reduce the presence of CSAM and related exploitation of children on their services, the problem remains persistent. Both INHOPE and the IWF have, for several years, categorised reports according to the type of web services hosting CSAM. Historically, general websites and image-hosting services accounted for the majority of reported content. This pattern is particularly evident in IWF data, although this concentration may partially reflect IWF's reporting methodology, which predominantly captures image-based content.

Analysis of 2023–2024 data indicates a noticeable shift in hosting patterns, with a substantial increase in CSAM hosted on forum-based websites in 2024. INHOPE data showed nearly a 50% rise in CSAM identified forums, a shift that aligns with findings

from the 2025 Index, which noted that one hotline had revised its detection policies, thereby influencing reporting patterns. In parallel, the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2025) documented the proliferation of highly organised online forums which enable the sustained exchange abusive content within offender networks and reduce barriers to access and redistribution.

This analysis represents only one dimension of the broader issue and therefore requires integration with complimentary findings presented in the 2025 Into the Light Index, which examined both the date of CSAM creation submitted for removal and the timeframes for platform takedown. The study identified a notable increase in removal times between 2022 and 2024, with both the IWF and NCMEC reporting that the process of securing CSAM removal took longer in 2024 than in previous years.

FIGURE 4 **INHOPE: Proportions of CSAM hosting by platform type**

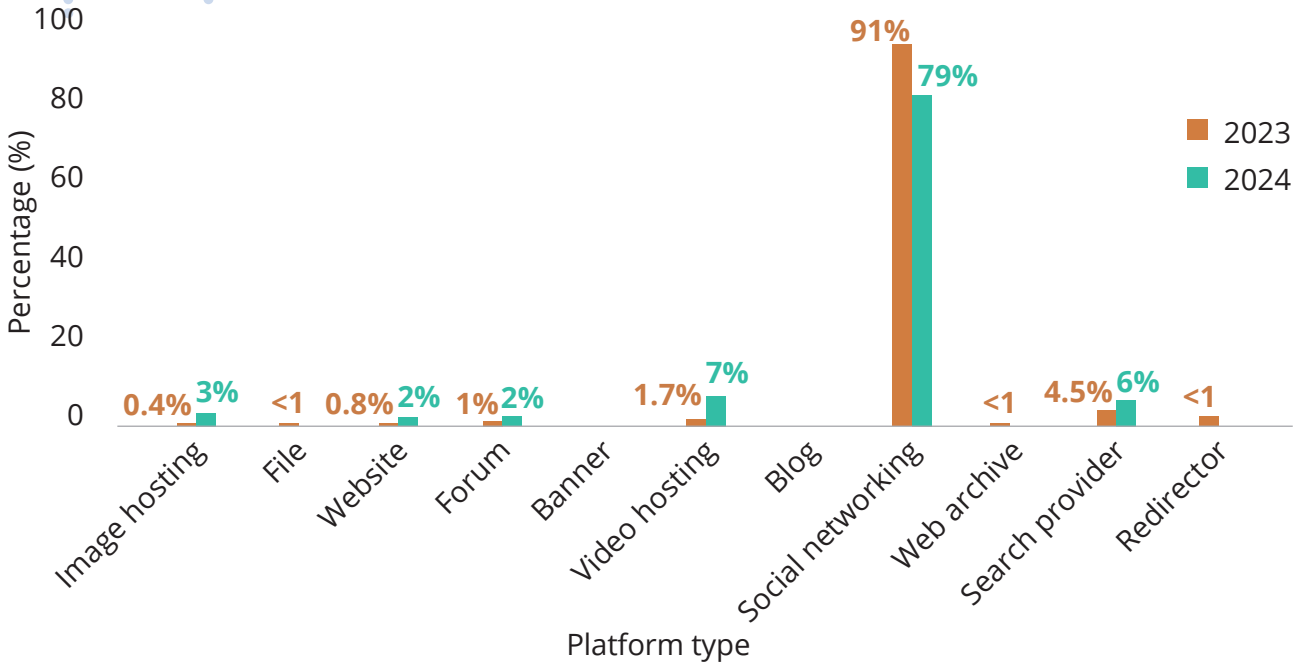


Data source: INHOPE Annual Report (2023, 2024), INHOPE: 2023 n=774067 2024 n=2377275.

When these findings are considered alongside evidence that a substantial proportion of content (upwards of 45% of all analysed material) consists of previously known CSAM repeatedly detected and reviewed by global hotlines, a concerning pattern emerges. Taken together, the data suggest that the distribution ecosystem for this illegal content may be adapting to current identification and removal strategies, potentially exploiting gaps or delays within existing response mechanism. This raises important questions about the resilience of current detection infrastructures, the capacity of platforms to respond at scale and the need for more robust, preventive approaches capable of addressing both the persistence of known material and the evolving tactics used to sustain its circulation.

To mirror the data found within IWF and INHOPE's annual reports, Childlight grouped the NCMEC reporting ESPs by their main function as an online service (see the Technical Note). As these companies report to NCMEC as the law in the US requires them to, the calculated proportions are influenced by the platforms which receive the most use online, thereby increasing the likelihood of an offence. Most reports to NCMEC originate from social networking services such as Instagram, X, TikTok and Facebook. Between 2023 and 2024, the proportion of reports submitted to NCMEC by social networking platforms declined substantially, falling by more than 10%, from 91.5% to 79% of all reports received. The 2025 Into the Light Index examined the implications of default end-to-end encryption and suggested that these changes may have had a disproportionate impact on the reporting capacity of social networking services relative to other platform categories. When interpreted alongside this analysis, the observed decline indicates a likely relationship between reduced visibility into encrypted communications and subsequent decreases in reporting volumes from these platforms.

FIGURE 5 **NCMEC: Proportions of CSAM hosting by platform type**

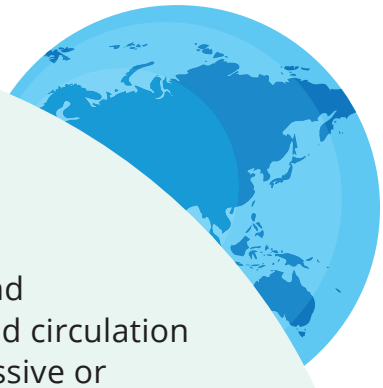


Data source: NCMEC (2023b, 2024b), NCMEC: 2023 n= 36210369 2024 n= 21179086.

Interpreting the platform and regional trends

The changes in type of platform hosting CSAM indicate that INHOPE is increasingly identifying content on forums and within more specialised areas of the internet. In contrast, when platforms are required to submit reports directly, it is predominately social networking services that detect the highest volume of sexualised content involving children. This divergence suggests the importance of integrating both perspectives to enhance the identification and removal of CSAM across the online ecosystem. The INHOPE data concerning commercial CSAM further suggest

persistent challenges in addressing the sale of CSAM hosted in Eastern Europe and Central Asian countries. While the majority of CSAM recorded in ICCAM is hosted in Western Europe and North America, neither region individually approaches the volume of commercial CSAM identified in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Understanding the factors that facilitate the hosting and circulation of commercially traded CSAM in this region may be critical to disrupting both its availability and the production of new recorded harm involving children.



More than profit: The complex drivers of CSAM circulation

Commercial incentives represent one dimension within a broader and complex ecosystem in the production and dissemination of CSAM. The dynamics of production and circulation may involve both deliberate participation and more passive or structurally constrained involvement. In certain contexts, structural poverty is regarded as a significant contributing factor.

Evidence from cases of livestreamed child sexual abuse in the Philippines indicates that extreme economic hardship can intersect with digital platforms in ways that facilitate exploitation. In some instances, children 'voluntarily' engage in sexual acts before cameras in exchange for payment from foreign audiences as a means of alleviating household deprivation. Alongside this, research shows the existence of family-based criminal networks in which parents or relatives manipulate or coerce children into performing sexual acts online, sometimes normalised locally as an income-generating strategy (Drejer et al., 2024). Within such contexts, the extent to which children's participation reflects agency, coercion or varying degrees of constraint remains difficult to determine and warrants careful consideration.

Beyond economic survival or organised profit-seeking, active production and dissemination of CSAM may also stem from individual motivations. Prior research suggests that adult offenders can be driven by sexual gratification, compulsive behaviour, escapism or distorted self-perceptions (Sheehan & Sullivan, 2010). Furthermore, this production and distribution may serve social purposes, such as gaining personal standing and validation within criminal networks through sharing materials with fellow offenders. In these contexts, CSAM functions as a form of currency in their dissemination, conferring status upon individuals within online communities.

Virtual and self-generated tags

With the growth of online sexual extortion and technology such as AI, it is imperative to understand the different ways CSAM is being created. As previously mentioned, when discussing commerciality, analysts using ICCAM will use a shared glossary for categorisation, and the process remains the same for identifying CSAM that is 'self-generated' (see Appendix 1 for a glossary of key terms and definitions) or 'virtual' as demonstrated below:

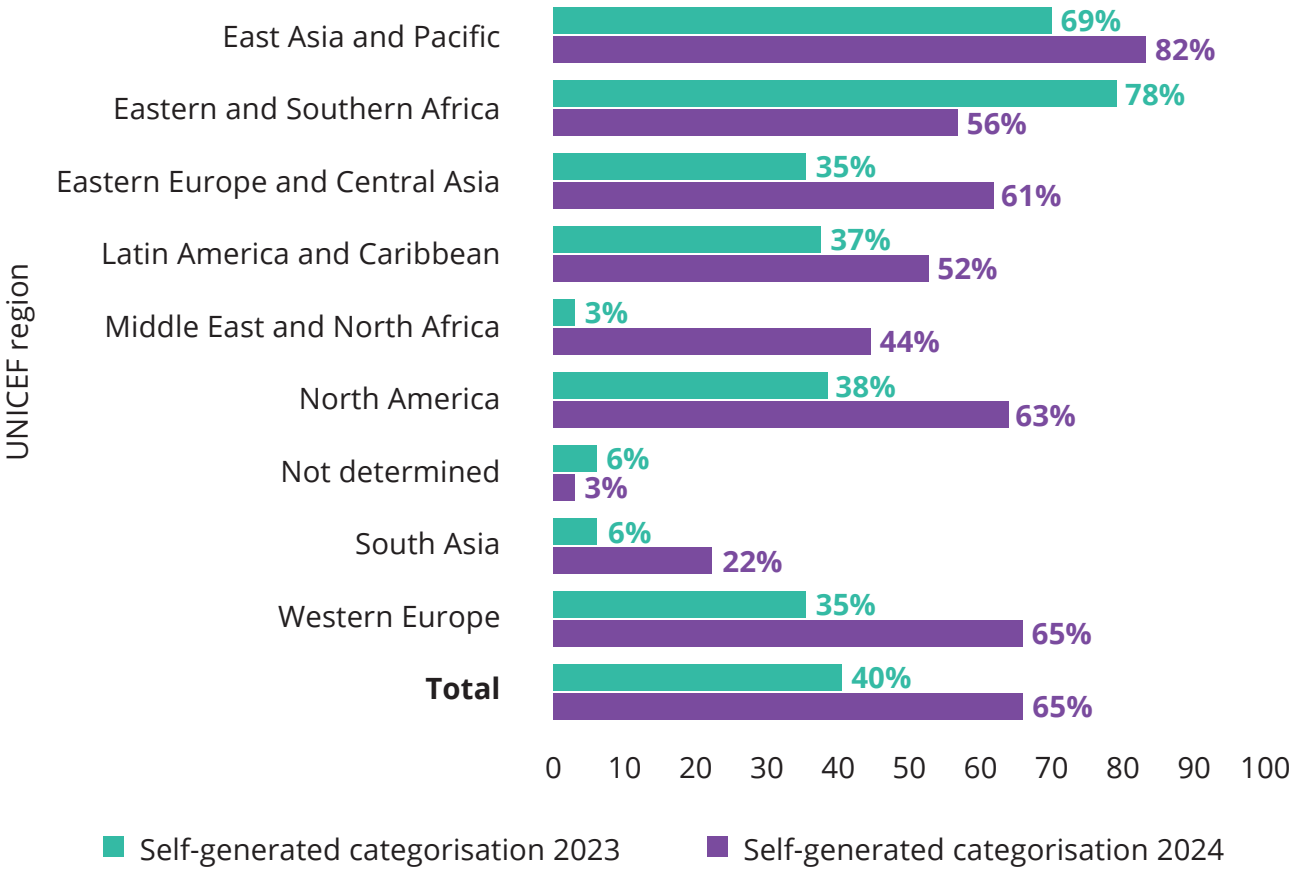
Being created 'virtually'	Being 'self-generated'
Not being created 'virtually'	Not being 'self-generated'
Indeterminate	Indeterminate

This three-way classification allows analysts to avoid forced binary decisions and to reflect uncertainty where appropriate. Allowing for this uncertainty gives a better potential understanding into stark differences between the proportions for 'self-generated' and 'virtual'. As AI and other virtual forms of CSAM become more pervasive, it is crucial to distinguish genuine volume changes from analyst capabilities. It is also important to note that while images may appear to be 'self-generated' Childlight understand this is a complex process often with the child having no autonomy in the recording of the sexual images.

Findings

When reviewing 'self-generated' tags from ICCAM reports, the highest proportions of these tags came from Eastern and Southern Africa (78%) and East Asia and Pacific (82%) in 2023 and 2024 respectively. This is coupled with an overall trend for CSAM to be increasingly categorised as 'self-generated' between 2023 and 2024 from 40%-65%. Interestingly, despite its higher-than-average proportion, Eastern and Southern Africa was one of two regional groups to see a decrease between 2023 and 2024.

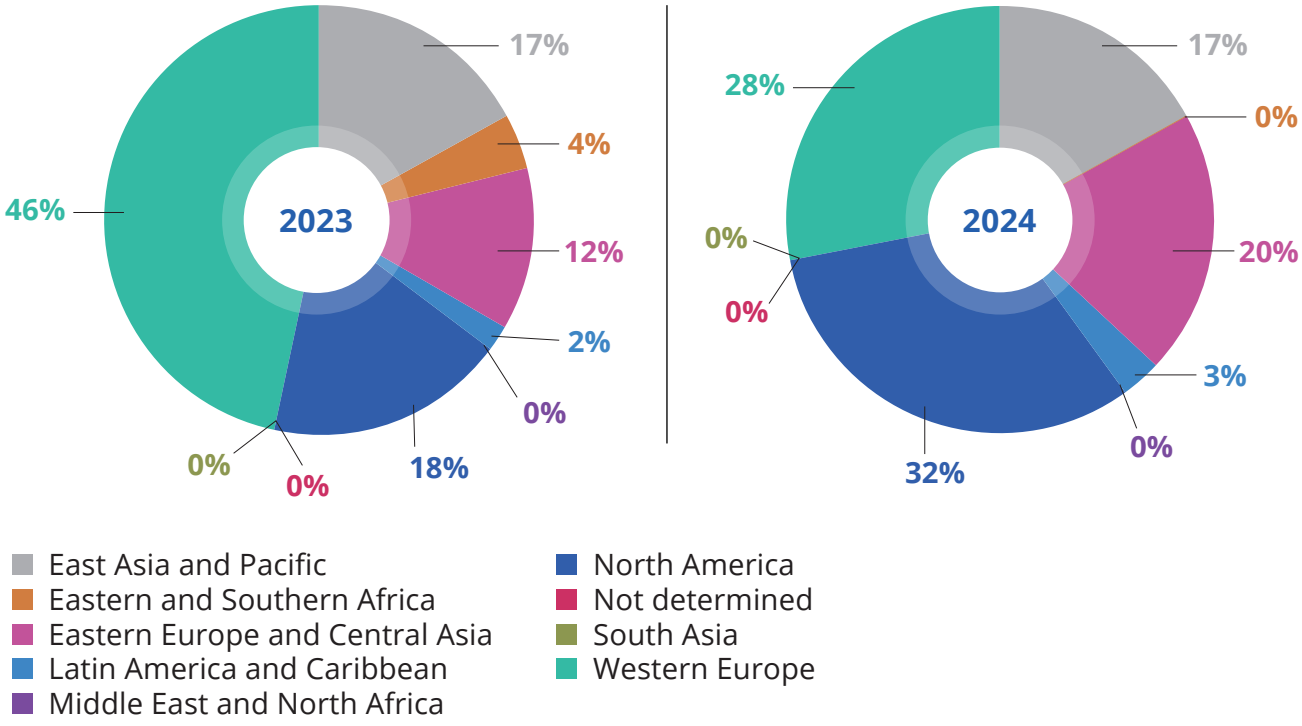
FIGURE 6 Proportion of CSAM categorised as 'self-generated' 2023–2024



Data sources: INHOPE 'ICCAM' 2023-2024 data provided to Childlight through a data sharing agreement.

When exploring the regional proportions of 'self-generated' tags as a subset of the overall data, we can see a change from Western Europe accounting for 46% of categorisations in 2023 to North America categorising the highest proportion with 32%. This is closely followed by Western Europe at 28% and Eastern Europe and Central Asia at 20% (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7 2023 and 2024 proportions of 'self-generated' tags by UNICEF regions



Data sources: INHOPE 'ICCAM' 2023–2024 data provided to Childlight through a data sharing agreement.

The overall increase in 'self-generated' CSAM is echoed by IWF, which was referenced in the 2025 Into the Light Index (Childlight, 2025). This seemingly global rise emphasises the need for expanding the 'traditional' view of abuse material being created by an adult abuser. The element of coercion, manipulation and exploitation that is required in the creation and dissemination of 'self-generated' CSAM does not fit neatly within these established frameworks. The high prevalence in regions which have historically not been the focus of CSAM availability also presents a unique perspective into the way in which CSAM appearance may differ by regions and why it may be missed in the overall data.

'Self-generated' CSAM can often be both in the possession of the victim and the offender due to the means of its creation. This has resulted in differing approaches for its reporting and adaptations by hotlines to facilitate increased access to support for victims. One way in which this has presented an opportunity to help reduce the harm to the victim is through self-reporting mechanisms for image cataloguing and removal. Services available in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and India have aimed to provide a lower barrier support for those victims wishing to prioritise image removal over all other responses. These services, which exist in the regions Western Europe, North America and South Asia, are notably not the two highest regions according to INHOPE data for 'self-generated' CSAM. In an effort to increase access to this type of remedy, similar services in East Asia, the Pacific, East Africa and Southern Africa regions could help to address the high proportions of 'self-generated' CSAM hosted in these regions.

In regard to 'virtual' tags, although the changes in proportions seem less drastic between the two years, 2023 and 2024, they are still worth noting. 'Virtual' refers to the imagery which includes non-photographic elements including partially or fully AI, computer generated, digitally manipulated or otherwise altered. An example of this is the change from 2% - 5% in North America (Table 8), this 3% proportion change accounts for a volume change of nearly 10,000 images/videos categorised as 'virtual'. Conversely all other regions, except Middle East and North Africa, have shown a decrease in proportion of material categorised as 'virtual' between 2023 and 2024 (Table 8).

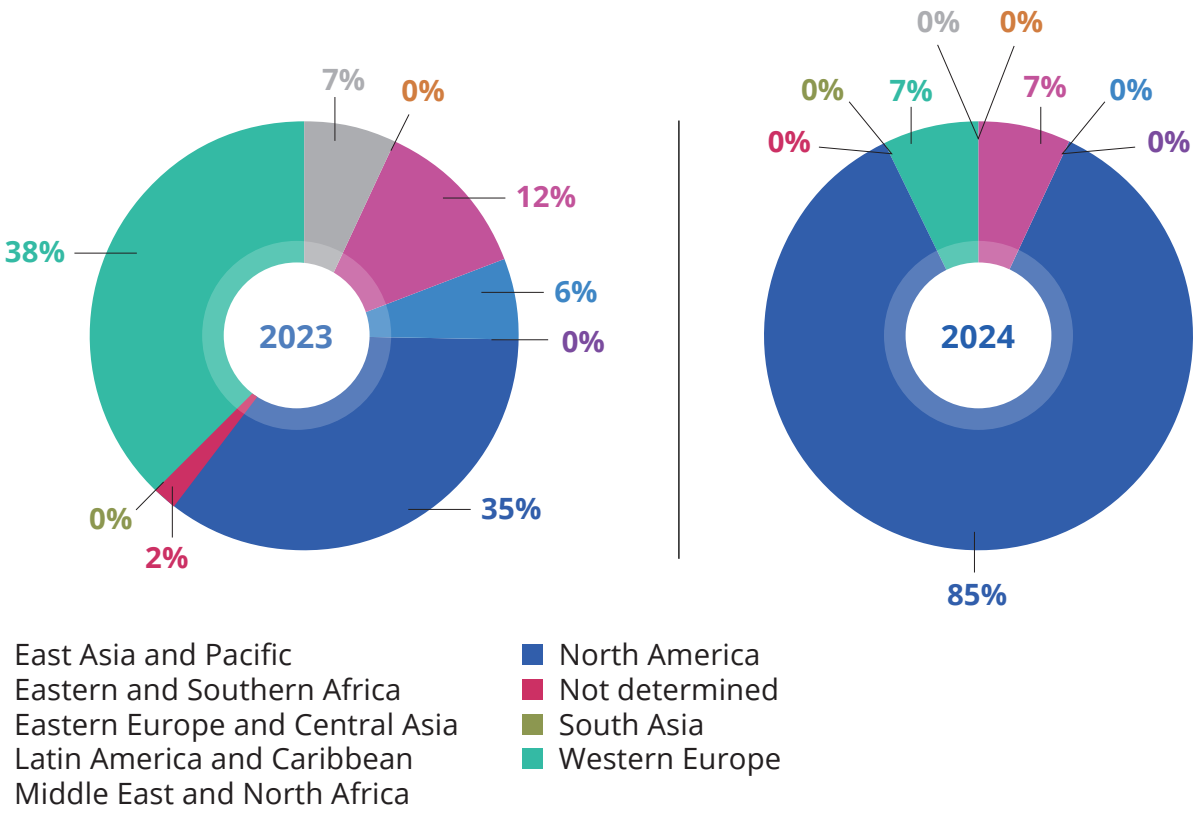
TABLE 8 2023–2024 proportion of 'virtual' tags

UNICEF region	Virtual tag 2023	Virtual tag 2024
East Asia and Pacific	1%	0%
Eastern and Southern Africa	0%	0%
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	1%	1%
Latin America and Caribbean	3%	0%
Middle East and North Africa	0%	2%
North America	2%	5%
Not determined	4%	0%
South Asia	0%	0%
Western Europe	1%	0%
Total	**1%**	**2%**

Data sources: INHOPE 'ICCAM' 2023–2024 (privately shared data).

When reviewing the 'virtual' tag subset over 2 years, it became apparent that there was a substantial shift between what region had the highest proportion of 'virtual' categorisation. In 2023, it was Western Europe with 38% of the categorisations, with North America closely following with 35%. By contrast, in 2024 North America's proportion more than doubled the previous year at 85% (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8 2023 and 2024 proportions of 'virtual' tags by UNICEF regions



Data sources: INHOPE 'ICCAM' 2023–2024 (Privately shared data).

When exploring the figures in North America we see different organisation's data exhibiting the same trend. In NCMEC's full Annual Report (2024), an astronomical rise of 1,325% in the amount of AI-generated CSAM from 2023-2024 was reported. When converting the proportion of 'virtual' categorisations in the region to a percentage rise between 2023-2024, it equates to a rise of 150%. It is important to note that the data coming from INHOPE's ICCAM is from their Hotlines network reporting hosting of CSAM in North America, not reports coming from North America itself. NCMEC is the only organisation that those geographically in North America are legally required to report to and although it is a member of INHOPE's network, they do not input any of their data into ICCAM. Thus, these data are not duplicated and despite the difference in volume, it is showing a similar trend in the increase of 'virtual' tag categorisation. This is an aspect that Childlight will continue to explore in its 2026 edition of the Into the Light Index.

The dynamics and functions of child abuse guidance materials ('paedophile manuals')

Understanding the nature, purpose, and circulation of materials that provide guidance or attempt to provide justification for the sexual abuse of children is essential for assessing risk, informing policy and strengthening global child protection responses. These materials, commonly referred to as 'paedophile manuals', though more accurately described as child abuse guidance materials, are poorly defined in law and under-examined in research, despite their recognised role in offender behaviour and their inclusion in legislation in several jurisdictions. To address this gap, Childlight undertook a mixed-methods study combining qualitative insights from experts with quantitative analysis of detected sharing patterns on peer-to-peer networks.

It is imperative to investigate paedophile manuals as components of an evidence base, as they indicate both the intent to harm children and a belief in the permissibility of their sexual exploitation and abuse. The UK government formally acknowledged the threat posed by such material in 2014 (Ministry of Justice, 2025) introducing a specific offence under Section 69 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 that criminalises their possession. However, a decade later, the law still lacks a consistent, research-informed definition of what constitutes a "paedophile manual". As a result, researchers, practitioners and policymakers lack a shared conceptual framework to identify, analyse or respond to these texts in a systematic and effective way.

To create a conceptual framework of what 'paedophile manuals' are, Childlight held a Delphi-inspired roundtable attended by thirteen key stakeholders including both current and former law enforcement, academics and experts from CSAM hotlines and the technology sector who have experience in the discovery and analysis of 'paedophile manuals'. The Delphi method is often used to collect, refine and synthesise expert opinion in order to reach agreement on complex or little-known issues (Hasson et al., 2000). This roundtable was Delphi-inspired as the starting point was a broad discussion around the topic of 'paedophile manuals', and participants were not anonymous to one another, as the goal was for participants to build upon the discussion rather than speak in isolation, as this may have created decontextualised knowledge.

The Delphi-inspired nature of the roundtable complemented the thematic analysis, as it allowed individuals' expertise from multiple disciplines to enhance and deepen the concepts that emerged. Moreover, through examples provided by the participants, the roundtable helps to update the limited literature on 'paedophile manuals', resulting in rigorous, robust and consensus-derived themes grounded in experts' experiences, which complement the adjacent knowledge regarding offender communications.

Former law enforcement spoke from experience that if a person were in possession of a manual, they were more likely to be a contact offender, or to be in the process of educating themselves on contacting offending. The link between having a manual and contact offending, along with the dearth of literature on manuals, means that it is imperative to bring together knowledge on this phenomenon as an indicator of risk. Participants described how child abuse guidance material is encountered and interpreted within investigative contexts, particularly in relation to broader patterns of offending.

"...Law enforcement actually have quite a lot of cases where someone has had a [child abuse guidance material]. But because law enforcement aren't necessarily educated on the potential value of that kind of knowledge, it's never been reported back... actually there are quite a lot of offenders who had [these materials], but because CSAM offending has become largely a numbers game. That's just fallen within the 10,000 files that that person had, rather than somebody saying, actually, we need to highlight that so that we can understand better whether possession of these types of things is a heightened risk of child sexual abuse or contact abuse."

Former law enforcement 3

"...In my career with law enforcement, I've never seen a suspect who only had the possession of a handbook. You would always find other CSAM as well on his computer."

CSAM hotline analyst

"...I think anybody who's downloading and keeping this kind of content is doing it for a particular reason. And that is either that if they ever get into the position where they can abuse a child, then they are going to, or they want to educate themselves so that they can get themselves into a position to do it...I don't think people are keeping it out of morbid curiosity. They might read it out of morbid curiosity, but they're not keeping it for that reason."

Former law enforcement 1

From the roundtable discussion, the overarching themes that arose were the instructional purpose of manuals, the justification and normalisation of paedophilic/offending behaviours and the role of manuals as a source of community among like-minded individuals. The discussion also extended beyond contents to the social role that 'paedophile manuals' perform as cultural artefacts — specifically as ideo-political touchstones through which offender rationalise, validate and excuse their behaviour.

Below, each theme is discussed.

Theme 1: Instructional

One element of manuals is to provide instruction on accessing and harming children. Historically, manuals began as handbook-esque documents with instructional content but have since evolved to encompass diverse formats, such as TikToks. From the discussion, the term 'paedophile manual' was deemed inaccurate, as it does not currently capture the essence of what these items are. None of the words 'paedophile' or 'manual' used for these items seems appropriate, as often the items are neither used by those with a diagnosable pathological sexual interest in children, nor are they in a form that would be understood as a manual. As a CSAM hotline analyst noted "[it] is defined as not really [a] manual, but more like documents of guidance for the sexual abuse of children. So it's a little bit broader." Former law enforcement 1 mentioned that websites which appear to be set up as self-help forums may descend into "information exchange about how they can best access children and how they can best avoid detection." Thus, a more appropriate term could be "information exchange or guidance" (Former law enforcement 1) rather than 'paedophile manual'.

There was agreement in the roundtable that a defining element of manuals was instruction as Former law enforcement 1 states, "guidance on how they got into the position where they could offend and the kind of history and background to their offending, which also includes information often about how they avoid detection and how they groom the children...some element of guidance in there, some element of instruction in there." However, where definitions are unclear, is what constitutes instructional, i.e., a medical textbook, could possibly come under the definition of instructional, or information on how to detect grooming. Thus, instruction alone is not enough to constitute a manual, but intention is required.

> "Any digital file such as a document, video or other media that contains advice, guidance or instructions on how to sexually abuse children includes documents, multimedia files, structured digital content, does not include casual or incidental communications, such as text messages and chat logs or general commentary without instructive intent [emphasis added]."
>
> **Former law enforcement 2**

This definition excludes “casual or incidental communications, such as text messages and chat logs or general commentary without instructive intent” (Former law enforcement 2). The definitions arose from an operational context but developed to also be applicable in an academic framework in order to guard against siloed knowledge. Thus, a foundation element of manuals is intentional instruction. However, intent does not have a clear-cut understanding. To address this, including a “behaviour-based approach” which “allows you to take account of a user as a whole and their whole use of the platform rather than a single piece of content” (Technology sector analyst), where content and intent are considered, may cultivate an agreed-upon understanding of intention.

Theme 2: Justification

Manuals are not merely instructional but also serve a legitimising function to validate a moral re-evaluation of child abuse, which Academic 2 names the “ideological, political, cultural, historical element” of manuals. Manuals create “a permission structure” about “the ethos of...and the politics of sexually abusing children” (Academic 2).

Manuals contain a political element, they minimise and/or neutralise harm; they “validate paraphilic desires, mitigate feelings of guilt and trepidation and reinforce the belief that sexual contact with minors is harmless or even beneficial.” This was reflected in the discussion, “these handbooks and these manuals...are an artefact of a pro-paedophile movement.”

Manuals go beyond mere instructional content about “how to commit the sexual offences that you want to commit” into “ideology and acculturation in the child sexual abuse space” (Academic 2).

Manuals are cultural tools which contain instructional intent, offering guidance on how to access and harm children with impunity. At the same time, they operate as cultural artefacts that work to neutralise, justify and validate CSEA, often by reframing abusive practices as acceptable or even beneficial. Moreover, these texts frequently deploy rhetorical strategies that minimise the perpetrator's responsibility by externalising blame onto children, societal norms or imagined ‘mutuality’, therefore reinforcing cognitive distortions that support offending. Importantly, these understandings of CSEA are not produced in isolation. They are socially situated and mediated, emerging through interaction with peer communities that co-construct, circulate and legitimise these narratives. Manuals therefore function not only as individual tools for offending but also as collective artefacts embedded within wider ecosystems of shared meaning, offender socialisation and community-based reinforcement.

Theme 3: Normative communities

As well as moral justification, manuals politically and ethically reframe abuse as (unfairly) socially stigmatised and misjudged (De Young, 1988; Durkin & Bryant 1999) and outside normative understanding, thereby creating a supportive peer community which is receptive to the shared moral and cognitive distortions of CSEA. Manuals are influenced by social interactions, cultural norms and shared meanings, rather than existing independently at the individual level. The literature states that offenders seek to interact with other likeminded individuals, where their sexual interest in children is supported (Leclerc et al, 2021) – a type of "community building" (Blokland et al, 2024, p. 2). This was evident in the roundtable discussion, "this text...fulfils a function within the group itself. It kind of bonds the group, it justifies, it unifies" (Academic 1). Due to the judgemental attitude towards paedophilia and CSEA in society, those who commit acts of CSEA are severely isolated and marginalised in society (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010, pp. 83-84). However, "being a member of an online community thereby gives users the impression of being part of an in-group, which works to reinforce one's perception that they are 'in it together', and 'them against us'" (Kloess & van der Bruggen, 2023, p. 1233).

Rather than functioning as isolated texts, manuals operate within a shared cultural milieu in which meaning is actively co-constructed through collaborative offender communities. As Academic 2 observes, "abuse-supportive beliefs" play a central role "in licensing child sexual abuse," and manuals both reflect and reinforce these belief systems. Furthermore, these texts are shaped by broader cultural belief systems, informed by community norms and embedded within shared values and political or ideological worldviews. They do not emerge in a vacuum, rather, they reflect and reproduce wider social narratives that legitimise or normalise harmful practices. Their content, meaning and purpose are continually filtered through, and reinforced by, the social contexts in which they circulate, making them both products and producers of the cultural environments and online communities, that sustain them (O'Halloran & Quayle, 2010).

Manuals are a manifestation of socio-ideological and political beliefs which sanction the abuse of children. They function as both an embodiment and an indicator of deeper cultural perspectives that normalise exploitation, making it essential to understand their role in sustaining an abusive-permissive environment, and, ultimately, in protecting children. Online communities play a central role in producing, curating and legitimising them. Within these spaces, manuals are shared, interpreted and refined through collective interaction, allowing offenders to co-construct meaning, reinforce harmful ideologies and cultivate a sense of communal validation.

Theory into practice

Manuals are instructional, educational, ideological, political, community and communal phenomena. With instructions, they guide offenders in successfully abusing children and young people whilst minimising visible harm and detection, provide access to a supportive outsider collective, and justify, normalise and permit a culture and ethos of harm that forecloses alternative narratives which might undermine those beliefs.

Further support for this conceptual understanding of 'paedophile manuals' is found in their inclusion in global legislation, specifically in attempts to criminalise their possession. The United Kingdom and Australia are known to have laws which either explicitly mention paedophile manuals or have the capacity for their inclusion. As these documents are shared in similar fora to CSAM and exist primarily as digital entities their monitoring closely resembles CSAM. It is for these reasons that legislation in the European Commission has proposed to include manuals under increased scope to remove all files associated with or stemming from child sexual exploitation and abuse.

As well as the content and role that manuals play, the sharing of them requires attention; this is considered below.

The sharing of 'paedophile manuals' on peer-to-peer networks

The measurement of possession of these types of files has not been shared publicly, largely due to the disagreement between what is considered to be a 'paedophile manual' and its differences in permissibility globally. Child Rescue Coalition, who monitor peer-to-peer networks for the exchange of CSAM, have also tracked the possession of these guidance files. In order to verify the harmful nature of the files, they are compared with those known to the Child Abuse Image Database (CAID) manged by the Home Office of the United Kingdom and the National Crime Agency.

As a result, only the files which are confirmed and predominantly in English have been included thus limiting the sample and comprehensive nature of distribution. This amounted to 869 files that could be considered to be 'paedophile manuals' in 2023 and 679 in 2024. The verified nature within law enforcement systems helps provide a greater degree of authenticity to their existence and nature. As these types of files are used by law enforcement in investigations, the data have been aggregated to the regional level according to UNICEF regional office classifications. Devices which were found to be in possession of these files were located in 61 countries between 2023-2024. The following Table 9 shows the country counts for the dataset.

TABLE 9 UNICEF regional possession of guidance documents by included countries

UNICEF region	Count of countries n=61
East Asia and Pacific	10
Eastern and Southern Africa	1
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	9
Latin America and Caribbean	11
Middle East and North Africa	9
North America	2
Western Europe	19

From this table it can be determined that these guidance documents are more often found across Western European countries than in any of the other regions when looking at peer-to-peer sharing. This is consistent with the proportional measures of this file possession, which found Western Europe to be the place with the highest volume of these known documents shared on peer-to-peer networks. These data are likely influenced by the nature of peer-to-peer use which appears in the data to be concentrated in Western European countries, as there were similarly high proportions and volumes of known CSAM in this region as well. Interestingly, the data do not follow a similar decreasing trajectory, with the regions which have the most countries, having a similarly high proportion of the actual files. Instead, the next region in dissenting proportional possession was Eastern Europe and Central Asia, followed by East Asia and Pacific. It should be noted each of these region's data were heavily influenced by a possession of these files in a single country in each region.

TABLE 10 UNICEF regional distribution of possession guidance documents

UNICEF region	Distribution of devices with guidance documents in 2023 n=869	Distribution of devices with guidance documents in 2024 n=679
East Asia and Pacific	14.4%	20.0%
Eastern and Southern Africa	0.1%	0.0%
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	18.6%	23.0%
Latin America and Caribbean	4.9%	7.8%
Middle East and North Africa	2.6%	4.1%
North America	5.6%	8.0%
Western Europe	53.6%	37.1%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Data source: Child Rescue Coalition (Privately shared data).

What these data show is similar to the data concerning commercial child sexual abuse material, that these are not an isolated phenomenon according to global regions. When the possession of these files was reorganised according to World Bank classifications for the countries, we see that they are found in High Income countries more than 75% of the time. If we see the possession of these documents as an intent, interest or risk of child sexual abuse as suggested by the roundtable, the data indicate that individuals in High Income countries are disproportionately represented among those detected devices in possession of 'paedophile manuals'. This pattern reflects where these materials are most frequently detected, circulated or intercepted within the dataset. While this does not suggest that these countries 'drive' the underlying ideology, it does indicate that such materials are present and being shared within these contexts, and that detection systems in these regions may be more capable of identifying them. The countries with the greatest safeguarding resources and more developed legislative frameworks appear most frequently in the dataset because possession of these files is more likely to be detected and recorded there. This should not be interpreted as motivation or acceptance, but rather may reflect the detection capacity, reporting infrastructure and digital exposure.

It is not a surprise that it is these regions which have started to include these types of files in their own legislative frameworks as items to criminalise or censor. In the United Kingdom, Netherlands and Australia 'paedophile manuals' have been illegal for a number of years, while the European Commission has put forward a separate proposal for the regulation of these documents across member countries. The limited number of jurisdictions that currently criminalise possession can be attributed to a combination of legislative gaps, persistent definitional ambiguity surrounding what constitutes a 'paedophile manual' and practical enforcement challenges that have slowed the development of targeted legal provisions. Should the European Commission proposal be adopted it would mean that 21 of the 61 countries showing individuals in possession of these files would have legislation criminalising that possession. At present without the EU legislation that number is only three.

TABLE 11 World Bank distribution of possession guidance documents

World Bank classification	Proportion of IPs with PMs in 2023 n=869	Proportion of IPs with PMs in 2024 n=679
High income	81.6%	75.0%
Lower-middle income	0.6%	0.0%
Not classified	0.2%	1.6%
Upper-middle income	17.6%	23.4%
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Data source: Child Rescue Coalition (Privately shared data).

These 'guidance files' appear to circulate in networks which are tied to sexual offending which makes their global distribution, as evidenced in the data, a relevant field of study. While research in this area is still developing, the data link between possession and offences is still limited to accounts from law enforcement and TF-CSEA frontline practitioners. The relationship between possession of guidance files also seems to be unilateral in regard to concurrent CSAM possession, with not all CSAM offenders also possessing these files, but most file possessors also possessing CSAM. It should be noted that these files are not a necessity for the sexual abuse of a child, however, based on the experiences of those participating in the qualitative research, there is a suggestion that the continued possession of these files suggests a future inclination to sexually abuse children.

Limitations

While there have been efforts to ensure that all data are presented alongside the required context and limitations, it is important to acknowledge some of the difficulties in the analysis of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse at a global and regional level. The report looks to provide an assessment based on the available data concerning scale and prevalence. This has its limitations when looking at global and regional populations which have very different systems which impact the lives of children and adults. Many of the UNICEF global regions have quite clear country differences in their internet access and use, while others have a more developed system of legality and governance. Below is a list by section of some critical limitations or considerations to keep in mind when reviewing the data analysis. Further information about the data can be found in the Technical Note.

Victimisation survey data: Systematic review and meta analysis

This study had several limitations. The data used in this systematic review were predominantly drawn from various surveys, which reported estimates at the regional, national or subnational level. Although the traditional survey methods appear to be the most common methods of prevalence estimation in technology-facilitated children sexual victimisation, they also have limitations when attempting to measure the prevalence of 'hidden' victims. TF-CSEA is often reported retrospectively, months or years after it occurred, therefore most survey research relies on recollection and is prone to recall bias. This and respondents' non-disclosure may lead to underestimating the prevalence rates. Moreover, the diversity of outcomes and outcome measures used within TF-CSEA research potentially affected the accuracy and comparability of regional estimates. Fragmentation of the data and lack of agreement on classifications of TF-CSEA outcomes limits our ability to draw strong and generalised conclusions regarding the scale of the problem.

In terms of the analytical approach, the random-effects meta-analysis used in this review has some limitations, including sensitivity to small sample sizes, susceptibility to publication bias and challenges with estimating variability. Such weaknesses can result in imprecise effect size estimates and wide variation across individual study estimates (Shuster, 2010). Our analyses revealed a high variability in estimates reported, even when estimates were disaggregated by sex, subtype of TF-CSEA and world region. This generally high variability in meta-analysed estimates potentially limits the reliability and accuracy of the pooled estimates.

Finally, we identified few sources of data for South Asia and North Africa and the Middle East, constituting another barrier to draw any strong conclusions about the prevalence of TF-CSEA in these regions. There is also still a limited number of studies reporting sexual extortion and online sexual exploitation at the national level. However, these forms of abuse are becoming more apparent in the most recent studies.

UNICEF regional CSAM analysis

The data, where available, were kept separate and presented as proportions of the total CSAM analysed by each of the data sources. As discussed in Table 5, this data is influenced by what it measures and how it is sourced. The data do not equate to criminality as there are many limitations to the way in which each country is attributed to the CSAM reported. The data are also limited in its ability to measure the level of offending or victimisation as CSAM and its viewing can represent a number of contextual factors simultaneously. As such, higher and lower figures can represent both increased levels of detection as well as occurrence, which suggests the need for understanding of other contextual factors in each region or country.

Data concerning the nature of CSAM portrayed is based on the analysis by trained hotline staff members. INHOPE acting as a convenor of over 55 hotlines globally have developed the Universal Classification Scheme and the I C ("see") Child Abuse Material database to develop a standardised approach to analysis. While this has provided an international understanding of material the process must rely on human interpretation. This suggests that there may be an imperfect application of tags both in its assignment of certain elements or its lack of inclusion. The data are a smaller sample of the overall volume of CSAM identified which also means that the included images represent those which may have more global or multi-country implication.

Commerciality of child sexual abuse

As with the regional data on tags for 'self-generated' and 'virtual', this is based on analyst assessment. While there have been measures put in place to ensure this is standardised across global hotlines there is still the influence of analyst impression which impacts the data. The data are global in coverage though are limited to just one of the major CSAM organisations, which does not allow for a comparison data set. The groupings of electronic service providers were made based on their primary function though some platforms included may have multiple uses.

The dynamics and functions of child abuse guidance documents

The data on child abuse documents are split into two input sources. The first is a roundtable group that brought together experts from the field to contribute to the understanding of these files. The second data source was based on the measurement of known and law enforcement tracked guidance documents shared on peer-to-peer networks.

The roundtable was made up of experts primarily from high income countries which understood how these documents are shared and presented in this context. This group represented multiple sectors, however, there was a larger representation of law enforcement compared to hotline and technology sector experts. This is notable as the discussion around the format of these documents suggested that they may be evolving. The roundtable group was also guided in their discussion which may have prompted some of the input. This has been covered through the making available of the guidance questions used by the facilitator available in the Technical Note.

The data on peer-to-per network possession of these documents were similarly limited in their representation of Western European and North America contexts which are all High-Income countries. Furthermore, as the data were verified using United Kingdom Law enforcement systems the data were further skewed towards a Western European context. The data were only able to track those guidance documents that had been verified and therefore is likely an underrepresentation within the peer-to-peer network environment. The data are also limited to those documents shared on these networks, which does not include the clear or dark web environments where much of the daily connectivity occurs. The data are presented as proportions of distribution as the data are limited to the one source and is still in the nascent stage.

One additional limitation is that this report does not cover evaluation data pertaining to intervention or response efforts around TF-CSEA, although it does include monitoring of TF-CSEA and documentation of relevant metadata. Emerging evidence suggests that TF-CSEA is preventable. A growing body of research highlights several interrelated domains that can stop violence before it starts and/or disrupt harm. First, prevention-oriented educational interventions, particularly those embedded in school and community settings, have demonstrated effectiveness in increasing children's and caregivers' awareness, digital literacy and protective behaviours in online environments (WHO, 2022). Second, system-level measures across technological, regulatory and commercial domains, including improved platform accountability and safety design, detection technologies, reporting mechanisms and strengthened law enforcement and judicial responses, play a critical role in detecting, deterring, and prosecuting abuse (IPIE, 2026). Third, addressing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), particularly among boys and young men, may help reduce risk of later harmful sexual behaviours, underscoring the importance of early, trauma-informed child protection and prevention strategies (Whitten et al., 2026).

Taken together, these findings support a multi-layered public health approach, combining primary prevention, system accountability and early intervention, as the start of a pathway to reducing the risk of TF-CSEA. Further research and rigorous evaluation of regulatory and legislative frameworks, as well as other primary prevention interventions (social and gender norms, parenting/caregiver support programmes, etc.), are needed to strengthen the evidence base in this area.

Conclusion

Global and regional perspectives on child sexual abuse and exploitation data are important to capture, especially when attempting to contextualise the findings at a country level. Data from the meta-analysis looking at subtypes of TF-CSEA showed that online solicitation was the most frequently measured and reported harm. The data also suggested there may be sex-based differences in the experiences of different types of TF-CSEA. Exposure to unwanted sexual content was found to be experienced more frequently by males, whereas the other subtypes showed higher experiences among females. This suggests that tailoring responses and awareness raising by sex or gender could have a meaningful impact.

The data point to regional discrepancies in data availability and a need for more unified approach to measuring the prevalence of TF-CSEA incidence as well as its impact. Victimisation data from the Middle East and North Africa were limited. As this area was highlighted in other TF-CSEA data, it suggests a need for further exploration. Data from Western Europe and East Asia and Pacific had the highest number of sources and regional coverage.

This report found that Western Europe and South Asia continued to show higher regional proportions of CSAM availability, further supporting the value in prioritising these regions initially at a country level. The data also showed a move towards more equal proportionality in NCMEC reporting globally. The result of which is a calculated CSAM rate that more equally represents the impact of reporting and hosting of child sexual exploitation and abuse globally. This rate along with the proportional data show the need for a global public health response which tackles the many drivers and contributors to the continued health emergency of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Through an examination of never-before-seen data from INHOPE's central database and Child Rescue Coalition's data set, we have been able to look at the global distribution of unique variables within technology-facilitated child sexual abuse. These variables help to point to more regionally tailored responses and supports which could help children. The data also show the value in hotlines and child sexual abuse material analysis and takedown organisations globally in their pursuit of identifying and removing this harmful content.

Finally, the report highlights new data on child abuse guidance materials which have been relatively unexplored. In addition to a study of the distribution of these materials globally, the study looks at their meaning and form. Improving the understanding of these files will be critical to addressing the harm that they present to children. It will also provide the basis on which future research can expand upon the value these files represent to investigations and systemic response.

This all points to a need for targeted and multi-sectoral changes to current practices to safeguard children from technological harms. Based upon the evidence, several recommendations have emerged with some further enforcing the previous findings of the Into the Light Index. These recommendations focus on how platforms, public sector and governments must each work towards a shared solution. The report highlights the importance of continued investment into safeguarding, whether through new or ongoing services, such as online reporting mechanisms and hotlines respectively.

Recommendations

Childlight is, at its core, a data institute. However, our purpose extends beyond measurement alone. We are committed to using data as a tool for the safeguarding of children, ensuring that emerging evidence is not only documented but meaningfully translated into action. In the context of technology-facilitated child sexual abuse (TF-CSEA), this requires engaging with a rapidly evolving and, at times, complex evidence base, and making sense of patterns that are often fragmented across sources, sectors and geographies.

As the field matures, the evidence base is becoming both more robust and more nuanced. It reflects a range of experiences, including exposure to unwanted sexual content, online solicitation, CSAM and image-based abuse, online sexual exploitation and online sexual extortion. While measurement challenges remain, the growing body of data provides critical insights into the prevalence, scale and the conditions under which harm occurs. Importantly, it also highlights opportunities for prevention, early intervention and detection and more effective responses.

This section draws on that emerging evidence to identify a set of recommendations for policy and practice. These recommendations are grounded in the best available data, while recognising the need for continued refinement as knowledge evolves. They aim to support decision-makers, practitioners and industry actors in strengthening safeguarding systems, improving responses to harm and ultimately reducing the prevalence and impact of TF-CSEA.

In doing so, we emphasise that data are not an endpoint. They are a foundation for action. **Because children can't wait.**

Recommendations stemming from the evidence in this report include:

1 Establish and enforce comprehensive national and regional legislative and regulatory frameworks that enable a population-level approach to preventing TF-CSEA, with clear accountability and consequences for non-compliance

- **We ask** that governments develop, implement and enforce national and regional legislative and regulatory frameworks that establish clear duties of care across relevant actors (including platforms and service providers), enable cross-sectoral coordinated responses and include proportionate but enforceable mechanisms for accountability and compliance. This draws on decades of public health experience in utilising regulation as a mechanism to enable population-level prevention, especially where industry is involved in health and well-being risks.
- **Childlight will** focus on two main areas: 1) supporting evidence-based legislative and regulatory development at global, regional and national levels, drawing on the best available data on the prevalence and nature of CSEA including TF-CSEA, 2) committing to evaluating the implementation and outcomes of legislative and regulatory approaches, including their effectiveness in preventing harm, improving responses and strengthening child protection systems.

2 Support the legal basis for CSAM detection, removal of content and safeguarding of children

- **We ask** that governments introduce and maintain a clear legal basis that permits and requires electronic service providers to detect CSAM on their platforms using appropriate technologies. This includes enabling and providing the mandate for reporting pathways to law enforcement and relevant authorities, ensuring that detection leads to investigation, victim identification and perpetrator accountability. Governments should ensure that legislative frameworks explicitly address impunity, recognising that the absence of a legal basis for detection and reporting limits enforcement and accountability which allows abuse to persist.
- **Childlight will** continue to analyse and report on trends in CSAM data, tracking and reflecting changes in the CSAM landscape through our Into the Light Index on Global CSEA. Through our Childlight Technical Advisory Programme (C-TAP), we will support system strengthening efforts to address impunity as a key driver of CSEA.

3 Improve efforts for enhancing TF-CSEA data completeness and quality

- **We ask** that every country fund and implement a representative victimisation survey, to fill existing data gaps. Specifically, we ask for greater data collection in Middle East and North Africa, where there is very little CSEA victimisation data. This should include a common approach to typologies, definitions, questionnaires, methods and implementation to capture both in-person and technology-facilitated CSEA. Moreover, participatory projects involving both youth and young adults are needed to map their understanding of what constitutes technology-facilitated harm beyond our established definitions or legal frameworks. Children's digital engagement and its consequences are not part of the standardised assessments of TF-CSEA, which can limit our ability to capture children's experiences and collect data effectively.

- **Childlight will** support work to improve data standards, TF-CSEA conceptualisation and survey instrument refinement and design, enhancing efforts already underway in the field and building on evidence from our Into the Light Index on Global CSEA.

4 Address legislative loopholes around AI-generated or virtual CSAM

- **We ask** that governments and policy makers review their legislation to ensure it is appropriate to address the rising number of AI-generated or virtual CSAM reports so perpetrators cannot exploit loopholes and can be brought to justice.

- **Childlight will** make methods and how to guides for conducting legislative review on AI related harms to children publicly available and continue supporting evidence-based reviews of this nature at country and regional levels.

5 Promote investment in national CSAM hotlines

- **We ask** that countries and governments invest further into hotline analysis and capacity. We have seen that when hotlines are encouraged to conduct proactive detection and are supported, they can safeguard more children, which includes the discovery and removal of their sexual abuse content. We have also seen when these organisations and other non-governmental organisations committed to safeguarding children are financially supported, they can focus all attention on continuous improvement and support to children and victims.

- **Childlight will** continue to analyse CSAM hotline data and make results available via our Into the Light Index on Global CSEA.

6 Encourage more community and survivor-led online reporting tools

- **We ask** that more online reporting portals for expedited image removal are developed globally to support children and youth in every region. Additionally, we encourage more platforms to work with services like Take it Down and Report Remove to support streamlined image based sexual abuse removal. The data show that services are increasingly being used over time, however are geographically limited to North America and Western Europe.

- **Childlight will** continue to include data on report and remove type services within our Into the Light Index on Global CSEA.

7 Address child abuse guidance materials within legislation and continue research into this area

- **We ask** that the conceptual understanding presented by Childlight on 'paedophile manuals' is accepted. This means that frontline practitioners consider these files as a part of risk assessment of potential perpetrators and that policymakers ensure legislation covers the impermissibility of the creation, possession and dissemination of these files.

- **Childlight will** continue to analyse existing qualitative and quantitative data and publish in this area. There will be a specific focus to include research stemming from practice-based knowledge to further explore all areas of CSEA especially those where data are limited.

Appendices and references

Appendix 1: Glossary

Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) Images

Image collections, videos and stills that capture the sexual exploitation and abuse of children. This material represents the evidence of past sexual abuse, as well as ongoing harm to the children and survivors depicted in the material.

'Commercial CSAM'

A value applied to CSAM which indicates that it is associated with commercial exploitation or trade, meaning the material in question is being distributed or directly sold for a profit.

End-to-end encryption (E2EE)

End-to-end encryption is a technology that makes messages, images, calls, and other communications accessible only to the sender and the intended recipient. From a CSEA perspective, this means that the content is completely hidden, even from the platform hosting the service, making it much harder for authorities, platforms, or safeguarding teams to detect, prevent, or investigate TF-CSEA.

Exposure to unwanted sexual content

A type of technology-facilitated child sexual victimisation that includes the unwanted exposure of a child to pornographic material (e.g., forcing a child to watch videos or pictures containing nudity or sending a child a link to a pornographic website). Unwanted exposure to sexual content occurs often while surfing or scrolling through social media. This type of exposure may or may not be a precursor to a request for reciprocity. Including exposure to unwanted sexual content (including pornography) is important because, as suggested by the growing body of literature, it plays a significant, but often overlooked, role in both the risk factors and developmental consequences of abuse. Including exposure to sexually explicit content in TF-CSEA discussions ensures a more holistic understanding of how technology can harm children, not just through direct abuse, but through the gradual erosion of boundaries, consent, and safety. It also helps shape better prevention strategies, education programmes, and support systems for children and families.

Helpline

A reporting and support service which that is available to children, parents, caregivers and the public to report concerns pertaining to children needing direct assistance. Helplines often operate in partnerships with key referral services such as hospitals, law enforcement agencies, judicial services, shelters and other child-related services.

Hotline

A reporting service that allows the public to anonymously share material they believe to be illegal or harmful to children online. These services often send removal notices to electronic service providers and/or share reported concerns with law enforcement agencies.

Internet Protocol (IP) address

A unique identifying number assigned to all devices that connect to the internet, including phones, laptops, tablets, modems and servers.

Lifetime prevalence

Experiences that occurred at any point during childhood (i.e., before the age of 18).

Meta-analysis

A statistical technique used to combine the results of several different studies on the same topic. By pooling data from multiple studies, a meta-analysis can give a more accurate estimate of overall effects or patterns than any single study alone.

Offline CSEA

Instances of CSEA that occur through direct, in-person interaction between the perpetrator and the child, without the involvement of technology-facilitated means. This includes acts such as rape, sexual assault and other forms of sexual abuse. While offline CSEA can include non-contact verbal sexual abuse and exhibitionism, the data presented in this report focus specifically on in-person contact abuse involving rape or sexual assault.

Online sexual exploitation

This subtype of TF-CSEA refers to all acts of a sexually exploitative nature carried out against a child that have, at some stage, a connection to the digital environment. It includes any use of technology that results in sexual exploitation of a child and/or images or other material of sexual exploitation to be produced, bought, sold, possessed, distributed, or transmitted. A child is often offered the provision of monetary or non-monetary resources in exchange for those exploitative sexual acts, online or offline. The terms 'ICT-facilitated' and 'cyber-enabled' child sexual exploitation are sometimes used as alternatives to define these practices.

Online solicitation

A range of unwanted or pressured sexual interactions, which may include casual sexual inquiries via mobile phone or the internet, or long-lasting sexual conversations that can lead to the exchange of sexual texts/pictures/videos or exposure of intimate body parts. All types of online solicitation may come from peers as well as adult perpetrators.

'Paedophile manuals'

According to background information provided by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre of the National Crime Agency these are highly detailed and instructive materials, which provide guidance on how to entrap, groom and offend against children including information on the avoidance of detection.

Past year prevalence

Experiences that occurred within the 12 months prior to when the survey was undertaken.

Prevalence estimate

The proportion of individuals in a population who have experienced CSEA. In this report, it represents the statistical outcome of a meta-analysis. Estimates are reported for specific recall periods (e.g., past year or lifetime before the age of 18) and by gender/sex where possible.

'Self-generated' CSAM

A type of media showing individuals who have physical control of their recording device (i.e., selfies, self-recordings from their computers, etc.), which may have been shared directly or captured indirectly by other means. This is often created due to the grooming, deception or extortion of a child by an offender. Due to lack of agreement on preferred terminology, we have used single quotes throughout the document to note the limitations of this terminology. According to the Terminology Guidelines (2025) terms such as 'first-person generated/produced sexual content involving children' or 'self-generated/produced sexual material involving children' may be more accurate. Additionally, a broader categorisation of 'image-based sexual abuse' would also cover this content. As such the term is only used in its relation to the tag applied by analysts to the material in an effort to distinguish it within a larger system and is not meant as a complete evaluation of the particular context in which it was first captured.

Sexual extortion

A form of blackmail that involves threatening to share an individual's intimate image or video online unless they comply with certain demands, such as for money, gift cards, other items of monetary worth, additional pictures or other sexual acts. The term also includes sexual acts on webcam coerced by a perpetrator.

Systematic review

A research method used to find, assess and summarise all relevant studies on a specific topic or question. It follows a clear and structured process to reduce bias and ensure that the findings are reliable.

Technology-facilitated CSEA (TF-CSEA)

Technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA) refers to a range of sexually harmful behaviours that occur online or through the use of other digital technologies, and include online solicitation, non-consensual image taking and sharing, forced exposure to pornography/unwanted sexual content, livestreaming of child sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or sexual extortion.

'Virtual' generation

All CSAM that includes non-photographic elements (e.g., AI-generated, meme, cartoon).

Appendix 2: Regional classifications

This report follows UNICEF's regional classifications. These are as follows:

East Asia and Pacific

Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Cook Islands, Fiji, Indonesia, Japan, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Viet Nam

Europe and Central Asia

Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Western Europe

Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan

Western Europe

Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Holy See, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Netherlands (Kingdom of the), Norway, Poland, Portugal, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom

Latin America and Caribbean

Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, British Virgin Islands, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Montserrat, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, Uruguay, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)

Middle East and North Africa

Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Israel, Jordan; Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen

North America

Canada, United States

South Asia

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

Sub-Saharan Africa

Eastern and Southern Africa, West and Central Africa

Eastern and Southern Africa

Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe

West and Central Africa

Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad; Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo

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