

Estimates of childhood exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors



A global study of childhood experiences of 18 to 20 years olds

CONDUCTED BY

**ECONOMIST
IMPACT**

Contents

Executive summary and key insights	03
About the study: methodology & research design	06
Experiences of online sexual harms during childhood	08
The dynamics of online sexual harms during childhood	15
The risk-protection gap	17
Conclusion	20
Acknowledgements	21



Executive summary and key insights

The internet, social media and other digital apps / platforms can be a double-edged sword for the 2.6 billion children¹ around the world today.² They provide important fora for learning and interaction, as well as a platform for positively exploring sexuality and fostering relationships between children. At the same time, they can be used to facilitate the sexual exploitation and abuse of children both by adults — known and unknown — and by peers, and enable access to age-inappropriate content.

This WeProtect Global Alliance study, conducted by Economist Impact (EI)³, explores the experiences of more than 5,000 18 to 20 year olds who had regular access to the internet as children to understand their experiences of and exposure to **online sexual harms**⁴ during childhood (see Figure 1).⁵ It looks across four different harms and their risk factors to provide evidence on the potential scope, scale and dynamics of child sexual exploitation and abuse online.⁶

Online sexual harms

This study explores the experiences of 18 to 20 years olds across four online sexual harms:

Being sent sexually explicit content from an adult they knew or someone they did not know before they were 18.

Being asked to keep part of their sexually explicit online relationship with an adult they knew or someone they did not know before a secret.

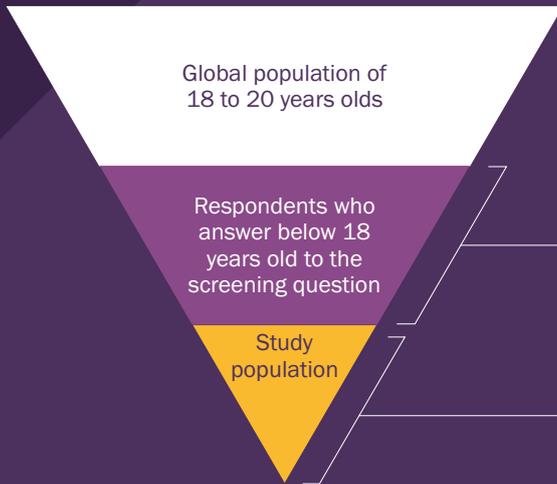
Having sexually explicit images of them shared without consent (by a peer, an adult they knew, or someone they did not know before).

Being asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with (by a peer⁷, an adult they knew, or someone they did not know before).⁸

1. Following the definition of a child in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, throughout this report, 'children' refers to people aged under 18 years.
2. UN World Population Prospects 2019, global population ages 0-19 in 2020. <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>
3. The services offered by Economist Impact previously existed within The Economist Group as separate entities, including EIU Public Policy, EIU Thought Leadership, EIU Health Policy, Economist Events, EBrandConnect and SignalNoise.
4. A set of harmful behaviours considered as risk factors for potential or actual child sexual exploitation and abuse online.
5. 'Regular access to the internet' is defined as someone going on the internet (i.e., not watching a friend, family person or other adult use the internet) at least once a week. 'Childhood' is defined as the period before the age of 18.
6. Conducting research on online sexual harms and sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood is challenging. Ethical concerns around surveying children, the risks of retraumatisation and sensitivities around sexuality and gender identity can restrict the survey population and the questions asked.
7. In this study, a "peer" is defined as a person belonging to the same societal group based on age; however, our survey allowed respondents to determine who counted as a peer and who did not. As such, it is possible that respondents included young adults over the age of 18 as peers rather than adults they knew before.
8. See "About the Study: Methodology & Research Design" on page 6 for more information on perpetrator groups and how EI separated harmful / abusive interactions from potentially positive sexual exploration and experiences between peers.

FIGURE 1

This study explores the experiences of 18 to 20 year olds who had regular access to the internet as children



Screening question: At what age did you first have regular access to the internet?
Regular access is defined as "going online yourself on a mobile phone, gaming device or laptop / computer at least once a week. Please answer about personal use (not watching a friend, family person or other adult use the internet).

18 to 20 year olds who had regular access to the internet as children

Online sexual harms against children are occurring everywhere, and both girls and boys are impacted.



54% of respondents had experienced at least one of the four online sexual harms considered **before they were 18.**



Nearly half of boys (48%) and 57% of girls reported experiencing **at least one harm.**

Online sexual harms by type of sexual harm.



Were asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with or did not want to do



Received sexually explicit content from an adult they knew or someone they did not know



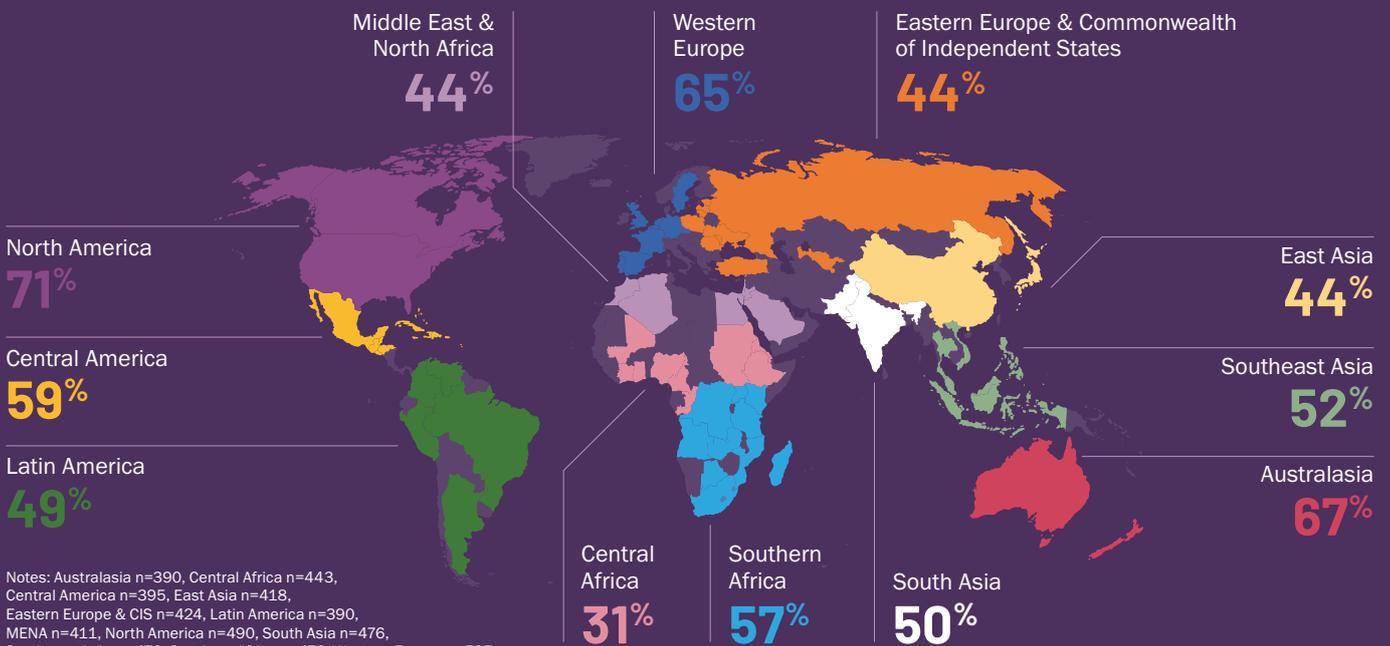
Had someone share sexually explicit images and/or videos of them without their permission



Had an adult they knew or someone they did not know ask them to keep part of their sexually explicit interactions online a secret

FIGURE 2

Percentage of respondents who experienced at least one online sexual harm during childhood by sub-region

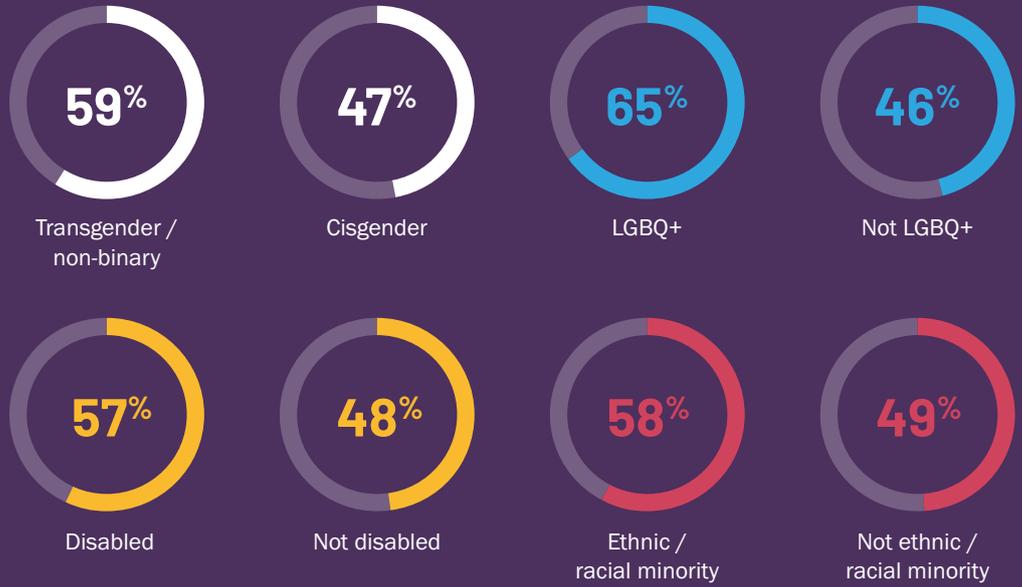


Notes: Australasia n=390, Central Africa n=443, Central America n=395, East Asia n=418, Eastern Europe & CIS n=424, Latin America n=390, MENA n=411, North America n=490, South Asia n=476, Southeast Asia n= 470, Southern Africa n=470, Western Europe n=525

Minorities are more at risk.

Respondents who self-identified as transgender or non-binary⁹, disabled¹⁰, LGBQ+¹¹ or as a racial or ethnic minority¹² were more likely to have experienced these online sexual harms during childhood (see Figure 3).

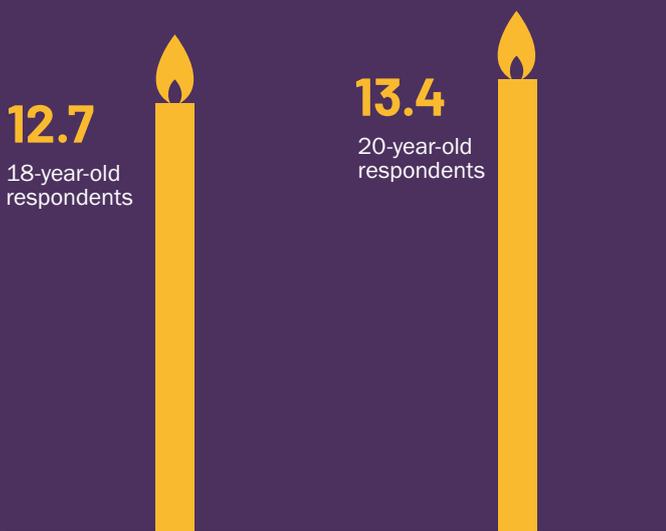
FIGURE 3
Respondents' experiences of online sexual harm during childhood disaggregated by characteristic¹³
% who experienced any online sexual harm



Notes:
Transgender / non-binary n=457; cisgender n=4568, LGBQ+ n=731; not LGBQ+ n=4264, Disabled n=549; not disabled n=4530, Ethnic / racial minority n=957; not ethnic / racial minority n=4226

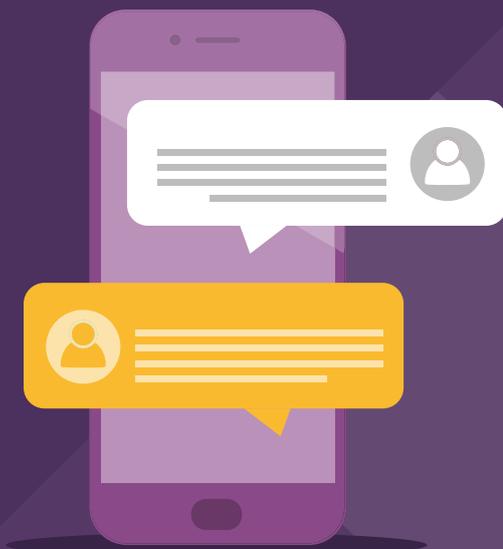
Respondents' age of first exposure to sexually explicit content is falling.

20-year-old respondents on average had their first exposure to sexually explicit content online at 13.4 years old compared with 12.7 years old for 18-year-old respondents.



Most online sexual harm against children is happening in private.

Two-thirds of respondents who received sexually explicit material online as children received it through a private messaging service, most commonly on their personal mobile device.



9. In this study, transgender / non-binary is defined as living or identifying as a different gender than that which the respondent was assigned at birth.
10. In this study, disabled is defined as an impairment or condition (physical or mental) that affects the respondent's ability to carry out daily activities.
11. In this study, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning (LGBQ+) is defined as being attracted to and / or having sex with, all the time or sometimes, people who identify as the same gender as the respondent.
12. In this study, racial or ethnic minority is defined as being of a race, nationality or ethnicity that is different to that of most people who are living in the respondent's country.
13. In this study, cisgender is defined as living or identifying as the same gender that the respondent was assigned at birth.

About the Study: Methodology & Research Design

Estimates of childhood exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors: A global study of childhood experiences of 18 to 20 years olds is based on data gathered through an online survey of 5,302 18 to 20 year olds who had regular access to the internet as children conducted from May to June 2021. This closed online questionnaire survey asked respondents about:

- Experiences of sexual harms (as defined on p4) and their risk factors online when under the age of 18;
- Exposure to sexually explicit content online when under the age of 18 and the platforms and devices where that content was encountered;
- Reactions and responses to sexually explicit content experienced online before the age of 18; and
- Access to and familiarity with actions and behaviours to mitigate risks of sexual harms online before the age of 18.

The survey was fielded in 21 languages across 54 countries, which were aggregated into 12 sub-regions¹⁴ — each containing a minimum of 390 respondents — for analysis.¹⁵ The global sample and regional aggregation were used for analysis of the experiences across genders and other demographic characteristics.

To develop global, regional and sub-regional samples, data was weighted by the number of young adults¹⁶ in each country within the 54 country sample.¹⁷

Research on online sexual harms against children presents a unique set of challenges. EI has included a brief discussion of these challenges and actions we took to mitigate the risks and ensure the research was safe and rigorous.

14. Australasia, Central Africa, Central America, East Asia, Eastern Europe & Commonwealth of Independent States, Latin America, Middle East & North Africa, North America, Southeast Asia, Southern Africa, South Asia and Western Europe.

15. Regional and sub-regional findings were built by aggregating the results from the countries included in this study. Not every country in a region is represented within the 54-country sample.

16. Defined as those aged 18 to 20 based on UNDP data.

17. In most cases, weightings were applied pre-field (i.e., the number of respondents sought from a given country corresponds to the relative size of their population); however, some weights were also added post-field.

Challenges

CHALLENGE

Asking questions about potentially traumatic / harmful experiences without being able to identify respondents' reactions and, if needed, provide support services.

ACTION

The study focuses on online sexual harms that are less likely to cause immediate or long-term trauma or harm to the respondent, and are more likely to occur at the beginning of a possible grooming or abuse process. We do not address each type of online sexual harm that could occur in an online setting.

CHALLENGE

Surveying children about sensitive topics using a remote fielding technique that cannot provide support services to those who might experience trauma or harm or where there could be duty-of-care to report at risk children.

ACTION

The survey was not fielded to children, but to young adults (aged 18 to 20) who were asked to look back on their experiences when they were under the age of 18. The survey received ethical approval from [HMLIRB](#) and was reviewed by experts in each region before being fielded.

CHALLENGE

Requiring respondents to remember and report on experiences that could have occurred more than a decade ago.

ACTION

The study population was restricted to 18 to 20 years olds to minimise the time lapse between when the experience occurred and when the survey was fielded. The majority of experiences reported had occurred between the ages of 15 and 18. For experiences that occurred before age nine, EI applied a set effect¹⁸ in addition to ensuring statistical significance to increase the reliability of the data. There is a possibility that, in retrospect, respondents included experiences that they now see as online sexual harms that they might not have considered as such during childhood.

CHALLENGE

Separating out harmful / abusive interactions from potentially positive sexual exploration and experiences between peers.

ACTION

The study asks about three perpetrator groups: a peer, an adult the respondent knew already and someone the respondent did not already know. To filter out experiences that might not qualify as online sexual harms, EI did not include experiences of receiving sexually explicit content from a peer or a peer asking respondents to keep part of their sexually explicit online relationship a secret in our analysis or aggregations. This decision was made to prevent respondents from feeling judged for their sexually explicit or potentially harmful actions taken online. The other two online harms, which specifically ask about actions taken without consent or that made the respondent uncomfortable, have been considered across all three perpetrator groups.

CHALLENGE

Controlling for self-selection bias in the sample.

ACTION

EI used a random device engagement tool that partners with mobile phone applications and engages respondents through services they are already using on their device. Survey respondents who meet the survey population criteria are asked to participate in a survey in exchange for an incentive token. This incentive encourages a broader population group that meets the sample criteria to participate even if they do not feel strongly about the survey topic. The tool is active on 120,000 different applications covering entertainment, education, social media and gaming applications. The tool employs a rolling profiling model to keep audience information up-to-date. There is still a risk that self-selection and self-reporting have impacted the size of the gaps in experiences of online sexual harms across sub-populations.

CHALLENGE

Identifying sub-population experiences and patterns across a limited sample size.

ACTION

The primary goal of this study was to get an initial understanding around experiences of online sexual harms during childhood across regions and demographics. Given sample size limitations, some of the findings across sub-populations should be considered as starting points. Future research at the regional and country-level with larger samples are needed to understand differences across demographic groups at a more granular level, especially for LGBQ+, transgender or non-binary, and disabled groups.¹⁹

18. An effect size is a number measuring the strength of the relationship between two variables in a population. A larger effect size means a stronger relationship between the two variables. EI applied a set effect of absolute 5% to the statistically significant data for experiences of online sexual harms under the age of 9. This set effect filters down the statistically significant data to those with the strongest relationship.

19. All of the findings included in this study are statistically significant.

Experiences of online sexual harms during childhood



Online sexual harms against children are occurring everywhere.

As access to the internet spreads, personal mobile devices become more common and the proliferation of social media platforms grows, young people are spending more time online. They are using the internet to build and maintain relationships, explore their sexuality and access content on a wide range of issues. With widespread access comes risk: globally, more than half of respondents (54%) had experienced at least one online sexual harm during childhood.

The most commonly experienced online sexual harm during childhood was being asked to do something sexually explicit online that made the respondent uncomfortable or that they did not want to do (34%), but almost three in 10 respondents (29%) had also been sent sexually explicit content online by an adult or someone they did not know. The same percentage had experienced a peer, an adult they knew or someone they did not know sharing a sexually explicit image of them without their consent (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4
Respondents' experiences of online sexual harms by type of sexual harm



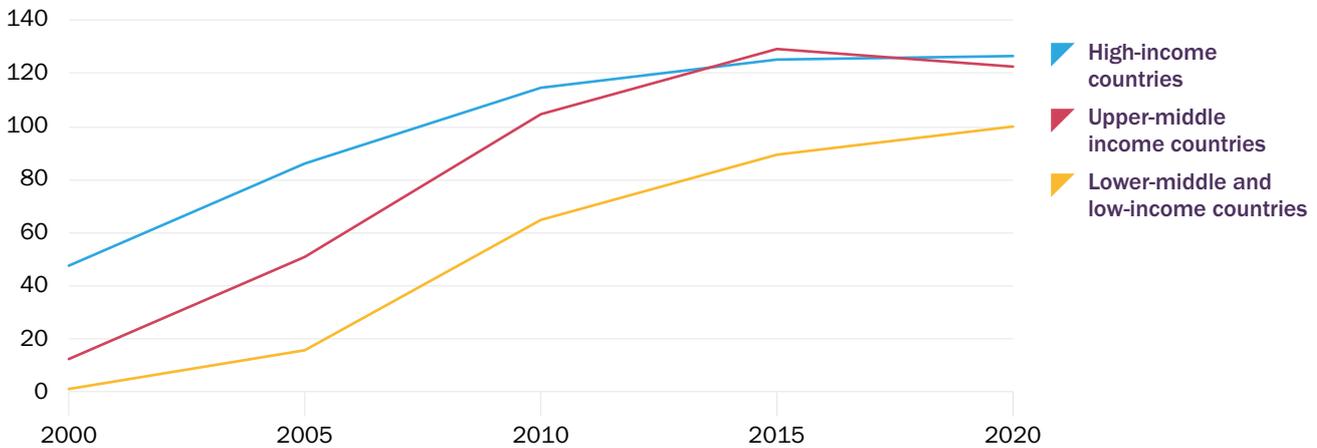
Regional experiences of online sexual harms in childhood.

Although online sexual harms to children are occurring everywhere, respondents in high-income regions were most likely to have experienced such harms: 71% of respondents in North America (n=490), 67% in Australasia (n=390) and 65% in Western Europe (n=525) reported experiencing at least one harm before they were 18 compared with 31% of respondents in Central Africa (n=443).

One of the possible driving factors behind this difference seems to be the age at which respondents first had access to the internet. On average, over a quarter (26%) of respondents in high-income

countries (n=1735) had access to the internet before the age of 10 compared with just 12% in upper-middle (n=1674) and lower-middle / low-income countries (n=1893). The data shows that internet access across income groups evens out later in childhood and, with this evening out, the levels of experience of online sexual harms also equalises. After the age of 15, 57% of respondents in both high-income and upper middle-income countries reported experiencing at least one online sexual harm compared with 52% of respondents in lower-middle / low-income countries.

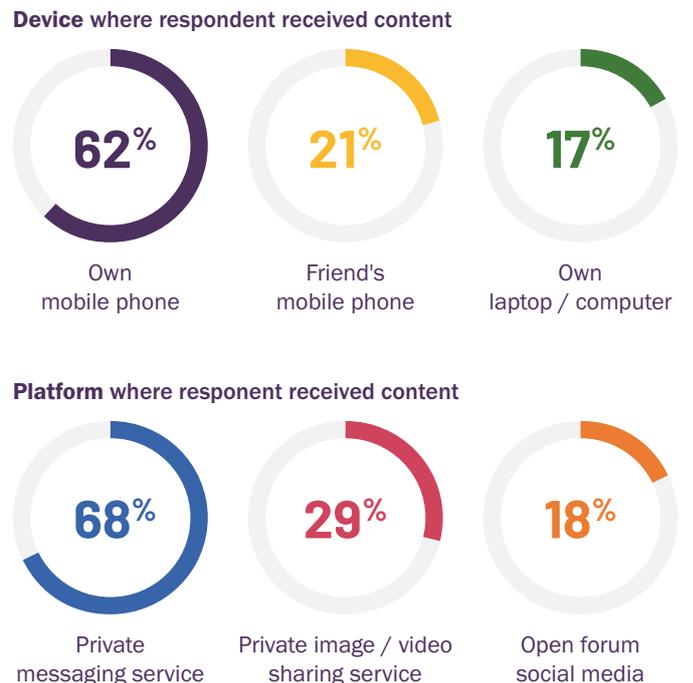
FIGURE 5
Mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants by country income groups, 2000-2020 (International Telecommunication Union; EI)



There are also differences in the most common types of online sexual harms experienced in each region. For example, the experience of having a peer, a known adult or someone unknown share a sexually explicit image of them without consent was 10 percentage points higher among respondents in Southeast Asia (n=470) than overall (38% compared with 28%) and significantly higher than the upper-middle income average (24%). Further research is needed to understand why these differences exist.

Despite differences in levels of experience of online sexual harms, there was one constant in how such harms were perpetrated across regions and income groups. Our respondents reported that most online sexual harm against children happened in private: over two-thirds (68%) of respondents who received sexually explicit material online as children received it through a private messaging service, most commonly on their personal mobile device (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6
Percentage of respondents who received sexually explicit content by type of device and type of platform



Gender and sexual orientation experiences of online sexual harms in childhood.

Our findings support previous research that shows girls are more at risk than boys;²⁰ however, this study indicates that the gap in experiences of online sexual harms during childhood between those who self-identified as sexual minorities — including LGBQ+ and transgender or non-binary children — and those who did not are more sizeable than the gap between girls and boys.²¹ But it is important not to overlook the risks that boys face online: nearly half of male respondents (48%) had been targeted during childhood. Almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents who self-identified as LGBQ+ (n=731) and three-fifths (59%) of those who self-identified as transgender or non-binary (n=457) experienced at least one online sexual harm during childhood compared with 57% of girl (n=2433) and 48% of boy (n=2797) respondents.

Respondents who self-identified as LGBQ+ were most vulnerable to the online sexual harms considered in this study. On average, their experiences of online sexual harms during childhood were 19 percentage points higher than respondents who did not self-identify as LGBQ+ (n=4264) (see Figure 7). This gap is particularly pronounced when being asked to do something sexually explicit online that made the respondent uncomfortable or that they did not want to do: 54% of LGBQ+ respondents had experienced this harm compared to 26% of non-LGBQ+ respondents.

Our findings support previous research that shows girls are more at risk than boys; however, this study indicates that the gap in experiences of online sexual harms during childhood between those who self-identified as sexual minorities — including LGBQ+ and transgender or non-binary children — and those who did not are even more sizeable than the gap between girls and boys. But it is important not to overlook the risks that boys face online: nearly half of male respondents (48%) had been targeted during childhood.

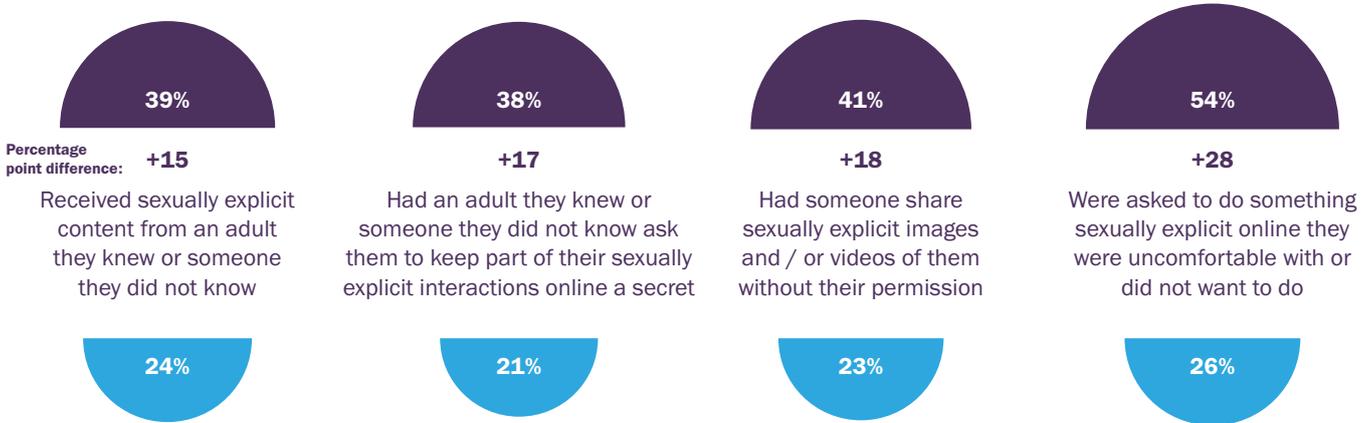


20. Thorn, "Responding to Online Threats: Minors' Perspectives on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking: Findings from 2020 quantitative research among 9–17 year olds", https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Responding%20to%20Online%20Threats_2021-Full-Report.pdf?utm_campaign=H2D%20report&utm_source=websitePotentially
21. Mark S Friedman et al, "A Meta-Analysis of Disparities in Childhood Sexual Abuse, Parental Physical Abuse, and Peer Victimization Among Sexual Minority and Sexual Nonminority Individuals", <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2009.190009>

FIGURE 7

Respondents' experiences of online sexual harms by sexual orientation

Self-identified as LGBTQ+



Did not self-identify as LGBTQ+

Notes: LGBTQ+ n=731, Not LGBTQ+ n=4264

These feelings of discomfort also translated into how respondents felt about receiving sexually explicit content from their peers. Recognising that the internet can be an environment where children explore their sexuality and foster appropriate and positive sexual relationships with their peers,²² our survey included a question on how respondents felt when they had received sexually explicit images, videos or messages online from a peer. Although respondents who self-identified as LGBTQ+ were more likely to describe their feelings as “happy” (16%) than non-LGBTQ+ respondents (9%), they were also somewhat more likely to report feeling “upset” (15% v 9%) and “scared” (14% v 10%).

The experiences of respondents who self-identified as transgender or non-binary mirrored those of LGBTQ+ respondents. Although experiences of receiving sexually explicit content from a known adult or someone they did not know were similar between those who self-identified as transgender or non-binary (23%) and those who did not (25%), transgender or non-binary respondents were significantly more likely to be asked by a known adult or someone they did not know to keep part of their sexually explicit online relationship a secret (38%), to have a sexually explicit image of them shared without consent (41%) and to be asked to do something sexually explicit online that made the respondent uncomfortable or that they did not want to do (44%) (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8

Respondents' experiences of online sexual harms by gender identity

Self-identified as transgender / non-binary



Self-identified as cisgender

Notes: Transgender / non-binary n=457, Cisgender n=4568

22. Sonia Livingstone and Jessica Mason, “Sexual rights and sexual risks among youth online: A review of existing knowledge regarding children and young people’s developing sexuality in relation to new media environments”, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64567/1/Livingstone_Review_on_Sexual_rights_and_sexual_risks_among_online_youth_Author_2015.pdf

Where experiences of transgender or non-binary respondents diverge from those of LGBTQ+ respondents is in how they felt about receiving sexually explicit images, videos or messages online from a peer. Nearly one-in-five (19%) transgender or non-binary respondents said being sent sexually explicit content by a peer made them feel happy and 21% said it made them feel excited, compared with 8% and 16% of cisgender respondents. Further, respondents who self-identified as transgender or non-binary were less likely to feel uncomfortable about receiving such content (18%) than cisgender respondents (25%).

Jarrett Davis, a social researcher and consultant focused on exploitation and violence against children and LGBTQ+ people in Southeast Asia, highlights some of the complications around peer-group relationships and the diversity of experiences across sexual minority groups: “Peer-group relationships can be very helpful in identity formation for LGBTQ+ people, but they can also

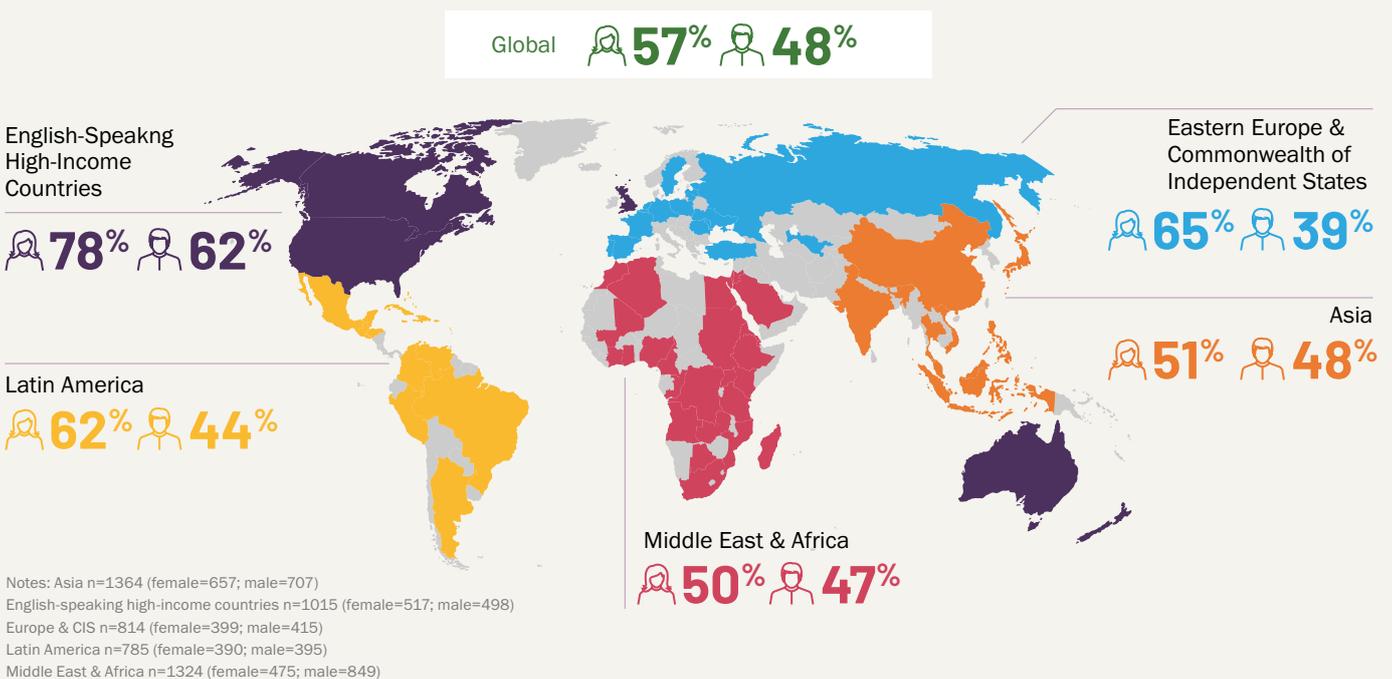
be a great source of pressure to conform. Peer-group identities in many queer communities can be strongly informed by the various stigmas, assumptions, and biases they face within their society, which is especially true in unaccepting societies. Peer groups can be hyper-sexual or even normalise the experience of some forms of sexual violence for children. While peer relationships with ‘people like us’ can be a great source of self-esteem and support, others can become a significant source of violence and vulnerability for many children — especially among children coming from unsafe or unaccepting home environments.” Davis also notes: “Each individual’s experience will be different, and recognising how diversity — particularly socioeconomic and ethnic diversity — can impact these experiences is really important.” More research is needed to understand the experiences of sexual minorities, particularly at regional, national and local levels.

Unknown perpetrators: girls’ experiences of online sexual harms

Almost three-in-five girls (57%) experienced at least one online sexual harm during childhood. Girls were more likely than boys to be targeted by someone they did not know. Almost one-third (31%) of female respondents had been sent sexually explicit content from someone they did not know compared with 12% of male respondents. Of the female respondents who received such content from someone they did not know, 11% were under the age of nine and 21% were under the age of 12.²³

In this survey, girls were also more likely to be asked to do something sexually explicit online that made them feel uncomfortable or that they did not want to do (39%) than boys (27%). This difference in experience levels between girl and boy respondents was, again, driven by being targeted by someone they did not know: girls were twice as likely than boys (24% v 12%) to have someone they did not know ask them to do something sexually explicit online that made them feel uncomfortable or that they did not want to do.

FIGURE 9
Respondents’ experiences of online sexual harms by region and gender²⁴



23. This equates to roughly 3% and 6% of total female respondents respectively.

24. The United Kingdom (UK), which was included in Western Europe in the sub-regional analysis, was aggregated into the English-speaking high-income countries in the regional analysis. This decision reflects more similarities in experiences between respondents in the UK to those in the other English-speaking high-income economies than to those in Eastern Europe & the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Although much existing research is focused on the experiences of girls and there is an increasing emphasis on understanding the experiences of LGBQ+ and transgender or non-binary children, it is important not to overlook the risks that boys face online. Just under half of boys (48%) reported experiencing at least one online sexual harm during childhood and the responses show that, in many cases, boys were targeted at a younger age than girls.

Almost one in five boys (18%) who received sexually explicit content from an adult they knew reported this happening to them before the age of nine, compared with one in 10 girls (10%). Similarly, 12% of male respondents who had been asked by an adult they knew to do something sexually explicit online that made them feel uncomfortable or that they did not want to do said they had this experience before the age of nine, compared with 5% of female respondents.

Racial and ethnic minority²⁵ experiences of online sexual harms in childhood.

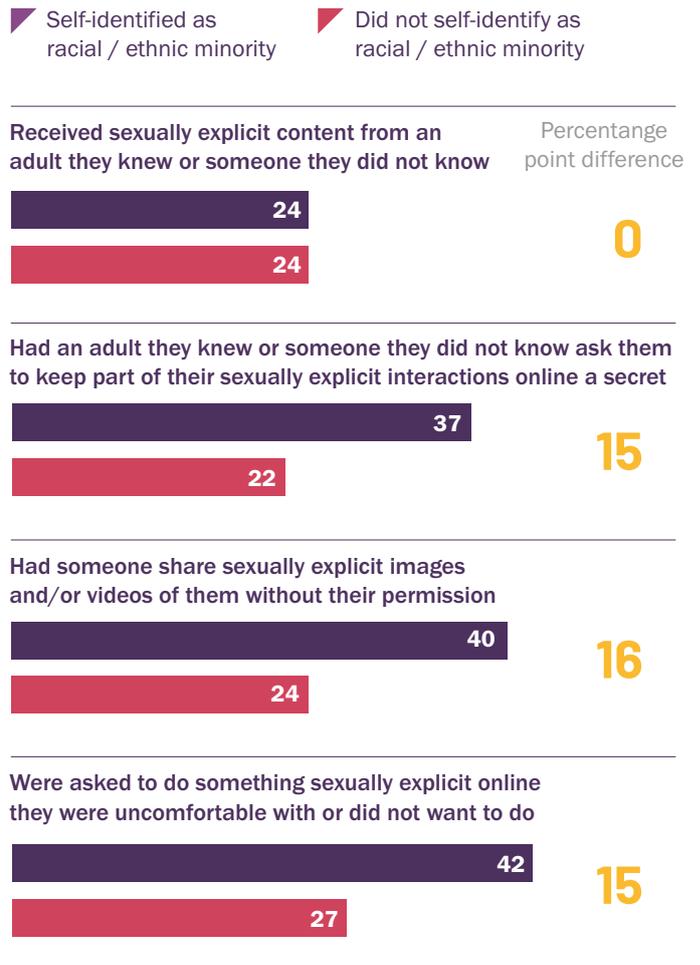
Respondents who self-identified as a racial or ethnic minority (n=957) were more vulnerable to online sexual harms during childhood (58%) than those who did not self-identify as a racial or ethnic minority (49%) (n=4226). Racial and ethnic minorities in upper-middle and lower-middle / low-income countries (n=555) were the most vulnerable: 58% of self-identified racial or ethnic minorities in these countries had experienced at least one online sexual harm compared with 48% of those who did not self-identify as a racial or ethnic minority (n=2893).

Racial and ethnic minorities in upper- and lower-middle income countries were the most vulnerable.

The gap in experiences of most online sexual harms between respondents who self-identified as racial or ethnic minorities and those who did not in upper-middle and lower-middle / low-income countries was, on average, 15 percentage points, highlighting the degree to which being a racial or ethnic minority is a risk factor (see Figure 10). According to Dr Rinchen Chopel, Director General of South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC), “Identity-based violence is a reality across the globe and sexual abuse against women and girls has long been identified as a show of masculine power in patriarchal society to inflict harm on other communities as revenge. Online slurs against others based on their racial and ethnic identity are more prominent as they seemingly disguise the violator and are based on prejudices and pent-up emotions, which vent through such mediums.”



FIGURE 10
Racial and ethnic minority respondents’ experiences of online sexual harms in upper-middle and lower-middle / low- income countries (%)



Notes: Racial / ethnic minority n=555, Not racial / ethnic minority n=2893

25. Minority is defined as race, nationality or ethnicity that is different to that of most people living in the respondent’s country.

Disabled individuals²⁶ experiences of online sexual harms in childhood.

Our study finds that respondents who self-identified as disabled (n=549) appear to be more vulnerable to online sexual harms than those who did not self-identify as disabled (n=4530) (57% v 48% experienced at least one online sexual harm). Much of this vulnerability was a result of being targeted by an adult they knew (see Figure 11).

Across all of the online sexual harms explored in this study, respondents who self-identified as disabled were significantly more likely to experience harms perpetrated by an adult they knew. This is particularly true when being asked to keep part of their sexually explicit online relationship

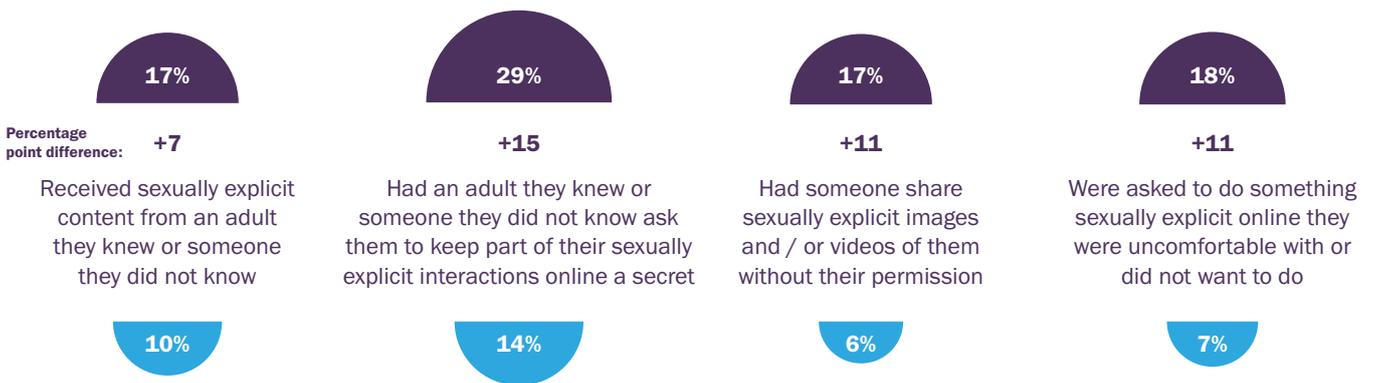
a secret – 29% of those who self-identified as disabled experienced this harm from an adult they knew compared with 14% of those who did not self-identify as disabled.

Existing research has highlighted that disabled children are more likely to experience in-person sexual exploitation and abuse than non-disabled children and, often, this is perpetrated by a known adult.²⁷ Our findings suggest that known adults are also using online platforms and devices as part of the grooming process of disabled children, reinforcing how online and offline tactics of exploitation and abuse are often used simultaneously.

FIGURE 11

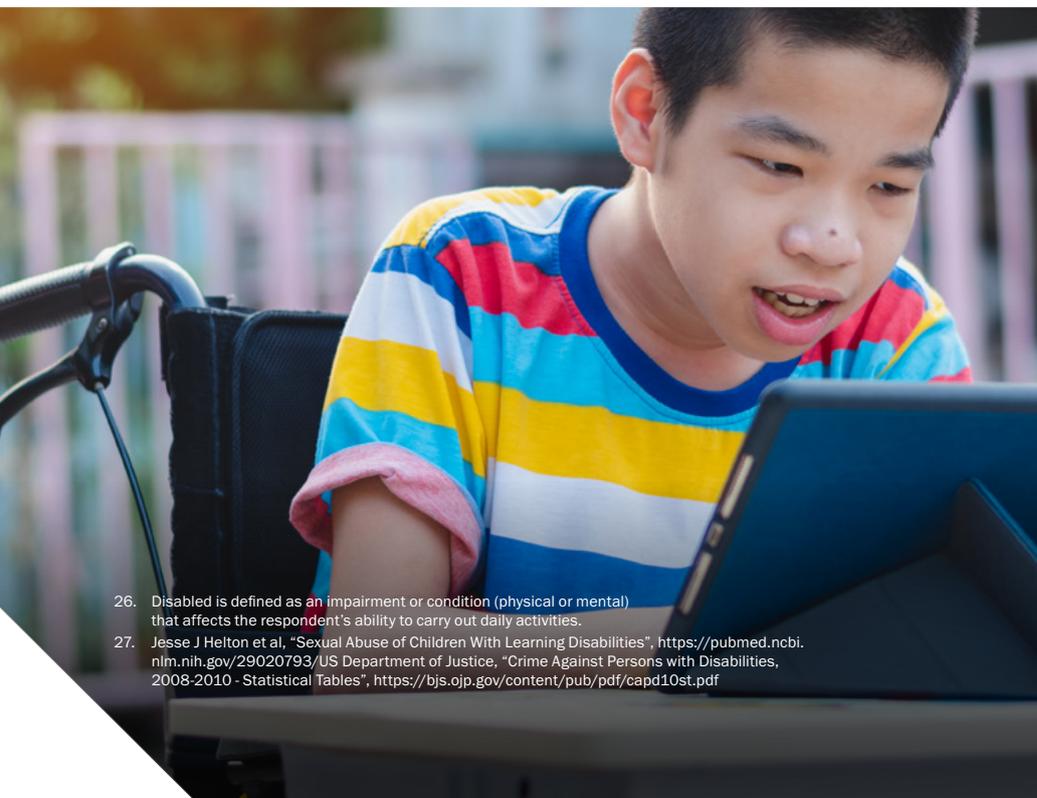
Respondents' experiences of online sexual harms perpetrated by an adult they knew

Self-identified as disabled



Did not self-identify as disabled

Notes: Disabled n=549, Not disabled n=4530



26. Disabled is defined as an impairment or condition (physical or mental) that affects the respondent's ability to carry out daily activities.
27. Jesse J Helton et al, "Sexual Abuse of Children With Learning Disabilities", <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29020793/> US Department of Justice, "Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2008-2010 - Statistical Tables", <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd10st.pdf>

The dynamics of online sexual harms during childhood

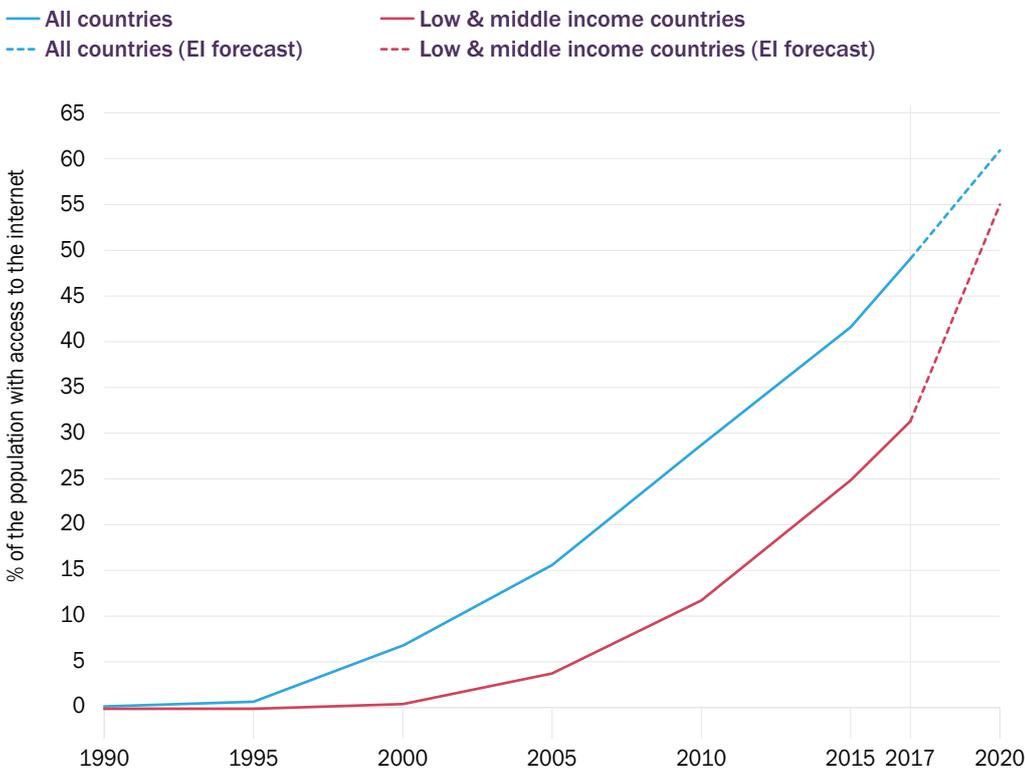
Age of first exposure to sexually explicit content online.

The age at which children are first exposed to sexually explicit content seems to be dropping, according to the responses collected. Across all of the respondents in this study, the average age of first exposure to sexually explicit content was 13.0 years old; however, the average age of first exposure among 18-year-old respondents was 12.7 years old, almost a full year younger than the average age of first exposure among 20-year-old respondents (13.4 years).

This fall in average age of first exposure is likely linked to rising access to the internet over the past decade. On average, our respondents first received access to the internet between 2014 and 2016. Since then, it is estimated that internet penetration

has risen by a third globally, and by over 55% in low- and middle-income countries (see Figure 12).²⁸ This suggests that, over the past five years, the average age at which children are first exposed to sexually explicit content and online sexual harms has continued to drop. Susie Hargreaves OBE, Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) CEO, said: “It’s incredibly concerning to learn that children are being exposed to sexually explicit content online at a younger and younger age. This will undoubtedly have an impact. At the IWF, we’re particularly concerned about the normalisation of sexual behaviour among some children, and we see this play out, sadly, in the huge numbers of ‘self-generated’ child sexual abuse images we tackle daily in our hotline.”

FIGURE 12
Internet penetration globally and by country income group, 1990-2020 (ITU; EI)



28. International Telecommunication Union's World Telecommunication / ICT Indicators Database; EI analysis.

Peer-to-peer interactions online.

Peer-to-peer sexually explicit interactions online are a frequent occurrence: one-third of respondents (33%) had been sent sexually explicit content online by a peer before the age of 18. Male respondents were significantly more likely to receive sexually explicit content from a peer than females (37% v 25%), and were also more likely to report that their first exposure to sexually explicit content had been from a peer (41% v 30%).

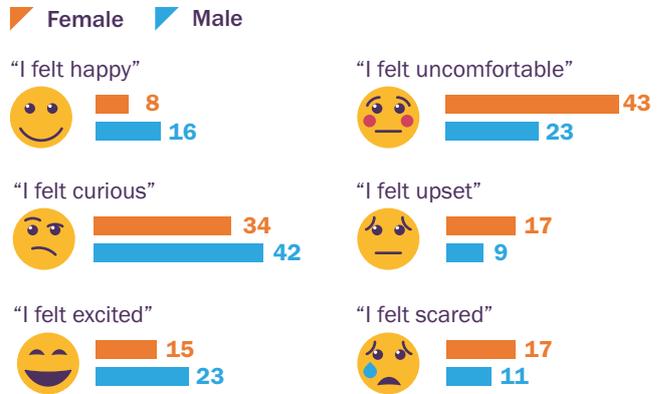
Although male and female respondents expressed both positive and negative reactions to receiving sexually explicit content from a peer,²⁹ on the whole male respondents were more likely to have positive reactions (the most common feeling among male respondents was curiosity) while females were more likely to have negative reactions (the most common feeling among female respondents was discomfort) (see Figure 13).

Peer-to-peer sexual interactions online are an important part of sexual exploration, learning and expression. But these interactions also present risks to children, especially around self-generated content that may be produced voluntarily but can be shared beyond the intended recipient without consent.³⁰ Overall, almost one-in-five (18%) of respondents reported experiencing a sexually explicit image of themselves being shared by a peer without consent. This figure was similar for both male and female respondents.

FIGURE 13

Respondents' reactions to receiving sexually explicit content online from a peer by gender (multiple response)

% of respondents who said...



Overall, almost one-in-five (18%) of respondents reported experiencing a sexually explicit image of themselves being shared by a peer without consent. This figure was similar for both male and female respondents.

FIGURE 14

Respondents' experiences of a sexually explicit image of themselves being shared by a peer without consent by region³¹

English-Speaking High-Income Countries

22%

Latin America

13%

Notes: Asia n=1364, English-Speaking High-Income countries n=1015, Europe & CIS n=814, Latin America n=785, Middle East & Africa n=1324



29. EI did not include experiences of receiving sexually explicit content from a peer in our analysis of experiences of online sexual harms during childhood or in our aggregations.

30. A child produces sexually explicit material of themselves and shares it with a peer in a developmentally appropriate exchange.

31. The United Kingdom (UK), which was included in Western Europe in the sub-regional analysis, was aggregated into the English-speaking high-income countries in the regional analysis. This decision reflects more similarities in experiences between respondents in the UK to those in the other English-speaking high-income economies than to those in Eastern Europe & the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The risk-protection gap



One of the interventions to prevent and respond to online sexual harms against children requires ensuring that children have the tools to recognise threats online and feel comfortable using response mechanisms to report and respond to online sexual harms.^{32,33} As part of this study, we asked respondents about their access to protections and how they responded to online sexual harms during childhood.

Access to protective measures.

Children in lower-middle / low-income countries were less likely to have access to protective measures than children in high- and upper-middle-income countries.

Across three of the four protective measures included in the study, respondents from lower-middle / low-income countries were significantly less likely to have access. This gap is particularly clear around having a trusted adult who they could go to if they received or saw content potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source: a similar proportion of respondents from high (42%) and upper-middle (43%) income countries strongly agreed they had access to this protective measure compared with three-in-ten (30%) respondents from lower-middle / low-income countries.

There are, however, clear gaps in access to protective measures across all income levels in the survey. On average, one third of respondents (34%) globally strongly disagreed or disagreed that they had a responsible adult who was aware of what they were doing online and 36% strongly disagreed or disagreed that a responsible adult had discussed with them how to deal with sexually explicit interactions online (see Figure 15).

Protective measures



Access to a responsible adult that was aware of what they were doing online.



Ability to identify a message and content that was potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source.



Access to a trusted adult if they received a message or saw content that was potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source.



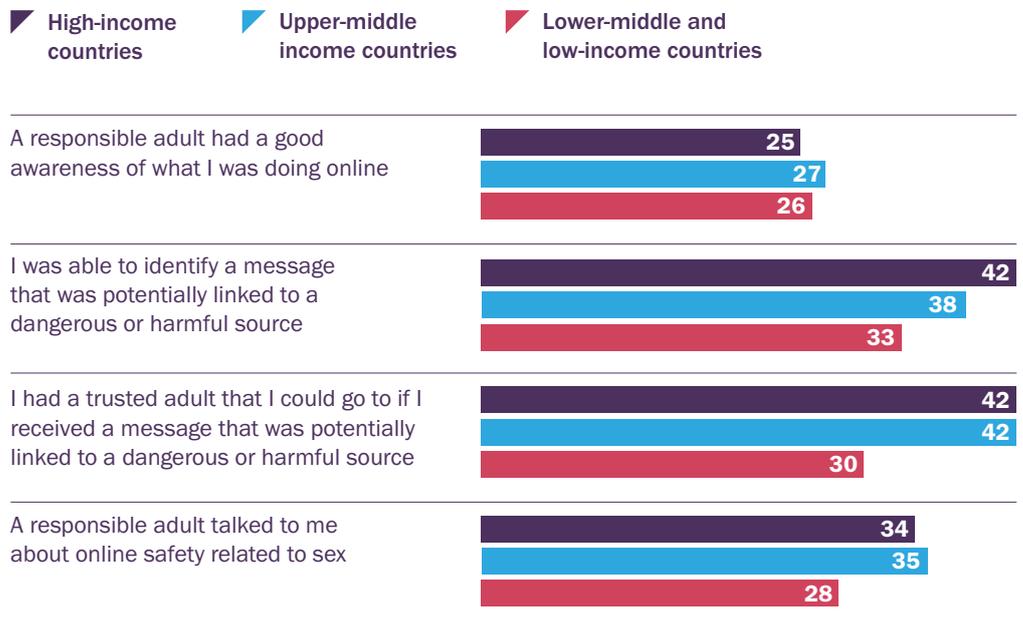
Awareness of harmful sexual interactions online (i.e., a responsible adult had discussed how to deal with people making contact or discuss or share / request sexually explicit information or images).

32. WeProtect Global Alliance, "GLOBAL STRATEGIC RESPONSE: Eliminating Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online". <https://www.weprotect.org/wp-content/uploads/WeProtectGA-Global-Strategic-Response-2021-EN.pdf>

33. The Australian eSafety Commissioner has developed Safety by Design, which focuses on how technology companies can minimise online threats by anticipating, detecting and eliminating online harms before they occur. This approach positions user safety as a fundamental design consideration. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/safety-by-design>

The protective measure that most respondents had confidence in was their own ability to identify potentially harmful and / or inappropriate content: two-thirds of respondents (67%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “When I was under 18, I was able to identify a message and content that was potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source”.

FIGURE 15
Respondents’ access to protective measures by country income group
% of respondents that strongly agreed to having access



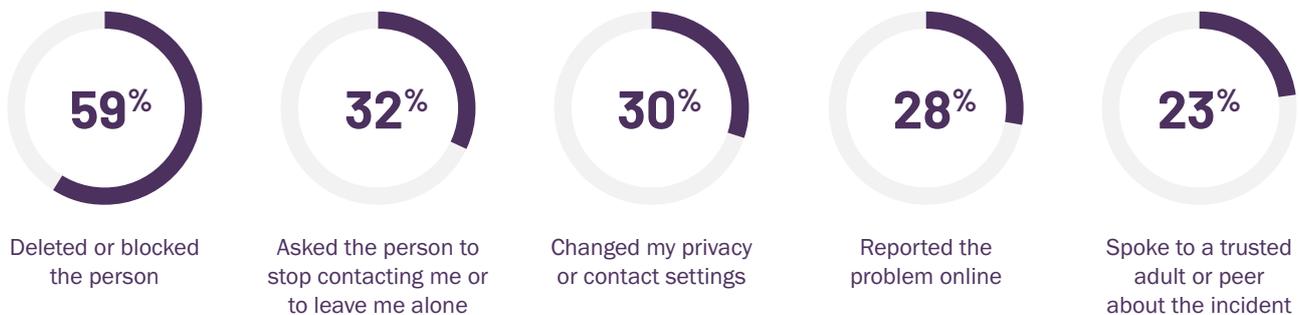
Notes: High-income countries n=1735, Upper-middle income countries n=1674, Lower-middle & low-income countries n=1893.

Use of response tools and reporting mechanisms.

This trend around respondents being confident in their own abilities to stay safe online also translated into use of response and reporting mechanisms. Three out of five respondents (59%) who received sexually explicit material “from an adult they knew or someone they did not know before” deleted or blocked the person rather than using the platform’s support services or consulting a trusted adult and / or a peer. The second and third most likely actions — asking the person to stop contacting them and changing

their privacy or contact settings — reinforce respondents’ comfort in taking action themselves (see Figure 16). This finding aligns well with previous research. According to a Thorn and Benenson Strategy Group report from May 2021, children who had potentially harmful experiences online were “more than twice as likely to use online reporting tools than seek help offline: 85% responded with an online safety tool (block / report / mute) and 41% turned to an offline support system (caregiver / trusted adult / peer)”.³⁴

FIGURE 16
Respondents’ responses to receiving sexually explicit material from an adult they knew or someone they did not know before



Notes: n=1537 (female=952; male=585)

34. Thorn and Benenson Strategy Group, “Responding to Online Threats: Minors’ Perspectives on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking”, May 2021. https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Responding%20to%20Online%20Threats_2021-Full-Report.pdf?utm_campaign=H2D%20report&utm_source=websitePotentially

Girls were more likely to take action when they received sexually explicit material from an adult they knew or someone they did not know before: just 6% of girl respondents took no action compared with 12% of boys. Two-in-three girls (65%) blocked the person and 37% asked the person to stop contacting them compared with 44% and 24% of boys respectively. This gap could be the result of boys facing their own set of challenges around sexual abuse and exploitation, including greater barriers to disclosure.³⁵ According to independent social researcher and consultant Jarrett Davis, “Gender norms dictate that boys have to be tough, strong, and resilient. Boys are often made to believe that real men like sex and shouldn’t be bothered by sexually explicit materials. Further, advocacy and awareness programming often targets girls, leaving boys with fewer messages about their bodies, saying no, and responding appropriately when they are made to feel uncomfortable. For many, being a boy means that you don’t cry, you don’t get hurt or bothered by sex, and you keep quiet when you feel sad or scared, which can leave them uniquely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.”

Concerningly, racial and ethnic minorities — who, in this study, were among the most vulnerable to online sexual harms during

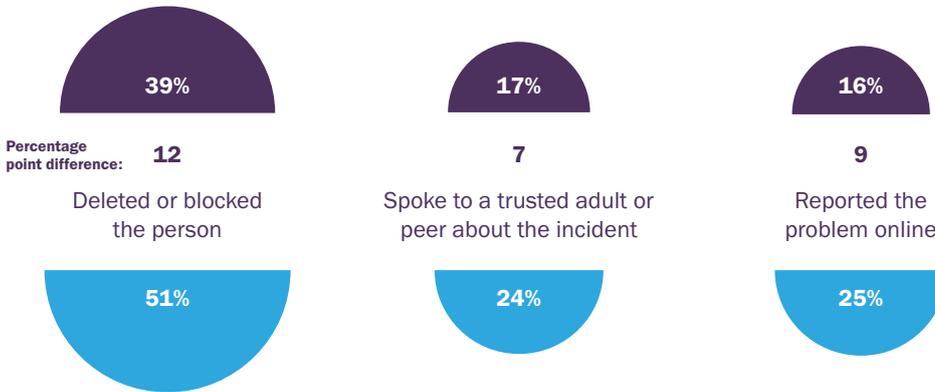
childhood, especially in lower-middle / low-income countries — were less likely to take action when they received sexually explicit material from an adult they knew or someone they did not know before. While over half (51%) of those who did not self-identify as racial or ethnic minorities deleted or blocked the person, only 39% of self-identified racial or ethnic minority respondents did the same. Racial and ethnic minorities were also significantly less likely to speak to a trusted adult or peer about the experience and to report the interaction to the platform (see Figure 17).

According to Nicole Epps, Executive Director of World Childhood Foundation USA: “Recognising the systemic and institutional bias that racial and ethnic minorities may face in their countries of origin, marginalised communities may be reluctant to access or report offences to official platforms due to wariness and a belief that their concerns will not be addressed, minimised and / or not believed. Moreover, using a culturally competent and intersectional lens, cultural factors such as parenting styles, due to a desire to safeguard and prepare their children for life as a minority in society, religious beliefs and familial privacy, may be a deterrent for children to share their negative experiences on and offline.”

FIGURE 17

Percentage of respondents who took a certain action when they received sexually explicit material from an adult they knew or someone they did not know before

Self-identified as racial / ethnic minority



Did not self-identify as racial / ethnic minority

Notes: Racial / ethnic minority n=306, Not racial / ethnic minority n=1226

35. The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Out of the Shadows: Shining Light on the Response to Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation - A 60-country benchmarking index”, <https://outoftheshadows.eiu.com/>

Conclusion

This study is a first step in painting a global picture of online sexual harms against children. It highlights different experiences of online sexual harms during childhood across key groups including regions, income levels, genders, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, and disabilities, and sets the stage for future research into the nuances of these experiences.

The findings make it clear that minority groups of all types are more at risk and are often less likely to have access to the protective mechanisms that could help keep them safe from online sexual harms. Many are also less likely to engage with response tools and reporting mechanisms, whether from lack of awareness, distrust of such mechanisms or cultural dynamics. How these findings translate down to regional and country-level experiences is a critical gap in the research around this issue. As an immediate next step, more granular data using representative samples at the national level are needed to inform prevention and response strategies.³⁶

Additional research on the role children themselves have in online sexual harms is also needed. Our study does not cover this topic because we did not want respondents to feel judged for their sexually explicit or potentially harmful actions taken online.³⁷

Conducting research on online sexual harms and sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood is challenging. Ethical concerns around surveying children and the risk of retraumatisation can restrict researchers from surveying children directly and prevent them from asking about the most harmful experiences. And, although there is evidence that computerised and online surveys can elicit more truthful responses on sensitive topics,³⁸ these anonymised tools can restrict researchers from identifying respondents' reactions and, if needed, providing support services. These limitations, however, should not prevent research from being done. There is a clear need for more data to inform stakeholders' understanding of threats to children and how to develop effective responses.

Digital and social media platforms have become, and will continue to be, a common way for children to explore sexuality and identity. These tools can provide an avenue for expression and discovery, but they also open doors to new threats. Understanding these threats and how they manifest across groups, platforms and devices is a key first step in developing interventions that better protect children without affecting age-appropriate growth.

36. A good example is ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF's Disrupting Harms project, which collected in-depth data on child sexual exploitation and abuse online in 13 countries to inform national prevention and response. Reports from the project are forthcoming in 2021.

37. Given the restrictions on the maximum number of questions it is possible to ask within an online survey fielded through random device engagement, we had to make choices around where to focus the research.

38. Timo Gnams and Kai Kaspar, "Disclosure of sensitive behaviors across self-administered survey modes: a meta-analysis", <https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/s13428-014-0533-4>



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