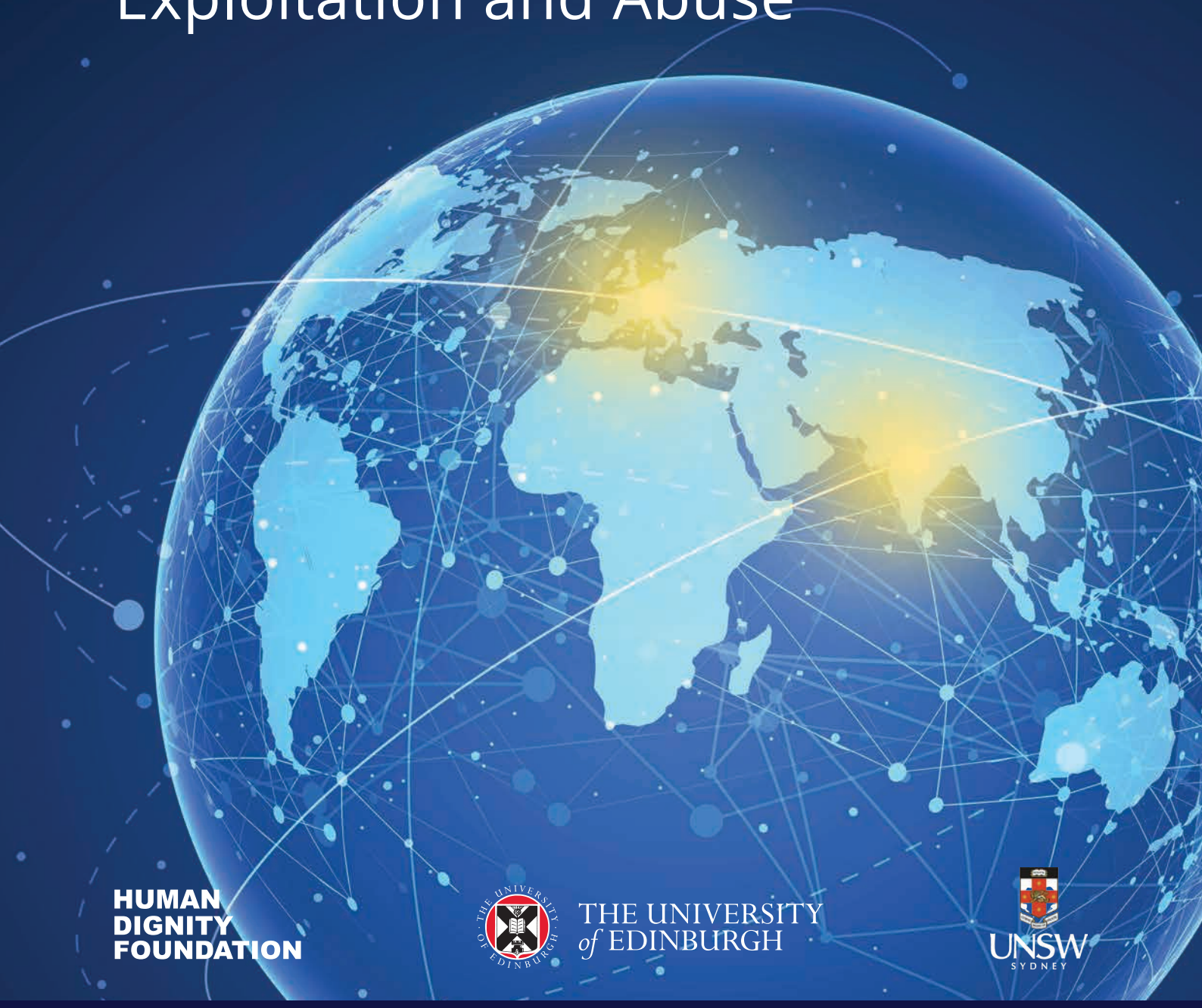
CHILDLIGHT
Global Child Safety Institute

2025
INTO THE LIGHT
Index on Global Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse



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UNSW SYDNEY

Supplemental Thematic Analysis Report

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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, Brave Movement or Stop it Now.

If you see harmful imagery or content online concerning a child, please report it to NCMEC, INHOPE, IWF or C3P.

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2025
INTO THE LIGHT
Index on Global Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Established by

HUMAN DIGNITY FOUNDATION

Hosted by

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Supplemental Thematic Analysis Report

FOREWORD

Last year, Childlight's inaugural Into the Light Index on Global Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA) delivered a shock to the world: for the first time, we produced global figures on CSEA, estimating that a staggering 300 million children are affected every year by technology-facilitated abuse. The number is haunting. It rightly drew global attention.

This year, our second edition of the index, builds on that foundation by providing the first ever country-level estimates of the prevalence, scale, and nature of CSEA. We begin with Western Europe and South Asia, regions where our initial data identified particularly high levels of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) hosting and where urgent, coordinated action could deliver major wins for children.

The latest findings are no less troubling. Approximately 1 in 15 children (6.7%) report experiencing rape or sexual assault before the age of 18, based on 48 studies from 19 countries across Western Europe. This is equivalent to around five million children. In South Asia, where we found representative survey data in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, around 1 in 8 children (12.5%) report such abuse before the age of 18. That would equate to about 54 million children in those three countries alone. Technology-facilitated abuse remains widespread and the deliberate commercially-led choices of major technology companies, such as rolling out end-to-end encryption without safeguards, are making it harder to detect and stop. In the Netherlands alone, the scale of CSAM is so vast that it accounts for more than 60% of all material hosted in Western Europe. This is unacceptable. Yet, it also highlights that decisive action in one country can make a difference across a whole region.

At Childlight, we insist that this global pandemic of CSEA must be understood, and addressed as a public health emergency. Just as the world mobilised against HIV/AIDS, Covid-19 and smallpox, so too must we mobilise against CSEA. With the right interventions, the right regulation, and the right will, millions of children can be protected.

The numbers are huge, but they also bring hope. Data shows us what works and what must be done. Since the 2024 Global Ministerial Summit on Ending Violence Against Children, 30 governments have pledged to act to make every click online safer for children. Intervention models, such as Barnahus and Child Advocacy Centres, are strengthening detection and child-centred responses. Family-based interventions are showing promise in reducing re-abuse in cases of neglect and physical violence.

We also see encouraging signs that regulation works, following leadership by several governments around the world. Emerging threats, like AI-generated CSAM, are being used to create new forms of harm, but AI, with adequate regulation, can also be harnessed to protect millions of children. With proper safeguards, AI can help remove abusive content faster than ever, ending the online re-victimisation of children whose images have circulated for years.

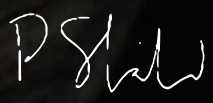
Safety by design, standard in every other area of consumer protection, must become the norm in the digital world. Mobile phones were once sold as reassurance of safety for children; today, they too often provide a direct line to offenders. That is a failure of design and of regulation, not an inevitability of technology.

Encouragingly, from India to Sweden, governments and authorities are developing robust systems to count, categorise, and act on data, becoming 'data beacons' that close prevention gaps and inspire others. Progress is not only possible; it is already underway. Children deserve nothing less. Increasingly, survivors and advocates are calling for restitution, recognising that justice for children subjected to CSEA is not only about prosecution but also about healing and recovery.

Our purpose at Childlight remains clear and unwavering: to safeguard children from sexual exploitation and abuse worldwide. Over the past year, we have grown from laying foundations to driving measurable impact, turning data into action, supporting frontline practitioners and reframing the global narrative. With support from Human Dignity Foundation, our teams, hosted by the University of Edinburgh and the University of New South Wales, continue to collaborate with researchers, policymakers and practitioners around the globe to take on this complex challenge.

This report is testament to their efforts. It underlines an inescapable truth: CSEA exists because it is allowed to exist. With sufficient will, it can be stopped and prevented. The time to act is now. The data is clear, the solutions are within reach and the stakes could not be higher.

Children can't wait.



Paul Stanfield

Chief Executive Officer
Childlight – Global Child Safety Institute

INDEPENDENT AUDIT STATEMENT

I am pleased that Childlight has given me the opportunity to review this year's index. I would make several observations.

The index now incorporates new data sources, including frontline data, alongside representative surveys and CSAM data sources, as in last year's edition. A more granular approach has also been introduced, with country-level data presented for Western Europe and South Asia. The process for selecting surveys and other sources is described in detail in the technical note. The process and code for producing the final estimates have also been published. Data obtained from these sources is available for download through the index dashboard and data archive, which, in principle, allows the analysis to be reproduced or alternative analyses to be undertaken.

The statistical accuracy and uncertainty of the estimates have been assessed through the calculation of confidence intervals, which are presented in the written account with narrative caveats where appropriate. The estimates remain conditional on the quality of the underlying data and on the statistical model used to produce them, with caveats included where data outliers may exist.

To support the new focus on country-level and regional data, an Index Impact and Communications Working Group was established. This group brings together CSEA data experts from civil society, frontline practice and government across nearly all countries represented in Western Europe and South Asia, as well as regional bodies and key actors. They have provided a review of the data, communications materials, and impact opportunities. Together with the Technical Subcommittee, this process has ensured that the index materials, including the thematic analysis report, underlying data, and technical notes, have been reviewed by 40 individuals. Feedback has been systematically documented, addressed, and communicated back to reviewers.

The index continues to operate within an evolving conceptual landscape, particularly around technology-facilitated CSEA. It is encouraging to see Childlight working alongside other key researchers in this space to ensure alignment and transparency in terminology and definitions, in what is a rapidly developing data field where knowledge grows each year.

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

Sir Bernard Silverman

Chair of the Childlight Technical Sub-Committee,
Emeritus Professor at the Universities of Oxford
and Bristol and former Chief Scientific Advisor
to the UK Home Office

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ACRONYMS

AI	artificial intelligence
AI CSAM	artificial intelligence child sexual abuse material
C3P	Canadian Centre for Child Protection
CHI	Child Helpline International
CI	confidence interval
CRC	Child Rescue Coalition
CSAM	child sexual abuse material
CSAM/IBSA	child sexual abuse material/image-based sexual abuse
CSEA	child sexual exploitation and abuse
C-TAP	Childlight Technical Advisory Programme
E2EE	end-to-end encryption
EU	European Union
GBV	gender-based violence
ICAST	ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool
ICAST-C	ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool Children's Version
ICAST-R	ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool Retrospective Version
ICCAM	I 'see' Child Abuse Material
INHOPE	International Association of Internet Hotlines
IP	Internet Protocol
ITL	Into the Light Index
IWF	Internet Watch Foundation
LGBTQI	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
NCMEC	National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
NCRB	National Crime Records Bureau
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OSA	Online Safety Act
STAR	Supplemental Thematic Analysis Report
TF-CSEA	technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States of America

GLOSSARY

This section sets out definitions of key terms used through this report. We draw from agreed terminology in the field following the Second Edition of the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (ECPAT International, 2025) as well on key definitions from the UN International Classification on Violence Against Children (UNICEF, 2023b). We also include definitions and recommendations for data enhancement in the CSEA field drawing on work by the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA, 2021) Inclusive Data Taskforce and from the independent Sullivan Review of data, statistics and research on sex and gender (Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 2025). More details on all these definitions, including underpinning conceptual frameworks, can be found in our Index Technical Note [**see the Technical Note**].

Baseline CSAM

A term created by INTERPOL, the international policing body, to define what is considered internationally illegal child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

Child

A term which means every human below the age of eighteen.

Child helpline tags

With Child Helpline International (CHI) data, we present child helpline tags, or how the child helpline staff document the contact (which can be calls, text or other forms of communication), into categories (e.g., sexual violence) within their data system. A contact does not always translate to a case, as there may be multiple contacts (i.e., calls) from one child or someone contacting the helpline on behalf of a child, which may be tagged into different categories. The tags are the number of times that helpline staff tag a category (one contact may be represented by multiple tags or categories, as the contact may report multiple issues). These data are directly reported by child helplines members to the umbrella organisation, CHI, via an annual survey.

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.

Child sexual abuse material/image-based sexual abuse (CSAM/IBSA)

For survey data, this combined term captures non-consensual image or video making, taking and/or sharing by an adult or another child. It 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 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. We decided to use the CSAM/IBSA term to avoid confusion across agencies in interpreting the findings and to indicate the possibility of increased use of both terms in future research.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA)

At Childlight, we use CSEA as an umbrella term, because it recognises that abuse and exploitation can take different forms and require different approaches to prevention, safeguarding, and data collection. The term covers situations involving child sexual abuse in which a child is involved in sexual activity that they do not understand, cannot consent to, are not developmentally ready for, or where an imbalance of power, trust, or authority is exploited. It also includes sexual exploitation when a child is manipulated, coerced, or forced into sexual activity in exchange for something, such as money, gifts, protection, or promises, which can involve situations like sex trafficking or sexual extortion. In relation to CHI data, CSEA is also a data category that encompasses the categories sexual violence (offline), commercial sexual exploitation (offline) and technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA). These categories are defined within this glossary.

Commercial sexual exploitation (offline)

This category is used by CHI to categorise their data. Their definition is as follows: A child performing a sexual act in exchange for (a promise of) something of value (including, but not limited to, money, objects, shelter, food, drugs, etc.). The use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of child sexual abuse material or for sexual performances. It can involve the trafficking of children for commercial sexual exploitation. It can also take place in the context of travel and/or tourism. In these cases, the offence can be committed by either foreign or domestic tourists and travellers, and long-term visitors (Child Helpline International, 2025b, p. 34).

Confidence interval (CI)

A range of values within which the true prevalence is likely to fall. A narrower interval indicates greater precision and reliability of the estimate, while a wider interval suggests more uncertainty – often due to smaller sample sizes or variation across studies.

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.

Exact matches (cryptographic)

Images that have been previously allocated an alphanumeric hash value with software and, therefore, match the hash value in a hash list possessed by an organisation. In verb form, the term is ‘exact matching’.

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.

Familial CSEA

Sexual abuse or exploitation of a child that occurs within the family environment, perpetrated by biological relatives (such as parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts or uncles) or individuals in a familial-like role (e.g., foster carers or a parent's partner). Often also referred to as 'intrafamilial CSEA', we use the term familial CSEA for ease in communicating to a variety of audiences.

First sighted

The first known location of CSAM that has been reported. This does not mean that it is the first or only place it was uploaded.

Frontline data

Data collected by child protection system actors (e.g., police, health, education, social care, and justice systems) and civil society actors (e.g., some child helplines) while providing services to victims/survivors or bringing perpetrators to justice. Often referred to as 'administrative data', Childlight uses the easier term 'frontline data' to refer to data that is not collected for research purposes, but gathered while providing services or fulfilling child protection duties.

Gender

Gender refers to the socially constructed norms, roles, behaviours, and relationships associated with being female, male, or another gender, which can vary across societies and change over time. Gender identity is distinct from biological sex and reflects an individual's internal experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with their sex. Also see definitions for 'Sex', 'Sex and/or gender' and 'Male, female, non-binary and unknown' in this glossary.

Hash value

A unique alphanumeric code assigned to every individual instance of known CSAM. Some CSAM data collection organisations have their own hash lists to compare reported CSAM to, but this is not this case for all of them. It is dependent on the organisation whether these hash lists are shared with other key stakeholders.

Helpline

A reporting and support service that is available to children, parents, caregivers and the public to report concerns pertaining to children needing direct assistance. Helplines often operate in partnership 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).

Male, female, non-binary and unknown

CHI uses the terms boy, girl, non-binary and unknown to classify the gender of those who contact their helplines. As the helpline data also contains data on individuals up to the age of 24, Childlight has chosen to use the terms male, female, non-binary and unknown to refer to gender and/or sex. Male is used to refer to a children or young person who identifies as male; and female is used to refer to a child or young person who identifies as female. In CHI's glossary, their definition of non-binary is: "[t]he child or young person does not identify primarily as female or male, or identifies as non-binary". CHI's definition of unknown is: "[t]he gender of the child or young person could not be identified for various reasons" (Child Helpline International, 2025b, p. 8). Also see 'Gender' in this glossary.

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 focuses specifically on in-person contact abuse involving rape or sexual assault.

Online sexual exploitation

Includes 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 or causes a child to be sexually exploited or that results in or causes images or other material documenting such sexual exploitation to be produced, bought, sold, possessed, distributed, or transmitted 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.

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 where possible.

Rape

Vaginal, anal or oral penetration of a sexual nature of the body of a child with any bodily part or object, with or without the use of force and without consent, because the child is too young to consent or consent is not given.

'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.

Sex

A binary classification based on biological factors (male and female).

Sex and/or gender

The term sex and/or gender is used in this report because many data sources do not clearly distinguish between the two. In surveys, questions may ask about sex, gender, or attempt to capture both, leaving it unclear what is being measured or reported. Administrative data vary widely, with categories recorded either through standard questions or inferred by those collecting the data, creating inconsistency across organisations. Big data sources, such as those derived from images or videos, generally only record sex, which reflects the type of information these methods are designed to capture. Also see 'Gender' and 'Male, female, non-binary and unknown' in this glossary.

Sexual assault

Unwanted groping, fondling or other touching of the private parts of a child or making a child touch the private parts of someone else (excluding penetration), with or without the use of force and without consent, because the child is too young to consent or consent is not given.

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.

Sexual violence (offline)

This is a category used by CHI to categorise their data. It is defined as: "[f]orcing or coercing a child to engage in sexual activity, whether they are aware of what is happening or not, or if they are able to articulate what is unwanted or not" (Child Helpline International, 2025b, p.38).

South Asia

Based on UNICEF's regional classification, South Asia refers to eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan (UNICEF, 2023b).

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)

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, and livestreaming of child sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or sexual extortion.

This is also a category used by CHI to categorise their data. Their definition is: "child sexual abuse becomes technology-facilitated child sexual abuse when it has occurred on social media or other online channels, or has a direct link to the online environment [...]. Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation includes all acts of a sexually exploitative nature carried out against a child that is at some stage connected to the online environment. This can be distinguished from technology-facilitated sexual abuse [sic] by an underlying notion of exchange, for example, money, food, accommodation, drugs, affection, gifts, etc" (Child Helpline International, 2025b, p.36).

Victimisation

CSEA represents forms of victimisation whereby the child is the victim of the exploitation/abuse. Victimisation tends to refer to a process more than to a single act. The term is used as a category by which to group indicators primarily from representative surveys in the Into the Light (ITL) Index 2025.

Victim/survivor

A combined term referring to children/adults who have experienced or are experiencing sexual violence, to reflect both the terminology used in legally binding instruments and an individual's choice to identify themselves as they wish to be identified.

Violence

When we use the term violence in this report, we are specifically referring to a category from Child Helpline International that is defined as "the maltreatment (improper and/or harmful treatment) of a child. Violence can take a number of forms, including emotional, physical, and sexual. Isolation and exclusion are also a form of violence. Violence can occur in many settings, including, but not limited to, at home, at school, in the neighbourhood, and online. The perpetrators can be members of the family, peers, other adults known to the child, or strangers.

The present category also involves the presence of violence in the child's environment" (Child Helpline International, 2025b, p.31). The violence category contains all the CSEA categories; plus, all other types of violence such as bullying, child labour, neglect, physical violence, emotional violence etc.

Visually similar

Images which, to the eye, appear to be the same image, but may in reality have differences in aspects such as size, colours or layout (e.g., mirrored). Due to these differences, the images may not be matched by cryptographic 'exact' hashing, despite being the same in content. They can be matched using software such as PhotoDNA by Microsoft, which enables a more accurate count of image content. Visually similar images are imperative to track in order to attain a more accurate understanding of the number of images that are actually new and the extent to which certain images are being reuploaded, shared or generally disseminated.

Western Europe

Based on UNICEF's regional classification, Western Europe refers to 33 countries: 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 and the United Kingdom (UNICEF, 2023b).

Youth

This term generally defines a 15–24-year-old age group. In this report, the term is used primarily with child helpline data for which some services are provided across a large age spectrum and in relation to some CSAM data when precise ages are hard to determine from images and videos.

Youth-produced images

Images that appear to be produced by children and/or youth due to the perspective or framing of the image. The term does not consider the process by which or context in which the image was created (e.g., coercion by an adult or peer, created for a romantic partner or taken under duress).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Childlight is pleased to launch the 2025 edition of its Into the Light Index on Global Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (ITL Index 2025), which includes estimates of the scale of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) in countries across Western Europe and South Asia. This country-level approach provides governments, civil society and other actors with evidence that is tailored and context specific. Over the coming years, this approach will be expanded to other regions, with our 2026 edition already set to focus on countries in North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, and East Asia and the Pacific.

ITL Index 2025 is an evolution from that published in 2024: we have deepened our data to country level estimates, included both technology-facilitated and in-person (offline) abuse, and integrated new data sources. Rather than simply explaining the data shown in the Index, the supplemental thematic analysis report highlights the cross-cutting trends, patterns and insights that the Index uncovers.

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 products: our Interactive Index Dashboard, Technical Note and open access data archive, for greater depth.

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

Key findings

ITL Index 2025 expands the number and type of data sources drawn into our analysis to include data from representative surveys, policing, helplines and child sexual abuse material (CSAM). The key findings presented below are linked to the thematic sections of the supplemental thematic analysis report.

Western Europe and South Asia in focus

This year, we explored both in-person (offline) and technology-facilitated abuse across multiple data sources, with a focus on prevalence, frontline data and CSAM indicators for countries in Western Europe and South Asia. These two regions were identified based on our ITL Index 2024, in which both regions showed a high prevalence of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA) and/or CSAM, but with differing demographic and data landscapes.

CSEA prevalence and CSAM: Western Europe

An estimated 4.7% of children in Western Europe were reported as experiencing rape before the age of 18, and 7.4% as being sexually assaulted, with a higher prevalence of abuse among females in both of these figures.

For TF-CSEA, we estimate that 19.6% of children have experienced online solicitation before the age of 18, and 13.5% in the past year. This subtype of TF-CSEA was well captured in the evidence base: studies measured both lifetime prevalence (before the age of 18) and past-year recall, and data were available from a wide range of countries. In terms of child sexual abuse material/image-based sexual abuse (CSAM/IBSA), 2.5% and 2.2% of children reported this type of TF-CSEA, in relation to lifetime (before the age of 18) and past year prevalence, respectively. Western European countries also frequently reported prevalence estimates of exposure to unwanted sexual content. Across the studies, 6.7% of children reported experiencing this type of exposure before the age of 18, while 20.2% reported such exposure in the past year.

Gender-based differences in TF-CSEA are evident throughout the data for Western Europe. Online solicitation was reported by 17.9% of females and 11% of males during the past year. These gender-based disparities were even more apparent when examining lifetime (before the age of 18) prevalence, which showed an average prevalence of 26.3% for females and 14.7% for males. A relatively small difference between males and females was found in experience of CSAM/IBSA, both in lifetime (before the age of 18) and past year. However, again females appear to be more affected than males by this type of harm, which is in line with recent findings. Conversely, more males than females were exposed to unwanted sexual content in the past year.

Western Europe was the internet host for the majority of CSAM in 2023 and 2024. In 2024, the Netherlands accounted for a disproportionate amount of CSAM, with

the highest CSAM volume (over 60% of all reported CSAM from Western Europe was associated with sites in the Netherlands) and the highest CSAM availability rate (880.9 reports/notices per 10,000 population) in the region.

CSEA prevalence and CSAM: South Asia

An estimated 12.5% of children in South Asia reported experiencing rape or sexual assault before the age of 18, with the prevalence being higher for females than males. Representative studies supporting this estimate were conducted in one third of the countries in South Asia (India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka), and therefore the figure should be interpreted as reflecting only those countries rather than the region as a whole. Other than India, which is commended for its level of transparency in police data, the lack of available data and differences in recording systems across the region also create substantial gaps and inconsistencies, affecting our ability to estimate and compare the prevalence of abuse.

Within the region, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have the highest volume of CSAM reports and together account for nearly all reports in the region, primarily based on reports by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). However, if we take population size into account, it is the Maldives that has the highest CSAM availability rate of any country within the region with 94 reports/notices per 10,000 population in 2024, followed by Bangladesh with 64.1 reports/notices per 10,000 population.

Patterns beneath the data

This section of the findings explores patterns of CSEA from the data including the link between online and offline abuse with a focus on familial abuse data, sex and/or gender differences in CSEA data, and youth-produced imagery. These findings support more effective prevention and response strategies.

Online-offline continuum: Focus on familial CSEA

Through our analysis of representative surveys, we explored the different types of perpetrators – an under-researched area within the field of CSEA.

Our analysis of Western Europe and global data highlights familial CSEA as a key issue. For example, nearly 1 in 13 children in Western Europe (7.6%) have experienced sexual assault by a family member during their lifetime (before the age of 18). These estimates should be interpreted with caution, as they are drawn from a small subset of surveys, include wide ranges of uncertainty, and are notably absent in South Asia. At the same time, they highlight the importance of strengthening data foundations in this critical but under-measured area. As well as in-person (offline) abuse, familial abuse also contributes to the amount of new CSAM being created.

Global NCMEC data on law enforcement action provides new insights into perpetrators associated with CSAM production. These data are drawn from large-scale online

detection and then enhanced through law enforcement investigation to identify offenders in certain cases. The majority of CSAM production in this dataset involved perpetrators known to the child, most often nuclear family members. These findings should be interpreted with caution, as big-data sources are more likely to capture certain abuse scenarios and may miss youth-produced material. By contrast, survey data often highlight youth-produced images as the most common form. The two approaches therefore illuminate different aspects of the problem, which remains one of the central debates in the field. This is the first time perpetrator information has been available from large-scale CSAM datasets, offering important but partial insights into production dynamics.

Sex and/or gender differences in CSEA data

Across nearly all of our ITL Index 2025 indicators, particularly lifetime (before the age of 18) experiences, CSEA is more prevalence among females than males in Western Europe, although boys are also victims at rates that may be higher than often assumed. This is similar when we look at experiences in the past year, although the gap between females and males is smaller than for lifetime experiences. In the specific category of unwanted exposure to sexual content, males show a higher past year prevalence than females. This is consistent with existing research on forced or unintentional exposure to pornography among children defining this type of harm as a violation of their rights and highlighting negative impacts on their wellbeing. There are, however, large data gaps in South Asia, which has a lack of representative survey data disaggregated by sex and/or gender. This means that it is difficult to understand the prevalence of CSEA by sex and/or gender in the region.

Youth-produced images

CSAM metadata analysis conducted for ITL Index 2025 shows an overall increase in 'self-generated' content, whether through public reporting, victim reports, analyst directed searches or identified by web crawlers. When youth-produced images circulate online the purpose of their generation is often difficult to ascertain. It may reflect an increase in abusive or harmful behaviour between children/peers. It may also reflect the abuse of children by adults, stemming from online solicitation, non-consensual taking and sharing of images and videos, and through sexual extortion. The imagery of this kind challenges previously held definitions for CSAM and requires a wider understanding of what sexually abusive material of children is.

Forces shaping the scale of TF-CSEA

The scale and nature of TF-CSEA, whether it's CSAM that is detected online or whether it's experiences of TF-CSEA as self-reported by children in surveys, is shaped by many factors including societal perceptions and how these influence policy and practice. Debates on policy decisions which make their way into the public sphere, such as end-to-end encryption (E2EE) and online safety regulations, in turn influence both the risks children take and the ability to tackle and prevent abuse. Technological

change can improve the ability for abuse to be disclosed, but it can also contribute to wider structural and systemic factors that enable CSEA to persist.

A standardised approach to CSEA

Too often, CSEA is only defined and tracked through the narrow lens of national criminal law, which varies widely from country to country. A standardised approach to CSEA, in which a consistent set of measures is applied to CSEA regardless of a country's legal framework, allows for the comparison of harm across national borders. This means using common indicators, categories, definitions and typologies so that data can be aggregated and compared internationally. There is still a large evidence gap in this area on how questions and definitions in the CSEA field are interpreted across cultures and countries.

Policy decisions on CSAM

Decisions made by technology companies, governments and regulatory bodies can lead to an increase or decrease in the amount of CSAM that is reported to or discovered by the leading CSAM detection organisations. This is demonstrated, for example, through the implementation of E2EE in communications data as the default setting. Between 2023 and 2024, all organisations tasked with CSAM data collection showed fluctuations in the amount of CSAM they assessed, but to differing proportions and in differing directions.

Legislative decisions

The year 2022 saw a wave of legislative changes aiming to put parameters around the responsibility of technology platforms to ensure user safety around the world, with new legislation introduced in the European Union (EU), Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). ITL Index 2025 data for Western Europe suggests that, for countries that have recently enacted regulations, these regulations are helping CSAM content to be identified and appear to be targeting the hosted content. This comes from early insights, as shown in the data for these countries; a more thorough evaluation of the impact of regulation is needed to eliminate alternative scenarios driving the changes in data.

Technological changes

An increasingly prevalent example of technological change influencing how people offend against children online is CSAM generated by artificial intelligence (AI), known as AI CSAM. The volume of AI CSAM is increasing across all data sources that track this as a specific category of material. The most recent analysis of emerging AI CSAM suggests this material is often of the more severe categories, almost completely depicting female children. As AI CSAM can be manipulated to the specifications of its creator, the increasing severity noted by Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), and its implications for female victims, should be of note to the child protection sector, as it may suggest interest in obtaining this type of material.

CSAM removal

The amount of time taken to remove CSAM content differs across take-down organisations and data sources. This is influenced by an increase in overall CSAM volume. Despite the best efforts of those working to remove CSAM, the length of time between CSAM being first sighted and taken down is increasing, which means that perpetrators have more time to download and re-share reported images. Known CSAM continues to circulate, which can be seen through an increase in the proportion of CSAM circulating that is already 'known'.

Community and child-friendly reporting mechanisms

Child helplines can be a lifeline to those seeking support or advice. However, there are barriers to accessing these services, such as connectivity, language, stigma, concerns about being traced, and a lack of awareness that these services even exist. Moreover, cultural factors influence outreach to child helplines, such as religious-cultural norms and beliefs which may influence whether or not families, individuals and/or children feel comfortable seeking help. Furthermore, people may not view these services as acceptable.

Data foundations

What, who and how we measure, matters. CSEA data measurement needs to be strengthened, from the very beginning – with how harm is reported, recorded and counted – all the way through to how that same data is contextualised, analysed and interpreted to make change.

How we measure CSEA

Reliable data on CSEA is essential for effective prevention, protection and policy-making. However, differences in how cases are reported, recorded and counted across jurisdictions and platforms can lead to inconsistencies in official statistics. These variations, shaped by differing legal frameworks, administrative practices and crime counting rules, can obscure the true scale of harm.

CSAM contextual influences

Many extenuating factors can impact on the volume of CSAM reports received in a year. One of these contextual factors is organisational change and the impact that this can have, particularly on big data such as CSAM data. For example, there was a drastic impact on the number of reports received by the International Association of Internet Hotline Providers (INHOPE) in 2024 due to the improved processes of one of three new hotlines.

Underreporting and underrepresentation

No single data source can give us a complete picture of CSEA. Prevalence surveys, police records and hotline data, and big data on CSAM, all have gaps and may underestimate the true scale of CSEA in some sources of data and potentially

overestimate it in others. For example, gaps exist regarding data on children under five years old, children in conflict zones, marginalised groups, children affected by online abuse and countries with no relevant legislation.

Data gaps and limitations

Although ITL Index 2025 draws on multiple data sources, there are still gaps in reliable, representative and comparable data. These challenges in data coverage and availability are exacerbated as existing data sources from established data owners decline, high-quality data from gold-standard representative surveys by countries are lacking, and inconsistencies persist in how administrative data is captured and reported, even within a country.

Conclusion: Data to action

We know that the scale of abuse, as well as how much needs to be done to better protect children, can be overwhelming. However, we also know that there is a pathway to reaching this impact. This pathway has many steps, some of which need to be taken together in collaboration. Below we set out some practical steps, organised under action areas, which, while not being the end goal, show a tangible way to progress towards a safer future for children. Because Childlight is part of that journey, we also highlight where we are catalysing, collaborating and contributing to much-needed global change.

ACTION AREA 1

Technology-facilitated CSEA and CSAM data availability

- **We ask** governments to ensure that law enforcement agencies have access to referrals from key reporting bodies, such as the NCMEC and INTERPOL, among others, and the ability to triage those referrals to identify children and remove CSAM. This reflects our understanding that in some countries such agencies may face serious challenges in terms of data access, supportive legislation, training or resources to act on CSEA intelligence. Specifically, we ask for prioritised support in the Netherlands and the Maldives, which have high rates of CSAM reports per 10,000 population, and India, which has a high volume of CSAM overall.

- **We commit** to working with countries to understand their current ability to access, triage, prioritise and use CSEA data, through our Childlight Technical Advisory Programme (C-TAP). We commit to providing targeted support and advice for high priority countries that show a willingness to improve their capability – with support for the Netherlands, the Maldives, India and Pakistan underway. We also commit to further research country contexts where CSAM rates are disproportionate to help support the identification of root causes for prevention and response.

ACTION AREA 2

Familial child sexual exploitation and abuse prevention

- **We ask** that when a country survey is being designed or when CSAM data is being collected and analysed it includes categorisation of perpetrator type including familial abuse, where possible, to address data gaps in this area. Perpetrator type can be captured through two approaches: NCMEC data and surveys that disaggregate perpetrator categories.

- **We commit** to the continued analysis and disaggregation of data to shine a light on the prevalence of familial abuse, exploring this through work with survivor groups and specialist researchers to explore developing specific indicators in the 2026 edition of our ITL Index on Global CSEA.

ACTION AREA 3

Data completeness and quality

- **We ask** that every country funds and implements a representative victimisation survey, to fill existing data gaps. Specifically, we ask for greater data collection in South Asia, where there is very little CSEA data from other sources. This should include a common approach to typologies, methods and implementation to capture both in-person and technology-facilitated CSEA. An investment in training, resources and technology to capture child helpline data will yield more detailed, harmonised and comparable help-seeking data from under-researched areas. National surveys should be complemented by publicly available crime statistics and child helpline data for CSEA that include age, gender and/or sex and outcomes.

- **We commit** to identifying novel data sources and methodologies that can fill data gaps and contribute to country-level data on CSEA, especially where traditional survey data is lacking – and to making these indicators publicly available through our Index. For example, early scoping has indicated that for the East Asia and Pacific region, which is one of the regional priority areas for 2026, there will be limited data from the Pacific Islands. To address this, we will offer deep-dive analyses into Fiji and Papua New Guinea and explore working with data partners across other remote, rural, small population countries in our ITL Index 2026.

ACTION AREA 4

Regulation of online spaces

- **We ask** that countries uphold the best interests of the child and establish legislation that gives power to a governing body to set child-centric, gender-sensitive and inclusive standards for the safety of children in online spaces, as well as consequences if these standards are not met. Countries should reflect on the regulations in place in the EU, UK and Australia as a starting point on how to both protect children online and put legal provisions and systems in place to hold accountable those who facilitate abuse. Legislation and regulation of online spaces requires an even-handed approach accompanied by increased investment in developing technological innovation. This innovation must ensure that users' private data is protected, while also allowing for the investigation and prevention of online harms. There is more work to be done, with legislators and regulators having a difficult task ahead as they implement policies aimed to create greater safety for all and critically evaluate those efforts.

- **We commit** to conducting evaluation research to better understand the impact of regulation on child safety across different legislative and regulatory frameworks. We also commit to sharing our CSEA prevalence and nature research with national regulators, such as Ofcom (UK), the E-Safety Commissioner (Australia) and Coimisiún na Meán (Ireland), among others. We also commit to using data to support governments to establish legislation in countries where it does not exist, to evaluating existing legislative and regulatory frameworks, and to continuing our research into AI CSAM accountability in legislation across countries. We commit to providing research that is without fear or favour, but always in the interest of children, through our membership of groups such as the Global Online Safety Regulation Network.

ACTION AREA 5

Connections to the field of gender-based violence

- **We ask** that when CSEA data is collected, it records both sex and gender. This will allow connection to the wider field of gender-based violence research (e.g., female genital mutilation and child marriage) and prevention programming, ensuring that support is calibrated ensuring that support is calibrated by gender.

- **We commit** to continue to include a disaggregation of data by sex and gender, depending on the data source, in our ITL Index and upcoming editions of Searchlight – our biennial publication examining the nature of CSEA. We also commit to seeking funding to develop a doctoral student training network with a consortium of partners on technology-facilitated sexual and gender-based violence to further the field by bringing innovative methodological approaches and learning to CSEA from the violence against women field, and vice versa, as well as linking academic research to policy and practice improvements.

ACTION AREA 6

Survivor care and restitution

- **We ask** that the lived experience of survivors is included in the designing and setting of national policy on CSEA. This includes consideration of schemes to provide restitution, redress, justice and healing for survivors of CSEA, including holding those who commit or facilitate abuse to account.

- **We commit** to using our index findings alongside our Justice Beyond Borders research, a legislative analysis of 28 countries on TF-CSEA cross-border survivor restitution, to highlight the need for an international pathway to a global restitution scheme. We commit to working with partners and supporting research on how global monetary funds operate and how such work could connect with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

In the spirit of a shared vision and collaboration to protect children and prevent harm, we hope that you find Childlight's ITL Index 2025 both insightful and useful. If you use our research to catalyse or inform change for children, we would love to hear from you. Please let us know by writing to childlight@ed.ac.uk.

We also welcome feedback on our work and other opportunities to improve and enhance the Index. We want to make sure that our resources are useful in your practice, because without you, our insight cannot be translated into much-needed action for children.

INTRODUCTION

About Childlight – Global Child Safety Institute

Childlight – Global Child Safety Institute is an independent, data-driven organisation dedicated to preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) worldwide. Founded by Human Dignity Foundation and hosted by the University of Edinburgh and the University of New South Wales, alongside a range of data partners, we bring together world-class expertise in epidemiology, data science, public health and child protection to create a robust evidence base for action. Our mission is clear: to use data to protect children and to work alongside frontline practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders to ensure that evidence is translated into meaningful change. Our role as a global data institute is to generate, curate and share high-quality information and to support others in using it effectively within their own contexts. We believe that credible, accessible and actionable data is one of the most powerful tools for safeguarding children.

The index journey so far

In 2024, Childlight launched the world's first comprehensive global index estimating the prevalence of technology-facilitated (TF-)CSEA. This inaugural Into the Light Index on Global Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (ITL Index 2024) was a milestone in the field, producing a new conceptual framework, the first global and regional prevalence estimates from population surveys, the first country-level perpetration prevalence estimates, and harmonised indicators on child sexual abuse material (CSAM) drawn from multiple data sources. We began with TF-CSEA because it was an urgent entry point with previous research that had been largely limited to high-income countries and had not captured the full picture from population-based surveys. ITL Index 2024 filled this critical gap, introducing new analyses on perpetration, aligning disparate CSAM datasets and highlighting the structural challenges that must be addressed to strengthen global monitoring.

What's new in the 2025 Into the Light Index

The 2025 Into the Light Index on Global Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (ITL Index 2025) marks a step change in both scope and ambition. We are expanding the Index in three major ways.

First, **broader scope:** While ITL Index 2024 focused exclusively on TF-CSEA, the 2025 edition addresses offline CSEA as well. This includes rape and sexual assault of a child, using data from population-based surveys. By integrating these forms of abuse into the Index, we can better understand how online and offline harms might intersect.

Second, **new data sources:** In ITL Index 2025, we are incorporating frontline data from publicly available policing crime statistics and child helpline data. The policing crime statistics reflect a dedicated deep dive into this data source for nine countries. The addition of child helpline data was made possible through a pioneering partnership with Child Helpline International (CHI), allowing us to include information that reflects the types of abuse that are being logged by child helplines. By including frontline data through official statistics with insights from child helplines we can identify both reported crimes and the often-hidden insights into abuse that never reach any statutory services.

Third, **country-level focus:** For the first time, we are producing country-level indicators and estimates, where data is available. ITL Index 2025 focuses on Western Europe and South Asia, as defined in UNICEF's regional classification (UNICEF 2023b). These two regions were chosen to start the country-level focus, because they were both identified in ITL Index 2024 as having a high prevalence of TF-CSEA across indicators. This country-level approach provides governments, civil society and other actors with tailored, context-specific evidence. Over the coming years, this approach will be expanded to other regions, with our 2026 edition focusing on North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, and East Asia and the Pacific.

Other innovations in 2025

Several new initiatives enhance the depth and usability of ITL Index 2025. In this edition, Childlight's **Index Impact and Communications Working Groups** bring together CSEA data experts and regional actors from nearly every country in focus, ensuring that findings are translated into concrete safeguarding and prevention actions. Our **Index Technical Sub-Committee** continues to guide the ITL Index with world-leading expert advice and guidance in prevalence estimation, frontline data and big data analysis. A **Supplemental Thematic Analysis Report** synthesises results across all indicators to identify trends, patterns and actionable insights. Finally, we are the first global violence prevention data institute to seek Enhancing Quality in Preclinical Data **(EQIPD) accreditation**, embedding rigorous, clinically informed data-handling and quality assurance standards into every stage of our work.

FIGURE 1 Into the Light 2025 Index Resources

Online Interactive Dashboard

Supplemental Thematic Analysis Report (STAR)

Archived Datasets

Technical Note

How to use the Index products and assets

ITL Index 2025 is designed as more than a single report or website, it is a suite of interconnected products that can be used by practitioners, policymakers, researchers and advocates to inform action in their own contexts.

The first is this **Supplemental Thematic Analysis Report** or **STAR**, which synthesises results across all indicators and data areas to identify key data findings, patterns and actionable insights. This report is intended to highlight priority areas for action and provide the contextual understanding needed to interpret the data.

The second is our online **Interactive Index Dashboard**, which presents detailed data for countries in Western Europe and South Asia, as well as region-level data produced in 2024. This will expand over time to cover additional regions and, by early 2026, it will include both regional and selected global interactive data. While the dashboard is accessible on our website, for the first time it includes a feature that allows users to create their own downloadable reports by selecting specific indicators. These tailored reports can be shared in meetings, presentations and policy discussions, making it easier to bring the data directly into decision-making processes.

We are also continuing to expand our commitment to **open data access**. All underpinning datasets are archived where possible and made publicly available, complete with detailed metadata, so that other researchers and decision makers can directly interact with the datasets. In addition, we are continuing to provide **comprehensive technical notes** for each indicator area in one full document detailing our approaches to using population surveys, frontline data and CSAM data, ensuring that every step of the methodology is transparent and reproducible.

Together, these products are intended to maximise the accessibility, accountability, usability and impact of ITL Index 2025, giving users the tools they need to turn evidence into action.

Looking ahead

ITL Index 2025 provides decision makers, frontline practitioners and concerned individuals and groups with high-quality, country-specific data to inform CSEA prevention programmes, strengthen policy and protect children worldwide. By combining population-based surveys, frontline reporting, big CSAM data and innovative analysis, this year's edition of Into the Light Index not only deepens our understanding of CSEA, but also strengthens the pathways from data to action. It reflects our belief that evidence, when used strategically, can drive urgent systemic change. **Because children can't wait.**

PART 1 Western Europe and South Asia: Data in focus

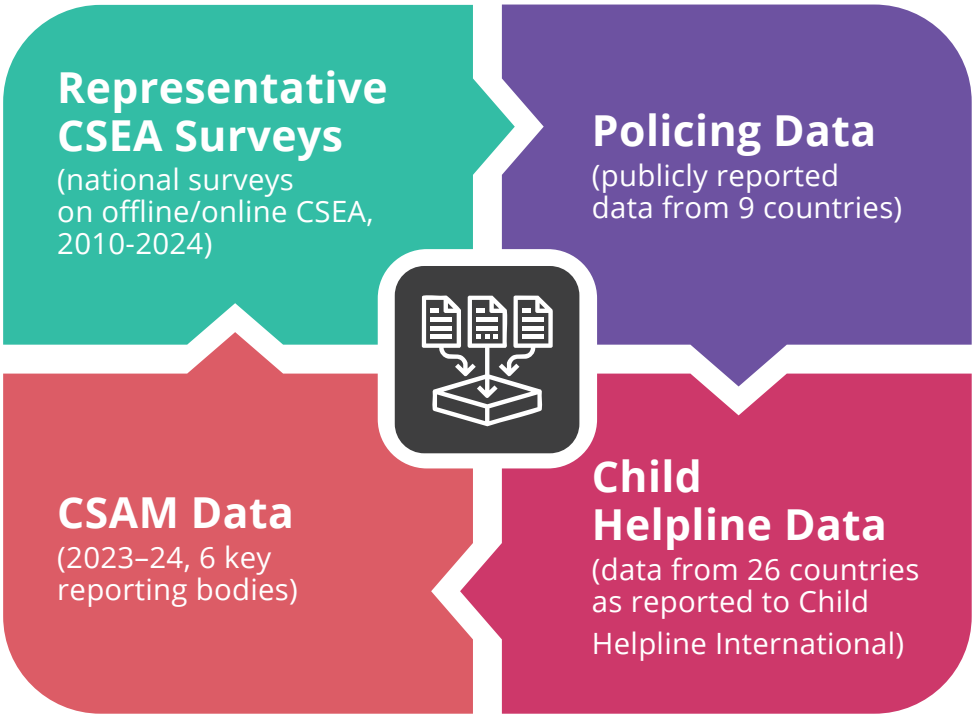
This part presents the ITL Index 2025 findings for Western Europe and South Asia – the first two regions selected for our expanded country-level analysis. These regions were chosen because in our ITL Index 2024 edition, both showed a high prevalence of TF-CSEA across multiple indicators. They also represent very different contexts, from the number of countries to the strength of data foundations, offering a valuable contrast for testing and refining this deeper analytical approach. In this section, we present prevalence estimates from population-based surveys, data from frontline actors and indicators on CSAM to provide a comprehensive picture of the magnitude, prevalence and thematic trends across the countries in the regions. Alongside the findings, we present examples of promising practices and country-specific highlights. The countries included follow UNICEF's regional classifications, ensuring that our data aligns with key programmatic organisations working on child protection and with governments in countries. This focus not only identifies shared and unique challenges across the regions, but also informs targeted prevention, policy and safeguarding actions grounded in robust evidence.

1.1 Introduction

Both Western Europe and South Asia, with markedly different histories, economies and data landscapes, stood out in ITL Index 2024. Both regions showed some of the highest reported CSAM. Together, they represent almost a third of the world's children: an estimated 76 million in Western Europe (19% of the region's 400 million people) and 648 million in South Asia (36% of the region's 1.8 billion people) (UN DESA, 2024). Western Europe comprises 33 high-income countries, while South Asia's 8 countries span a broad economic spectrum, from one low-income country (Afghanistan) to an upper-middle-income country (Maldives), with the remainder in the lower-middle-income brackets. The combination of high prevalence rates, differing population structures and markedly different data environments makes these regions especially valuable for in-depth analysis in ITL Index 2025.

1.2 What we measured

FIGURE 2 Into the Light 2025 Index Data Sources



Representative victimisation surveys

Rape and sexual assault

The prevalence of people experiencing rape or sexual assault before the age of 18, was assessed through a systematic review that aimed to bring together results from large national studies and regional surveys that captured these types of abuse. Studies were only included if they were representative at the national or sub-national level. The definitions used for rape of a child and sexual assault of a child follow the operational categories set out in UNICEF's International Classification of Violence against Children (UNICEF, 2023a), which distinguishes rape as penetration (vaginal, anal, or oral) and sexual assault as non-penetrative sexual acts, such as unwanted touching or coercive sexual contact. Data was extracted from publications between 2010 and 2024 of representative surveys involving both adults recalling their experiences as children and children reporting their experiences directly. The studies included in the review employed a variety of measurement tools to capture instances of offline CSEA. However, these tools often did not disaggregate data by specific subtypes of offline CSEA (i.e., rape or sexual assault). This led to three distinct categories; rape, sexual assault and, in instances where it was unclear which of the two subtypes were being reported, the third category captured either rape or sexual assault. For example, a common question used in adverse childhood experiences (ACE) questionnaires asks "Did an adult person at least 5 years older than you ever... touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way or attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?"

Where possible, data related to the perpetration of rape or sexual assault were extracted and analysed across three main perpetrator categories: strangers, peers and family members. Most available data related to familial perpetrators and, within this group, distinctions could be made between rape and sexual assault subtypes. In contrast, there was a paucity of peer- and stranger-related data disaggregated by these types of abuse.

Technology-facilitated CSEA

TF-CSEA refers to a range of sexually harmful behaviours that occur online or through the use of other digital technologies. It includes 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 (Bryce et al., 2023; Finkelhor et al., 2022; WHO, 2022). The term is now well-established and consistently used in research as an umbrella construct for various forms of online and technology-facilitated abuse, in line with the latest Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (ECPAT International, 2025). Childlight updated the systematic review in ITL Index 2024 in order to include new TF-CSEA studies published over the past year,

as well as additional sources provided by members of Childlight's Index Impact and Communications Working Groups. A key change to the 2024 framework involved separating forced/unwanted exposure to sexually explicit material/pornography from non-consensual taking and sharing of sexual images and videos. Five broad subtypes – online solicitation, child sexual abuse material/image-based sexual abuse (CSAM/IBSA), unwanted exposure to sexual content, online sexual exploitation and sexual extortion – were defined based on the existing terminology guidelines, empirical research and with consideration of selected international and national policies and legislation.

It is essential to emphasise that the research approach and aims of early studies on technology-facilitated risks or harms differed as compared to the most recent investigations. For our analyses, we have accepted a broader approach to data interpretation and included a wide range of studies that might not have clearly categorised the specific behaviours as 'abusive' or 'exploitative'. However, given the current developments and consistency with the recent findings, they could have been an indication of harmful behaviours we recognise now as abusive. This is consistent with our universalist approach to safeguarding children, which aims to recognise and capture all types of harmful behaviours, regardless of whether it is contingent on varying national legal frameworks. Researchers that would be interested in looking at more strict estimates, can use our dataset for further investigation.

In terms of online solicitation, based on our findings, methodological discrepancies often make it impossible to fully understand the context of 'unwanted sexual interactions', including who was involved in those (i.e., adults or peers) and how the child responded to them (e.g., declined, engaged). Data on emotional and psychological impacts of peer sexual interactions should be collected alongside the data on incidences of online solicitation, to better understand the dynamics and children's perception of them. Until more reliable measures with specific follow-up questions are developed, we may need to accept either a broader or stricter approach to data interpretation. Results obtained from the surveys may include unwanted solicitations that occur in peer-romantic relationships, although it is usually unknown to what extent those were perceived as abusive or exploitative by a child due to the lack of contextual data (e.g., no information on perpetrator type) and conceptual inconsistencies.

Considering exposure to unwanted sexual content, we were particularly careful to include studies that specifically framed the unwanted exposure as harmful to children and that often reported children's perceptions of the events. Many of the studies used specific questions to indicate that children were made/forced to watch pornographic content when they did not want to. Others included broad lists of unwanted content that a child can come across while using the internet.

We believe that children are not in a position to provide meaningful consent to receiving unwanted sexual or harmful content, nor are they developmentally equipped to process or respond to such material in a safe or healthy way. Exposure to this type of content, regardless of intent or legality, constitutes a violation of their rights and can have significant short- and long-term impacts on their wellbeing. Unwanted exposure to content that occurs when a child is using social media or scrolling through various websites is also a measure of service negligence and goes beyond clear perpetrator-focused considerations. We take a child-centred stance, recognising that any such exposure is inherently harmful and warrants safeguarding responses, independent of how it may be classified within legal or cultural frameworks.

Frontline data

Police data

CSEA is a crime and it is the responsibility of law enforcement to investigate and record it, making police data a valuable source of information on CSEA. Our police data indicators are based on publicly available data on CSEA cases and case outcomes, as recorded by the police in nine pilot countries across Western Europe and South Asia. As far as possible, indicator numbers include all officially recorded sexual crimes against children, as defined in the relevant legislation for each country. The neutral term 'cases' was used instead of 'offences' or 'crimes', because definitions for the latter two can vary with national legislation. Importantly, the number of cases should not be confused with the number of victims or perpetrators of CSEA; police recorded CSEA cases are often not a good measure of the number of victims or perpetrators due to how these crimes are recorded and counted. Where possible, the international definition of 'child' as every person under the age of 18 (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, 1989) was used for the indicators. However, for some countries, this was not possible given available data, so the national age of consent was used. Notably, levels of CSEA cases officially recorded by the police vary greatly across countries and over time. However, these differences do not allow us to draw conclusions about differences in the level of CSEA crimes across countries or over time, because the numbers in each country are influenced by a complex interplay of factors over and above the actual level of crime, including the rules for how reported cases are recorded. Please refer to our Technical Note for more information about these and other limitations.

Child helpline data

Child helpline data is a valuable source of information regarding the scale and nature of CSEA as it represents victims/survivors contacting child helplines regarding abuse experienced by themselves, or others contacting the child helpline reporting on their behalf. Through an innovative data partnership with Child Helpline International (CHI), we worked collaboratively to support a deeper analysis of CSEA data for the ITL Index 2025. Child helpline data was collected by counsellors (frontline individuals working on behalf of the child helpline) who tag each contact into relevant categories. Once a year, the member organisations of CHI submit the data for the previous year, aggregating all individual tags. The aggregated data in the year 2023 was shared with Childlight. We analysed the data pertaining to the countries in Western Europe and South Asia. The dataset included the number of times that counsellors tagged calls (or other communications with the child helpline such as emails) under various categories. The violence category is made up of the number of tags by counsellors referring to emotional, physical and sexual abuse (please see the glossary for a more in-depth definition). The sub-category of violence is the CSEA category, which is the combination of commercial sexual exploitation (offline); TF-CSEA; and sexual violence (offline). It is important to note that the number of tags in categories does not necessarily correlate with the number of times that the child helplines were contacted; or the number of individuals contacting the child helpline in relation to violence and CSEA. Please refer to our Technical Note for more information about these and other limitations.

The data from CHI describes the scale and nature of categories of sexual exploitation and abuse by gender and sex. As the CHI member helplines cater for individuals up to age 24, this means that the data has also captured instances of exploitation and abuse which was not experienced by children (individuals aged seventeen and younger). However, this data is still a valuable resource for estimating the magnitude of CSEA, as the existing data landscape is fragmented.

Child sexual abuse material

CSAM refers to images and videos that show the sexual abuse of children. For Childlight's ITL Index on Global CSEA, we analyse metadata related to these materials, working with data provided by key organisations that have government mandates to collect this content for law enforcement and takedown purposes. Our ITL Index 2025 brings together data from the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE), the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), Child Rescue Coalition (CRC), THORN and the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) to examine multiple indicators, including total volume, CSAM rate, and new and emerging trends such as AI generated child sexual abuse material (AI CSAM).

CSAM data is unique within the ITL Index 2025, because it is drawn from large-scale, real-time systems that are continually updated, offering broad country-level coverage. When triangulated with other data sources, these datasets help us to better understand the scale and dynamics of CSEA in national, regional, and global contexts, and how these change over time. Working closely with and supported by the data owners, we identify where harmonisation across sources is possible, where limitations remain, and what can and cannot be concluded from these datasets. The results of this analysis are presented in ITL Index 2025 and will inform the global and regional updates of our 2026 edition of the Index, strengthening the evidence base for prevention, policy and enforcement efforts.

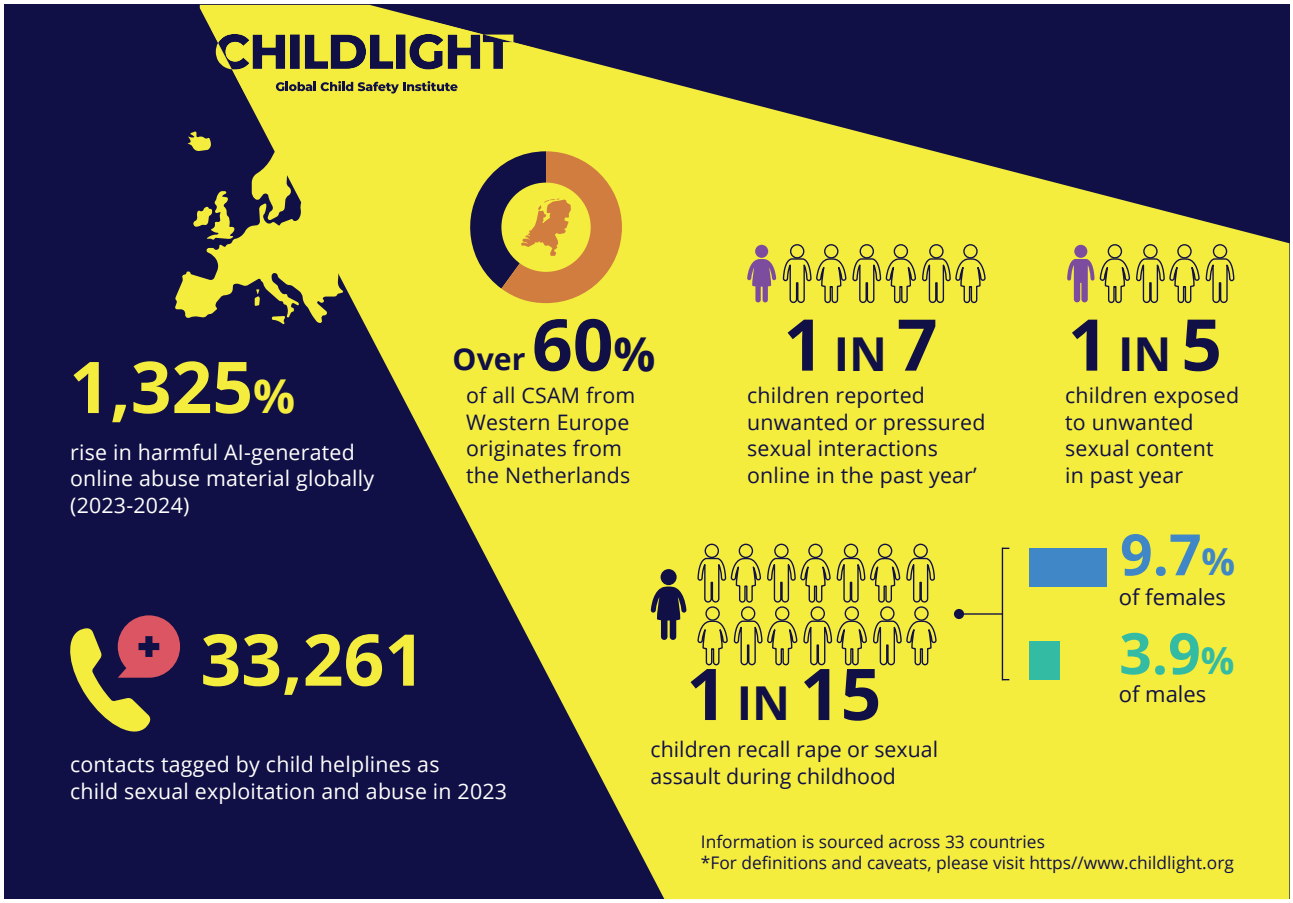
The detailed methodologies used for generating the evidence in this report and on our online Interactive Index Dashboard are available in our 2025 Into the Light Global CSEA Index Technical Note [**see the Technical Note**].

1.3 CSEA in Western Europe

Summary of key findings

In this Supplemental Thematic Analysis Report (STAR), we highlight selected findings from Western Europe to draw out regional themes and findings across countries. Readers seeking more granular, country-specific information can explore our online Interactive Index Dashboard [**see the Dashboard**], which offers in-depth country-level indicators and data to complement the broader regional perspective presented here. This combined approach will be expanded in future years to include more extensive regional and global indicators, as well as prevalence estimates that enable cross-regional comparison. For 2025, Western Europe and South Asia are the first regions to benefit from this dual focus, in both the online Interactive Index Dashboard and STAR.

FIGURE 3 CSEA in Western Europe in numbers, ITL 2025 Index Data



Prevalence of rape and sexual assault

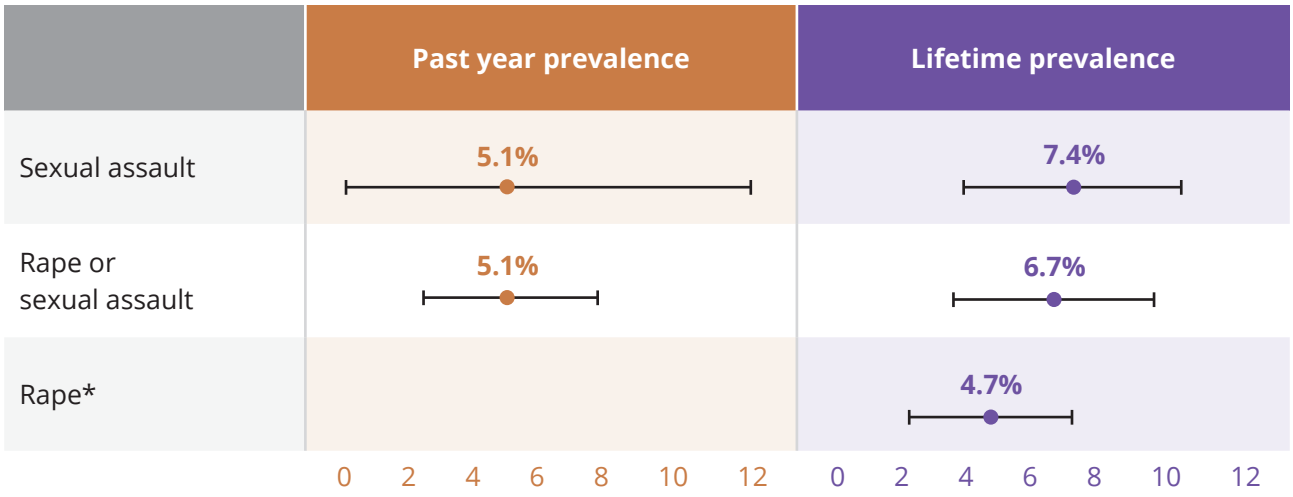
To estimate the prevalence of CSEA, we conducted a meta-analysis of nationally or sub-nationally representative surveys, following a public health approach. This approach treats CSEA as a population-level problem, emphasising systematic measurement of its occurrence across large, representative samples with the use of standardised definitions. A meta-analysis is a way of combining independent results from multiple studies to produce one overall estimate, giving us an overall trend of the current evidence. A minimum threshold of four studies was required for the meta-analysis to ensure that the prevalence estimates were based on sufficient data to provide meaningful and reliable results, and to reduce the risk that findings were driven by a single study. When reading this section, you will see the prevalence estimates from the meta-analysis within the region. In parentheses, we also show a statistic called the confidence interval (CI). A 95% CI is used for all estimates to allow better understanding of the variation and uncertainty of the estimates. A narrower range means we can be more confident in the precision of the estimate, while a wider range means there is more uncertainty.

There were two prevalence estimates reported in the included surveys: 'past year' and 'lifetime'. Past year prevalence refers to experiences that occurred within the 12 months prior to when the survey was undertaken, while lifetime prevalence refers to experiences that occurred at any point during childhood (i.e., before the age of 18). Prevalence estimates were provided for the whole sample, as well as for males and females. Many of the studies asked adults to recall experiences that happened in their childhood, and only a few reported data for the past year experiences of CSEA.

Figure 4 presents the prevalence estimates of CSEA subtypes within the region, for which sufficient data sources were available. In Western Europe, 48 studies from 19 countries were included in the meta-analysis to produce lifetime prevalence estimates of rape or sexual assault (before the age of 18). Countries included in each estimate can be found in the Technical Note. The lifetime prevalence estimate of rape or sexual assault experienced before 18 (lifetime recall) was 6.7% (95% CI: 3.7% to 9.6%). Seven studies reported rape or sexual assault in the past year with a prevalence estimate of 5.1% (95% CI: 2.5% to 7.6%). In total, 17 studies from 12 countries looked at the lifetime prevalence of rape (before the age of 18). For these studies, an average prevalence of 4.7% (95% CI: 2.4% to 7.1%) was estimated. The estimate of lifetime sexual assault before the age of 18, based on 15 studies from 11 countries, was 7.4% (95% CI: 4.3% to 10.6%). The past year experience of sexual assault prevalence estimate was 5.1% with a wide confidence interval that also includes zero (95% CI: 0% to 11.8%), underlining both the scarcity of the data and the need for more robust measurement for past year sexual assault during childhood.

FIGURE 4

Prevalence estimates of offline CSEA in Western Europe from representative surveys, by subtype and recall period



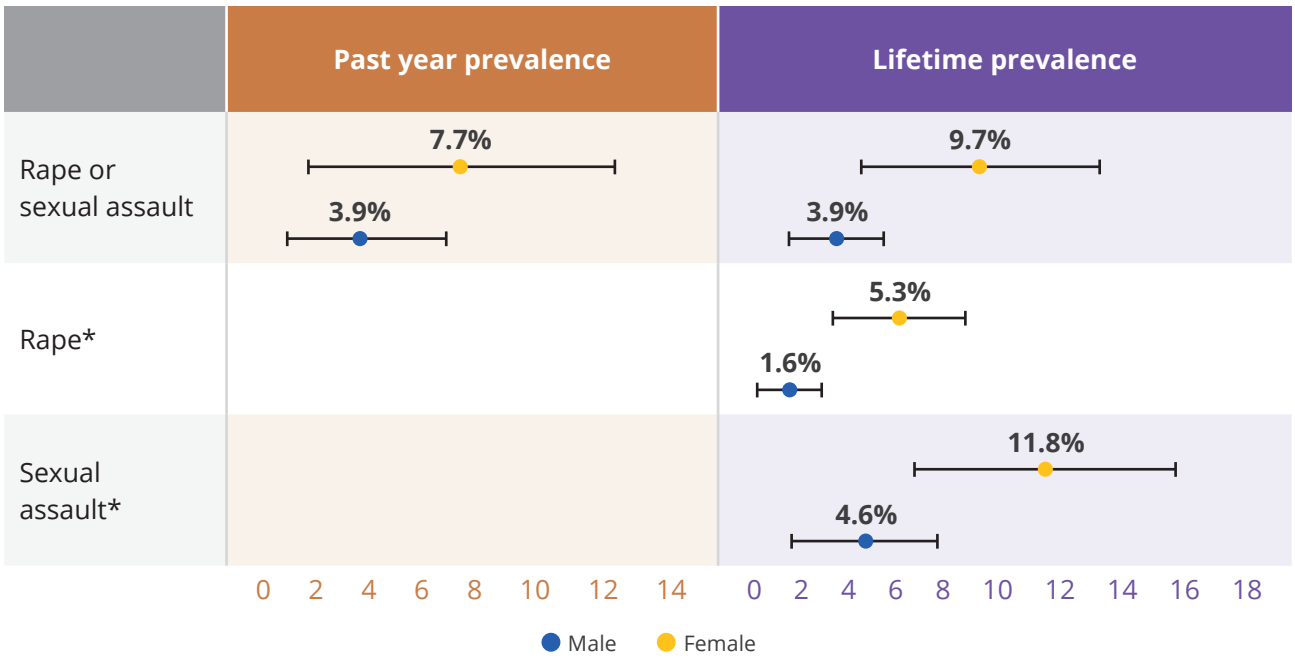
The error bars ⊢⊣ show the uncertainty around each point estimate (95% confidence interval).

*Prevalence was not estimated due to insufficient data sources.

Source: Systematic review and meta-analysis of studies published between 2010 and 2024 (lifetime), and 2011 and 2024 (past year recall); studies conducted between 1991 and 2022 (lifetime) and 2009 and 2023 (past year recall).

FIGURE 5

Prevalence estimates of offline CSEA in Western Europe from representative surveys, by subtype, sex and recall period



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

*Prevalence was not estimated due to insufficient data.

Source: Systematic review and meta-analysis of studies published between 2010 and 2024 (lifetime), and 2011 and 2024 (past year recall); studies conducted between 1992 and 2023 (lifetime) and 2009 and 2023 (past year recall).

For studies reporting lifetime before the age of 18 experience of rape, a prevalence estimate of 5.3% (95% CI: 2.9% to 7.8%) and 1.6% (95% CI: 0.5% to 2.8%) was estimated for females and males, respectively (see Figure 5). Past year prevalence estimates of rape or sexual assault were higher for females (7.7%; CI: 2.4% to 12.9%) than males (3.9%; CI: 0.9% to 6.9%). This was consistent with the lifetime estimates of rape or sexual assault, showing higher prevalence among females (9.7%; CI: 5.4% to 14.1%) than males (3.9%; CI: 2.2% to 5.6%). Prevalence estimates for studies reporting lifetime sexual assault were 11.8% (95% CI: 7.0% to 16.6%) and 4.6% (95% CI: 1.9% to 7.3%) for females and males, respectively.

A limited number of studies reported past year prevalence estimates of rape and sexual assault. Therefore, those figures are not presented in this thematic report. This data adds to the evidence base of other recently published estimates for some of the countries in Western Europe (e.g., see UNICEF, 2024 and Cagney et al., 2025). More research is needed to explore the scale and risk factors of exposure to these two forms of violence against children.

Prevalence of technology-facilitated CSEA

Following the focus of this year's Index, a more granular analysis of TF-CSEA prevalence estimates in Western Europe was conducted to explore variations across different forms of TF-CSEA, in the sex of the victim/survivor, and in the recall period within this region. Analyses were conducted in which the number of studies met the minimum threshold (i.e., ≥4 studies), which meant that only certain TF-CSEA subtypes could be analysed at the regional level.

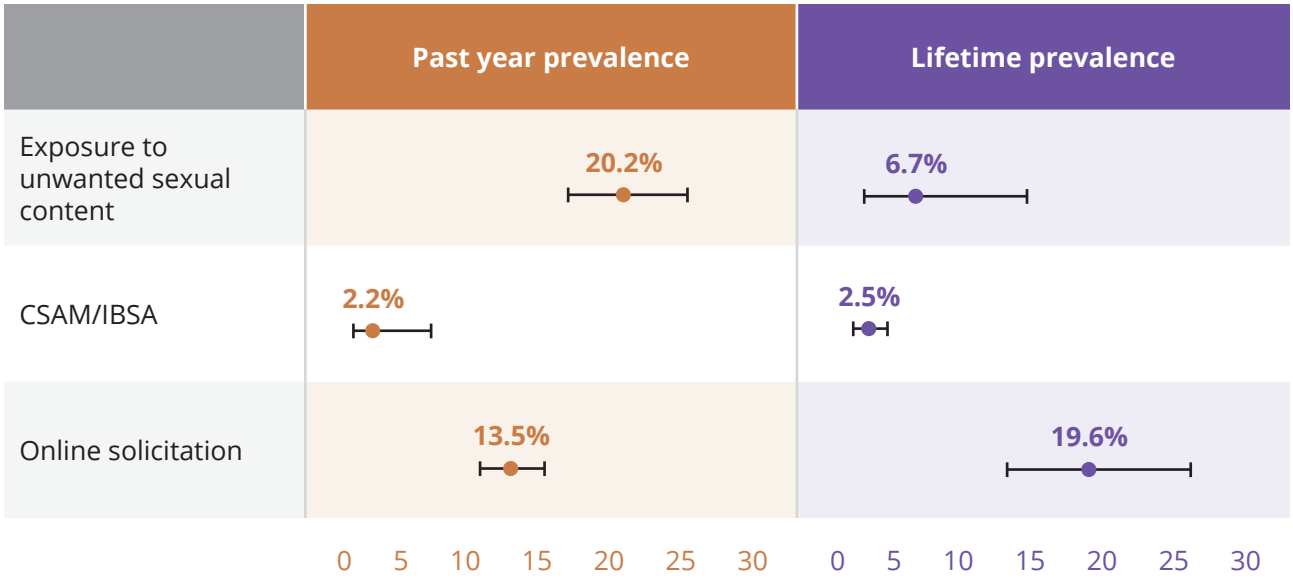
Three TF-CSEA subtypes – online solicitation, child sexual abuse material/image-based sexual abuse (CSAM/IBSA), exposure to unwanted sexual content – were relatively well represented by data sources and had good geographical coverage. Online solicitation included a range of behaviours such as grooming, sexual harassment, online solicitation, or any other form of coerced sexual interactions. Those may include casual sexual inquiries via mobile phone or the internet, as well as long-lasting sexual conversations that can lead to the exchange of sexual pictures/videos, or exposure of intimate body parts/engaging in cybersex (no money exchange or threats involved).

CSAM/IBSA refers to non-consensual making, taking or sharing of images or videos of a child. 'Self-generated' sexual material by children (sometimes coerced, sometimes not) is also classified as CSAM/IBSA under most laws, because minors cannot consent. Considering the survey data, there is still limited contextual information about non-consensual sharing, which makes it difficult to determine that the child produced the images that were shared without their permission.

Exposure to unwanted sexual content includes the unwanted exposure of a child to pornographic material (e.g., forcing a child to watch nude videos or pictures, sending a child a link to pornographic websites). This type of TF-CSEA does not imply intentional adult content seeking and consumption among young people. However, we included involuntary exposure to this type of content that occurs when a child is using social media or scrolling through various websites, as it indicates harms caused by service negligence and goes beyond clear perpetrator-focused considerations.

Figure 6 presents the prevalence estimates of three TF-CSEA subtypes within the region, for which sufficient data sources were available. A total of 41 studies reported prevalence estimates of online solicitation covering 19 countries in Western Europe. For studies reporting lifetime (before the age of 18) exposure to online solicitation, an average prevalence of 19.6% (95% CI: 13.7% to 27.1%) was estimated. The prevalence estimate for studies reporting past year experiences of online solicitation was 13.5% (95% CI: 11.3% to 16.0%). This subtype of TF-CSEA was well represented by data sources for both lifetime (14 studies) and past year recall (27 studies) and showed good geographical coverage.

FIGURE 6 Prevalence estimates of TF-CSEA in Western Europe from representative surveys, by subtype and recall period



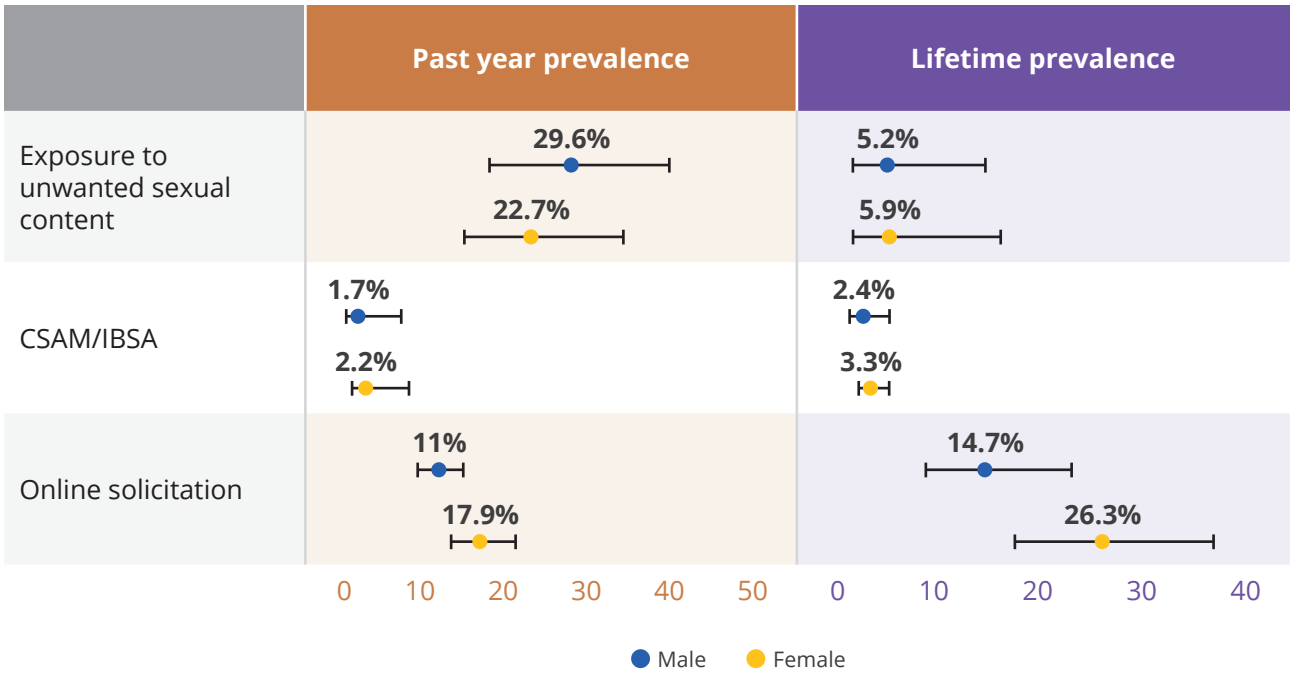
The error bars ⊢⊣ show the uncertainty around each point estimate (95% confidence interval).

Source: Systematic review and meta-analysis of studies published between 2011-2024 (past year) and 2011-2025 (lifetime); studies conducted between 2008 and 2023 (past year recall) and 2009 and 2024 (lifetime).

Prevalence estimates of online solicitation for males and females were reported in 33 studies covering 18 countries. For studies reporting lifetime (before the age of 18) exposure to online solicitation, prevalence estimates of 14.7% (95% CI: 8.9% to 23.2%) and 26.3% (95% CI: 17.8% to 37.1%) were estimated for males and females, respectively (see Figure 7). The prevalence estimates for studies reporting past year experiences of online solicitation were 11% (95% CI: 8.5% to 14.1%) and 17.9% (95% CI: 14.4% to 22.0%) for males and females, respectively. These findings suggest that more females than males may be affected by this type of technology-facilitated sexual harm, although recognising the estimates for most sub-types are close in prevalence.

In total, 15 studies conducted across 11 countries reported prevalence estimates of child sexual abuse material/image-based sexual abuse (CSAM/IBSA) in Western Europe. Of these, 12 studies focused on reporting lifetime (before the age of 18) experiences and 5 studies reported past year experiences of this TF-CSEA subtype.

FIGURE 7 Prevalence estimates of TF-CSEA in Western Europe from representative surveys, by subtype, sex and recall period



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

Source: Systematic review and meta-analysis of studies published between 2011-2024 (past year) and 2011-2025 (lifetime); studies conducted between 2008 and 2023 (past year recall) and 2009 and 2024 (lifetime).

For studies reporting lifetime (before the age of 18) exposure to CSAM/IBSA, an average prevalence of 2.5% (95% CI: 1.5% to 3.9%) was estimated. The estimate for studies reporting past year prevalence was 2.2% (95% CI: 0.7% to 6.4%). Of the 15 studies that collected data on CSAM/IBSA, 12 studies covering 10 countries reported prevalence estimates disaggregated by sex. For studies reporting lifetime recall of CSAM/IBSA, average prevalences of 2.4% (95% CI: 1.2% to 4.9%) and 3.3% (95% CI: 2.2% to 5.0%) were estimated for males and females, respectively. The prevalence estimates for studies reporting past year experiences of CSAM/IBSA were 1.7% (95% CI: 0.4% to 7.1%) and 2.2% (95% CI: 0.6% to 7.8%) for males and females, respectively. Although more females than males seem to be exposed to this type of violence, the observed difference is relatively small, for both lifetime and past year recall.

Prevalence estimates of exposure to unwanted sexual content were reported in 46 studies covering 25 Western European countries. Of these, most of the studies (n=36) collected data on past year experiences, covering 25 countries, and 10 studies reported lifetime (before the age of 18) experiences, with coverage across seven countries. For studies reported lifetime (before the age of 18) exposure to unwanted sexual content, an average prevalence of 6.7% (95% CI: 2.9% to 14.8%) was estimated. The estimate for studies reporting the past year prevalence was 20.2% (95% CI: 16.2% to 24.9%). Of these 46 sources, 19 studies from 15 countries reported data disaggregated by sex. For studies reported lifetime (before the age of 18) exposure to unwanted sexual content, average prevalences of 5.2% (95% CI: 1.8% to 14.6%) and 5.9% (95% CI: 2.0% to 16.3%) were estimated for males and females, respectively. The prevalence estimates for studies reporting past year experiences were 29.6% (95% CI: 19.8% to 41.8%) and 22.7% (95% CI: 14.4% to 33.9%) for males and females, respectively. The past year sex differences are in line with the existing research, suggesting that generally more males than females are exposed to unwanted sexual images and videos. The overall and sex-disaggregated estimates for studies reporting the past year prevalence were considerably higher than for the lifetime estimate. This could potentially be explained by the recall bias – an information bias that occurs when respondents are asked to recall events in the past. For example, participants are likely to recall recent experiences more accurately than those that occurred longer ago. Alternatively, the variation may reflect conceptual or methodological differences across studies or a cohort effect, whereby different age groups or generations are exposed to varying levels of risk or report experiences differently. A limited number of studies reported prevalence estimates of online sexual exploitation and sexual extortion. Therefore, those figures are not presented in this thematic report. More research is needed to explore the scale and risk factors of exposure to these two forms of violence against children.

Policing data

In our dedicated deep dive into publicly available policing data, six countries were purposefully selected in Western Europe including: England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Sweden, and Poland.

In Western Europe, police data on CSEA is consistently available, but differs in scope and recording practices across countries. England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland publish annual police data on CSEA cases, with England and Wales providing the most detailed outcome statistics, including prosecution rates and alternative case outcomes. Scotland and Northern Ireland also offer data on cases against children, although no prosecution data were available. Sweden's data include case numbers and prosecution rates, but lack detailed breakdowns of non-prosecuted cases. In Poland, police publish some of the CSEA case numbers and 'confirmed crimes', as a proxy for prosecution rates, but do not provide comprehensive outcome statistics. While all six countries make some police data publicly available, differences in counting rules, outcome classifications, and the timing of offence recording limit comparability (see section 4.1).

Because each country counts and records cases differently, it is not possible to make fair comparisons between them. Talking about the numbers side by side could even be misleading. That is why in this report we do not discuss country-by-country results. If you are interested in seeing the available data, you can explore it in our online Interactive Index Dashboard [**see the Dashboard**].

Child helpline data

Through our partnership with Child Helpline International, we analysed child helpline data for 24 countries in Western Europe including Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (UK). Sweden and Malta are members of CHI but did not report CSEA for 2023 and thus are not included in the analysis. Sweden and Malta are members of CHI but did not report CSEA for 2023 and thus are not included in the analysis. We recognize that there may be more child helplines operating within this region. Our first step in exploring child helpline data has been to work with CHI and the data that is reported to them by individual child helpline members in Western Europe and South Asia. This data is what is represented in this report. In future, we would like to expand the data that is reported from other countries that have a child helpline; in order to enhance data reporting for the ITL Index.

With child helpline data, we present child helpline tags or how the child helpline staff document the call (which can be calls, text or other forms of communication) within their data system and then how this is reported in a standard template to CHI. Child helpline data provide a critical, but still emerging, source of evidence on CSEA. The number of contacts tagged as CSEA can be influenced by many factors, including whether child helplines have formal tagging systems aligned with CHI categories, the consistency of tagging practices by staff, and how local categories are defined. In some cases, low or zero counts may reflect differences in categorisation or

reporting rather than an absence of contacts related to CSEA. These figures, therefore, represent both practice in data documentation and, where alignment is strong, the scale of concerns within the broader set of violence-related calls. While this highlights important limitations, it also underscores the value of documenting and strengthening child helpline data as a key source that has rarely been systematically analysed. We see this as a starting point for building harmonised minimum data standards and supporting child helplines to operationalise them across diverse contexts, recognising the leadership role child helplines already play in responding to children's needs.

In 2023, Western Europe recorded 243,204 child helpline tags under the category of violence, of which 33,261 (13.7%) were related to CSEA. In Western Europe, the country with the highest number of CSEA tags is the Netherlands (7,117 tags). The country with the lowest number of CSEA tags is Cyprus one tag. The country with the highest proportion of CSEA in its violence category is Norway at 40.6% (1,215 CSEA tags out of 2,990 violence tags). The country with the lowest proportion of CSEA in the violence category is Latvia at 6% (141 CSEA tags out of 2,337 violence tags).

For Western Europe, within the CSEA category (33,261 tags), sexual violence (offline) had the highest number of tags (27,003), which is 81.2% of CSEA. TF-CSEA was tagged 5,769 times, which is 17.2% of CSEA. Commercial sexual exploitation (offline) was tagged 489 times, which is 1.5% of CSEA. Therefore, it would appear that contact sexual abuse is more commonly tagged than technology-facilitated or in-person commercial exploitation. However, the caveat is that what is being measured is tagging by child helpline staff (which occurs when callers contact the child helpline and counsellors record the issues that are mentioned), thus this number is indicative of the magnitude of categories of CSEA, but not the prevalence.

In Western Europe, the country with the highest number of sexual violence (offline) tags is the Netherlands with 5,819 tags. The country with the highest number of TF-CSEA tags is the UK with 2,095 tags. The country with the highest number of commercial sexual exploitation (offline) tags is Ireland with 227 tags.

Barring the countries which report zero for sexual violence (offline), TF-CSEA and commercial sexual exploitation (offline), the country with the lowest number of sexual violence (offline) tags is Cyprus with one tag. The country with the lowest number of TF-CSEA tags is Greece with 11 tags. The country with the lowest number of commercial sexual exploitation (offline) tags is Portugal with one tag.

In relation to the highest proportion of sexual violence (offline) in CSEA in each country, the countries with the highest proportion are Belgium (534 tags), Cyprus (one tag), Finland (256 tags) and France (3,515 tags), which is 100% of CSEA for each country. This means that there were no tags for TF-CSEA or commercial sexual exploitation (offline) for these countries. This may be due to the child helpline categorisations, which do not always match CHI's categories and, thus, child

helplines are aggregating data into one category. Or it may be that only sexual violence (offline) was observed.

Barring the countries with 100% sexual violence (offline); Portugal has the largest proportion with 41 tags out of 42 CSEA tags; making sexual violence (offline) 97.6% of the CSEA category.

Barring the countries with 0% sexual violence (offline), Luxembourg has the lowest proportion with 18 tags out of 65 CSEA tags; making sexual violence (offline) 27.7% of the CSEA category.

In relation to the highest proportion of TF-CSEA in CSEA in each country, the country with the highest proportion is Luxembourg with 47 TF-CSEA tags out of 65 CSEA tags, which is 72.3%. Add the following sentence to close the paragraph: Barring the countries with 0% TF-CSEA, Spain has the lowest proportion with 218 tags out of 3,361 CSEA tags, making TF-CSEA 6.5% of the CSEA category.

In relation to the highest proportion of commercial sexual exploitation (offline) in each country, the country with the highest proportion is Ireland with 227 commercial sexual exploitation (offline) tags out of 339 CSEA tags, which is 67%.

Barring the countries with 0% commercial sexual exploitation (offline), Poland has the lowest proportion with 2 tags out of 1,237 CSEA tags, making commercial sexual exploitation (offline) 0.2% of the CSEA category.

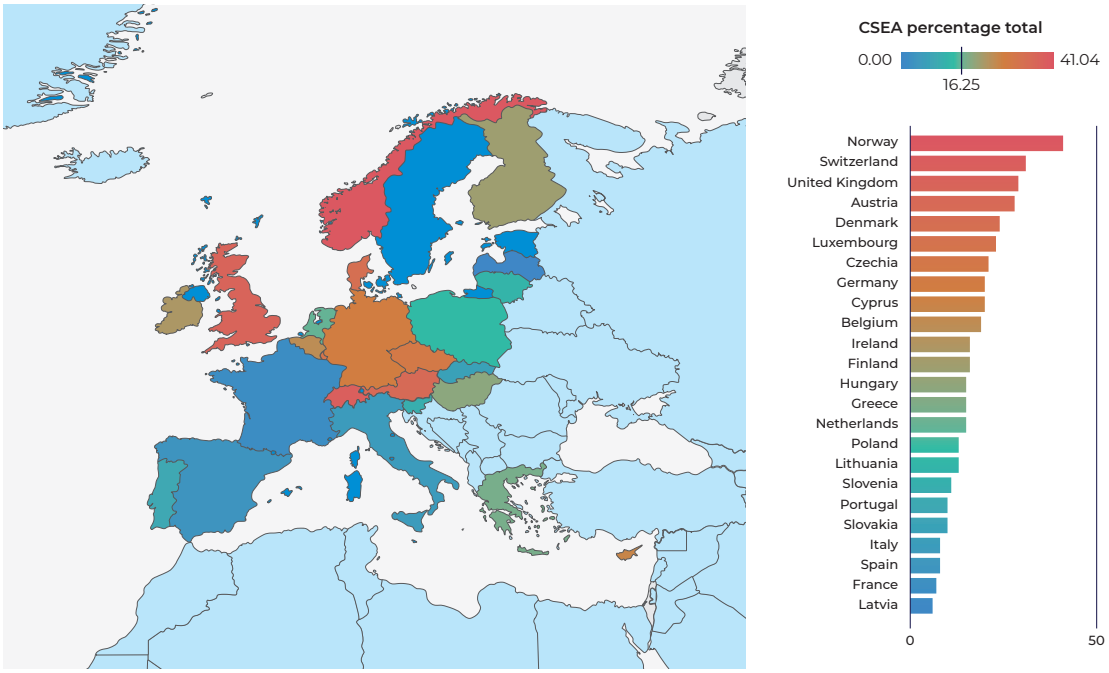
Regarding the countries which report zero, Ireland reports zero for sexual violence (offline). Cyprus, Portugal, Finland, Belgium and France report zero for TF-CSEA. Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Luxembourg, Norway, Slovenia, Switzerland and the UK report zero for commercial sexual exploitation (offline). A report of zero does not necessarily mean that there were zero contacts related to these categories, but similar to the countries which have 100% in one category, this may be due to tagging practices and/or harmonisation across conceptual and definitional reporting to CHI. More research is needed in this area.

Figure 8 shows the percentage of CSEA occurring within the violence category. The proportion of CSEA in the violence category ranges from 6% in Latvia to Norway at 40.6%.

Child sexual abuse material

CSAM in Western Europe remains high, compared to other UNICEF regions, when looking at both the data on hosting CSAM (the location of the server making the CSAM available globally) and the reported possession, distribution and creation of this content. This is evidenced by the data collected between 2018 and 2022 from data owners C3P, INHOPE and IWF, as presented in ITL Index 2024 (Childlight, 2024). This

FIGURE 8 The proportion (percentage) of contacts tagged as CSEA within all violence related contacts to child helplines, 2023



Source: Child Helpline International (2023).

Note: Created by Childlight using country-level data on the percentage of CSEA within the violence category. Percentages indicate the share of CSEA-related contacts within the total number of violence-related contacts in each country.

remained the case in both 2023 (52.8%) and 2024 (73.7%), when, according to INHOPE data, Western Europe hosted the majority of CSAM in both years. Additionally, data from CRC noting the number of Internet Protocol (IP) addresses (unique identifying numbers assigned to all devices that connect to the internet, including phones, laptops, tablets, modems and servers) in possession of CSAM also found Western Europe to be the region with the largest volume of IP addresses possessing CSAM. CSAM rate changes year on year can be influenced by many factors including actual increases/decreases, better detection, changes in organisational counting/detection, changes in legislative landscapes, among other factors. More research is needed at a national level to better understand what might influence changes in a particular direction.

The CSAM rate is a measure that looks at CSAM availability for countries by its population. 'Availability' refers to CSAM that has been reported from this country and CSAM that is being hosted within the country. Reports from NCMEC refer to the likely place of abuse or location of reporting source as provided by companies to NCMEC. Whereas hosting concerns the location of the server where the content is stored electronically (please refer to the Technical Note for more details). The CSAM rate for Western Europe varied from 5.4 reports/notices per 10,000 people in San Marino to just over 880 reports/notices per 10,000 people in the Netherlands, according to the 2024 data. This was an increased range from the year prior, which saw a lower bound of 6 reports/notices per 10,000 people in Ireland and a higher bound of just over 172 reports/notices per 10,000 people in the Netherlands.

TABLE 1 Calculated CSAM rate per 10,000 people for countries in UNICEF Classified Region of Western Europe, 2023–2024

Countries in Western Europe	CSAM rate 2023	CSAM rate 2024
Andorra	32.0	12.9
Austria	21.5	30.9
Belgium	36.0	22.9
Cyprus	56.4	42.6
Czechia	34.0	26.9
Denmark	20.0	17.5
Estonia	39.2	40.2
Finland	31.0	55.2
France	49.9	28.3
Germany	24.5	29.3
Gibraltar	38.4	23.9
Greece	24.4	16.7
Belgium	36.0	22.9
Hungary	26.6	34.8
Iceland	33.5	44.0
Ireland	6.0	53.5
Italy	15.0	22.6
Latvia	48.7	72.1
Liechtenstein	8.0	11.5
Lithuania	44.0	190.0
Luxembourg	125.7	186.3
Malta	32.0	22.9
Monaco	78.0	29.5
Netherlands	172.1	880.9
Norway	26.5	44.5
Poland	28.0	21.6
Portugal	44.0	25.7
San Marino	11.0	5.4
Slovakia	74.0	193.7
Slovenia	29.8	22.2
Spain	21.9	14.9
Sweden	36.8	95.2
Switzerland	56.8	21.5
United Kingdom	27.2	41.8

Source: Childlight CSAM rate calculated using INHOPE (INHOPE, 2023, 2024)
NCMEC Cybertipline Country reports (NCMEC, 2023a, 2024a) (see Technical Note).

Note: CSAM rate was calculated as follows: Sum of reports from INHOPE and NCMEC/regional population per 10,000; see UNICEF Regional Classifications (UNICEF, 2023b) for classification of Western Europe.

Shining a light on the Netherlands: The critical lever for understanding and change

The Netherlands accounts for a disproportionate amount of CSAM hosting both regionally and globally; with over 60% of all CSAM from Western Europe and over 30% of all CSAM globally hosted in the Netherlands, according to reports by INHOPE and IWF. Not only is the volume of CSAM stored on servers in the Netherlands the highest in the region, but, when looking at the CSAM rate or the number of reports/notices per 10,000 population, the Netherlands is also proportionally the highest for the region. The CSAM rate is 880.9 reports/notices per 10,000 population, which is much higher than the regional rate of 73 reports/notices per 10,000 population in Western Europe. This rate considers not only the hosting of CSAM but also the number of reports that are sent to the country concerning CSAM.

Several factors may underpin this pattern, including the country's role as a global hub for data centres and internet exchange points, the scale and openness of its hosting market, and potential differences in hosting business models or takedown procedures. Legal and regulatory frameworks may also shape both the speed of content removal and the visibility of CSAM in monitoring data, while strong detection partnerships could amplify reporting compared to countries with weaker monitoring capacity.

A key next step for research would be to investigate these hypotheses systematically, comparing the Netherlands with other major hosting hubs. Future studies could examine relative prevalence (i.e., CSAM as a proportion of overall hosting), evaluate industry practices and takedown responsiveness, and analyse the influence of regulatory environments and detection partnerships. Such research would clarify whether observed concentrations reflect genuine hosting patterns, reporting biases, or structural features of the global internet infrastructure.

Recent changes in legislation in both the European Union (Digital Services Act) and in the Netherlands (Administrative law approach to online child pornography material Act), which specifically target the removal of CSAM, provide the backing for greater safeguarding efforts in the country. The impact of this legislation will need to be monitored moving forward, as we have seen with other legislation enacted in countries there is an anticipated increase in the number of hosting notices sent following enactment. This is further bolstered by the recent addition of a Netherlands regulator to the Global Online Safety Regulatory Network, a group which looks to ensure that online safety is achieved globally. These elements, specific legislation and a regulatory body, are present in countries which are known to purposefully address the matter of online child safety, such as the United Kingdom and Australia.

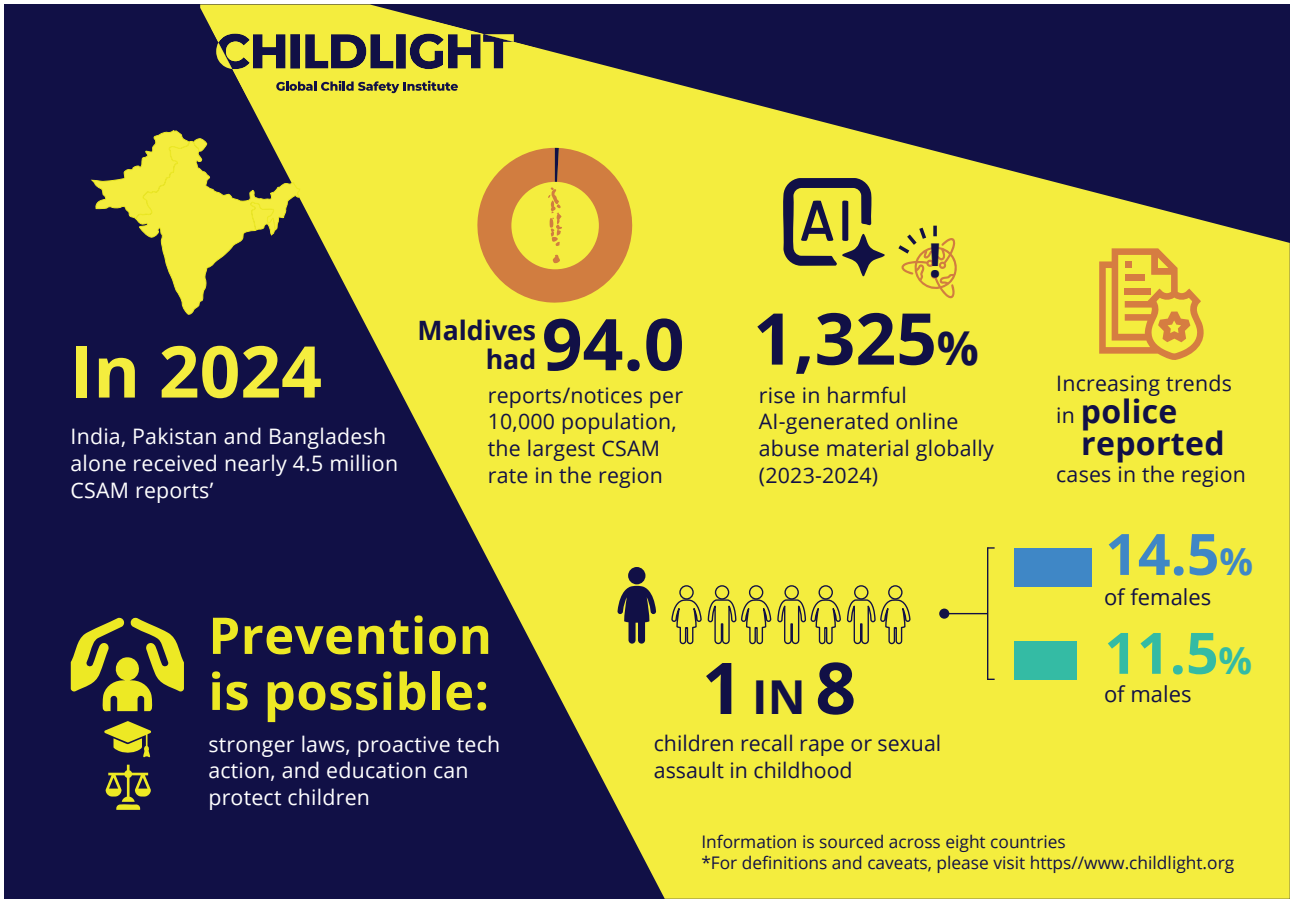
In 2025 Dutch police were able to shut down a large hosting company which was making illegal content available including CSAM (Mous, 2025). Tackling CSAM where the data is disproportionate offers an unprecedented opportunity to both investigate underlying causes and to potentially protect children at scale and to turn the tide on this global challenge.

1.4 CSEA in South Asia

Summary of key findings

The online Interactive Index Dashboard [**see the Dashboard**] accompanying ITL Index 2025 contains the full set of country-level indicators and data for South Asia. In this STAR, we bring together highlights from across the region to show how individual country findings connect to wider regional patterns. Compared with Western Europe, South Asia has significantly fewer data resources on CSEA, and this gap is reflected in the analysis that follows. Highlighting these limitations is important for understanding both the findings presented here and the priorities for strengthening future measurement. The regional perspective in this chapter provides additional context for the country-level patterns visible in the dashboard and helps identify shared challenges and opportunities for action. In future years, this combined STAR and dashboard approach will be extended to other regions, creating a more complete set of regional and global indicators and prevalence estimates. For 2025, South Asia and Western Europe are the first two regions to undergo this deeper, dual-format analysis.

FIGURE 9 CSEA in South Asia in numbers, ITL 2025 Index Data



Prevalence of rape or sexual assault

There are very few representative population surveys that include questions on CSEA in the region, either offline CSEA or TF-CSEA.

Based on six studies from Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Bangladesh. An estimated 12.5% (95% CI: 0% to 32.9%) of children in South Asia have reported experiencing rape or sexual assault in their lifetime before the age of 18. It is important to note that this estimate includes a wide interval of prevalence among underlying studies underscoring the high uncertainty of this estimate. Among females, the estimated prevalence is 14.5%, with very high levels of uncertainty from 0% to 47.2%, reflecting the variation across studies. Among males, the estimated rate is 11.5% (95% CI: 2.2% to 20.7%).

These figures suggest that within the lifetime before the age of 18 of children in South Asia, rape or sexual assault is being reported in existing survey data, and both males and females are at risk of these types of sexual violence. However, these prevalence rates are not likely to accurately represent the true scale of abuse, due to the lack of high-quality, representative survey data on CSEA in South Asia, making it difficult to fully understand the scope and nature of abuse children face with any certainty. Other recently published estimates for South Asia present important findings for an often-underrepresented region in data (e.g., see UNICEF, 2024 and Cagney et al., 2025). One of the challenges of data in this region and prevalence estimation efforts is that they often extrapolate from 'proximal' countries where country data is unknown or missing. These findings underscore the urgent need for stronger data collection across the region.

Prevalence of technology-facilitated CSEA

Our systematic review found only five representative surveys that reported data disaggregated by TF-CSEA subtypes in the South Asia region. Of those, two were conducted in India, two in Sri Lanka and one in Pakistan. The most frequently reported forms of harm were CSAM/IBSA (four studies) and exposure to unwanted sexual content (three studies).

Policing data

Three countries in the South Asia region were covered in our deep dive into policing data including India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In South Asia, the availability of police data on CSEA varies significantly across the three countries reviewed. India publishes national police data on CSEA, including annual case numbers and some outcome statistics, such as prosecution and conviction rates, although detailed breakdowns of alternative case outcomes are not available. In Pakistan, no routinely published official police data exists; instead, partial information is accessible through the reports of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which obtain provincial police data via formal information requests. This data, while valuable, is limited in terms of its consistency and completeness across years, provinces and territories. In contrast, Afghanistan has no publicly available police data on CSEA, preventing any systematic measurement through this source. These differences in data availability and recording systems highlight substantial gaps and inconsistencies in the region, limiting comparability and comprehensive analysis.

Because each country counts and records cases differently, it is not possible to make fair comparisons between them. Talking about the numbers side by side could even be misleading. That is why in this report we do not discuss country-by-country results. If you are interested in seeing the available data, you can explore it in our online Interactive Index Dashboard [**see the Dashboard**].

Child helpline data

Three countries in South Asia reported their child helpline data to CHI for the year 2023. They are the Republic of Maldives (the Maldives), Nepal and Pakistan. Although Nepal is a member of CHI, it did not report on violence or CSEA in 2023 and, thus, is not included in the analysis.

We acknowledge that additional child helplines may be operating in this region beyond those represented here. For this initial step, our analysis draws on the data collated by CHI from the individual child helplines that report into its system. Over time, we aim to broaden this coverage by incorporating data from a wider range of countries and strengthening child helpline contributions to the Into the Light Index.

In this report, we present child helpline data based on the way staff tag and document calls (or in some cases texts and other forms of communication) within their internal systems, and how these are subsequently reported through CHI's standardised template. Child helpline data represent an important, but still developing, source of evidence on CSEA. The number of contacts recorded as CSEA can be influenced by multiple factors, including whether child helplines have formal tagging procedures, whether CSEA is disaggregated from other forms of violence, whether particular subtypes are tagged separately, or whether no tagging system exists at all. As a result, low or zero figures may reflect differences

in categorisation or reporting practices rather than a true absence of CSEA-related contacts. Therefore, these numbers illustrate not only underlying caseloads, but also variations in practice and documentation. While such limitations must be kept in mind, the exercise is valuable: it highlights both the potential and the gaps in using child helpline data, and it underscores the need to build harmonised minimum data standards. Looking ahead, we see this as a starting point for supporting child helplines to operationalise more consistent approaches across diverse contexts, while recognising the vital role they already play in responding to children's needs.

In 2023, South Asia recorded 323 child helpline tags under the category of violence, of which 48 (14.9%) were related to CSEA. The country with the highest number of CSEA tags in South Asia is the Maldives (47). The country with the lowest number of CSEA tags is Pakistan (1). The country with the highest proportion of CSEA within the violence category is the Maldives at 16.3% (47 CSEA tags out of 288 violence tags). The country with the lowest proportion of CSEA within the violence category is Pakistan at 2.9% (1 CSEA tag out of 35 violence tags).

For South Asia, within the CSEA category, sexual violence (offline) had the highest number of tags (46), which is 95.8% of CSEA. TF-CSEA was 1 tag, which is 2.1% of CSEA, and commercial sexual exploitation (offline) was 1 tag, which is 2.1% of CSEA. Therefore, in South Asia, the majority of tags were in the sexual violence (offline) category.

The Maldives reported 1 tag of commercial sexual exploitation (offline) (2.1%), 1 tag of TF-CSEA (2.1%), and 45 tags of sexual violence (offline) (95.7%) (out of 47 CSEA tags). Thus, the largest proportion of tags in the Maldives were in the sexual violence (offline) category.

Pakistan only reported 1 tag of sexual violence (offline), which represents 100% of the data.

The data and analysis most likely do not reflect the true scale of CSEA occurring in the Maldives and Pakistan. Instead, it may suggest that children, young people and those contacting child helplines on their behalf are not making full use of the child helplines or people may be unaware of child helplines. Moreover, child helplines may be unable to respond to all calls, emails etc. due to lack of resources, the categories used by individual child helplines may not tally with the categories used by CHI in its annual survey; and/or child helplines may not consistently record and report data broken down specifically for CSEA; among other potential explanations.

Shining a light on India: Leveraging data for protection

India stands out in South Asia for the breadth and depth of its available data on CSEA. It is one of the few countries in the region with multiple representative surveys covering both contact CSEA and TF-CSEA. Findings from a recent systematic review identified four studies providing prevalence estimates for rape or sexual assault experienced before the age of 18. Rates vary widely, from as low as 0.3% to as high as 35.3%, reflecting differences in study design, sampling and measurement tools (Bhilwar et al., 2015; Saha et al., 2014; Damodaran & Paul, 2017; Wilson et al., 2021). Unfortunately, a meta-analysis of these studies was not possible, because they use different definitions. Aligning future surveys to use similar instruments and measures would make it easier to compare findings across studies and strengthen the evidence base by providing an overall estimate across representative surveys.

India has also demonstrated a commendable level of transparency in its approach to police data, enabling stakeholders to monitor patterns, assess responses and identify gaps in protection systems (see text box in section 4 on 'Data Beacons: India's National Crime Records Bureau'). From this data, India like most other countries where we conducted a frontline data deep dive analysis, shows an increasing trend in the number of police recorded CSEA cases per 10,000 children under 18. What is promising is that India also shows an increasing prosecution rate for CSEA. This analysis is possible because India publicly reports crime statistics.

The country's leadership in publishing and archiving administrative crime statistics offers a valuable model for other child protection sectors. This is particularly relevant for the national child helpline, which has historically been a regional leader in service provision and a rich source of data on children's needs. Following organisational changes, India's helpline data is no longer shared publicly or reported to Child Helpline International. Drawing on the innovative approaches already used to make law enforcement data accessible to decision makers and researchers, the helpline could adopt similar best practices to ensure these important datasets remain available. Doing so would allow India to continue its leadership role in transparency, promote cross-sector learning and strengthen evidence-based responses to CSEA.

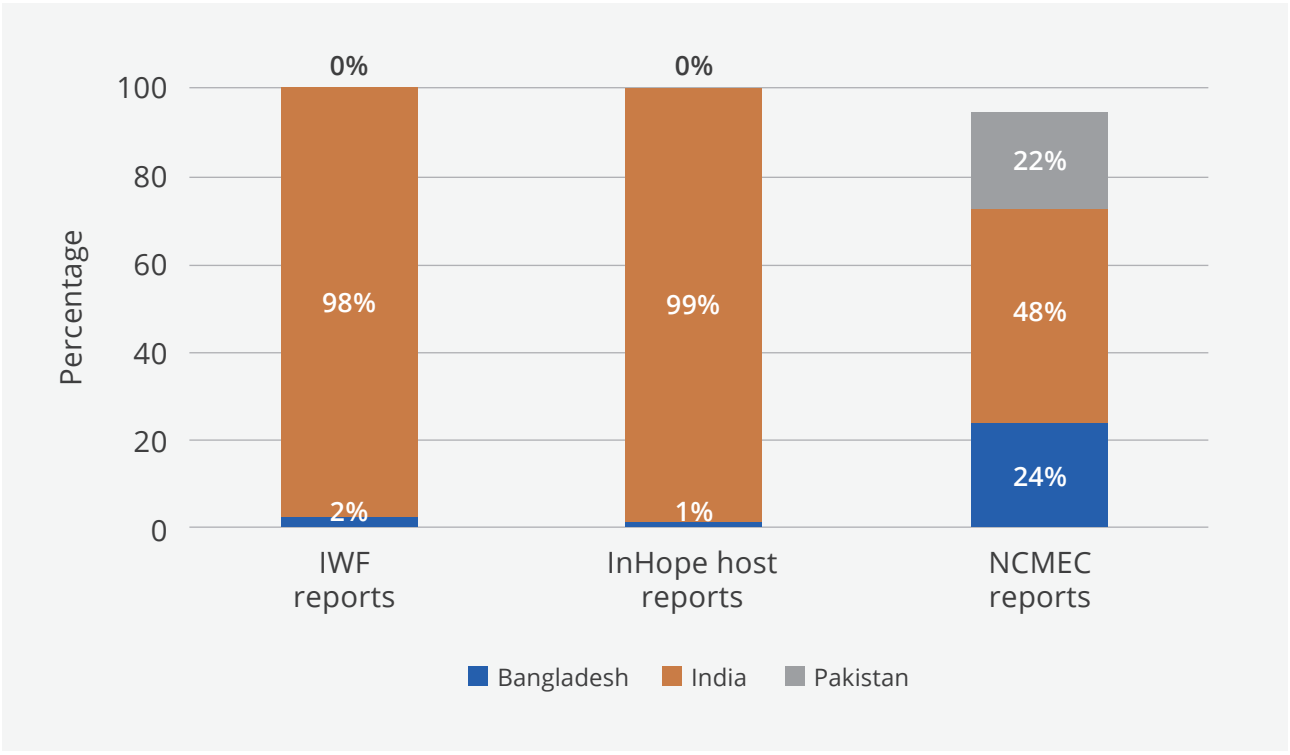
In terms of CSAM, India is widely recognised, both regionally and globally, for the high volume of reports/notices from within its borders. While the scale of this issue is concerning, the visibility of the data offers an opportunity to focus efforts on prioritising law enforcement responses and ensuring timely follow-up on reports. Importantly – and what ITL Index 2025 shows for the first time – is that when we look at the CSAM rate or the reports/notices per 10,000 population with 2024 data, India ranks the lowest or 8th out of the eight countries in the region.

In recent years India has worked to develop multiple services to support the removal of sexual images of children in India. The first is the 'Meri Trustline' supported by IWF, which acts in a manner similar to IWF's 'Report Remove'. Additionally, the 'Sahyog' Portal has been developed to automate the process of sending notices to intermediaries by the appropriate government or its agency under IT Act, 2000 to facilitate the removal or disabling of access to any information, data or communication link being used to commit an unlawful act. This brings together all authorised agencies in the country and all of the intermediaries in one platform to ensure immediate action against unlawful online information. In May 2025, all platforms operating in India have been mandated to register and report CSAM-related complaints to the Sahyog portal (I4C, MHA).

Child sexual abuse material

Regarding CSAM data in 2024, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan were the top three reporting countries for the South Asia region in terms of volume of reports: 2,252,986, 1,112,861, and 1,036,608, respectively. This is not surprising given the large population in these countries. Together these three countries accounted for nearly all of the NCMEC reports for South Asia, as well as all the IWF and INHOPE reports (see Figure 10). Noteworthy in the CSAM data for South Asia is the limited number of notices issued by IWF or INHOPE. FFor both 2023 and 2024, only two of the eight countries received any notices from either organisation suggesting we have limited knowledge on CSAM hosting in this region.

FIGURE 10 Percentages of the top 3 reporting countries in South Asia for each CSAM data source – IWF, INHOPE and NCMEC



Source: NCMEC (2024a); IWF (2025).

If we look at the CSAM rate, or the proportionality of CSAM per 10,000 people, the highest rate of CSAM in South Asia was in the Maldives, which had an overall CSAM rate of 94.0 reports/notices per 10,000 population in 2024, followed by Bangladesh with a rate of 64.1. Given the differences in population sizes, it is interesting to note the similarity between the CSAM rates in the Maldives and Bangladesh. In the mid-range of CSAM rates for the region was Pakistan with a rate of 41.3 and Bhutan with a CSAM rate of 41.0. The lowest rates of CSAM per 10,000 people were India with a rate of 15.5 and Nepal with a rate of 19.4.

Calculated CSAM rate per 10,000 people for countries in UNICEF Classified Region of South Asia, 2023–2024

Countries in South Asia	CSAM rate 2023	CSAM rate 2024
Afghanistan	47.5	28.9
Bangladesh	145.2	64.1
Bhutan	75.0	41.0
India	62.0	15.5
Maldives	158.4	94.0
Nepal	58.9	19.4
Pakistan	77.8	41.3
Sri Lanka	59.8	27.8

Source: Childlight CSAM rate calculated using INHOPE (INHOPE, 2023, 2024)
NCMEC Cybertipline Country reports (NCMEC, 2023a, 2024a, UN Population Data) (see Technical Note).

Note: CSAM rate was calculated as follows: Sum of reports from INHOPE and NCMEC/regional population per 10,000; see UNICEF Regional Classifications (UNICEF, 2023b) for classification of South Asia.

Shining a light on the Maldives: A small nation making a big difference

The Maldives stands out as having the highest rates of CSAM reports/notices among the countries in South Asia, with an overall CSAM rate of 94 reports/notices per 10,000 population. For context, the next closest CSAM rate is Bangladesh, which has a much higher population size, with a rate of 64.1 per 10,000 population.

The data concerning the CSAM rate in the Maldives was generated from NCMEC report data. As such, this points to the types of harms that are most often discovered by content moderators on their own platforms. The NCMEC data does not reference the hosting location of CSAM, as INHOPE and IWF data does, but focuses on the possession, creation and distribution of the reported CSAM. It is also important to note that during the period 2020 to 2024, the Child Rescue Coalition did not find any IPs in possession of CSAM in the Maldives, which would include IPs from devices that have connected to the peer-to-peer network while in the region.

It is also important to note that the Maldives does not currently have a hotline for reporting TF-CSEA or CSAM. However, it does have a child helpline as a support service to children, in which CSEA contacts represent 16.3% of all contacts related to violence (by children or others contacting the helpline on their behalf).

The Children's Ombudsperson's Office in the Maldives is a member of Childlight's Index Impact and Communications Working Group, collaborating over the course of the year to nationally validate data and ensure that findings from ITL Index 2025 are communicated in ways that drive national impact. Even before the launch of this report, the Ombudsperson worked to unite key stakeholders across government, law enforcement, child protection organisations and partners such as UNICEF to develop a comprehensive national impact plan from the Index data. This is a strong example of how a country, and a national institution can embrace evidence to create meaningful, context-specific change for children.

PART 2 Patterns beneath the data

This part takes a closer look at the patterns and contexts of CSEA in Western Europe and South Asia, breaking the data down to reveal important differences. It explores the continuum between online and offline abuse, showing how technology can intersect with in-person harm. Particular attention is given to familial CSEA (committed by a family member or relative), a form of abuse often hidden from view yet critical to understand, as well as to sex differences, for which prevalence, impact and disclosure patterns can vary significantly. This section also explores youth-produced imagery, a growing concern across countries, as highlighted by the data. By unpacking these dimensions, we aim to build a more complete picture of how CSEA manifests across the two regions, informing more targeted and effective prevention and response strategies.

2.1 Online-offline continuum: A focus on familial CSEA

Introduction

Child sexual abuse by family members is a serious and often hidden issue affecting many children globally. Studies suggest that family members are responsible for up to one third of all child sexual abuse cases, with fathers and stepfathers being the most common perpetrators in these situations (Mathews et al., 2024; Seto et al., 2015). Furthermore, research indicates that a notable share of CSAM is created and shared by those in positions of trust, particularly parents who abuse their own children (C3P, 2024). Despite how common this form of abuse is, many cases are never reported or identified. Children often stay silent because they fear the abuser, do not want to disrupt the family, blame themselves, or may not realise that what happened was abuse (Mathews et al., 2025; McPherson et al., 2025; Scott, 2018). These challenges highlight the urgent need for more research to better understand the global scale of this problem and inform prevention efforts.

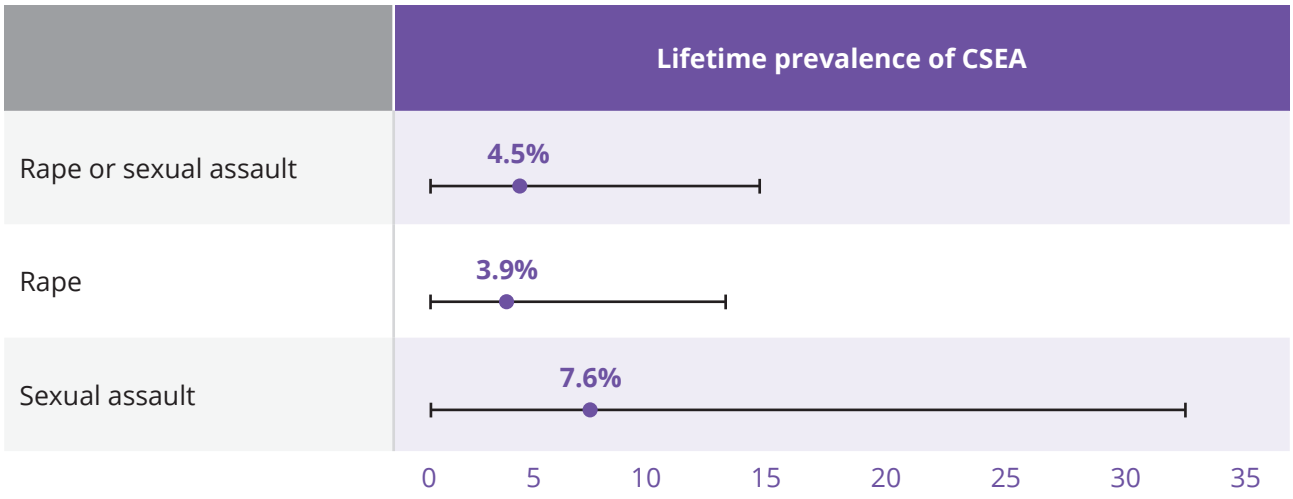
Findings

In Western Europe, six studies from seven countries were included to produce pooled lifetime before the age of 18 prevalence estimates of rape or sexual assault experienced before the age of 18, perpetrated by family members. Family members included parents, caregivers, siblings, grandparents and extended family such as uncles or aunts. While there was sufficient data to perform the analysis, it should be noted that very few studies captured or report data on perpetrators. Findings across four studies from Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom indicate that nearly 1 in 13 children or 7.6% (95% CI: 0%[1] to 32.5%) have reported experiencing sexual assault by a family member before the age of 18. Five studies from Germany, Ireland, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland reveal that 3.9% (95% CI: 0.0% to 12.7%) of children have reported experiencing rape by family members. While 4.5% (95% CI: 0.0% to 14.2%) reported either rape or sexual assault, including five studies from France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Slovenia (all estimates are presented in Figure 11). The wide range and uncertainty in our estimates reflects the limited number of studies available and perhaps the hidden nature of abuse within families.

1 Confidence intervals that include 0% reflect high uncertainty due to limited data, not a flaw in the analysis. The point estimate remains valid, but the range indicates that very low prevalence cannot be ruled out.

As these estimates are derived from general population samples with wide levels of uncertainty, they should be interpreted with caution, given the known barriers to disclosure and the underreporting of familial abuse in large-scale surveys.

FIGURE 11 Lifetime before the age of 18 prevalence of offline CSEA by family members in Western Europe

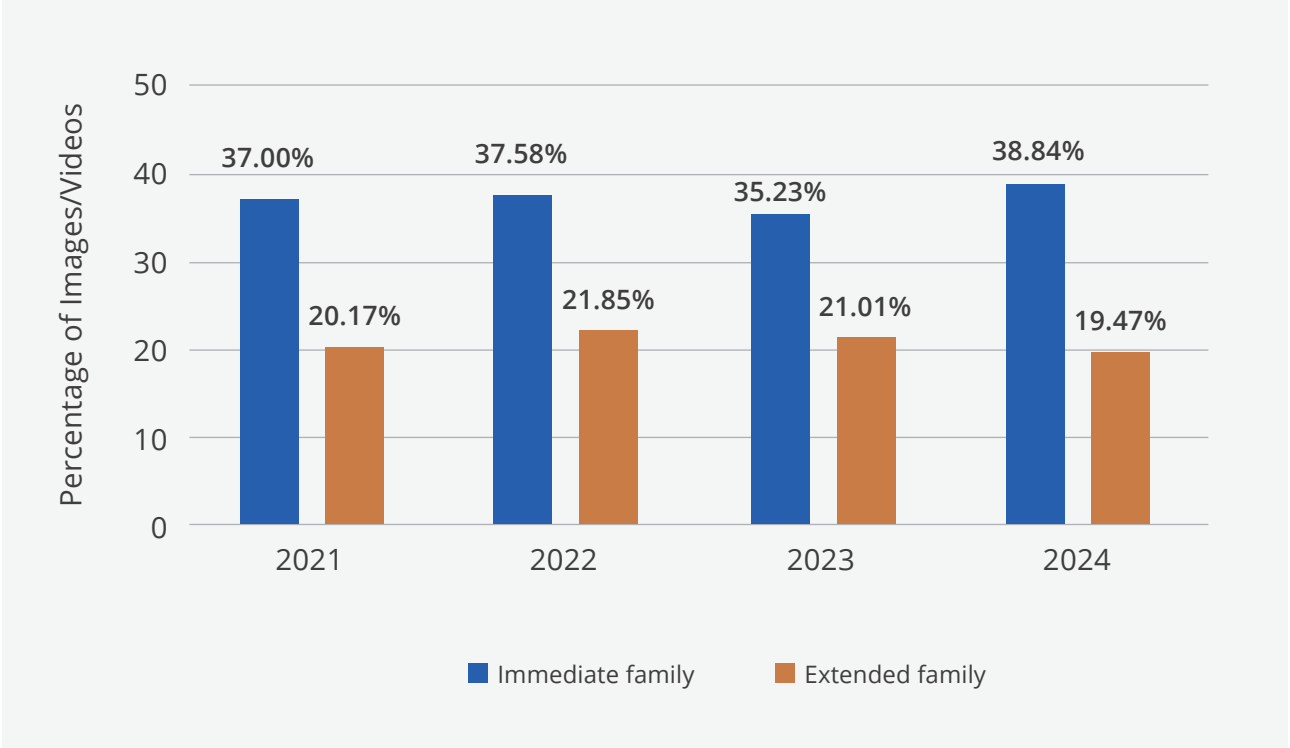


The error bars ⊢⊣ show the uncertainty around each point estimate (95% confidence interval).

> **Online offending and CSAM introduce complex new dimensions to intra-familial sexual victimisation.**
>
> Salter et al., 2021, p. 15

Data shown in Figure 12 was compiled using two separate yet connected reports by NCMEC and Thorn (NCMEC, 2024b; Thorn, 2025). The data highlights the relationship between suspected offenders and child victims in cases involving CSAM. In 2024, there was a notable increase in cases involving immediate family members, with fathers identified as primary offenders. This relationship classification is based on law enforcement records and confirmed victim identification processes that document the offender's connection to the child. However, many images lack sufficient contextual information to determine the identity of the offender. According to a NCMEC law enforcement enhanced dataset through their Child Victim Identification Program (CVIP) (NCMEC, 2024c), over 900,000 images were suspected to have been produced by fathers (see Figure 12). Of these, nearly half 430,106 of the images were identified as unique to the NCMEC dataset, indicating a large volume of newly produced material rather than recirculated content. It is important to note that big-data sources enhanced with law enforcement insights may capture certain abuse scenarios such as familial abuse more compared to other scenarios such as youth produced material. While this is an important finding from CSAM specific data, more research is still needed in this area.

FIGURE 12 Proportion (percentage) of CSAM produced by family members



Source: NCMEC (2024b); Thorn (2025).

Summary

The volume of CSAM produced by family members stands in contrast to lower prevalence rates reported in administrative records and survey data, and the low scale of youth produced images in CSAM data stands in contrast to high prevalence reported in surveys. More work is needed to better capture the diversity of perpetrator types in all CSEA data sources. Despite potential underreporting and disclosure, the findings from surveys in Western Europe reveal high rates of familial child sexual abuse, with nearly one in 13 children experiencing sexual assault by a family member.

Data also shows that familial CSEA may be associated with the production of CSAM. If we prevent familial CSEA, we may then also prevent a large proportion of newly created CSAM globally. Importantly, however, the dynamics of familial CSEA may differ between cases recorded and disseminated as CSAM and those that are not.

Familial child sexual abuse can lead to lasting trauma and multiple adverse long-term impacts for victims and survivors. As many victims/survivors do not disclose their experiences, the topic remains largely taboo (Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2019; Lateef et al., 2025). The lack of disclosure, along with cultural and methodological differences likely contributes to fewer studies disaggregating abuse by this perpetrator type (Alaggia et al., 2017).

2.2 Sex and gender differences in CSEA data

Introduction

In this report, we use the terms gender and sex to reflect the different ways information is collected across data sources. In survey research, participants typically self-report their gender, while in CSAM data, the sex of a child or perpetrator is visually assessed by analysts based on the child's visible sex characteristics. Using both terms together (gender and/or sex) acknowledges these methodological differences.

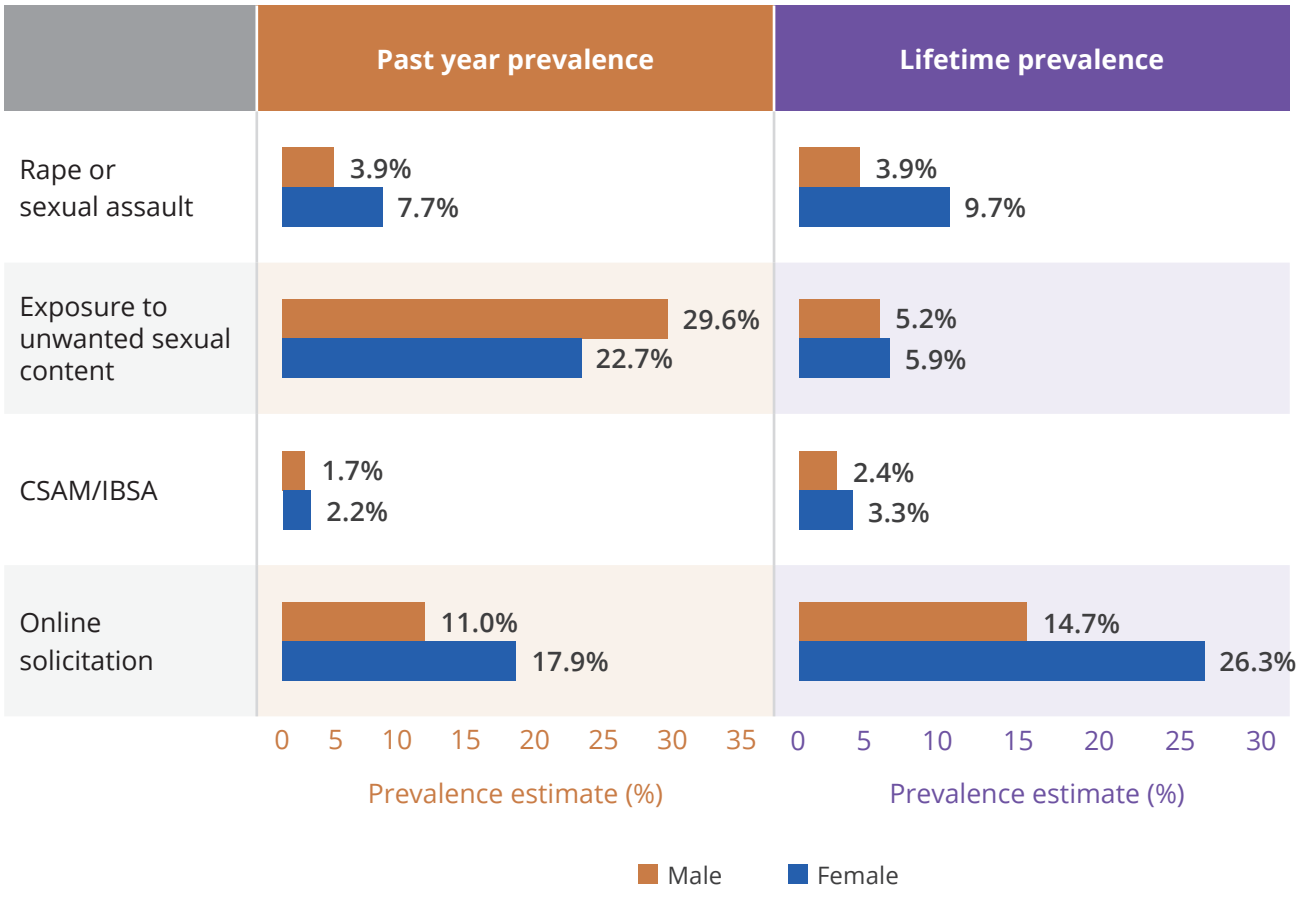
Gender and sex play a critical role in shaping patterns, experiences and responses to CSEA. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Piolanti et al., 2025 demonstrates that the likelihood of experiencing CSEA is significantly greater for females than males, with females facing approximately double the risk of victimisation. However, these estimates are influenced by significant restrictions, including insufficient reporting, incidents that have not been confirmed and the widespread social stigma associated with sexual abuse of males (Gray & Rarick, 2018). Furthermore, because a significant amount of the current literature on CSEA has concentrated on female survivors, methodological biases may be partly responsible for the apparent sex differences. Nevertheless, representative survey data from a systematic review and meta-analysis found no significant sex differences in technology-facilitated child sexual victimisation (Fry et al., 2025).

Current research frameworks often do not adequately measure gender in surveys or, if they do, they sometimes conflate questions with asking about both gender and biological sex in one question/construct. Childlight believes that we need to better measure both sex and gender in all data sources related to CSEA. In addition, currently used gender measures often rely on binary gender categories, which marginalise non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals. DeFrain and Demers (2025) highlight that non-binary individuals are simultaneously at high risk of sexual violence victimisation and unlikely to receive adequate post-assault care, partially due to societal perceptions of such individuals that do not align with stereotypical victim/survivor profiles. This exclusion perpetuates gaps in understanding the full spectrum of CSEA experiences and limits the development of inclusive prevention and response strategies.

Findings

The bar chart in Figure 13, illustrates sex disparities in the lifetime before the age of 18 and past year prevalence of various forms of CSEA, based on representative surveys that were conducted in Western Europe. Across most categories, female victims/survivors consistently report higher rates of victimisation than males, particularly in terms of lifetime experiences. The most pronounced sex gap in lifetime recalls appears in online solicitation, with 26.3% of female victims/survivors reporting experiences compared to 14.7% of male victims/survivors. In the past year recalls, the data reveal a similar pattern to lifetime recalls in most categories, although the sex gap is narrower. Interestingly, in the category of unwanted exposure to sexual images and videos, male victims/survivors report a higher prevalence than female victims/survivors for the past year, at 29.6% compared to 22.7% respectively.

FIGURE 13 Sex differences in the prevalence of CSEA in Western Europe, by subtype, sex and recall period

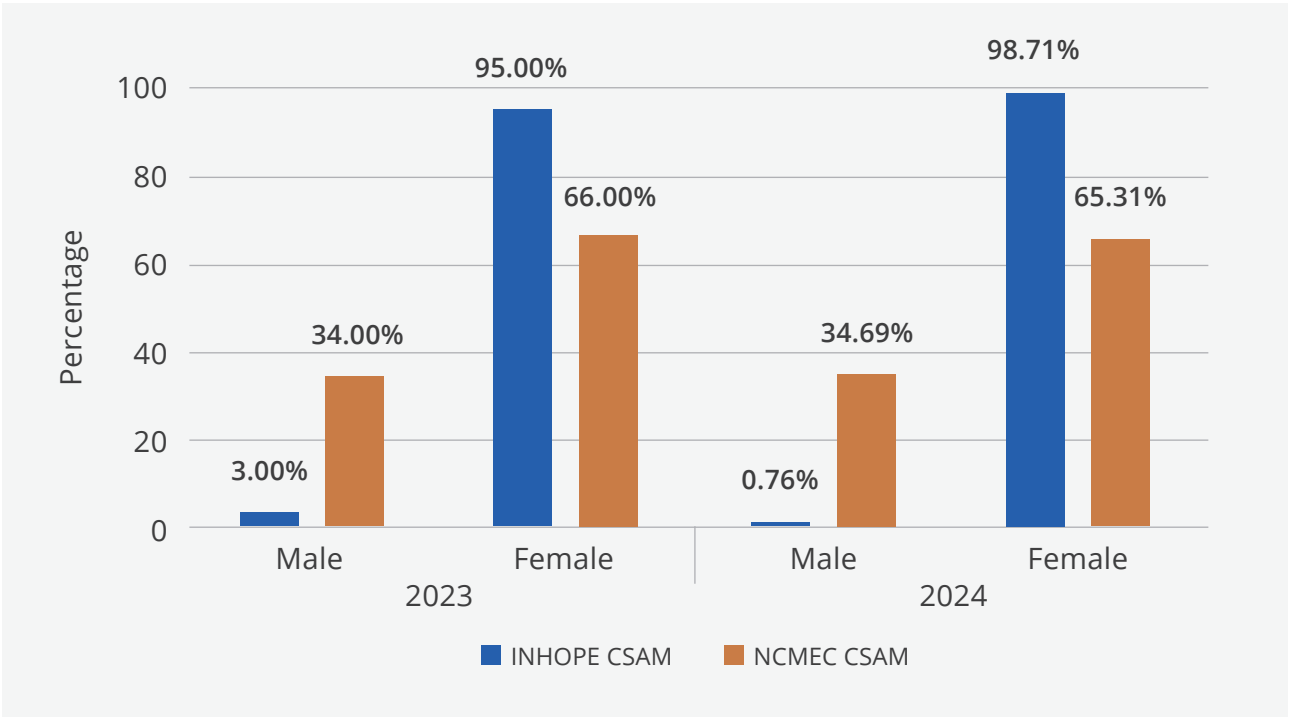


Source: Systematic review and meta-analysis of studies published between 2010 and 2024; studies conducted between 2008 and 2023.

In Figure 14, the bar chart presents the breakdown between sexes in CSAM reports submitted to NCMEC and INHOPE globally for the years 2023 and 2024. The data reveals a significant sex disparity across both platforms.

In both years, female victims/survivors account for the majority of CSAM reports to INHOPE, at 95% in 2023 and 98.7% in 2024. Notably the proportion to which female victims were portrayed differed by over 30%. This is likely influenced by the sample used for the NCMEC data which looked at cases which received law enforcement action, compared to the total image analysis completed by INHOPE member hotlines for all submitted CSAM. Like last year's Index (Childlight, 2024), the data is also heavily influenced by its reporting source: where NCMEC received largely mandated company/platform reports, INHOPE hotlines received reports from the public and through analyst identification. In contrast, the proportion of male victims/survivors declined significantly, dropping from 3% to 0.8% over the same period. In the NCMEC reports, the gender distribution of victim/survivor reports remained approximately the same between 2023 and 2024, with only slight changes of less than 1%. The representation of female victims/survivors decreased slightly from 66% in 2023 to 65.3% in 2024, while the proportion of male victims/survivors increased slightly from 34% in 2023 to 34.7% in 2024. The data may also be influenced by many other factors that are different between the global CSAM detection organisations which are documented further in the Technical Note.

FIGURE 14 Sex differences in the CSAM reports globally to INHOPE and NCMEC (2023–2024)



Source: Created by Childlight, based on the number of reports related to CSAM in 2023 and 2024, disaggregated by gender, based on data from INHOPE annual reports (INHOPE, 2023, 2024,) NCMEC OJJDP reports (2023, 2024).

Administrative data from police records in both Sweden (calendar years 2015–2024, running from January to December) and Northern Ireland (financial years 2014/15–2023/24, running from April to March) revealed a consistent sex and/or gender disparity in the reporting of sexual offences against children. Throughout these periods, female victims/survivors were consistently reported in greater numbers than male victims/survivors, highlighting persistent gender differences in official records of CSEA. However, many other countries in Western Europe and South Asia did not have publicly available sex or gender-disaggregated CSEA statistics.

Similarly, analysis of CHI 2023 data for ITL Index 2025, reinforces this trend. Of the data combined for Western Europe and South Asia for 2023, violence was tagged 243,527 times, out of which CSEA was tagged 33,309 times, making CSEA 13.7% of all violence. In the CSEA data, the most frequently tagged category was sexual violence (offline), which was tagged 27,049 times (81.2%), TF-CSEA 5,770 times (17.3%), and commercial sexual exploitation (offline) 490 times (1.5%).

In the CSEA data (33,309 tags), female victims/survivors were recorded 18,775 times (56.4%), while male victims/survivors were recorded 8,692 times (26.1%). Non-binary victims/survivors were recorded 260 times (0.8%) and victims/survivors of unknown gender 5,582 times (16.8%). Across all the CHI data categories for CSEA (commercial sexual exploitation [offline], sexual violence [offline], and TF-CSEA), females are tagged most frequently in every category.

For sexual violence (offline) (27,049 tags), females were recorded 16,160 times (59.7%), males 6,619 times (24.5%), non-binary 231 times (0.9%), and unknown 4,039 times (14.9%). For TF-CSEA (5,770 tags), females were recorded 2,348 times (40.7%), males 1,944 times (33.7%), non-binary 27 times (0.5%), and unknown 1,451 times (25.1%). For commercial sexual exploitation (offline) (490 tags), females were recorded 267 times (54.5%), males 129 times (26.3), non-binary 2 times (0.4%), and unknown 92 times (18.8%).

Although females make up the majority of contacts to child helplines, this does not necessarily correlate with females suffering more abuse than males. It may mean that they are more likely to contact child helplines. Help-seeking tends to be gendered in children, whereby patriarchal masculine traditions tend to preclude males from seeking help (Watling et al., 2021, p.11). Whereas females are more willing to recognise a need for help and "less afraid to share problems with others" (Franks & Medforth, 2005, p.79).

While these figures reflect the overall pattern, country-specific data may differ. Notably, ITL Index 2025 highlights that more male victims/survivors were tagged than female victims/survivors by child helplines in Slovakia, at 383 (male tags) and 292 (female tags), and Luxembourg, at 39 (male tags) and 26 (female tags). Lithuania had similar numbers for males and females: 201 male tags and 205 female tags.

> **The number of girl children being affected is disproportionately high. It is not that boys are not affected, boys also get affected, victimised, but like one in 10 or less than that. The seriousness with which the girl child problem is taken is not taken with boys.**

From a Childlight interview with a police representative in India

Summary

Across multiple data sources, including population-based surveys, police administrative records, child helplines and hotline reports, consistent sex and/or gender differences emerged in the prevalence and reporting of CSEA, however more work is needed to fully understand these differences. Notably, across the three data sources, reported (in the case of surveys and child helpline data) or assessed (in the case of big data), female victimisation may be higher than that reported or assessed for male victims/survivors. These findings underscore the gendered nature of CSEA and highlight the need for targeted prevention and support strategies that address the specific vulnerabilities and experiences of both male and female victims/survivors. This data also reports the need to enhance measures of sex and gender within existing data sources on CSEA.

2.3 Youth-produced images

Introduction

Youth-produced imagery is another complicated area within the field of data concerning CSEA, due to the varying purposes which it is produced for and how it is subsequently shared. Sexual images or videos that appear to be created by the child victim can be part of a consensual relationship with a peer, be produced upon direction by a perpetrator or be created as part of an instance of sexual extortion. There is emerging evidence that youth produced images are as harmful for children as adult produced images (Finklehor et al., 2023). While there may be some indication in the actual image or video as to the intended recipient, there is no concrete way in the reporting or analysis of this imagery to know who the intended recipient is with any certainty. As such, the data concerning this type of CSEA is highly fragmented, with certain data sources referring to individual elements of youth-produced imagery, rather than the whole collection of material labelled as youth-produced or 'self-generated'. Data for this type of content can be found in various reports of image-based abuse between peers, harmful sexual behaviour, sexual extortion or through the use of victim reporting services for image removal.

It is, therefore, essential that shared images are included within the definition of CSAM/IBSA. Once disseminated, such material escapes the control of the child and is vulnerable to redistribution, misuse, and integration into offender collections in ways indistinguishable from other CSAM. Excluding shared 'self-generated' content risks underestimating the scope of the problem and obscures the harms experienced by children when intimate material is used for exploitative purposes. Including these images within CSAM frameworks ensures more accurate prevalence estimates, enhances the coherence of child protection responses, and acknowledges the potential for re-victimisation and long-term exploitation.

Findings

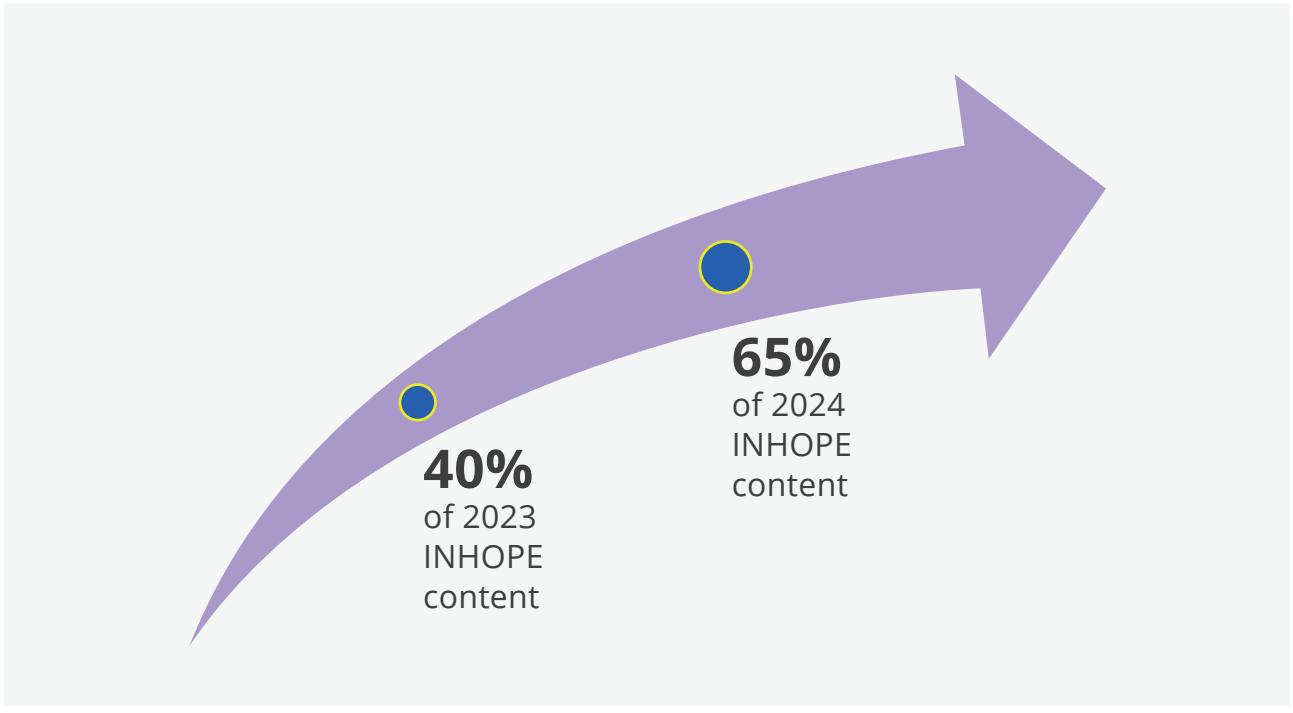
INHOPE's I 'see' Child Abuse Material (ICCAM) system receives analysed CSAM from over 50 different countries (and includes IWF). The data from ICCAM reports contains evidenced that the proportion of assessed content tagged as 'self-generated' increased from 2023 to 2024 (see Figure 15). This may signal a change in the appearance of CSAM, which was noted specifically by IWF in their 2024 Annual Report (IWF, 2025). Although they did not provide an assessment of 'self-generated' CSAM in 2024, in 2023 IWF found that over 80% of the images with the youngest child between 14 and 17 years old were 'self-generated'. In the 2024 report, they found a 35% increase from the previous year in the volume of CSAM with the

youngest child in the images between 14 and 15 years old, and a 67% increase in the number of received reports of CSAM with the youngest child in the images 16 or 17 years old. The overall proportion of post-pubescent images increased only 1% between 2023 and 2024. IWF also noted that of the reports assessed to be criminal in nature, 91% contained 'self-generated' imagery.

In addition to the increase in the amount of content featuring older children over time, which was found to be predominately 'self-generated', data is showing the trend in 'self-generated' material is not limited to older children. IWF's 2023 Annual Report (IWF, 2023) highlighted an increase in the number of reports featuring children between the age 7 and 10, which increased to 65% from 2022. This report also highlighted that the age group which had the largest number of images assessed to be self-generated was the 11 to 13 age group.

In 2023, the proportion of content labelled by all INHOPE analysts as 'self-generated' was just under 40% (39.8%). In 2024, this share rose to just over 65% (65.1%) of the assessed content that was tagged. This was accompanied by an increase in the total content assessed by the hotline network overall. Overall, these insights point to an increase in the volume and proportion of 'self-generated content', suggesting that more needs to be done to address the availability of this type of sexual material depicting children.

FIGURE 15 Increase in the proportion of self-generated images for 2023 and 2024 from INHOPE's global data year on year



Source: INHOPE annual reports (INHOPE, 2023, 2024).

Summary

‘Self-generated’ is not an exact measure of one specific type of harm, but rather a culmination of many types of image-based sexual exploitation that can occur. What is noteworthy is the increase in content that appears to be youth-produced. Furthermore, it points to the importance of creating safety measures on devices used by children, as these devices are the source of the generation of this sexual content. In recent years, there have been several awareness movements centred around the monitoring of children’s devices to help address any potential for CSEA, including the Trojan Horse campaign by C3P (2023).

> **“We’re handing kids technology that is being weaponized against them by predators. There are no meaningful guardrails in place to keep them safe in the same way we protect kids offline.”**
>
> Lianna McDonald, Executive Director of the Canadian Center for Child Protection (C3P) (see Today’s Trojan Horse Looks Different)

Device safety and software development are two approaches being used alongside education to address this concern. However, with an ever-increasing number of photo-taking or video recording devices available, it is a challenge to ensure that all have the appropriate design elements to protect child users.

PART 3

Context matters: Forces shaping the scale of CSEA reports

Part 3 examines the broader forces that shape the scale and nature of CSEA. It explores how societal perceptions of CSEA influence policy and practice, and why a universalist approach is vital for effective prevention and response. This part looks at the role of policy decisions, including debates on end-to-end encryption (E2EE) and the introduction of online safety acts and how these influence both the risks children face and the ability to tackle abuse. It also considers the impact of technological change including emerging threats such as AI CSAM alongside structural and systemic factors that enable CSEA to persist. Finally, it examines the different ways CSEA is reported, from children's self-disclosure in surveys to reports made via services, hotlines and child helplines, showing how context shapes not only the prevalence of abuse, but also the visibility of the problem.

3.1 Why a standardised approach to CSEA matters

Introduction

One of the biggest barriers to better global data on CSEA is how fragmented our measurement is. Too often, CSEA is only defined and tracked through the narrow lens of national criminal law, which varies widely from country to country. This means that what counts as abuse in one place may not be recorded at all in another, even when the harm to the child is the same. A universalist approach offers a way forward. Grounded in the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), it focuses on the rights and harms experienced by children, rather than solely on what national legislation defines as a crime. This lens has been successfully applied in other areas, such as child marriage, on which countries with very different legal definitions have still agreed on shared indicators and thresholds, enabling comparable global estimates. By applying this standardised framing to CSEA, Childlight argues that we can build a clearer, more consistent picture of the problem across borders and drive stronger, more coordinated action.

Data beacons: Taking a standardised approach and making CSEA visible in crime statistics in India, Northern Ireland and Scotland

Official crime statistics that rely on crimes recorded by the police often do not make it easy to see the level of sexual crimes against children. Typically, there are several relevant crime categories such as rape of a child under 13, sexual assault of a child under 15, or sexual harassment of a minor, which need to be combined, and some categories, such as grooming, might include child and adult victims. Scotland and Northern Ireland have found a good way to make the level of police recorded CSEA crimes visible. Both countries include a separate category combining all CSEA related crimes against children under 18 in their official crime statistics. Note that in these countries, the age of consent is lower than 18, but using the age of 18 to measure all CSEA related crimes honours the international UN Convention on the Rights of the Child definition of a child as every person under the age of 18 (United Nations, 1989).

Another good practice example is India, whose National Crime Records Bureau regularly publishes the number of police recorded CSEA crimes across a range of categories, as defined in legislation. It goes a step further than others that publish official crime statistics in that the Bureau breaks down CSEA crime numbers by age and gender, providing more detailed insights into the nature of these crimes.

New conceptual frame

A standardised approach to CSEA measurement means moving beyond the constraints of country-specific criminal codes, with their varying ages of sexual consent and differing definitions of illegal material, to establish a consistent set of baseline measures that can be applied across borders. At its core, this approach recognises CSEA as the sexual abuse or exploitation of anyone under 18, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, while still allowing space to capture contextual nuance.

In practice, this means using common reporting anchors across data sources. A useful parallel can be drawn with child marriage reporting, which consistently presents figures for 'under 18' and 'under 15' irrespective of national laws. In the ITL Index, we follow this model: we apply the INTERPOL baseline definition of criminal CSAM across all data provided by data owners to generate internationally comparable figures. While INTERPOL applies this baseline specifically to prepubescent material, our application extends across all CSAM data. We acknowledge, however, that these data sources may, though not always, skew towards prepubescent content. More work is needed to address both gaps in coverage and the contextual understanding of behaviours among older adolescents across data sources.

Each type of data presents particular challenges in this regard. Survey data often lack contextual detail, for example, whether an experience took place within a relationship, involved a peer, or was linked to coercion by a known or unknown person. Administrative data may underrepresent adolescents who do not engage with child protection systems, even when they experience harm. CSAM data tends to be skewed towards younger children, partly because assessment techniques rely on visual cues, and distinguishing older adolescent material is more complex and, therefore, less frequently coded. Together, these limitations make it harder to capture the full context of older adolescents' experiences.

By standardising baseline reporting (e.g., all under-18s, and in the future potentially also under-15s, as with child marriage), while also reflecting contextual nuances where relevant, we can produce both globally comparable statistics and locally meaningful insights. This reduces the inconsistency of shifting age categories across countries and creates a clearer picture of the full spectrum of harms across childhood and adolescence. Addressing these gaps, particularly for older adolescents, is a priority area for further work, including a planned initiative through the Child Light East Asia and Pacific Hub, where we aim to work with partners to deepen contextual understanding of image-based abuse, CSAM, and other forms of exploitation.

FIGURE 16

What is a standardised approach to CSEA data?

Applied to different data sources, a standardised approach offers a practical blueprint for global harmonisation. For population surveys, it means developing indicators that consistently measure victimisation of those under 18 and in the future potentially under 15 years old, capturing both past year and lifetime exposure (i.e., at any point in childhood). For frontline police data, this could mean every police force recording and reporting on a core set of indicators that include both under-18 measures and country-specific measures tied to local law. For child helpline data, it involves harmonising categories, definitions and typologies, so that calls can be aggregated and compared internationally. For population-survey data it would involve using standardised and agreed definitions such as the International Classification on Violence Against Children (ICVAC). ICVAC provides a vital global framework, but it lacks the granularity needed to capture TF-CSEA. Childlight is working with key partners to advance enhanced classifications and typologies to close this critical measurement gap. Future research can also help move the field towards a standardised approach including studying where consensus lies among experts on some boundary issues, looking at the harm element of different types of sexual episodes, etc.

By setting out clear, shared definitions and minimum indicators for each data source, as the only global index on CSEA prevalence, we are helping to establish a benchmark for what is possible, showing that with a universalist lens we can both respect national contexts and build the consistent, comparable evidence base needed to drive global change.

Data beacons: INTERPOL's Baseline tool

According to INTERPOL's Resolution No. 4, 'Baseline' is a tool that is meant to empower both public and private entities to recognise, report and remove CSAM from their networks. This definition of CSAM was originally conceptualised at the INTERPOL general assembly meeting in 2015 (INTERPOL, 2015). The resolution urges both public and private entities to ensure they are not storing, displaying or propagating CSAM on their networks. This definition was later revised in 2023 at another general assembly meeting, but INTERPOL continues to promote its application to both public and private entities (INTERPOL, 2023).

What is important to note is that Baseline has three criteria, one of which is an assessment of apparent sexual maturity as 'prepubescent', the other is 'serious sexual abuse' targeting a child. The final criteria is that the content must have been validated by three independent reviewers as 'Baseline' CSAM. What is important to note is that this definition has a quality assurance requirement measure to ensure there is consistency in the way that the content is being reviewed, it limits the amount of sexual abuse material that is found to meet the first two criteria. The second element of this international standard is its proposed scope in both the public and private sector.

While this definition may work in assessing for illegality for the 196 member countries, it cannot sufficiently cover all the material that should be removed from being shared, displayed or propagated, as INTERPOL first envisioned. The limits around 'serious sexual abuse' and only children assessed to be 'prepubescent' means that a significant portion of sexual material on children is not covered by this definition. As INTERPOL is a respected international authority on criminal justice and legal matters, their definition is important. Baseline serves a purpose, however, some of the elements of the definition and its application require review as the awareness of image-based harm to children increases. Elements such as serious, prepubescent, and public and private entities need to be explicitly defined so that this criterion is applied only in legal matters and not used as a metric to measure harm or the validity of the rest of the sexual content featuring children. This will remove the degree to which subjectivity impacts CSAM analysis, as the person assessing should have clear guidance on what would be illegal globally and the content that is illegal in the jurisdiction it is located in. This is something that can be assisted by the Universal Classification Schema, a document that seeks to standardise CSAM analysis for both law enforcement, industry and NGOs.

Summary

In summary, adopting a standardised approach to CSEA is not only important, it is essential. Without a shared set of minimum standards and definitions, the field will remain fragmented and our ability to measure, compare and ultimately reduce CSEA will be limited.

This approach provides the foundation for building a coherent global evidence base that captures both prevalence and magnitude, as well as the nature of abuse, in a way that transcends national legal boundaries, while still recognising local context. Childlight is working with other key data actors to develop these minimum data standards and supporting conceptual frameworks, alongside practical tools, for harmonising data across all major sources – from CSAM reporting systems to population surveys, frontline police data and child helplines.

Some of the most valuable learning in tackling CSEA happens when countries can see how they compare with others, identifying where they are making progress, where they face similar challenges and where new approaches are delivering results elsewhere. Yet without compatible data, these insights remain out of reach. Minimum data standards and a stronger, more consistent monitoring system make those lighbulb moments possible, helping countries step outside their own context and see clearly what is working and what needs to change.

3.2 Impact of policy decisions on the nature and scale of CSEA

Introduction

CSAM availability and its discovery are impacted by several factors beyond offenders uploading/downloading harmful and illegal content. Decisions made by platforms, governments and regulatory bodies can lead to an increase or decrease in the amount of CSAM that is reported to or discovered by the organisations tasked with monitoring CSAM globally, including its assessment and removal. Between the years 2023 and 2024, there have been major decisions made by governments, hotlines and platforms which have implications concerning CSAM discovery.

Starting in 2022 and continuing through 2023, many of the most used platforms began to change their policies on the implementation of end-to-end encryption (E2EE) communications/data as the default setting – making messages, images, calls, and other communications accessible only to the sender and the intended recipient. While these decisions affect large parts of the global population in terms of how all user data is made available and stored, they also have a direct impact on the operations of organisations that monitor CSAM. It was also during this time that platforms and reporting bodies started to change the way in which they processed reports of CSEA. The NCMEC started to implement bundling, a feature which allows individual mandated reporting companies to associate reports before sending them to NCMEC to increase efficiency in triaging. Also, in the period between 2022 and 2024, the Tech Coalition started its Signals programme, a cross platform reporting portal that allows the sharing of data concerning TF-CSEA occurring on multiple platforms. This is an optional programme and only available to members of the Tech Coalition, but shows the increased focus on linking up data before it reaches law enforcement for investigation.

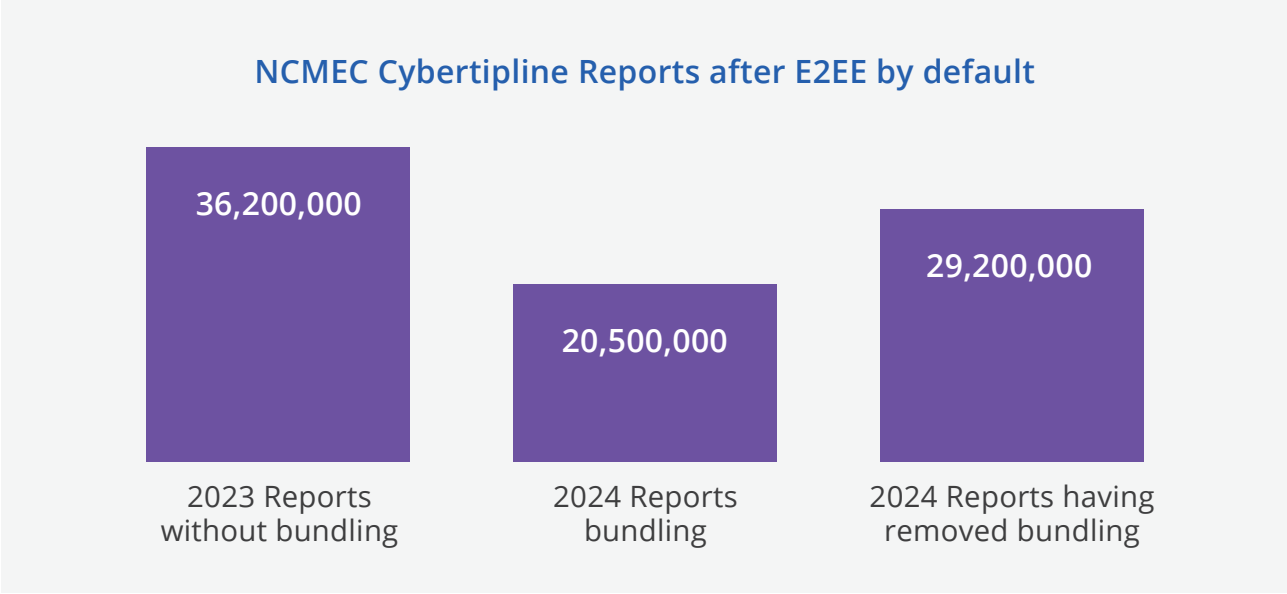
Findings

Between 2023 and 2024, all organisations tasked with CSAM data collection showed fluctuations in the amount of CSAM they assessed, but to differing degrees and in different directions, both increasing and decreasing. The changes shine a light on the features that can influence CSAM numbers and how this can be understood.

NCMEC, the largest source of CSAM reports globally, saw a noticeable decrease in the volume of CSAM reports between 2023 and 2024, from 36 million to 20.5 million. This decrease was attributed to two key decisions, one of which was an

internal decision organisationally to allow companies to bundle their reports, and the other was a decision made by the technology sector more broadly. First, the internal procedural change at NCMEC, called bundling, saw similar images/reports of CSAM that had previously been counted as multiple reports grouped as one single report. This procedural change was only used by one of the many reporting companies to NCMEC, Meta. It should be noted that Meta has routinely been the largest source of NCMEC reports over recent years, which has amplified the impact of their bundling on NCMECs overall volume of CSAM reports. Second, a number of platforms, including Meta, have moved to E2EE by default. This means that automated detection of CSAM on these platforms no longer identifies illegal images passing through their applications in user-to-user communication. To help uncover the true impact of these two changes, NCMEC provided additional narrative analysis concerning the report volumes in their 2024 annual report. NCMEC showed that after accounting for all individual reports there was still a 7 million report drop from 2023.

FIGURE 17 **A review of the report volume decrease to NCMEC accounting for bundling, 2023–2024 data**



Source: NCMEC Cybertipline Report (2023, 2024).

In United States (US) legislation, there has been a push to have CSEA reported and removed more efficiently including CSAM. NCMEC, a US-based organisation and the listed US hotline in INHOPE's hotline network, saw a decrease in reports of all types of CSEA. It is also telling that report volumes not only dropped from Meta, but also from major platforms like X, Google, Discord and Microsoft. As mentioned above, the decision by many of platforms to move to E2EE by default was made between 2023 and 2024, which meant that platforms had less ability to respond to or detect when their platforms are being used to sexually exploit or abuse children. As such, the drop in the number of reports made by platforms as a part of their mandated duty may have been linked to this platform level decision.

> **Implementing end-to-end encryption without technology in place to address child sexual abuse, exploitation and imagery on platforms will stop professionals from saving children in real time.**
>
> Pheonix 11 "Statement from the Phoenix 11: Meta prioritizes profit over children"

Summary

These fluctuations illustrate that changes and trends in reports of CSAM cannot be interpreted as true increases or decreases in the availability of images or the rapidity of their circulation. This was also almost certainly true for the increase in reports prior to 2024, which was likely an underrepresentation of the total availability of CSAM online. It points to the need to better understand and document the systems that produce the numbers and all the influences that affect their changes. While the practice of bundling needs more evaluation, the more information sharing that occurs prior to law enforcement involvement is generally seen as positive.

3.3 Impact of legislative decisions on the nature and scale of CSEA

Introduction

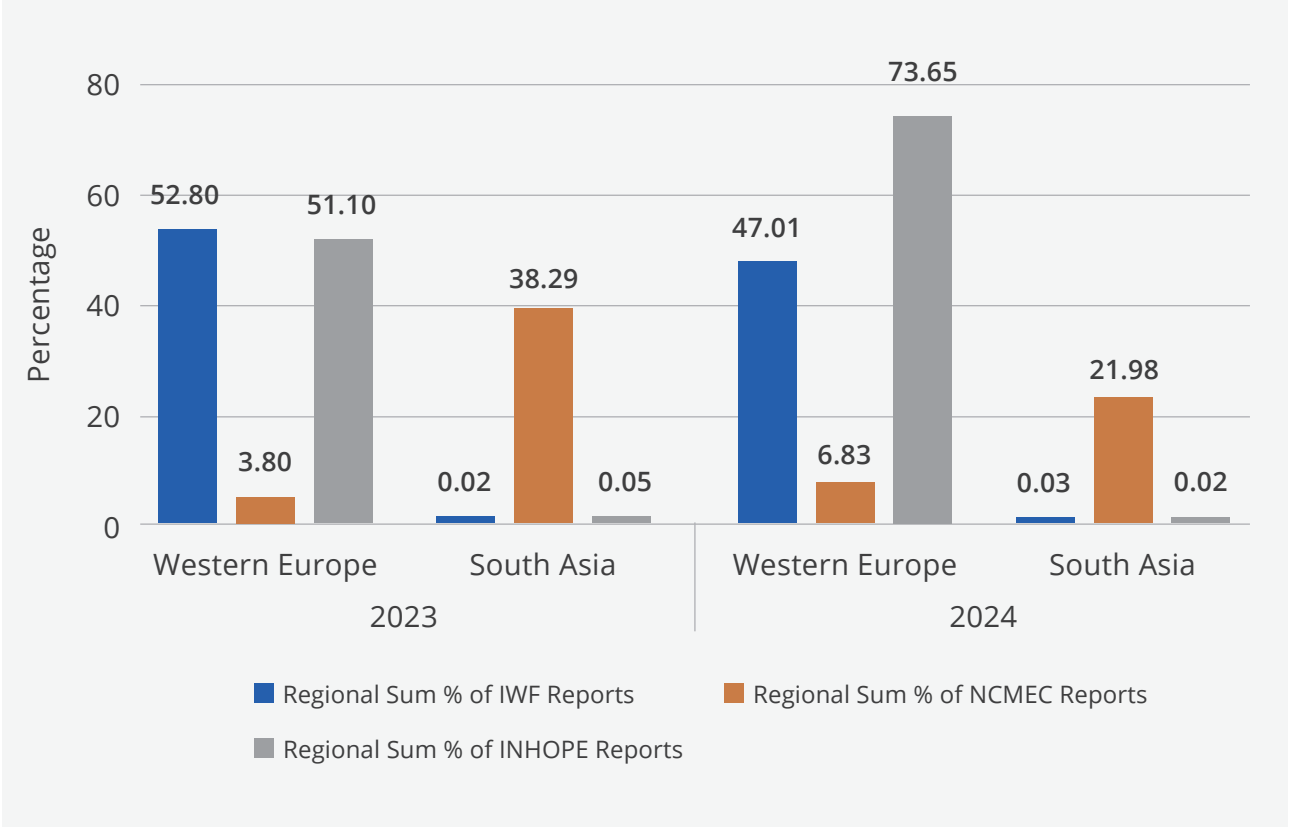
The year 2022 launched a wave of legislative changes which aimed to put parameters around the responsibility of technology platforms to ensure user safety around the world. These acts included new legislation or amendments to existing legislation in the European Union, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and, quite recently, Pakistan. Legislation can often take time to impact practices around the reporting of CSEA, which means that it is often more prudent to look at the report figures for the year following the passing of any new legislation (or even longer) to allow for its implementation.

Findings

From 2022 through 2023, Australia, the UK and the EU each passed acts that reinforced mandates concerning the expedited removal of CSAM. In 2024, the US also passed its own piece of legislation, the Report It Act, which requires all platforms to report two additional types of CSEA. These acts addressed other forms of TF-CSEA through the requirements for timely and thorough reporting on all platforms. While it often takes time for legislation to truly make its impact known, there is some monitoring that can be done following its passing to see if there is any correlated impact. As these acts seek to increase the level of safety and scrutiny of conduct on platforms, this may result in increased reporting to address the harms that previously went unreported. In other words, an increase in prevention (whether through regulation or through other population based prevention interventions), prevalence (in surveys) and magnitude (for CSAM) may rise initially. Figure 18, shows increases in the proportion of NCMEC reports and INHOPE notices sent to Western Europe from 2023 to 2024 following the implementation of legislation in the region.

FIGURE 18

Regional CSAM proportion data following the implementation of legislation and E2EE by default, IWF, NCMEC and INHOPE data 2023–2024



Source: Created by Childlight using NCMEC Country reports (2023, 2024), INHOPE Dashboard, IWF Annual Reports (2023, 2024). (See Technical Notes for full calculations).

What we saw from the data from IWF and INHOPE was that there was an increase in the volume of CSAM assessed and reported to both organisations. The CSAM rate calculated by Childlight for the UK went up to 41.8 (notices/reports) per 10,000, from 27.2 in 2023. This, as mentioned above, was to be expected with added focus on addressing and removing CSAM online in both the UK and EU legislation, which impacts the regions most covered by IWF and INHOPE.

The Online Safety Act (OSA) in the UK, in particular, represents a piece of national legislation that focuses on addressing the safety of users, especially children. This Act places legal duties on technology companies to remove CSAM and protect users from exposure to harmful content. These two elements were both in place from the date of Royal Assent, the point at which legislation is officially passed in the UK, in November 2023.

Shining a light on the United Kingdom: Ramping up the response

In the United Kingdom, Into the Light Index estimates 4.4% of children may have experienced rape or sexual assault, with a possible range from 0.2% to 8.7%. This is estimate is based on 14 UK based studies published between 2011 and 2019.

Reports of CSAM from the United Kingdom are lower than those from countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, meaning the UK contributes a smaller share to both global and regional CSAM reports. However, the numbers are still high. The United Kingdom accounts for 12% of all CSAM reports from Western Europe reported by NCMEC.

Frontline police data from the UK shows the total number of police reports related to CSEA. Across all parts of the UK, there has been a steady increase in CSEA reports over the past nine years. The rise is especially sharp in England and Wales, where the number of reports has gone up by over 80% highlighting growing concern and possibly greater awareness or detection of these crimes.

The UK stands out in Western Europe as a country taking a proactive approach to reshaping the online safety landscape. The United Kingdom's Online Safety Act is a world-leading example of how comprehensive regulation can drive platform accountability for online harms, especially CSEA, by placing a legal duty of care on technology companies to proactively identify and mitigate risks, setting a pathfinding standard for the region and beyond.

The data from NCMEC and CRC saw the proportion of Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, a numeric identifier for connected devices, and reports for the UK drop from 2023 to 2024, despite the priority of addressing CSEA and CSAM on technology. As the OSA specifically targets the mechanism pertaining to the hosting of content and platforms that are UK-based, these two datasets would be less impacted. More importantly, IWF achieved the highest level of first removal among the CSAM data organisations tasked with removal, in large part due to their mandates and the presence of targeted legislation in the UK. IWF, as a UK-based organisation, can work alongside the regulatory body to improve moderation and removal practices, something other countries have yet to employ to the same extent.

According to the survey data collected from 25 countries from 2023 to 2025, including the UK, children under the age of 18 experiencing unwanted exposure to sexual content in the past year was the most common form of TF-CSEA. The data showed that between 14% and 24% of all children were exposed to this type of sexual harm, providing further evidence in favour of legislation, such as the OSA, to help address these harms. It will be crucial to monitor surveys following 2025 and 2026, when the more restrictive safety measures are put in place, to see if children are reporting this type of harm less.

Summary

Legislation can be an effective tool to ensure that investment is made in the discovery and removal of content related to CSEA. Legislation also comes with a responsibility for enforcement and assessment. This is the first time that the ITL Index can start to track the potential implication of legislation on country and regional TF-CSEA reporting. Early signs point to the positive impact of having a coordinated approach to the discovery and removal of harmful users, content and platforms for the protection of children while using technology. It will be important to monitor the progress in regions over time, highlight where the process could be replicated in the future, and test other potential hypotheses for these changes.

One aspect of particular interest concerning legislative changes is the ability to enact and monitor enforcement of the law. The UK's OSA, as well as Australia's Online Safety Act, specifically list two regulators to accomplish this – Ofcom and the eSafety Commissioner, respectively. In particular, Ofcom started enforcement with greater intensity in 2024 and has imposed various codes and procedures to ensure that those under 18 are not able to access pornographic content and that CSAM is removed swiftly from file-sharing services (a frequently misused place for making CSAM available online). In addition to the measures imposed on retrospective platform developments, Ofcom has implemented a requirement that all newly developed updates and services must prove they have considered the safety of children, seeking to curb harm before it occurs.

3.4 Impact of technological changes on the nature and scale of CSEA

Introduction

As technology continues to advance and change, so too does the methodology used to offend against children online. An increasingly prevalent example of this is CSAM generated by artificial intelligence, or AI CSAM. This particular subtype of CSAM appears in several formats and has become a main component of what was previously known as cartoon or non-photographic CSAM. While this material still exists online, the hyper-realism achieved using AI appears to be the emerging focus in non-photographic CSAM creation.

As AI has developed, so has the ability to harm children. AI CSAM is the use of user requests (i.e., prompts) to instruct the output of an image or video to certain specifications. Often this means the creation of fictional children being sexually abused in the created or generated images/videos. In addition to the mostly synthetic CSAM generated from a multitude of images, of both children and adults, AI CSAM has allowed for more tailored image generation of specific children, often known as 'nudification' or 'deepfake'. This particular form takes innocuous images of children and makes them sexual in nature. AI CSAM can also provide offenders with the potential to request information around how to obtain sexual images from children or sexually exploit them in some other manner.

Data beacons: Internet Watch Foundation's work on AI CSAM

In October 2023, Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) became one of the first organisations to comprehensively analyse the scale and nature of AI CSAM, setting a new benchmark for the field. Their initial case study examined Dark Web forums and revealed significant criminality, according to the UK Protection of Children Act 1978. In March and April 2024, they repeated the study, reviewing 12,148 unique AI-generated images. Of these, 29% (3,512 images) were found to be criminal. This represented a 14% increase from 2023, despite a decrease in the overall number of images. They also examined the images classed as 'discounted' and estimated that 42% could still be considered exploitative. This combination of methodological rigour, statistical transparency, and willingness to address a fast-evolving issue has firmly established IWF as a data beacon in the field.

IWF has not paused since that groundbreaking 2023 report. Its 2024 case study shows that AI CSAM is now appearing beyond the Dark Web. Between April 2023 and March 2024, IWF received 375 reports of AI CSAM, with almost all of it hosted on the Clear Web. Seventy per cent of this content was classified as criminal. They also documented the emergence of 'nudification' apps, with 21 dedicated sites reported during the same period. These tools can transform clothed or 'innocent' images into realistic nudes, which offenders are increasingly using to blackmail children into providing real intimate content. By identifying new threats early and applying innovative, repeatable analysis, IWF continues to lead global efforts against AI CSAM, providing the sector with authoritative and actionable evidence to address one of the fastest-moving harms in the online safety landscape.

Findings

In 2024, IWF provided additional details of the severity of AI CSAM, suggesting this material is often of the more severe categories, almost completely featuring female children. The data from 2023 and 2024 suggests that the amount of AI CSAM or non-photographic CSAM located is increasing. INHOPE, the International Association of Internet Hotlines, found more content that was tagged 'virtual' by analysts in 2024 than in the previous year. It should be noted that 2024 saw a marked increase in the total volume of all types of CSAM analysed by INHOPE members, which was reflected in the volume of AI CSAM. As such, Childlight calculated the proportion of virtual content for each year, finding that in fact there was a decrease in the overall proportion of AI CSAM from 2023 to 2024. NCMEC found that there was an increase in the volume of reports that contained AI CSAM by over 1,325% from 4,700 reports in 2023 to over 67,000 in 2024. IWF, which also tracks the amount of

AI CSAM assessed annually, reported an increase in the number of files they assessed as containing AI CSAM. AI CSAM is assessed by hotlines based on visual and digital analysis of images. This process is constantly being refined to ensure that analysts and image processing software are attuned to this type of imagery, which might affect any trends we see in the data (e.g., an increase could be partly or fully due to better methods of identifying AI CSAM, as opposed to a genuine increase in volume).

> **“The people behind this... don't realise the consequences in the real world when they do something like that... It plays across into people taking actual real-world actions against ourselves.”**
>
> Penny Mordaunt on BBC Newsnight
> (see AI deepfake porn humiliated me, says Penny Mordaunt)

Summary

Artificial intelligence is a technology that is becoming more commonplace in everyday life and is continually evolving to become easier for anyone to use. AI CSAM is becoming increasingly pervasive on the Dark Web and Clear Web, as evidenced by the increasing volumes and proportions of reports falling into this category. Even if a ‘real’ child or ‘real’ photo is not being shared, it can still cause tremendous harm in normalising traumatising content, as well as being used in criminal behaviour like sexual extortion.

3.5 Removal rates of CSAM

Introduction

Despite international agreement on the need for the complete removal of CSAM, not only do new images continue to be circulated, but already known and previously removed content continues to permeate online spaces.

One of the factors facilitating this continued existence is the latency of removal rates from the time of 'first sight'. First sight refers to when a report is first seen by a mandated reporting body to the time the image is removed.

Findings

NCMEC, IWF and INHOPE all provide data on content removal times for 2023 and 2024. IWF is mandated to report and remove all the content found to be hosted in the UK or on UK-based platforms. NCMEC is the mandated reporting body for many of the major electronic service providers based in the US. INHOPE is an international network of over 50 hotlines and their report numbers in this instance refer to reported URLs, which can be either singular images with their own website pathway, or website pages with images on them.

As can be seen in Table 3, in 2023 IWF had 38% percent of the reported content removed in under 2 hours and was able to achieve total removal from first sighted location in over 2 hours. INHOPE removed 14% of the reported CSAM in approximately a day or less and total removal of CSAM from the first sighted location in over 7 days. NCMEC only reports one timeframe, which is that over 50% of the content is removed in under 3 days.

However, when looking at Table 4, you can see that in 2024 the removal for two of the three data sources (IWF and NCMEC) took longer and their reported timeframes have been adjusted. IWF have been able to remove 87% of content within 1 day and the remaining 13% between 2 to 7 days. INHOPE removed 33% within 1 day and the other 70% within 2 to 7 days. Lastly, NCMEC achieved 50% removal within 4 days rather than the previous 3.

TABLE 3 Reported CSAM removal times from data owners IWF, INHOPE and NCMEC, 2023

Removal time 2023

	2 hours or less	Over 2 hours	
IWF UK only	38%	100%	
	1 day or less	**7 days or less**	**Over 7 days**
INHOPE	14%	50%	100%
	Within 3 days		
NCMEC	50%		

Sources: INHOPE 2023 Annual Report (INHOPE, 2023); IWF 2023 Annual Report (IWF, 2023); NCMEC 2023 CyberTipline Report (NCMEC, 2023a)

TABLE 4 Reported CSAM removal times from data owners IWF, INHOPE and NCMEC, 2024

Removal time 2024

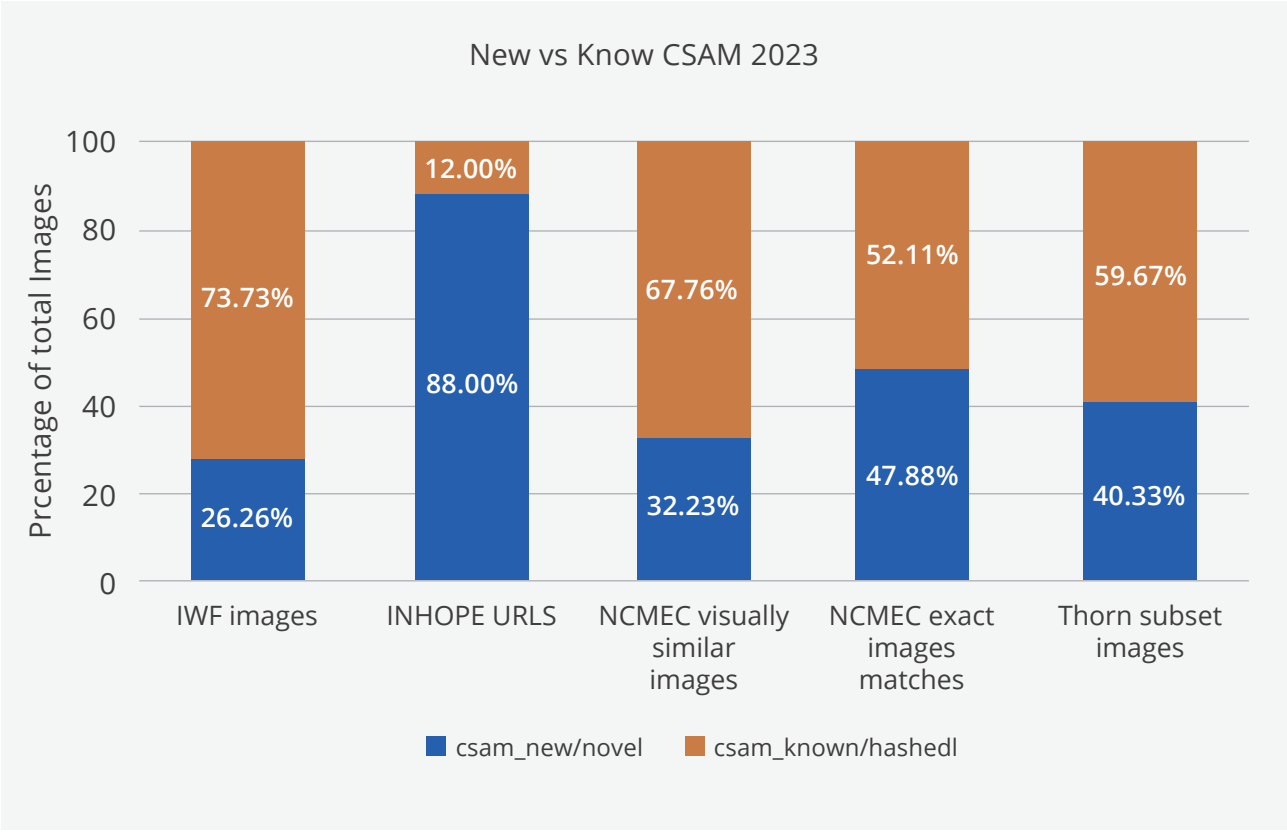
	1 day or less	2–7 days	
IWF UK only	87%	100%	
	1 day or less	**2–7 days**	**Over 7 days**
INHOPE	33%	70%	100%
	Within 4 days		
NCMEC	50%		

Sources: INHOPE 2024 Annual Report (INHOPE, 2024); IWF 2024 Annual Report (IWF, 2024); NCMEC 2024 CyberTipline Report (NCMEC, 2024d)

When reviewing these findings, it is important to keep in mind the exponential increase in workload for these organisations in terms of number of reports and growing areas of CSAM (e.g., AI CSAM and youth-produced CSAM).

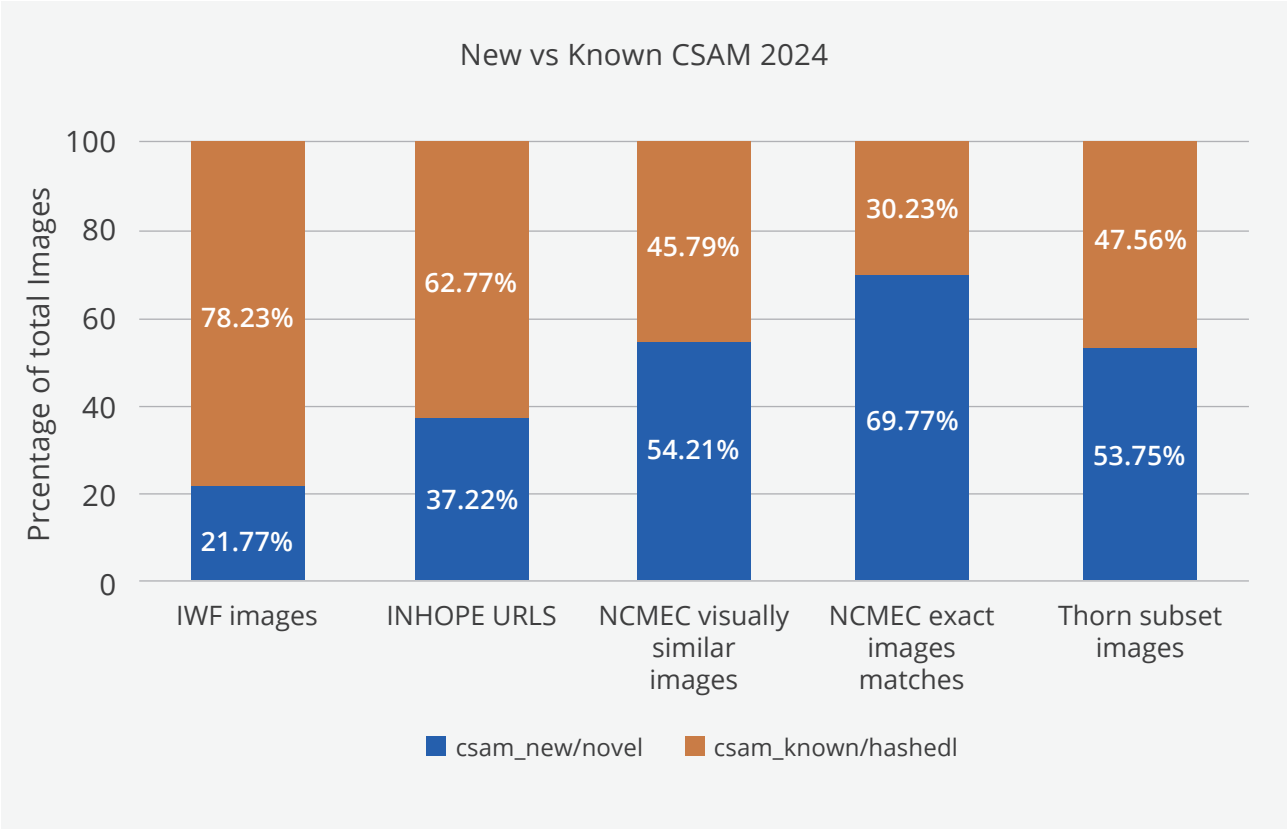
The evidence of known CSAM continuing to circulate can be seen in Figures 19 and 20, which show the comparison between CSAM that has already been matched to a 'known' hashlist from each organisation and CSAM that has not been seen before and is 'new'. Both IWF and INHOPE report an increased in the proportion of known CSAM from 2023 to 2024. Although NCMEC shows a drop in proportionality of known CSAM, which is still almost half the images for 'visually similar'.

FIGURE 19 **Proportion of reported CSAM that is 'new' or 'known' from data owners and subset, 2023**



Sources: INHOPE 2023 Annual Report (INHOPE, 2023); IWF 2023 Annual Report (IWF, 2023); NCMEC 2023 CyberTipline Report (NCMEC, 2023a); Thorn's 2023 Impact Report (Thorn, 2024)

FIGURE 20 Proportion of reported CSAM that is 'new' or 'known' from data owners, 2024



Sources: INHOPE 2024 Annual Report (INHOPE, 2024); IWF 2024 Annual Report (IWF, 2024); NCMEC 2024 CyberTipline Report (NCMEC, 2024d) Thorn's 2024 Impact Report (Thorn, 2025)

Summary

Despite the best efforts of those working to remove CSAM, the length of time between 'first sight' is increasing, and perpetrators have more time to download and re-share reported images. This in turn facilitates the cycle of CSAM still being available online, despite international agreement on the need for complete removal of CSAM. This is evidenced by the existence of known CSAM that continues to be reported year on year and is the tip of the iceberg regarding latency and removal issues. Research such as the Jane Doe project (Salter et al., 2025) includes survivors who are now adults and are still having their abuse from childhood circulated over 10 years on.

3.6 Factors influencing reporting of CSEA: The importance of child and community-friendly reporting mechanisms

Introduction

CSEA remains one of the most hidden forms of violence against children. Whether children report CSEA or not depends on many factors, such as how they feel, who is around them and the services they can access. This section looks at what helps or stops children and adults from reporting CSEA and how we can improve systems so more children and adults are heard and supported.

Findings

What affects whether abuse is reported?

There are many reasons why a child or their family might not report abuse. Some of the main reasons are discussed below.

Fear and shame

Children often feel afraid of what might happen after they tell someone or embarrassed to talk about their experience. Some believe that they will not be taken seriously, especially if the abuser is someone they know and trust like a parent, teacher, or family friend (e.g., Alaggia et al., 2017; Yurteri et al., 2021). In some communities, there is still a lot of shame around talking about sex and abuse, which makes it even harder for children to speak up (Childlight, 2024; Alaggia et al., 2017).

Lack of trust in services

Children and families may hold back from reporting because they have little trust in the police or social services (e.g., Brennan & McElvaney, 2020). They may worry that nothing will be done, or that the child will be blamed or even taken away from home. If people think reporting will make things worse, they may choose to stay silent (qualitative interview by Childlight, 2025).

Age, gender and identity

Younger children often lack the words to explain what happened. Males and LGBTQI+ children and youth may also find it hard to report because of fears of being judged or not taken seriously (e.g., Capaldi et al., 2024).

Data Beacons: Switzerland's UBS Optimus Prevalence Survey

The Optimus Study was launched in 2007 as a ten-year research project that aimed to collect representative data on the prevalence of various types of violence against children and youth to identify gaps in child protection systems. For Europe, the data were collected in Switzerland in three cycles (Averdijk et al., 2012; Jud et al., 2021; Schmid et al., 2018).

The first Optimus Study focused on sexual violence against children (population survey) and recorded cases of child victimisation known to public and private institutions involved in child welfare (the agency survey). The second cycle involved discussions among experts and in the public domain about challenges in the child protection system and appropriate plans to address those. The final Optimus Study continued the efforts to collect nationally representative data with a specific focus on the provision of care in cases of child endangerment. An innovative and comprehensive approach was implemented to access and analyse data from the child protection, social, health, and penal organisations in Switzerland.

The Optimus Study was the first nationally representative Swiss study that combined standardised population-based survey methods with statistics from child protection agencies. It also efficiently gathered data on multi-sectoral responses to child endangerment and identified the gaps in existing systems to improve policy responses and interventions, providing a good example of a comprehensive national data approach to CSEA. UBS Optimus prevalence studies have also been conducted in South Africa and China.

Reporting in surveys: Why the way we ask matters

Surveys are often used to ask children and adults about experience of CSEA. This helps researchers understand the scale of the problem, including abuse that has never been reported officially. However, how the questions are asked makes a big difference to the answers we receive (e.g., Alaggia, 2004; Gnambs & Kaspar, 2014; Martin et al., 1993; McCallum & Peterson, 2016).

If children are interviewed face-to-face, they may feel nervous or uncomfortable (e.g., Krayem et al., 2021; Barr et al., 2017; Negriff et al., 2017; Langeland et al., 2015; Williams, 1994) and might give answers they think the interviewer wants to hear. By contrast, private responses, such as those collected through a phone, tablet or computer, may help children feel safer and more able to tell the truth.

Where the survey takes place also matters. For example, children may feel unsafe speaking about abuse if they are at home and a family member is nearby. A private room at school or another safe setting may help them share more openly, as long as proper safeguarding is in place.

Another important factor is 'recall bias', particularly when adults are asked about abuse they experienced as a child. People may forget or misremember events, which can lead to underestimates. This is why survey data must be interpreted carefully, and why it is important to consider the limitations of all data sources when estimating prevalence.

Data beacons: Poland's longitudinal survey

Population-based longitudinal surveys that focus on the prevalence of both technology-facilitated and offline CSEA are still limited in the field. One of few research efforts to monitor the prevalence of child abuse and neglect over time is 'The diagnosis of violence against children in Poland', a nationally representative study conducted every five years since 2013 by the Empowering Children Foundation (e.g., Makaruk et al., 2023; Włodarczyk et al., 2018; Włodarczyk & Makaruk, 2013).

The objective of this survey was not only to assess the scale of child abuse and neglect, but also to understand the risk and protective factors, polyvictimisation, and the relationship between experiences of violence and neglect in children and engaging in self-destructive behaviours (e.g., self-harm and suicide attempts). Data were collected using a validated measure, the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) (Finkelhor et al., 2005; Hamby et al., 2011), which was adapted to the Polish context and extended with questions on other forms of victimisation, including non-consensual sharing of sexual images.

This survey constitutes one of the few comprehensive sources of knowledge about the problem of violence against children in Poland. The most recent edition (third) was carried out on a representative sample of over 2,000 children aged 11–17 years from 64 schools across the country (Makaruk et al., 2023). The study is part of the project 'Diagnosis of the problem and support services for children harmed by crime in Poland', financed by the Justice Fund, administered by the Minister of Justice. This systematic and collaborative multi-agency approach (i.e., an NGO and academia) to data collection, funded by the government, is an example of joint efforts at the national level to improve the quality and robustness of the data, better understand the risks of various forms of victimisation, and expand policy responses. It is one of the only comprehensive global longitudinal surveys on violence against children and a data beacon in the field.

Child helplines: Children and adults reaching out

Child helplines: Help-seeking

Child helplines are a crucial component of child protection services, because they are often the first point of contact a child has with a national child protection system. CSEA is underreported for multiple reasons including fear, stigma and the threat of repercussions for disclosure. Helplines can cut through these barriers and provide children with avenues of support.

Child helplines are often trustworthy resources for children and young people. Child helplines are confidential and make it clear to children if, when, and how, confidentiality needs to be broken to protect the child from serious harm. This promotes a sense of control and trust, which helps children feel comfortable disclosing at their own pace, while ensuring the safety of the child at the same time.

Child helplines are essential in the prevention and detection of CSEA and the provision of victim support services, as well as for referral to other agencies. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 12 states that children have the right to express their views and be taken seriously. Child helplines are a key mechanism for facilitating this right, because they provide a platform for children to be heard. Child helplines are generally free-of-charge, safe, anonymous, and offer multiple methods of communication such as calls, texts, chatboxes, letters and so forth. This inclusivity amplifies their accessibility for marginalised children such as those with disabilities. Child helplines facilitate safe disclosure, as they provide a low-threshold, child-friendly, confidential and safe service for children to build trust in the system and eventually disclose sexual abuse and exploitation, making further action and support possible. Child helplines are not only child-friendly mechanisms for help-seeking, but they also offer confidential routes for adults to express concerns about children who they suspect are at risk of abuse or harm (Child Helpline International, 2025a; Ulvfot et al, 2023; Watling et al., 2021; Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2006-2025; Franks & Medforth, 2005).

Child helplines can be a lifeline. However, not everyone knows that these services exist and some children may not have access to a phone or the internet. Others may worry about being traced, or may not speak the language. When child helpline data is used to understand trends in abuse, it is important to remember that it reflects those who are able to and feel safe enough to reach out. Many others may not feel this way.

Online reporting tools can help children regain control

Online platforms help children and adults report and request the removal of harmful images and videos. Each system has its own strengths, which can be learnt from and shared across systems.

The CyberTipline run by NCMEC accepts all types of child sexual abuse reports. It is available in both English and Spanish and includes a 'quick exit' safety button so users can leave the site immediately if they feel unsafe. The CyberTipline is also linked to the 'Take It Down' platform, which helps children remove images shared online in 31 languages, and its reports are carefully screened, offering more detailed case information for follow-up.

The IWF offers another well-established platform, which allows people including children to self-report CSAM including in relation to their own image online. Reports are reviewed by trained staff, rather than automated systems, and the service is available in English and Welsh. A strong feature of this approach is its reliance on human judgment to confirm if the content is illegal and its transparency in explaining what happens after a report is made.

The IWF has also created a child friendly platform called 'Report Remove', designed specifically for children who want harmful images of themselves taken down. This site uses simple, supportive language and clear steps, while ensuring children remain anonymous, although they must create an account to use it. It also offers ongoing support and explains how information is used, helping children feel reassured throughout the process.

Beyond national platforms, there are also global efforts. INHOPE, the International Association of Internet Hotlines, now connects 54 hotlines across the world. By pooling data, it can highlight global trends such as the sharp increase in 'self-generated' images, and identify gaps in support, particularly for teens.

Together, these examples show how online reporting platforms can give children more control, reduce fear and provide safer ways to seek help. Making such platforms more inclusive, child-friendly and widely available will help protect more children.

What official reports show and do not show

Reports to police, social services, or health systems often come from adults, not children. These reports usually only include the most visible cases, for example, when a child is physically injured, or when a teacher notices signs of abuse. Many children do not come into contact with the police or other authorities (e.g., Manay & Collin-Vézina, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2024). This means that the true number of children affected by abuse is likely to be much higher than what is recorded in official statistics.

> **It's a lot of guilt and shame. That hinders them from filing a police report. Many of the people we meet are exposed to sexual violence by someone that is very close to them, someone they depend on or someone they love, and they take a lot of responsibility for the perpetrator. Like what will happen to him if I report this? And when it comes to children, they can't. They can't tell anyone about this because they are scared.**

CEO of a Swedish victim support organisation
(Childlight interview)

Summary

Reporting abuse is not just about data. It is about making sure children feel seen, heard and protected. Whether a child speaks to a hotline, fills in a survey, or tells a trusted adult, every report matters. The more we understand about what helps or prevents children from coming forward, the better we can design systems that truly keep them safe. For a fuller discussion of the limitations of the data and sources that measure these disclosures and how we can improve them, see section 4.4. Beyond the offering of services and the receipt of reported concerns, systems must be in place to respond to child victims and care for them beyond the point of reporting.

PART 4

Improving the data foundations

This section explores how we can strengthen the foundations for measuring CSEA, drawing on our insights from across the ITL Index on Global CSEA. We focus on four key areas: first, how CSEA is reported, recorded and counted, from crime counting rules to child helpline data, including the way questions are asked in surveys and why these choices impact on data. Second, the role of the wider context, using a case study to show how report volumes can fluctuate and how organisational decisions, especially in big-data environments, shape what we see in the numbers. Third, who is missing from our data, examining persistent under-representation and the ethical and practical ways to better include those voices. Finally, we highlight key data gaps and limitations across all sources, outlining how Childlight will take this forward to help develop minimum data standards and strengthen evidence in areas where it is most lacking.

4.1 What we measure matters: Learning across index areas

Introduction

Understanding how we report, record and count cases of CSEA is essential to effectively confront this issue. The accurate reporting, recording and counting of CSEA incidents are not just administrative tasks; they are foundational to shaping effective policy responses to protect children. Child helplines, frontline professionals and digital reporting platforms play a vital role in bringing these crimes to light. However, their effectiveness depends significantly on the way that questions are framed, the method in which disclosures are managed and the interpretation of the data collected.

Child helplines are pivotal. Not only do they provide confidential, accessible support that encourages early disclosure, but they also serve as critical gateways in the prevention and detection of CSEA, as well as victim assistance. Developing data harmonisation and minimum data standards for CSEA reporting by child helplines is crucial for enhancing the use of this data to inform practice and policy globally.

Meanwhile, frameworks for counting CSEA crimes determine what qualifies as a notifiable crime, emphasising victim belief as sufficient grounds for recording and shaping how incidents are classified and interpreted. However, these processes are not without limitation. Variations in the interpretation of crime counting rules, evolving definitions of CSEA globally and administrative complexities can lead to inconsistencies, resulting in either overcounting or undercounting of cases. Such discrepancies between official police statistics and the actual prevalence of harm undermine the reliability of crime data. Ultimately, the accuracy and credibility of these statistics and our capacity to effectively safeguard vulnerable children, depend on the integrity and consistency of every stage in the reporting and recording process.

Findings

TABLE 5 Cross-national differences in crime counting rules across countries in Western Europe and South Asia

		England and Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Sweden	Poland	India
What time period does police data cover?	1. Jan-Dec 2. Apr-Mar	2	2	2	1	1	1
When is a reported incident recorded?	1. When reported 2. After investigation	1	1	1	1	2	1
Which point in time does police data reflect?	1. When offence was reported 2. When offence was committed	1	1	1	1	No information	1
Is an evidential threshold required to record an instance?	1. Yes 2. No 3. Uncertain	1[1]	1[2]	2	2	3[3]	2
How is a single instance of abuse by one perpetrator recorded?	1. As one offence 2. As two or more offences	1	1	1	1	1	2[4]
How is prolonged sexual abuse over time by one perpetrator recorded?	1. As one offence 2. As two or more offences	1[5]	2[6]	1	2	No information	2
How is abuse by multiple perpetrators on the same occasion recorded?	1. As one offence 2. As two or more offences 3. Depends on the case	2[7]	2[8]	3[9]	1	No information	2

		England and Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Sweden	Poland	India
How is sexual abuse followed by murder recorded?	1. As one offence 2. As two or more offences	1[10]	2[11]	1	2	1	2
How is a rape case with images shared recorded?	1. As one offence 2. As two or more offences	2[12]	2[13]	2	2[14]	No information	2[15]
How is one incident with images shared by several perpetrators recorded?	1. As one offence 2. As two or more offences	2	2[16]	2	2	No information	2

Source: Created by Childlight, based on available administrative data in Western Europe and South Asia.

Notes:
[1] A crime is recorded if the crime recording decision making process (CRDMP) determines that it is more likely than not that a crime occurred.
[2] A crime is recorded if sufficient basic information (location, time, description of what happened) is provided. If no crime is recorded, a justification must be documented.
[3] There are no evidential threshold rules for reporting crimes. However, the police compile statistics only after investigation, which means that crime statistics mostly include cases that meet a high evidential threshold.
[4] There is a possibility that the same crime is counted under multiple offences defined in different sections of the law, e.g., as 'penetrative assault' and as 'aggravated sexual assault'.
[5] Counted as one crime if abuse was reported on one occasion and as several if reported on several occasions.
[6] Multiple crimes might be recorded if distinct acts or locations are identified.
[7] Multiple crimes recorded in rape cases if each perpetrator committed penetration.
[8] Depends on collaboration between perpetrators. May be recorded as one or several crimes.
[9] One crime for sexual assault. Multiple crimes for rape, one per perpetrator.
[10] Counted as one offence applying a 'principal crime rule' according to which the most serious crime is recorded.
[11] Two crimes recorded, one for each type of offence defined in legislation.
[12] One for rape (crime against a victim) and one for image distribution (crime against the state). For indecent image offences, one crime per perpetrator is recorded.
[13] Multiple crimes recorded for each act under distinct offence categories, unless one act enables the other.
[14] One offence for rape per child (if one occasion) and one child pornography offence per perpetrator.
[15] Three or more offences typically recorded.
[16] One for each act that falls under a distinct offence category.

Table 5 compares how police data is recorded and interpreted; including timeframes, thresholds for recording and handling of complex cases such as prolonged abuse, multiple perpetrators and image-based sexual offences. Notable variations exist in evidential requirements, the point at which incidents are recorded and whether multiple offences are counted separately. These discrepancies highlight challenges in cross-national comparison and underscore the importance of contextual understanding when interpreting crime statistics for research purposes.

Data Beacons: India's National Crime Records Bureau

India's publicly available police records system, primarily through the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), demonstrates several practices that can inform good practice discussions on law enforcement data accessibility for researchers. The NCRB was established in 1986 to function as a repository of information on crime and criminals (NCRB, 2024a). In addition, the 'Crime in India' report has been published annually since 1953 (NCRB, 2024b).

The system provides historical continuity through seven decades of data collection, with the 2022 report representing the 70th edition (NCRB, 2023). This longitudinal dataset enables trend analysis, as evidence by measurable changes in crime patterns over time, including a documented 94.13% surge in sexual offences against children under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act between 2017 and 2022, with 64,469 cases recorded in 2022 compared to 33,210 in 2017 (NCRB, 2024b).

A notable technical infrastructure feature is the integration with India's Open Government Data Platform, which provides structured access to crime datasets through an application programming interface (API) and multiple data formats, including Comma-Separated Values (CSVs) and JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) (Data.gov.in, 2024). The platform offers programmatic access to NCRB datasets, enabling researchers to retrieve data systematically for computational analysis. This API-based approach facilitates automated data collection and supports reproducible research methodologies.

The standardised reporting format across Indian states is facilitated through a network of State Crime Records Bureaus (SCRBs), which serve as state-level data collection units responsible for compiling annual crime data for the national 'Crime in India' report using NCRB-prescribed formats and guidelines (Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2023). This decentralised yet standardised approach enables comparative analysis within the national context.

Most Western European countries participated in the EU Kids Online surveys, which employed a consistent and standardised approach to data collection, including harmonised question wording across countries. This consistency enables more reliable cross-country comparisons within the region. In contrast, participation from South Asian countries was notably more limited and survey instruments showed greater variability in question design and scope, with some subtypes – particularly sexual exploitation and sexual extortion – being inconsistently measured. These gaps underscore the need for more comprehensive and standardised survey frameworks in South Asia to ensure robust data collection and comparability across regions.

Childlight has developed a White Paper and a forthcoming journal article that critically examine the current landscape of TF-CSEA survey measurement. These publications will offer clear recommendations for harmonising approaches, improving comparability and strengthening the global evidence base on child victimisation in digital contexts.

> **“Most of the sexual offences, when it gets reported, it gets recorded. In fact, there is a penalty. There is a penalty for police officers, if they don’t record a crime of sexual offence.”**
>
> Interview with a police representative from India

Data beacons: Sweden's police system for crime recording

Sweden offers a compelling example of how administrative data practices can enhance the visibility of CSEA. Unlike many countries that consolidate multiple offences into a single case or apply the 'Principle Crime Rule' (such as England and Wales), Sweden records each reported incident as a separate offence, including attempted crimes. This detailed methodology means that long-term or serial abuse is fully reflected in the data, providing a more accurate picture of the scale and complexity of CSEA. It is noteworthy that the Swedish police record offences at the time they are reported, regardless of when the abuse occurred. Even if an investigation later determines that no crime took place, the report remains in the official statistics. This inclusive methodology contributes to higher recorded crime figures, not necessarily more instances of abuse. While the Principal Crime Rule contributes to some undercounting, particularly when multiple offences are present, it is not the main divergence between Sweden and other countries like England and Wales. The more significant difference lies in Sweden's practice of counting each instance of abuse, whereas England and Wales count reports of crimes. This distinction has substantial implications for data interpretation, victim recognition, and policy relevance.

However, it is important to recognise that the most effective counting method must be sensitive to the broader system in which it operates. For example, England and Wales previously adopted a similar approach to Sweden by counting individual instances of offences. Yet, this proved problematic within their incentive structures. As a result, the system reverted to counting reports of crimes – sometimes modified depending on the nature of the case – rather than individual acts of abuse.

Sweden also stands out for its transparent and disaggregated reporting. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) published detailed statistics, including outcome data and how decisions are made by police or prosecutors within the calendar year. This offers valuable insights into how cases are processed through the justice system. While this system may limit direct comparability with countries using more restrictive counting rules, it sets a high standard for data integrity, victim recognition, and policy relevance. Sweden's model demonstrates how thoughtful administrative practices – aligned with the surrounding institutional context – can support a more victim-centred, evidence-informed response to CSEA.

Source: Brå (2024, November); RIF-gruppen (2012)

Summary

Reliable data on CSEA is essential for effective prevention, protection and policymaking. However, differences in how cases are reported, recorded and counted across jurisdictions and platforms can lead to inconsistencies in official statistics. These variations, shaped by differing legal frameworks, administrative practices and crime counting rules, can obscure the true scale of harm. Ultimately, the integrity of CSEA data depends on consistent, trauma-informed practices across all stages of reporting and recording. Ensuring that every child's voice is heard and every case is counted is not only a matter of data accuracy, but also a matter of justice and protection.

4.2 Impact of organisational decisions on report volume: A case study

Introduction

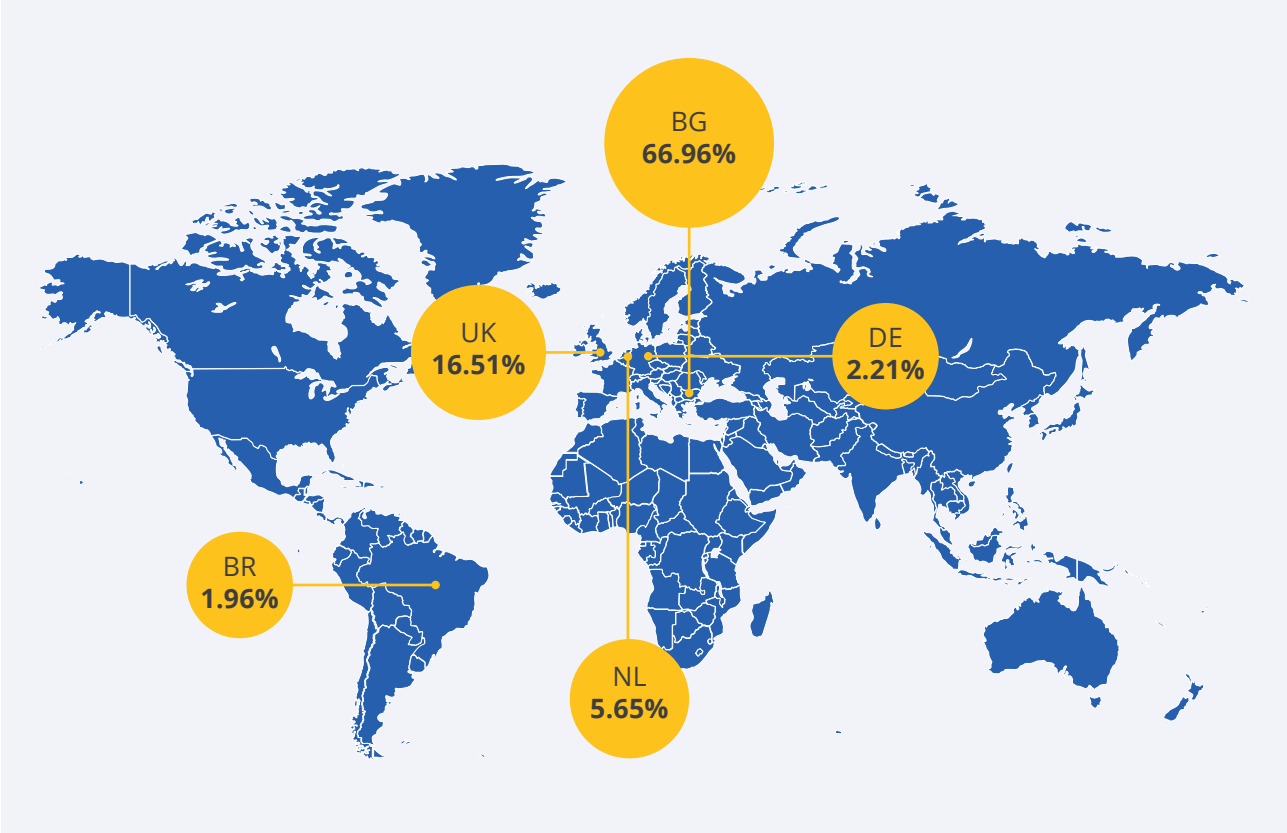
As seen throughout this report, data from many sources can be varied and inconsistent. There are various factors that could contribute to this discrepancy. We will focus on the effects of organisational decisions and the type of information recorded in a report. A case-study example of this is exhibited using the data received in 2025 from INHOPE.

Findings

From the beginning of 2024 to the present, INHOPE has welcomed three new hotlines into its global network of reporting: Action Against Child Sexual Abuse Initiative (ACSAI) in Nigeria, Internet Hotline Centre Japan and the new consortium SafeNet Bulgaria. Of the 2.5 million reports recorded overall, 1.6 million were from the Bulgarian hotline. This translates to over half of the total volume (66.96%) of reports, as can be seen in Figure 21 on the top 5 reporting countries in 2024. In comparison the largest proportion of reports in 2023 was 35.03% from the UK.

Although this is a remarkable increase in volume attributed to one hotline, it is important to note the context of the reports. The majority of them come from a concentrated cluster of known forums in which offenders have switched to uploading separate video frames rather than composite images, thus increasing the volume.

FIGURE 21 Percentage of reports from the top five reporting countries, INHOPE data 2024



Source: INHOPE Annual Report 2024 (INHOPE, 2024)

This demonstrates the impact that an organisational change such as, adding a new hotline, can have on the volume of reports received. Without these specific forums being forced offline by hotlines or law enforcement, the volumes seen in 2024 will continue for the foreseeable future.

Data beacons: INHOPE's coordinated and unified data classification and reporting

TF-CSEA is a transnational issue in which abuse can happen in one country, be shared with others in another country, and images and videos can be stored on a server in a third country, for example. Tackling CSAM requires global coordination and consistent systems for reporting and classification. INHOPE, a global CSAM hotline network, is continuously working to expand its hotline network and reach regions with distinct data gaps. From the beginning of 2024, INHOPE has welcomed three new hotlines into their global network of reporting: Action Against Child Sexual Abuse Initiative in Nigeria, Internet Hotline Centre Japan and SafeNet Bulgaria.

Having an expanding network of hotlines is only one piece of the puzzle, coordination across countries is equally important. For this reason, it is imperative that a global approach is taken, which is what INHOPE aims to do with its ICCAM 'I 'see' Child Abuse Material' system. INHOPE seeks to connect all hotlines together to reduce the duplication of reports from different countries and unify the classification of criminality. The way it works is when an analyst reviews a public report and determines it to be illegal according to Baseline international standards, the URL is added to the ICCAM system. ICCAM then crawls for all other information or images on the URL. If further information is found and classified as illegal, it is sent to INTERPOL and added to their International Child Sexual Exploitation Database (ICSE Database). All INHOPE data is also classified according to their Universal Classification Schema, allowing for harmonisation across different countries, a model that could be adapted for traditional child helplines.

This allows member countries to work together without requiring much planning or time. It is one way in which a large, mandated data collection organisation can reduce its impact on volume volatility moving forward.

Summary

Many extenuating factors can impact on the volume of CSAM reports received in a year – some of which we in the field have no control over. However, it is important to highlight the impact that organisational changes can have on data. In this instance, there was a drastic impact on the number of reports received by INHOPE.

4.3 Who is missing from the data? Addressing underreporting and underrepresentation

Introduction

No single data source can give a complete picture of CSEA. Prevalence surveys, police records, child helpline data and hotline data help us understand different parts of the issue, but all have blind spots. Building on section 3.6, which explored the factors shaping children's willingness to disclose instances of CSEA, this section considers which groups of children remain systematically absent from existing data and why. Understanding who is missing helps us interpret the scale of the problem more accurately.

Frontline data

Who is missing and why?

Certain groups of children may be less visible in certain sources of CSEA data for a variety of reasons. Very young children may be unable to disclose abuse and their cases may go unnoticed without adult reporting or medical detection (e.g., Barth et al., 2013; Finkelhor et al., 2015; Khambati et al., 2018; Yurteri et al., 2021). Children in conflict zones, institutions, or remote areas may be excluded from prevalence surveys or lack safe ways to report abuse. In such settings, even basic child protection systems may be missing.

Children deprived of liberty, for example, those in detention, police custody, immigration facilities, secure care or psychiatric institutions, are also largely absent from existing data. Their isolation from families and communities combined with power imbalances and restricted oversight, means that abuse is less likely to be detected, reported, or officially recorded (e.g., Thomsen et al., 2024; United Nations, 2019).

Children with disabilities also remain significantly underrepresented. They may face greater risks of abuse due to dependency on caregivers, communication barriers, and social stigma, yet they are less likely to be identified in surveys or official reports. In some contexts, their abuse is hidden within institutions or family settings and never reaches formal systems (e.g., Euser et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2012).

Marginalised groups such as LGBTQI+ youth, out-of-school youth, looked after children/children in care, and children from ethnic minorities also tend to be overlooked (e.g., Capaldi et al., 2024; McMinn et al., 2024). These groups often face stigma, discrimination, social isolation, or additional barriers that prevent them from reporting sexual abuse. In countries where legislation is weak, data systems are unable to collect or publish reliable information.

Even where cases are recorded, they may be listed under broad categories like 'sexual violence', without clearly identifying that a child was involved. In the online space, many children whose abuse results in 'self-generated' CSAM may not perceive their experience as a crime and, therefore, do not report it.

Case example: Missing groups in CSAM data

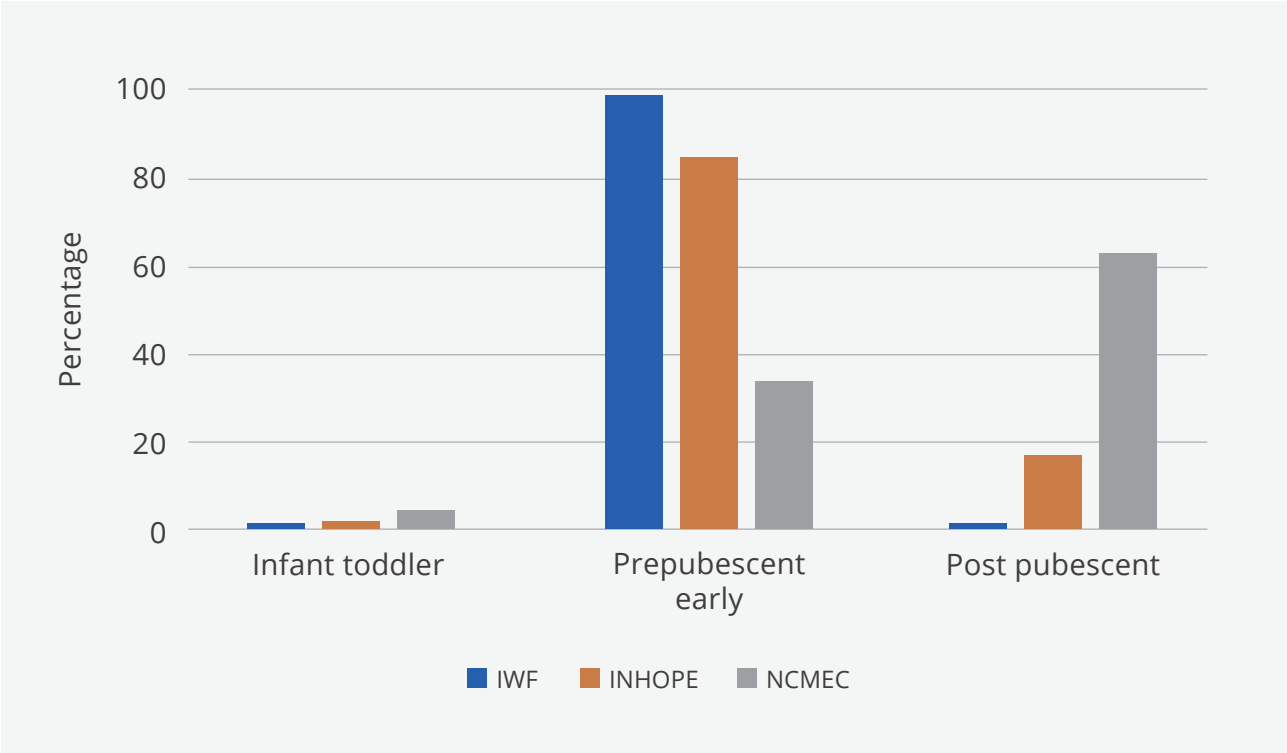
Across different reporting systems, prepubescent children appear as the most common age group recorded in CSAM statistics (Figure 22). However, this trend is shaped by the way cases are coded, rather than by the full reality of abuse. In most systems, when multiple children appear together in the same image or video, the age of the youngest child is the one entered into the data. This means that if a teenager appears alongside a much younger child, the case is logged under the younger age group. As a result, adolescents are often underrepresented, which can give the misleading impression that CSAM mostly involves very young children.

A related limitation occurs when several children of similar age appear together. Here too, only one child, typically the youngest, is counted, leaving the involvement of the others invisible in the CSAM data. This reinforces the distortion and further obscures the scale of abuse among older children and adolescents.

IWF recently began tagging cases where multiple children appear. In one year alone, this new method identified more than 70,000 additional children who would otherwise have been excluded from the data (IWF, 2024). There continues to be gaps in the CSAM data, particularly around CSAM that depicts multiple victims, as well as differences in the treatment of post-pubescent content compared to CSAM content depicting younger children.

FIGURE 22

Global proportions of analysed CSAM by age category



Source: Created by Childlight using data from the 2023 annual reports of INHOPE and IWF (INHOPE, 2023; IWF, 2023), and NCMEC's 2023 CyberTipline Report of (NCMEC, 2023a).

Summary

The absence of certain children in data is not a random phenomenon, but is linked to clear social and structural barriers. These gaps reflect who can safely report, who has access to support and how systems record cases. Some of the most vulnerable children, including very young children, LGBTQI+ youth, children with disabilities and those affected by crises or technology facilitated abuse are often left out of surveys and official records. To truly understand the scale and nature of CSEA, it is essential to consider these missing individuals and to strengthen the foundations of how data on CSEA is collected and used. For more details on how structural limitations and data gaps affect our knowledge, see section 4.4.

4.4 Data gaps and limitations across all data areas

Introduction

All data sources on CSEA have limitations, including the data used for Childlight's ITL Index 2025. A detailed analysis of the limitation of each data source used for the Index can be found in the Technical Note [**see the Technical Note**]. The aim of this section is to identify limitations that affect more than one indicator area and complement each other, thus creating acute shortcomings in the data on CSEA and presenting important caveats on the interpretation of the Index.

Findings

Geographic data gaps

The ITL Index aims for full geographic coverage to show the scale and nature of CSEA in every country across the globe. This year's edition focused on countries in the UNICEF regions of Western Europe and South Asia. In these regions, some countries have a lot more data sources covering CSEA than others. A clear trend across data sources is that there is less data for South Asia than there is for Western Europe, indicating a need for more efforts to collect and share data across this region.

For the indicators based on survey data, there were more surveys covering countries in Western Europe than South Asia. Five countries in Western Europe had enough surveys covering offline CSEA to conduct a meta-analysis combining data from several studies for a more robust prevalence estimate. Notable exceptions in South Asia are India, which has good survey data, as well as Pakistan, with some survey data.

South Asian countries were also underrepresented in child helpline data, where data was only available for the Maldives, reported through CHI. Notably, India also has a child helpline, but has stopped sharing its data publicly and through reporting to CHI, thus creating less transparency on a national scale in relation to help seeking for CSEA through the child helpline.

Indicators based on official CSEA crime statistics using police data were developed only for a selection of countries in each region. While data was publicly available for all selected countries in Western Europe (including Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Sweden and Poland), two of the three selected countries in South Asia had no or very little data publicly available, namely, Afghanistan (with no data) and Pakistan (with very limited data). By contrast, India as the third selected country in South Asia has very good publicly available CSEA crime statistics based on police data.

Data capturing the amount of CSAM, including images and videos of CSEA, detected online are typically global because CSAM is easily uploaded, shared and accessed from around the world through the internet. However, the fact that the organisations whose mission it is to detect and remove CSAM are mainly based in Western Europe and North America might introduce a geographic bias in numbers. This is because these organisations, being based in these regions, have specific mandates to address the presence of CSAM in Western European and North American countries.

Thematic data gaps

There are also aspects of CSEA for which less data is available across data types and our indicator areas. One key gap is data on TF-CSEA when images, the internet, online grooming or sexual extortion play a role. Survey measures and other data collection tools are still being developed to capture TF-CSEA; as a result, there is not much data on these topics yet. Legislation is still adapting to these newer crime types. As a consequence, official crime statistics that rely on police data and crime categories, as defined in legislation, often do not show TF-CSEA crimes separately. This makes data on CSAM all the more critical as they offer insights into the scale of files circulating online and shed light on some of the abuse enabled by technology, including livestreamed child sexual exploitation and sexual extortion.

Another key gap is data on perpetrators – how many are there? Who are they? What are the risk factors that make it more likely that someone perpetrates CSEA? Most data on these questions comes from forensic samples of convicted offenders. The only population-based survey that provides estimates for the overall population that currently exists is the one our ITL Index 2024 indicators are based on. This is a new survey instrument that requires further testing and validation. In addition, it has only been conducted in three countries so far: the UK, Australia and the US. Another valuable data source is a novel survey that can be accessed from the web by those looking for CSAM (Insoll et al., 2022). Although the resulting data is from a convenience sample and cannot easily be generalised to the full population, the high number of respondents gives the findings weight and value. More testing of these novel survey approaches is needed to determine if they include all the

different groups of perpetrators, in particular assessing when these behaviours are committed by other children and young people. Potentially, there is a fear that spending money on more perpetrator data would redistribute money away from victim/survivors. However, a better understanding of who the perpetrators are and what the risk factors are is essential for effective prevention and intervention, which would make the world safer for all children.

Few population-based studies provide detailed reporting on victimisation by perpetrators, largely due to measurement tools not being equipped to capture such granularity, as well as methodological and ethical limitations. In many cases, collecting detailed perpetrator data is not the primary objective of the survey, further contributing to the limited availability of disaggregated perpetrator information. ICAST-C (ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool Children's Version), a survey tool used to measure the prevalence of violence against children (Zolotor et al., 2009), distinguishes perpetrators only by adult/child and gender, offering some insight, but lacking specificity. In contrast, the revised ICAST-R (ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tools Retrospective Version) provides a more comprehensive breakdown, asking participants "Who did this to you?" and listing categories such as parents, siblings, teachers, strangers and peers, which enhances the potential for more detailed perpetrator analysis.

Some commonly used instruments such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire (ACE-IQ) do not ask about perpetration at all, focusing instead on frequency of abuse. While it includes a section on peer violence, this is limited to items like “I was made fun of with sexual jokes, comments, or gestures” (sexual harassment) and does not include sexual assault or rape by peers. This points to a critical gap in measurement tools and emphasises the need for instruments that can capture both subtype and perpetrator-specific data.

It is also important to note that studies analysed for this Index differ in how they classify sibling perpetrators – some categorised siblings under ‘peers’. For example, the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) asks “Now think about other kids, like from school, a boyfriend or girlfriend, or even a brother or sister”. Whereas ICAST-R differentiates between siblings and peers. This highlights the need for clearer and more standardised conceptualisation of perpetrator subtypes in future CSEA research to improve comparability and analytical accuracy.

There is an increasing body of research on peer-related sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours (e.g., Russell et al., 2025; McKibbin et al., 2025; McPherson et al., 2024; Mathews et al., 2024), with emerging evidence suggesting that peers, particularly during early adolescence can be significant perpetrators (Kloppen et al., 2016; Mathews et al., 2024). Yet, many representative prevalence surveys still have limitations in consistently capturing perpetrator type, including abuse by peers. Many of the studies included in this review used the Adverse Childhood Experiences

(ACE) framework, to measure child sexual abuse. While widely used, the ACE CSEA item typically includes a 5-year age difference modifier, that the abuse must have been committed by someone at least five years older than the child. Recent research has questioned the validity of this threshold, highlighting that such a modifier may exclude survivors who experienced abuse by someone closer in age, including peers or slightly older individuals, even in cases where coercion or lack of consent was present (Dolson et al., 2021). This age-based limitation may result in significant underreporting of CSEA, as it fails to capture the full range of abusive experiences that fall outside the narrow definition.

Furthermore, much of the existing literature on peer-perpetrated sexual abuse tends to focus on sexual harassment, with far less attention given to other forms of abuse. For example, a systematic review by Tener and Katz (2019) highlights this imbalance, noting a lack of consistent definitions and variation in findings depending on the age and gender of those involved. These gaps point to a clear need for research that distinguishes between types of peer perpetrators such as known peers, romantic or dating partners and unknown peers, and that more fully addresses the prevalence and dynamics of abuse. Such research also requires more nuanced consideration, as dynamics may differ across developmental, cultural, and digital contexts. This is critical for developing targeted prevention, early intervention and support strategies tailored to peer-related sexual abuse.

Hidden cases

There is not one type of data that captures all cases of CSEA. This is why our ITL Index on Global CSEA combines a wide range of data sources whose strengths and weaknesses complement each other and, when combined, provide a fuller picture of the scale and nature of CSEA.

Population-based surveys collect data for research from a representative sample of people in a population. Statistical methods then allow researchers to generalise findings, such as the number of victim/survivors, from the survey to the full population, which often leads to very good estimates of social phenomena, especially when the estimates of several surveys can be combined in a meta-analysis. However, asking about experiences of CSEA in surveys is notoriously difficult and there will always be hidden cases that are not captured by a survey. Surveys often ask adults about their childhood experiences of CSEA, which can lead to biases and lower estimates when adults do not fully remember their childhood experiences or do not feel comfortable or safe enough to disclose them in a survey (e.g., Krayem et al., 2021; Barr et al., 2017; Negriff et al., 2017; Langeland et al., 2015; Williams, 1994). In addition, some groups of victim/survivors are unlikely to be covered by surveys, for example young children (e.g., Barth et al., 2013; Finkelhor et al., 2015; Khambati et al., 2018; also see section 4.3 above). In these cases, it is

typically a parent or guardian who replies to the survey and they might not be aware of experiences of abuse or decide not to disclose if they are the abuser or close to the abuser.

Child helpline data is very valuable, because it can often capture data on experiences of CSEA in close to real time and from the victim/survivor, who calls to seek help directly. However, not every victim/survivor will call a child helpline, leading to cases of CSEA not captured in this type of data.

Similarly, crime statistics using police recorded CSEA crimes provide yet another perspective on the scale of CSEA in a country, showing the number of CSEA cases the police are handling every year. However, not every case of CSEA will come to the attention of the police (Colburn et al., 2023). The number of recorded cases depends on a range of factors including whether a victim/survivor or bystander understands that a crime has happened, whether they feel comfortable and safe enough to report it to the police, and whether the police actually record the case (**see our Technical Note** on police data indicators).

Data on CSAM that circulates online provide evidence of the global scale and nature of CSEA captured in images and videos. However, not every type or instance of abuse will be captured in images or videos and shared online. In addition, not all CSAM files in circulation will be detected and, hence, counted in the data.

Lack of clarity on what we are measuring

Each of our data sources and indicator areas raises questions around what exactly is being measured or counted, and there are often a range of factors that influence the indicator numbers over and above the actual number of CSEA cases, victims, or perpetrators. This makes it difficult, and at times impossible, to compare and combine data across data types and countries.

For population-based surveys, there is a lack of sufficiently refined and validated survey measures for CSEA that are used as a standard across all surveys, especially for TF-CSEA, to ensure that different surveys measure the same phenomena.

Official crime statistics based on police data are highly sensitive to a range of factors that are independent of the actual number of CSEA-related crimes and differ widely across countries. For examples, different countries can have widely differing rules for recording and counting crimes, which leads to the situation where, in the case of long-term abuse of the same victim, one crime would be recorded in England and Wales, but over a hundred crimes in Sweden (for details see section 4.1. above). Another factor is how CSEA-related crimes are defined in national legislation,

which differs across countries, thus leading to different crime statistics measuring somewhat different crimes. For example, a lower age of sexual consent will rule out cases that would be a crime in countries with a higher age of sexual consent.

CHI's data is not based on the number of calls/contacts/communications to child helplines, or the number of individuals contacting the child helpline; rather what is measured is the number of times that child helpline staff/counsellors tag calls/contacts/communications as specific sex and/or gender identities and categories of CSEA. This means that the data cannot be used to estimate the prevalence of types of CSEA, or the number of males, females and non-binary persons contacting a child helpline. CHI's data is further complicated by the categories of individual child helplines not tallying with CHI's, leading to missing data.

Data on the number of CSAM reports do not measure the number of CSAM victims, because the same victim can be in multiple images. It does not even measure the number of CSAM images, because the same image can be shared multiple times and one report can refer to either one image or a zip file with thousands of images. In addition, the level of detected CSAM is sensitive to a range of other factors that are irrelevant to the magnitude of the problem including the mission of the organisation providing the data and their methods used to detect CSAM. Some methods will be able to detect CSAM on the Dark Web that are not indexed by standard search engines, while others only work across the easily accessible Clear Web.

Data beacons: EU Kids Online

The EU Kids Online project is one of the most well-known and influential studies on children's experiences online in Europe (Livingstone et al., 2011; Smahel et al., 2020). It set out to understand both the risks and the opportunities presented by the internet for children aged 9–16, and to help make the online world safer for young users. Led by a network of researchers from across Europe, the team developed a detailed survey that worked well in many different economic, cultural, and regional settings — showing that the approach could be used in other parts of the world too. To make sense of children's complex and varied online experiences, they also created a new theoretical framework for research, helping to compare data more clearly between countries (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). The first EU Kids Online survey ran in 21 European countries between 2006 and 2009, followed by a second in 25 countries from 2009 to 2011, and the most recent in 19 countries between 2017 and 2019. Because there are so few representative studies on the prevalence of TF-CSEA in Europe, and especially those that use the same instrument and terminology, the findings from EU Kids Online remain an essential, and often the only, source of evidence on the scale and nature of the problem of TF-CSEA.

Lack of shared terminology

A lack of shared terminology affects data and research on CSEA across the board, creating difficulties for combining and comparing data and for sharing insights.

Survey research, especially on TF-CSEA, lacks shared classifications of types of abuse, making it difficult to compare survey results and combine results from different studies. As surveys are designed by researchers and are not bound by national legislation or other official terminology, they offer a promising opportunity to harmonise terminology for data collection instruments used across countries. In this vein, Childlight is working towards a shared classification system for TF-CSEA, alongside the development of the Index.

Similarly, the child helpline data collected by CHI is affected by child helplines in different countries using different terminologies, which makes it difficult to combine and compare help-seeking data across countries. As child helplines can freely decide which terminology to use, a helpful step is the adoption by CHI of the Luxembourg Terminology Guidelines in its own data framework (ECPAT International, 2025), which offers a very detailed set of terms around CSEA that have been developed with input from a wide range of experts and stakeholders. CHI works to encourage its members to integrate the CHI data framework into their data collection to further the opportunities of comparability of child helpline data. In addition, CHI is exploring ways to collect more detailed data from its members, to allow better analysis and closer mapping of terms across members.

CSAM data is also affected by a lack of shared terminology across organisations that publish the data. For example, these organisations use different age groupings and abuse severity scales for their analyses, making it difficult to compare and combine data across sources. As these organisations can choose the terminology they use, efforts to agree on a core terminology and classifications would support an improved, more unified understanding of the scale and nature of CSAM globally.

Official crime statistics based on police data use different CSEA crime categories, because these depend on the definitions in national legislation. We cannot expect these laws to be harmonised globally. However, more can be done to harmonise official crime data collated for statistical purposes. Scotland and Northern Ireland provide good practice examples here. Rather than CSEA-related crimes being hidden in categories that also cover adults and spread over a range of crime categories, they provide a separate figure for sexual crimes against children. Moreover, although the age of sexual consent in these countries is lower than 18, their overall number is for sexual crimes against children under 18, using the international definition of a child as every person under 18. This makes the level of police reported CSEA crimes visible and easy to see, following international standards.

Admittedly, a major challenge for harmonised terminology across countries is that the multitude of languages spoken across the globe and the terminologies used often cannot be readily translated into other languages, making it important to assess and agree on terminologies in different languages separately. In addition, languages are embedded within different cultural contexts, which can present further challenges to agreeing on a universal framework. More research is also needed on the cross-cultural understanding of questions and behaviours related to CSEA as this will impact on responses to surveys and other forms of reporting.

Summary

All data sources on CSEA have important limitations. Key limitations to keep in mind when using the ITL Index on Global CSEA include (1) the lack of data for some countries, especially in South Asia, and on some aspects of CSEA, in particular TF-CSEA and perpetrators; (2) that no data source shows the full extent of the problem, because of hidden cases that are not captured, including whole groups of victims who are likely excluded; (3) that the lack of harmonised terminologies and differences in what is measured and how can mean that comparing and combining data from different sources, studies, or indicators can be difficult and even misleading. However, to improve the data foundations we need to make a start and the first step is thoroughly documenting current data sources, as we are doing with the ITL Index. This will then allow identification of key priority areas for improving data foundations and addressing the limitations of the CSEA data landscape.

PART 5 Data to action

This part moves from analysis to action, highlighting priority areas where the findings from our thematic analysis can have the greatest impact. While these represent only a small part of the broader opportunities within the data, they signal where Childlight will focus its efforts, in collaboration with its partners. We encourage advocates, activists, frontline practitioners and others to identify and pursue their own impact pathways using this evidence. Alongside key thematic areas, we also draw attention to notable outliers, unexpected patterns and surprising results. All underlying data is available in the country profiles and explored in greater depth on our online **Interactive Index Dashboard,** offering further opportunities for national, regional and global action.

5.1 Data to action: Our pathways to impact

Childlight's mission is to use data to prevent CSEA. We are a data-driven, evidence-based organisation and within our core mission is the commitment to turn data into change for children. While we are not an advocacy organisation, we see our role as a data institute as one that connects rigorous analysis to action. This means ensuring our findings reach frontline practitioners, policymakers and other key actors who can use them within their specific context to protect children. Our work includes actively supporting these stakeholders to interpret, adapt and apply data in ways that make sense in their regional, national, organisational or individual setting. The way in which we translate our research outputs into tangible impact for children and young people is called our 'Pathway to Impact' (see Childlight Impact Transparency Report April 2025 – Childlight).

With this in mind, the 2025 ITL Index on Global CSEA presents an opportunity to identify and prioritise areas where our research can have the greatest impact. We have drawn on our thematic analysis to select the findings that are most relevant for driving measurable change. All of the underlying data presented in this report is publicly accessible via our online Interactive Index Dashboard [**see the Dashboard**], in this thematic analysis report and through openly available datasets for each indicator by country. Readers of ITL Index 2025 can also create bespoke reports from our data that they can download and share with colleagues and others. We encourage readers to use these resources to inform their own work and we welcome hearing how the Index findings have been used to create impact. We have also established systems to track and document impact from ITL Index 2025 and will focus on specific thematic areas where change is both necessary and achievable.

Our approach moves beyond simply highlighting 'interesting' findings. Instead, we focus on where data points to clear opportunities for targeted action and where there is a defined audience who can be engaged. For each theme, a key data point underpins the finding, and the accompanying message is shaped to support the impact plan. We have worked with our 2025 Index Impact and Communications Working Group, which has a CSEA expert from nearly every country represented in this year's edition, to help shape the plan. We have also worked at a much deeper level with global, regional and country partners prior to the launch of this report to help secure support and further deepen impact planning.

5.2 Our vision for the future

Childlight's purpose is to safeguard children around the world from sexual exploitation and abuse. Our vision, increasingly shared by others, is that child sexual exploitation and abuse is treated as a global health issue that can be prevented and treated. To enable this, Childlight has three core missions:

Mission 1: To make available data that drives sustainable, coordinated action to safeguard children across the world

Mission 2: To improve CSEA data quality, integrity and reproducibility

Mission 3: To be recognised as the leading independent authority for global CSEA data

Specifically, we envision a future of 'health-centric intelligence', in which there is increased priority on and investment in public health approaches for prevention, supported by efforts to resolve data gaps and remove imbalances in how data is collected and used. In this future, prevention and public health are at the forefront of societal priorities, supported by robust, transparent, and interconnected data systems. Governments, organisations and communities recognise that a healthy population, free from the harm of CSEA, underpins economic resilience and social stability. Data coherence and robust data systems ensure accurate, real-time insights, facilitating proactive interventions and equitable access to healthcare and support services.

5.3 Where to start

We know that the pathway to impact and making the changes to reach that big picture future can often seem overwhelming, with lots of discussion on what isn't working and what needs to be fixed, but without knowing where to start.

Below, we describe six themes that are highlighted through our 2025 Into the Light Index on Global CSEA and for each area, some tangible next steps that can be taken now. Because Childlight is part of the solution and wants to play an active role in bringing change, we also highlight what we are doing and how we are also catalysing, collaborating or directly contributing to the future we want to see.

FIGURE 23

Recommended action areas from the ITL Index 2025 findings

ACTION AREA 1

Technology-facilitated CSEA and CSAM data availability

- **We ask** governments to ensure that law enforcement agencies have access to referrals from key reporting bodies, such as the NCMEC and INTERPOL, among others, and the ability to triage those referrals to identify children and remove CSAM. This reflects our understanding that in some countries such agencies may face serious challenges in terms of data access, supportive legislation, training or resources to act on CSEA intelligence. Specifically, we ask for prioritised support in the Netherlands and the Maldives, which have high rates of CSAM reports per 10,000 population, and India, which has a high volume of CSAM overall.

- **We commit** to working with countries to understand their current ability to access, triage, prioritise and use CSEA data, through our Childlight Technical Advisory Programme (C-TAP). We commit to providing targeted support and advice for high priority countries that show a willingness to improve their capability – with support for the Netherlands, the Maldives, India and Pakistan underway. We also commit to further research country contexts where CSAM rates are disproportionate to help support the identification of root causes for prevention and response.

ACTION AREA 2

Familial child sexual exploitation and abuse prevention

- **We ask** that when a country survey is being designed or when CSAM data is being collected and analysed it includes categorisation of perpetrator type including familial abuse, where possible, to address data gaps in this area. Perpetrator type can be captured through two approaches: NCMEC data and surveys that disaggregate perpetrator categories.

- **We commit** to the continued analysis and disaggregation of data to shine a light on the prevalence of familial abuse, exploring this through work with survivor groups and specialist researchers to explore developing specific indicators in the 2026 edition of our ITL Index on Global CSEA.

ACTION AREA 3

Data completeness and quality

- **We ask** that every country funds and implements a representative victimisation survey, to fill existing data gaps. Specifically, we ask for greater data collection in South Asia, where there is very little CSEA data from other sources. This should include a common approach to typologies to capture both in-person and technology-facilitated CSEA. An investment in training and technology to capture child helpline data will yield more detailed and comparable help-seeking data from under-researched areas. National surveys should be complemented by publicly available crime statistics and child helpline data for CSEA that include age, gender and outcomes.

- **We commit** to identifying novel data sources and methodologies that can fill data gaps and contribute to country-level data on CSEA, especially where traditional survey data is lacking – and to making these indicators publicly available through our Index. For example, early scoping has indicated that for the East Asia and Pacific region, which is one of the regional priority areas for 2026, there will be limited data from the Pacific Islands. To address this, we will offer deep-dive analyses into Fiji and Papua New Guinea and explore working with data partners across other remote, rural, small population countries in our ITL Index 2026.

ACTION AREA 4

Regulation of online spaces

- **We ask** that countries uphold the best interests of the child and establish legislation that gives power to a governing body to set child-centric, gender-sensitive and inclusive standards for the safety of children in online spaces, as well as consequences if these standards are not met. Countries should reflect on the regulations in place in the EU, UK and Australia as a starting point on how to both protect children online and put legal provisions and systems in place to hold accountable those who facilitate abuse. Legislation and regulation of online spaces requires an even-handed approach accompanied by increased investment in developing technological innovation. This innovation must ensure that users' private data is protected, while also allowing for the investigation and prevention of online harms. There is more work to be done, with legislators and regulators having a difficult task ahead as they implement policies aimed to create greater safety for all and critically evaluate those efforts.

- **We commit** to conducting evaluation research to better understand the impact of regulation on child safety across different legislative and regulatory frameworks. We also commit to sharing our CSEA prevalence and nature research with national regulators, such as Ofcom (UK), the E-Safety Commissioner (Australia) and Coimisiún na Meán (Ireland), among others. We also commit to using data to support governments to establish legislation in countries where it does not exist, to evaluating existing legislative and regulatory frameworks, and to continuing our research into AI CSAM accountability in legislation. We commit to providing research that is without fear or favour, but always in the interest of children, through our membership of groups such as the Global Online Safety Regulation Network.

ACTION AREA 5

Connections to the field of gender-based violence

- **We ask** that when CSEA data is collected, it records both sex and gender. This will allow connection to the wider field of gender-based violence research (e.g., female genital mutilation, child marriage) and prevention programming, ensuring that support is calibrated by gender.

- **We commit** to continue to include a disaggregation of data by sex and gender, depending on the data source, in our ITL Index and upcoming editions of Searchlight – our biennial publication examining the nature of CSEA. We also commit to seeking funding to develop a doctoral student training network with a

consortium of partners on technology-facilitated sexual and gender-based violence to further the field by bringing innovative methodological approaches and learning to CSEA from the violence against women field, and vice versa, as well as linking academic research to policy and practice improvements.

ACTION AREA 6

Survivor care and restitution

- **We ask** that the lived experience of survivors is included in the designing and setting of national policy in CSEA. This includes consideration of schemes to provide restitution, redress, justice and healing for survivors of CSEA, including holding those who commit or facilitate abuse to account.

- **We commit** to using our Justice Beyond Borders research, a legislative analysis of 28 countries on TF-CSEA cross-border survivor restitution, to highlight the need for an international pathway to a global restitution scheme. We commit to working with partners and supporting research on how global monetary funds operate and how such work could connect with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

We end this Supplementary Thematic Analysis Report with a clear call to action and some tangible next steps. We know that many of the actions described above will be dependent on multi-level collaborations across new groups of people, organisations and sectors. We support this need for collaboration, so that we can build better trust and systemic approaches across local, national and international governments and agencies, while being mindful across cultures and contexts.

With this sentiment in mind, therefore, we hope that you find Childlight's Into the Light Index on Global CSEA and supplementary reports not just insightful, but useful. We would love to hear from you if you have used our research to catalyse or inform change for children, so that we know that it is indeed useful to others. We also welcome any feedback on our work and other opportunities to improve and enhance the Index. Without you – our users and practitioners – our insights cannot be translated into action for children, and **children can't wait.**

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Country coverage for ITL Index 2025

This table reflects the country coverage across indicator data sources for Western Europe and South Asia for the 2025 Into the Light CSEA Index.

TABLE A1 Country coverage for ITL Index 2025

Source	Surveys	Crime statistics*	NCMEC	IWF	INHOPE	C3P	CHI
Total countries	**27**	**4**	**40**	**6**	**25**	**5**	**34**
Western Europe	Austria Belgium Cyprus Czechia Denmark Estonia Finland France Germany Greece Hungary Ireland Italy Lithuania Malta Netherlands Norway Poland Portugal Slovenia Slovakia Spain Sweden Switzerland United Kingdom	United Kingdom Sweden Poland	All	Gibraltar United Kingdom Gibraltar United Kingdom	Austria Belgium Czechia Denmark Estonia Finland France Germany Greece Hungary Iceland Ireland Italy Luxembourg Latvia Lithuania Malta Netherlands Poland Portugal Slovenia Slovakia Spain Sweden United Kingdom	Germany Belgium Estonia Finland Sweden	Austria Belgium Cyprus Czechia Denmark Estonia Finland France Germany Greece Hungary Iceland Ireland Italy Luxembourg Latvia Lithuania Liechtenstein Malta Netherlands Norway Poland Portugal Slovenia Slovakia Spain Sweden Switzerland United Kingdom
South Asia	Pakistan Sri Lanka India	India	All	India Pakistan Nepal Sri Lanka			Pakistan Maldives Nepal

Source: Created by Childlight, based on the coverage of each indicator area.
* Note: Nine countries were sampled for a deep dive of police crime statistics data as a proof of concept for this indicator area.

The table in this appendix includes data from five major organisations: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE), Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P), and Child Helpline International (CHI), alongside information on the presence of official crime statistics and population-based surveys.

The data reveals that Western Europe demonstrates significantly broader coverage across international child protection networks, with many countries participating in multiple reporting and support systems such as INHOPE and CHI. In contrast, South Asia shows limited engagement, with fewer countries represented across these platforms. It is important to note that the countries listed under publicly available crime statistics are those for which data was successfully located during this research; however, they do not represent the full extent of countries in these regions that may publish such data.