

SEARCHLIGHT 2025

Technical Notes

Who benefits?

Shining a Light on the Business of
Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse



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Shining a Light on the Business of
Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Study E: Hidden Casualties of War: CSAM Possession
During Humanitarian Crises

Established by

**HUMAN
DIGNITY
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1. Background

Children are at increased risk of harm during humanitarian crises, including abuse, exploitation, trafficking, malnutrition and violence, due to the suspension of social norms, which is seen by perpetrators of harm as an opportunity. Children are also at increased risk of harm online. This study investigates the landscape of technology facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA) online during humanitarian crises, specifically looking at child sexual abuse material (CSAM) on peer-to-peer (P2P) networks. CSAM is the content, images, videos and sound clips created from the sexual abuse/exploitation of children. Accessing, sharing and creating this material is a crime in most countries. P2P networks are a distributed application architecture that partitions tasks or workloads between peers, including through files, disk storage capacity, and network bandwidth. Peers are equal within the network and a P2P network is created when two or more computers are connected and share resources without going through a separate server computer.

The data for this study was provided by Child Rescue Coalition (CRC), a non-profit organisation that rescues children from sexual abuse by “building technology for law enforcement, free of charge, to identify, arrest and prosecute child predators.”¹

This specific study investigates the sharing of CSAM in ongoing conflicts; the larger research project examines humanitarian crises more broadly.

2. Rationale

The aim of this research is to use CRC data to better understand the global data picture on the prevalence and nature of TF-CSEA – specifically the sharing of CSAM on P2P networks. It was carried out by examining the scale/magnitude and changes in CSAM-sharing at the beginning, during and after (if possible) humanitarian crises, in this case, countries undergoing conflict.

Events such as pandemics, disasters, migration or wars are transformative moments when legislative, regulatory and social norms are in flux or

¹ [Child Rescue Coalition, \(2025\), *Child Rescue Coalition and The Knoble Partner to Protect Children Worldwide*.](#)

suspended, which presents amplified opportunities for exploitation. These crises share “high rates of population displacement along with breakdown of the social and legal systems that deter criminal behaviour” (Spangaro et al., 2013, p. 2). Moreover, there is evidence of opportunistic sexual violence perpetrated within the climate of impunity present in war zones, where there is a breakdown of both social and legal systems for sanctioning aberrant behaviour (Marsh et al., 2006).

UN Secretary General António Guterres stated that, “For predators and human traffickers, war is not a tragedy. It is an opportunity. And women and children are the targets” (Guterres, 2022). There is evidence of human trafficking and the exploitation of refugees in Ukraine, as well as a rise in interest in and online searches for pornography featuring Ukrainian refugees. Fischer, a senior adviser for human rights crimes at Thomson Reuters stated: “[o]ur latest 2023 data analysis shows that internet demand for derogatory material relating to displaced Ukrainians is driving traffickers to coerce, lure and groom women and children into sexual exploitation” (The Guardian, 2023).

Over 14.33 million Ukrainian refugees have crossed borders in search of a safer environment since war broke out in Ukraine. The rate of family separation is 70%, and this exposes children to intensified dangers including “sexual violence, trafficking, exploitation, abuse and gender-based violence” (Child Helpline International, 2024).

Similarly, refugee children in Turkey are principally susceptible to early and forced marriage and exploitation through prostitution. The lack of economic opportunities for those in refugee camps is also exploited by criminal networks, which have been reported to pressure young Syrian women into sex work, which is especially prevalent among adolescent girls.

There is no publicly available data about rates of child sexual exploitation in prostitution, online child sexual exploitation or sexual exploitation of children in the context of humanitarian crisis (ECPAT, 2020). Therefore, there is an urgent need to investigate the sharing of CSAM, as there is evidence of an increase in demand for the exploitation of children during conflict. By looking at the nature and prevalence of sharing before the eruption of conflict and comparing this with the sharing taking place during the conflict, we can establish a reference point from which to measure change.

3. Research questions and aims

3.1 Research questions

Per country/region and globally (where data is collected), the following questions were asked:

- How do volumes of IP addresses sharing CSAM change before, during and (potentially) after crises (e.g., wars, covid, disasters etc.)?
- What correlation/association can be made between crises and CSAM-sharing?
- What impact do humanitarian crises have on the prevalence of CSAM-sharing?

3.2 Objectives

The main objectives are to:

- Understand the prevalence of the sharing of CSAM globally and per country (where country data is collected) before, during and (if possible) after crises
- Understand the association of humanitarian crises (war, covid etc.) on CSAM-sharing

4. Study design and methods of data collection and analysis

Based on the differences in available data as well as the duration of crisis experienced by each country, the data was broken down into three intervals per country. One measuring the amount of CSAM before the crisis; one during the crisis; and a final point at the last available date in 2023 or 2024, depending on the dataset.

Once the data had been categorised according to the criteria listed above and below, the difference between the first interval and last interval was calculated to measure the change in volume over the course of the crisis. In addition, a calculation of the percentage of the volume change was assessed by comparing the volume difference with the first measured volume.

4.1 Countries by crisis type

The countries were broken down by crisis type. Those categorised as affected by conflict or war were Ukraine, the Holy Land,² Venezuela, Sudan, Myanmar, Central African Republic, Yemen and Iraq. Countries classed as affected by famine were Ethiopia, South Sudan and Afghanistan. Those included as impacted by natural disaster were Somalia and Sierra Leone.

Conflict/war	Famine	Natural disaster
Ukraine	Ethiopia	Somalia
Holy Land	South Sudan	Sierra Leone
Venezuela	Afghanistan	
Sudan		
Myanmar		
Central African Republic		
Yemen		
Iraq		

Due to the differences in the type of volume sources found in the data sources, the measurements were separated by their source either CRC, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) or Association of Internet Hotline Providers (INHOPE). This assisted in comparing how the different methods of CSAM distribution and possession could influence the rates of CSAM in each country. It also helped to point to the impact of any technological changes in the countries or more globally.

4.1 Sample and recruitment

The study was conducted on data prepared by CRC for Childlight, along with publicly available data found in reports produced by INHOPE and NCMEC. The data prepared by CRC was based on measurements at three intervals during periods of crisis in 20 specified countries. These countries were

² Israel and Palestine, including the Gaza strip.

chosen based on their experience of a globally recognised crisis from 2014 to 2024, according to information from the United Nations and Global Conflict Centre. Where possible, this data was also retrieved in similar periods from both NCMEC and INHOPE. INHOPE only had data concerning three of the listed countries across their data. NCMEC held data for all 20 countries and, therefore, was used as a comparison.

The data from the Child Rescue Coalition was imported and processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to determine the volume change, percentage change and standard distribution across all 20 countries. The countries were then labelled and sorted according to the first crisis experienced within the measured period (2014–2024).

5. Study setting/information about data sources

The Child Rescue Coalition is a non-profit organisation that rescues children from sexual abuse by “building technology for law enforcement, free of charge, to identify, arrest and prosecute child predators.”¹ Childlight used CRC data to better understand the global data picture on the prevalence and nature of online child sex abuse exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) – specifically the sharing of CSAM on P2P networks.

6. Ethical and regulatory considerations

The data does not contain any identifiable material. No participants were involved.

Data where a child may currently be at significant risk of harm has been shared by CRC with relevant local law enforcement and child protection professionals. This data-sharing for referrals from CRC is highlighted in the UK government’s privacy notice around their own Child Abuse Image Dataset (CAID), from which UK-specific CRC non-redacted data feeds into (note that this privacy notice is for a separate dataset and the relevant section is around sharing referral information:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-abuse-image-database/child-abuse-image-database-caid-privacy-notice>).

6.1 Safeguarding and researcher well-being

Childlight researchers have undertaken the Sexual Violence Research

Initiative's 4-module online course, 'Dare to Care: Wellness, self and collective care for those working in the VAW and VAC (Violence Against Children) fields'. Childlight has its own psychological well-being programme available to researchers.

6.2 Research approval

The research was approved by The University of Edinburgh's Ethics Committee ref: UTGNO-AMF-0050424CL.

6.3 Study advisory committee and peer review

The advisory committee is comprised of individuals from government organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who have experience with either the disruption of child sexual abuse material or safeguarding during humanitarian crisis. They reviewed the findings before the publication of this Searchlight report. The five-person committee included the following organisations:

- Interpol
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)
- Academic Clinical Psychologist
- SOS Children's Villages
- Previous board member Médecins Sans Frontières Amsterdam (retired)

The group met on 8 November 2024. Feedback on the methodology and approach was presented during the meeting. The group also provided input on where best to take this research in terms of further study and outputs.

Advisors were provided with a copy draft of the research via email on 6 February 2025. Each provided written feedback on the research, which they reviewed and provided suggested changes. These changes were received by the research and applied accordingly to a final copy.

The group will meet again following publication of the Searchlight report to discuss any changes made to the report, as well as the ongoing development of further publications and associated studies from this research.

7. Data management: Access to final study dataset

The data cannot be shared due to a confidentiality agreement with CRC.

8. References

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