

Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse **Findings from a National Survey**

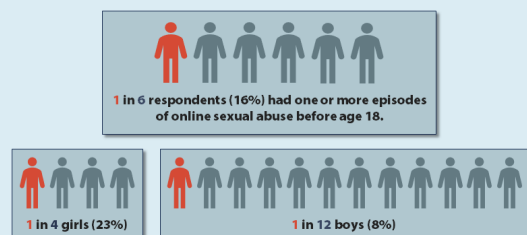
David Finkelhor, Heather Turner, Deirdre Colburn, and Wendy Walsh



Prevalence

Online Child Sexual Abuse

Results of a national survey based on 2,639 people aged 18 to 28, members of the IPSOS Knowledge Panel



➤ Online child sexual abuse was prevalent.

Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., & Colburn, D. (2022). Prevalence of online sexual offenses against children in the US. *JAMA Open network*, 5(10), e2234471. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.34471



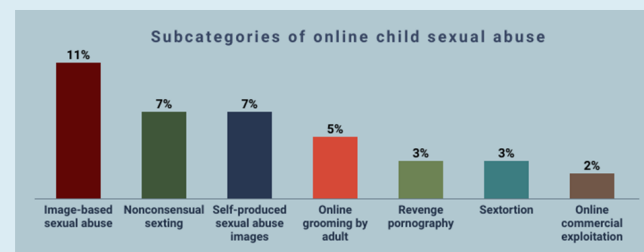
One in six respondents had an episodes of online child sexual abuse (OCSA) before age 18.

OCSA was defined as a positive response to any one of 9 questions, covering: 1) non-consensual image sharing; 2) non-consensual image taking; 3) forced imaged recruitment; 4) threatened sharing of sexual images; 5) unwanted sexual talk; 6) unwanted sexual questions; 7) unwanted requests for sexual acts; 8) older partner voluntary sexual interaction; and 9) commercial sexual activity including commercial sex talk, commercial sex images, or other commercial sex acts.

The unwanted solicitation items (5, 6, 7) were counted as online child sexual abuse only when the perpetrator was a known or suspected adult, because unwanted solicitations from peers include a considerable portion of bids for intimacy in teen relationships that do not qualify as sexual abuse in offline contexts.

Subtypes

Online Child Sexual Abuse Subtypes



➤ Online child sexual abuse had varied dynamics.

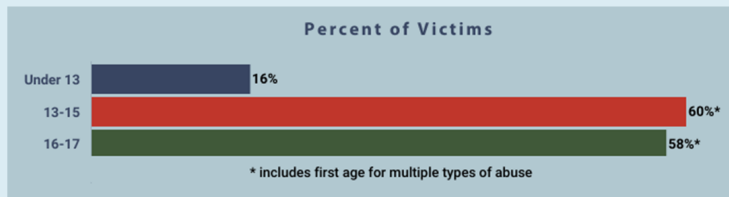
Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., & Colburn, D. (2022). Prevalence of online sexual offenses against children in the US. *JAMA Open network*, 5(10), e2234471. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.34471



There are a variety of subtypes of OCSA that have been highlighted in media discussions. Image-based sexual abuse included all the episodes involving misused images, taken, sent, or coerced. Non-con-sensual sexting included someone taking or sharing the victim's sexual image without consent. Self-produced sexual images were limited to misused images originally made by the victim, not by any one else. Online grooming by an adult included unwanted solicitations, pressure for images and voluntary sexual interactions with someone known or presumed to be an adult. Revenge pornography was the misuse of images with the perceived intent to harm or humiliate mostly by former intimate partners. Sextortion included perpetrators who were using images or threats of images to get the victim to provide money, additional images, or some other unwanted favor. Online commercial exploitation involved youth who provided sexual images in exchange for money or something else of value. Overall, image-based sexual abuse was more common than online grooming by adults.

Victim Age

Age Youth First Experienced Various Online Child Sexual Abuse?



➤ Online child sexual abuse has an older age profile than offline sexual abuse.

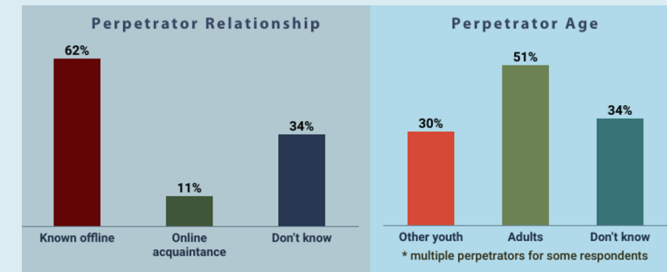
Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., & Colburn, D. (2022). Prevalence of online sexual offenses against children in the US. *JAMA Open network*, 5(10), e2234471. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.34471



The vast majority of OCSA occurred to youth 13 or older. This stems from two important facts observed in other research. Children under 13 are engaged in less online social media activity than teens. Moreover, teens are at the age where they use digital technology to develop and experiment with romance and sexual relationships, which involves openness to image making, sharing, flirtation, and sexual conversations. This high percentage of teen victims makes OCSA somewhat more of a teen problem than conventional child sexual abuse.

Identity of Offenders

Who Were the Perpetrators of Online Child Sexual Abuse?



➤ Most online perpetrators were people known from offline and a large number were other youth.

Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., & Colburn, D. (2022). Prevalence of online sexual offenses against children in the US. *JAMA Open network*, 5(10), e2234471. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.34471



People tend to associate OCSA with adult strangers. But most OCSA victims had perpetrators who were acquaintances from offline contexts. The perpetrators were also other juveniles for about 30% of victims. Another third of the victims did not know the identities of their offenders. It should not be assumed, however, that these unknown offenders were all strangers, because acquaintances also have multiple motivations, such as part of bullying or revenge dynamics, to try to keep their identity hidden.

Impact

What Features Made Online Sexual Abuse More Impactful?

Impact = 1) "Angry", 2) "Afraid", 3) "Sad", 4) "Embarrassed", 5) "Anxious or Worried", 6) "Like you couldn't trust people?", 7) "Like you were alone?", and 8) "Ashamed"



What made it worse?

- Non-consensual image sharing, image taking, or threatening to misuse image



What made no difference?

- Adult vs youth perpetrator
- Stranger vs known perpetrator
- Age at time of victimization
- More explicit images

Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., & Colburn, D. (2023). Which dynamics make online child sexual abuse and cyberstalking more emotionally impactful: perpetrator identity and images? *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 137, 106020. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106020

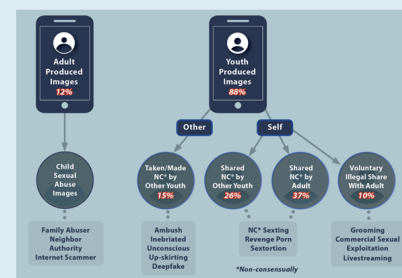


Some people might assume that adult or stranger perpetrator experiences would be more emotionally impactful on victims. The findings did not show this. Adult and youth perpetrators had equivalent negative impacts. So did known and unknown perpetrators. There was also no impact difference due to age of victim or more explicit images. What was more impactful was online abuse episodes that involved images—non-consensual image sharing or taking or threats. (Impact was measured by responses to 8 questions about different negative feelings that resulted from the episode.)

Image Abuse Subtypes

Image Based Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children (IBSEAC)

IBSEAC is broader than Child Sexual Abuse Images/Materials (CSAM).



- The vast majority of abusive images were produced by victims or other youth.
- The category called CSAM may not fully reference the youth produced dynamics.

Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Colburn, D., Mitchell, K., & Mathews, B. (2023). Child sexual abuse images and youth produced images: The varieties of image-based sexual exploitation and abuse of Children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 143, 106269. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106269

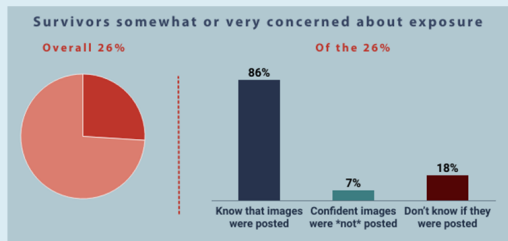


Image-based sexual abuse is not well understood. Most people assume that these offenses represent images made in the course of an adult's direct sexual abuse of a child. But those kinds of adult produced images made up just 12% of the image abuse reported by victims. The largest proportion of image abuse started with images made by youth themselves, 15% by youth perpetrators and 73% by victims themselves. These victim-made images ended up being abusive when they were non-consensually misused by other youth (26%) or adults (37%) or when they were voluntarily but illegally shared by youth with adults, including for payment. These findings tell us that the youth-produced portion of the image abuse problem has become substantial and predominant. This has important implications for prevention, which may need to focus more on dissuading youth from making and sharing images. Moreover, the term Child Sexual Abuse Images (CSAI) may not adequately reference the full contemporary problem that includes youth production. We suggest a new term: Image-Based Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children (IBSEAC).

Image Persistence Concerns

Persisting Concerns about Public Exposure among Survivors of Misused Sexual Images

Among survivors: "How concerned are you currently that friends or acquaintances, recent or future romantic partner, present or future employer, or someone you might meet will learn about the pictures or videos?"



> Not all survivors had a high level of concern about future exposure, especially when they didn't think images were posted and generally available. If they thought they were available, concern was intense.

Finkelhor et al. (2023). *Persisting Concerns about Image Exposure among Survivors of Image Based Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Childhood.*

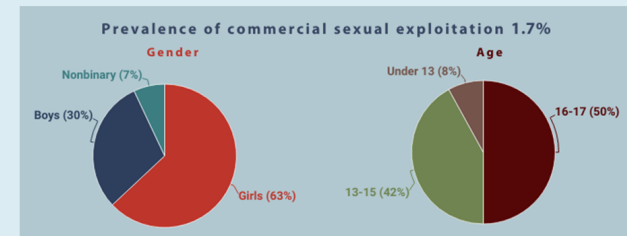


One of the most serious and special harms of image abuse is that survivors can be troubled by persisting concerns about who might see them and where they might resurface. A bit more than a quarter of survivors of image abuse reported being somewhat or very concerned about others in their life encountering the images. The main and somewhat surprising finding was that many survivors did not believe that their misused images were posted in an accessible place. This may have been because the non-consensual sharing was to a relatively small group of acquaintances. Those who believed their images were posted had very high levels of concern. But among those who knew they weren't posted or didn't know for sure, the level of concern was much lower.

Commercial Sex

Online Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (OCSEC)

"Have you done any of the following things over the Internet or a cell phone (including texting) in exchange for money, drugs, or other valuable items: Sexual talk; Making, sending, or posting sexual pictures or videos of yourself; and/or Any other sexual activity."



> Most of the exchanges (92%) were self-negotiated. Only 8% involved a pimp or facilitator.

Walsh et al. (2023). *Commercial Online Sexual Exploitation of Children in a National Victim Survey.*



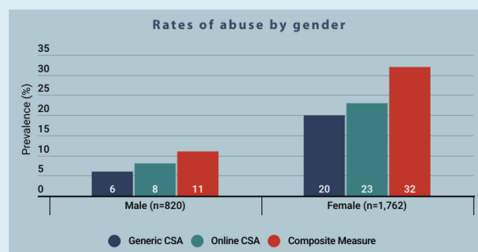
One important finding of the study was the proportion of the sample (almost 2%) who had engaged in commercial sex, sharing sexual activities for money, drugs, or other valuables when they were juveniles. Both girls and boys had engaged in such activity. Half the youth were 16 or 17 and 42% were 13 to 15 when they first did this.

The most startling finding was that nearly all these youth were engaging in commercial sex on their own initiative without a pimp or facilitator. This suggests the degree to which remote payment systems and online apps for marketing and sharing sexual images, all innovations of the digital environment, may be changing the nature of commercial sexual activity even for juveniles.

Prevalence with Offline

Combined Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse – Offline and Online

What Was the Total Prevalence of CSA If Online CSA Was Included?
Generic CSA (measured by 2 questions) + Online CSA (measured by 9 questions)



➤ Online CSA raised the rate by 50%.

➤ Online CSA also increased the association with mental health symptoms.

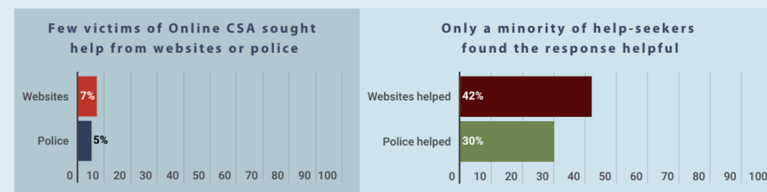
Finkelhor et al. (2023). *The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse with Online Sexual Abuse Added.*



There have been many national surveys estimating the prevalence of child sexual abuse in the United States. But none of them combined online sexual abuse with conventional, generic sexual abuse estimates. The figure above shows the prevalence rate for a generic measure of CSA, the rate for online CSA, and the rate for the two combined. The combined estimate is not a simple sum of the two kinds of CSA because many victims had both kinds of exposures. The results show that for boys and girls the addition of online sexual abuse substantially increased the estimate of total sexual abuse to 32% for girls and 11% for boys. Other analyses showed that incorporating information on online CSA exposures made it easier to identify the victims with the most mental health symptoms. It is likely that combined generic and online abuse leads to more lasting harm.

Help-seeking

Help-Seeking from Websites and Police for Online Child Sexual Abuse



➤ Major improvements are needed in how websites and law enforcement respond to victims of technology-facilitated offenses.

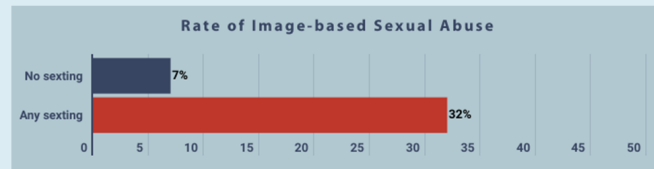
Colburn et al. (2023). *Help-Seeking From Websites and Police in the Aftermath of Technology-Facilitated Victimization.* *Journal of Interpersonal Violence.*



Victims of online CSA were very unlikely to seek help from authorities, the police, or the websites that may have been involved in the abuse. Moreover, when victims did seek help, only a minority found the experience actually helpful. The small percentage (5%) reporting to police and their low level of satisfaction (30%) with the response is compelling news. Juveniles experiencing online abuse are not inclined to make reports, perhaps in part because they sense accurately that there is little of value that they will be offered. Clearly, these two important potential help sources, police and websites, need to find better ways to help juvenile victims and persuade them of the merits of reporting.

Risk of Sexting

How Risky Is Sexting?



- No sexting was strong protection but not absolute.
- Once youth sexted, risk escalated.
- Limited sexting was not strictly safe – nearly a third victimized.

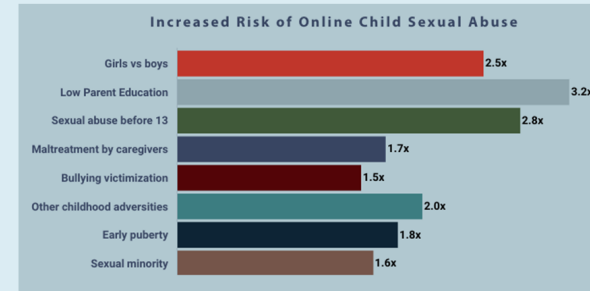
Finkelhor et al. (2023). *How Risky is Sexting by Minors?*



Sexting, the making and sharing of sexual images for romance, excitement, or humor, is a growing practice among youth and other segments of the population. Educators and parents warn about sexting and its risks for abuse, but some listeners presume the fears are exaggerated. We compared abuse rates among those who engaged in sexting and those who did not. The contrast was striking. Nearly one third of those who engaged in sexting experienced a form of image abuse. The rate of abuse among those who did not sext was much smaller, but not zero. For example, non-sexsters might find themselves abused by someone who non-consensually took their picture. Reducing the amount of sexting to just occasionally did not provide protection. A third of those also were abused. Sexting appeared to be quite risky.

Risk Factors

What Are Risk Factors for Online Child Sexual Abuse?



- Some youth were much more vulnerable to online CSA.

Turner, H., Finkelhor, D., & Colburn, D. (2023). *Predictors of Online Child Sexual Abuse in a U.S. National Sample. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 38*(11-12), 7780-7803. doi:10.1177/08862605221149



Various characteristics and background experiences were associated with higher levels of OCSA. Three big risk factors were being a girl, coming from a low education household, and having already been a victim of sexual abuse before age 13. Other kinds of challenges also increased risk: parental child maltreatment, peer bullying, and other adversities occurring before age 13. Early puberty and identifying as a sex or gender minority were also risk factors for online sexual abuse. Knowing that each of these characteristics increases risk may be useful to help prevention educators to target vulnerable youth.

Methodology

The information in this bulletin comes from the experiences of a nationally representative sample of 18- to 28-year-olds, reporting about their experiences before the age of 18. The respondents were members of the KnowledgePanel recruited by the IPSOS polling firm. They had been chosen via sampling to be representative of the national population. Twenty percent of the eligible respondents agreed to participate in a survey completed online.

Appendix

Before citing statistics in this bulletin, please consult the source article for more information on definitions, measurement, statistical significance, and other limitations of the findings.

Online Sexual Abuse Questions

1. Non-consensual image sharing (“Has someone ever shared with other people a sexual picture or video of you without your permission?”)
2. Non-consensual image taking (“Has someone ever taken or made a sexual picture or video of you without your permission?”)
3. Forced imaged recruitment (“Has someone ever threatened, tried to force you, or strongly pressured you to provide sexual pictures or videos online or through a cell phone?”)
4. Threatened sharing (“Has someone ever threatened to share a sexual picture or video of you to get you to do something—like take or send other sexual pictures of yourself, have a sexual relationship with them, pay them money, or something else?”)
5. Unwanted sexual talk (“Before the age of 18, did anyone ever use the Internet or a cell phone to try to get you to talk about sex when you did not want to?”)
6. Unwanted sexual questions (“Before the age of 18, did anyone ever use the Internet or a cell phone to ask you for information about yourself when you did not want to answer those questions? This means very personal questions, like what your body looks like or sexual things you have done?”)
7. Unwanted requests for sexual acts (“Before the age of 18, did anyone ever use the Internet or a cell phone to ask you to *do* something sexual that you did not want to?”)
8. Older partner consensual sexual interaction (“Before the age of 18, did you have intimate sexual conversations or share sexual pictures or videos (online or through a cell phone), even if you wanted to, with a person who was five or more years older than you?”)
9. Commercial sexual activity including commercial sex talk (“Sexual talk”), commercial sex images (“Making, sending, or posting sexual pictures or videos of yourself”) or other commercial sex acts (“Any other sexual activity”) which are each asked through the following survey question: “Have you done any of the following things over the Internet or a cell phone (including texting) in exchange for money, drugs, or other valuable items?” All qualifying episodes had to have occurred before age 18. The unwanted solicitation items (5, 6, 7) were counted as online child sexual abuse only when the perpetrator was a known or suspected adult, because unwanted solicitations from peers include a considerable portion of bids for intimacy in teen relationships that do not qualify as sexual abuse in offline contexts.

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