

SEARCHLIGHT 2025

Technical Notes

Who benefits?

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



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Who benefits?

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

Study: Words Matter: The value of an updated
“dictionary” for safeguarding around child sexual
exploitation and abuse

Established by

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1. Background

In 2016 ECPAT Luxembourg in collaboration with 18 other participating organisations and 3 further observing organisations founded an Interagency Working Group with the purpose of creating a guiding document around the language and terminology used for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and abuse. The publication and dissemination of the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, originally known as the Luxembourg Guidelines due to the involvement of ECPAT Luxembourg, was intended to improve communication across the globe as well as between sectors. This document was a move towards a cohesive global response to child sexual abuse and exploitation. To our knowledge there had been no subsequent investigation into updating the terminology guidelines since their publication, or on whether these guidelines are being suitably applied. Thus, it is imperative to investigate whether the terminology guidelines have made an impact on discussions around terminology. With the fast-evolving publication of social science research, public policy and legislative documents related to CSEA, particularly technology-facilitated CSEA, it is also imperative to seek updated consensus on previously debated terms and to highlight any new terminology recommendations for review.

2. Rationale

The current study sought to gain greater awareness of the impact of the original 2016 publication of the terminology guidelines. This was measured through examination of how frequently they were referenced, the extent to which their recommendations were adhered to and the coverage/relevance of their current terms and phrases within social science research, public policy and legislative documents.

Adherence to the recommendations and coverage of the guidelines were further tested through the development and delivery of a survey of professionals in the field. This survey captured the sector's awareness of the terminology guidelines, their use by professionals in the sector and the emerging terminology not found within the published terminology guidelines.

These two inputs were used as a guide for informing the revision work for the terminology guidelines¹.

3. Research questions and aims

The research questions and aims were broken down between the various strands for the review study. Those pertaining to the scoping review are listed below:

- To systematically scope social science research, international policy and legislative literature on terminology and definitions of child sexual abuse and exploitation following the publication of the terminology guidelines.
- To investigate whether the publication of the Luxembourg guidelines has led to more consistent use of key terms, with a particular focus on concepts that were highlighted in the guidelines as requiring careful consideration, such as age-appropriate terminology, online-facilitated CSEA and victim and offender discourse.
- To investigate whether there are key terms emerging from social science research, international policy and legislation that may not have been included in the terminology guidelines and thus require clear definitions.
- To work with ECPAT to present findings and engage with practitioners and policymakers (through the Interagency Working Group and other fora) to discuss outstanding as well as new and emerging terminology areas to inform ECPAT and core partner's work on updating the guidelines.
- To use study findings to inform qualitative interviews with key stakeholders and experts across multiple agencies working within the field of CSEA to shed insights into the awareness and application of the terminology guidelines, as well as any neglected or emerging terms that require further clarification.

The second strand comprised the aims of the survey conducted by Childlight to help inform the Interagency Working Groups:

- How are key definitions and terms discussed in the terminology guidelines being used in practice?

¹ At time of publishing the revised Terminology Guidelines have been published and can be found at the following link [Terminology Guidelines - ECPAT](#)[Terminology Guidelines - ECPAT](#).

- How are stakeholders approaching key definitions and terms discussed in the terminology guidelines?
- What is the impact or influence of the terminology guidelines and similar attempts to provide clear and consistent definitions on practice?
- Are there any neglected or emerging key definitions and terms?
- Do different agencies and stakeholders agree or disagree on the use and definitions of key CSEA terms?

4. Study design and methods of data collection and analysis

The scoping review adhered to the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Review) guidelines (Tricco et al, 2018), and the protocol was developed in line with the Preferred Reporting of Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis Protocols (PRISMA-P; Moher et al, 2015) and JBI Evidence Synthesis guidelines (Peters et al, 2020).

5. Study setting/information about the data source

Social science research and select legislation/policy documents were included in the current review if they primarily focused on and discussed definitions and conceptualisations of key terms pertaining to CSEA. Key terms had to be specific to CSEA; thus, studies or documents that focused on non-sexual abuse, neglect, maltreatment, adverse childhood experiences, violence, including gender-focused and domestic violence, or adult trafficking were not included. Similarly, studies or documents that focused on sexual or non-sexual abuse in adults were not eligible for inclusion.

Eligible social science research reflected empirical studies, reviews, editorials or opinion papers; other types of publications, such as book chapters or conference proceedings were not included.

To be eligible for inclusion, legislative documents were required to be published during the time period pertaining to the anticipated or actual

introduction of, or amendments to, legislation pertaining directly to CSEA; other document types, such as legislation or policy documents which did not directly address CSEA, individual cases or commentaries were not eligible for the current review. This review was not meant to be a legislative analysis or policy analysis, as the scoping review focussed on the use of CSEA terminology within these documents, not the use or coverage of the documents in addressing CSEA.

Policy documents were included if they outlined actions and/or recommendations to address key issues in the field of CSEA. All studies and documents included in the review had to be available in English and published in 2017 or later, following the release of the terminology guidelines in 2016.

No exclusions were made on geographical location or on publication status.

6. Sample and recruitment

6.1 Eligibility Criteria – primary research studies

Following advanced searches conducted on the included databases (Scopus, Web of Science, LexisNexis, Practical Law and Policy Commons, Social Science Research Network, OpenGrey and the first 100 entries from Google Scholar), all identified studies and/or documents were screened against inclusion and exclusion criteria. Social science research was uploaded to EndNote, before being transferred and screened using COVIDENCE (www.covidence.org). A second reviewer double screened 25% of titles and abstracts selected at random from COVIDENCE as well as screening of all of the full-text studies. A similar double screening strategy was used for legislative and policy documents, which were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria, with these documents instead being stored and screened using an Excel spreadsheet due to software incompatibility with COVIDENCE. Any disagreements were resolved by mutual discussion and agreement. Citation chaining was conducted on identified full-text studies and external researchers involved in the review were approached with the finalised list of documents included in the review to see whether there is any further grey literature not included.

6.1.1 Inclusion criteria – for both primary research and scoping/systematic and legislative reviews

- Outlined actions and/or recommendations to address key issues in the field of CSEA
- Published in English
- Published between 2017-2023

6.1.2 Exclusion criteria

- No exclusions were made on geographical location or on publication status
- Studies that did not provide any definitions pertaining to CSEA
- Studies published prior to 2017 and after June 2023
- Studies not published in English

6.2 Recruitment

Participation and distribution of the Delphi survey was focused on gathering the greatest number of responses through snowball sampling. As such the survey was distributed via an anonymous email link along with a brief explanation of the survey and its purpose to various email lists. These lists included We Protect members, Safe Online grantees, ECPAT partners, ISPCAN members, Childlight and SVRI contacts. Additionally, a note to all recipients was sent that they should only complete the survey once even if they received multiple email requests.

As survey questions were optional rather than required, the number of responses per survey question did not equal the total sample size. The sample size for each question is indicated throughout the findings section so as to provide context to the figures. Where questions were linked to previous responses these were indicated.

6.2.1 Sample Identification

The terminology guidelines survey ran from November 22, 2023, to December 15, 2023, which resulted in a total of 129 responses during this period.

6.2.2 Consent

Interested participants were provided with the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) via a weblink at the start of the survey and had to confirm they agreed to the study prior to commencing with the survey. The Participant Information Sheet communicated the purpose and requirements of the study, as well as the right to withdraw, possible benefits and risks and detailed data protection and confidentiality information.

7. Ethical and regulatory considerations

There was a possible risk of low participant numbers. As such, after careful consideration and extensive recruitment a plan was devised, from both the community and established partnerships available to Childlight. The strategy ensured that relevant members of the research team were able to capitalize on their partnerships, using clear communication strategies between team members to avoid any possible overlap. Given the nature of the study, there was also a risk of attrition to participant numbers across stages. It was therefore decided we would not exclude participants data who drop out at later stages; instead, we reported attrition statistics at each stage of the survey.

7.1 Safeguarding and researcher well-being

It was not anticipated that the researcher's safety would be compromised but as with all those who have occupational experience of CSEA (much like participants), the research could invoke emotional and/or psychological distress in the researchers. Regular check ins were conducted with members of the research team, and the same supporting sources and signposting were disseminated amongst the team.

7.2 Research approvals

The research received Ethics Approval from the University of Edinburgh Childlight Ethics Sub-Committee reference number: ENIM14102022.

7.3 Study advisory committee and peer review

An advisory committee made up of members of the core working group around the revision of the terminology guidelines was arranged for this study. This group are experts in the understanding and awareness of the contents of the terminology guidelines and work within the field of prevention of child sexual exploitation and abuse. The group included senior leadership from two multi-national non-governmental agencies, a project lead on the revised terminology guidelines as well as technical expert from a global not for profit organisation.

The group met several times over the course of the research beginning with an in-person meeting in Edinburgh on June 15-16, 2023. The group met regularly online and communicated via email correspondence and through shared working documents. The group provided direct feedback both into the scoping review as well as the development of the survey. Members of the advisory group also assisted with dissemination of the survey to their networks. The group most recently met on February 14, 2025 to discuss the finalisation of the revised terminology guidelines.

The group was appropriate as they provided input throughout the development both of the scoping review as well as the survey. The core group met multiple times over the course of the project where regular updates were provided by the research team on the status of the research studies.

7.4 Data management

This study adopted a privacy by design approach, whereby careful consideration with regard to data protection and processing was adhered to. Data privacy and security considerations with regard to both data collection and storage adhered to both the University of Edinburgh's Information Security Policy and Data Protection Policy and Caldicott Principles of Confidentiality. The study also adhered to the principles of Good Clinical Practise. A Data Management Plan (DMP) was completed prior to data collection and storage. The minimal personal data was collected for this study, from participants who were asked to provide demographic information (age, gender, location, sector) and email addresses only. Consent and demographics were collected using a University of Edinburgh (UoE) Qualtrics account and stored in a separate place apart from their email addresses in order to reduce risk of identification.

All personal data was stored on a password-protected, encrypted platform

(University of Edinburgh Microsoft Sharepoint). Personal data was retained for a maximum of 6-12 months. Email addresses were not deleted or, where possible, not collected unless the participant express a wish to be contacted with a summary of study findings once they have been written up. All study data was uploaded to the same UoE encrypted and password protected SharePoint site.

Collected data will be stored for a minimum of five years on an online data repository where other researchers may access the data as part of future research, subject to ethical approval. Details about our data management plan and policies, as well as surrounding participation and data withdrawal, was clearly communicated to participants in the Participant Information Sheet.

7.5 Access to the final dataset

The final dataset is available upon request and consists of the data extraction document and Qualtrics report generated by the survey.

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