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Online Crimes of Sexual Violence Against Children in Finland

Statistics on Crime and Perpetrators

Protect Children / Suojellaan Lapsia ry.

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Online Crimes of Sexual Violence Against Children in Finland: Statistics on Crimes and Perpetrators

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Crimes of sexual violence against children occur in Finland

Children are subjected to crimes of sexual violence all over the world, including in Finland. Unfortunately, when we talk about sexual violence against children, we often try to distance ourselves from the phenomenon. It is easier to think that children are being abused by perpetrators from outside Finland or Europe. This mentality is not only incorrect, but also harmful to crime prevention efforts. This report investigates the prevalence of online crimes of sexual violence against children in Finland and outlines preliminary findings from Protect Children’s research on Finnish perpetrators of such crimes. Crimes of sexual violence against children are on the rise and Finnish children are also subjected to sexual violence.



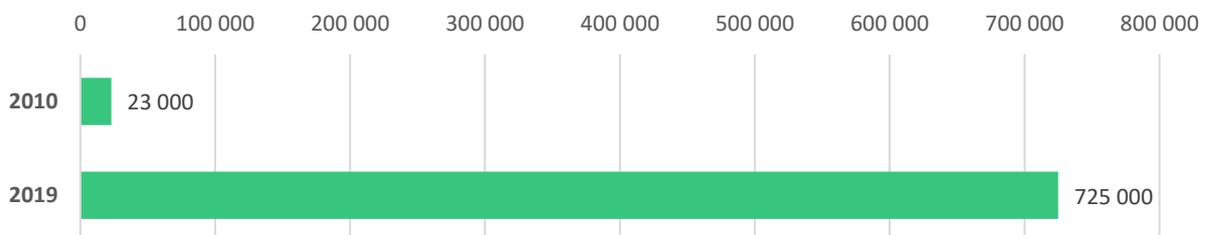
One in five European children will fall victim to a crime of sexual violence.

A report published by the European Commission in 2020 shows that approximately 20% of European children will fall victim to a crime of sexual violence.¹ With the development of technology, crimes of sexual violence against children, like other crimes, have increasingly moved to the internet. A child can become the victim of sexual violence without physical proximity to the offender. For

example, the offender may use the internet to entice, deceive, manipulate, coerce, intimidate, extort, threaten, or otherwise cause a child to commit acts of sexual violence against themselves or another child. The offender can capture and record real-time acts or manipulate and pressure a child into sending images and/or video material of themselves to the offender. Offenders often distribute the child sexual abuse material (CSAM) they have recorded or otherwise attained.

With the advancement of technology, the amount of CSAM has grown exponentially worldwide. Such increasing prevalence has also been reported in European Union (EU) Member States. A total of 23,000 reports of child sexual abuse images were reported in EU countries in 2010 and 725,000 in 2019. In 2019, the reports included approximately three million individual images and/or videos of child sexual abuse.² EUROPOL’s IOCTA 2020 report indicates that in most EU countries, the authorities lack the capabilities and resources to adequately identify child victims of sexual violence and to investigate sexual offences against children.³

Figure 1: The number of reports of images and/or videos of child sexual abuse in the EU have risen dramatically.



Source: European Commission

The material recorded in connection with a crime of sexual violence against a child is evidence of the offence. The images depict crime scenes, victims, and perpetrators. As images of sexual violence are circulated online, the child is revictimized time and time again, which may have long-lasting harmful impacts on the health and wellbeing of the child. Online crimes of sexual violence against children where the video recording is distributed online must be considered as extremely harmful offences.

1 European Commission, EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse (2020) https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-07/20200724_com-2020-607-commission-communication_en.pdf 1.
 2 European Commission, EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse (2020) https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-07/20200724_com-2020-607-commission-communication_en.pdf 1.
 3 EUROPOL, IOCTA (2020) p. 36.

Only a fraction of crimes come to the attention of the authorities

Crimes of sexual violence against children, like other crimes of sexual violence, are hidden crimes. According to the latest study, it is estimated that only 12% of crimes of sexual violence against children are brought to the attention of authorities in Finland.⁴ The study found that the most common reason for nondisclosure was the child victim's belief that the experience was not considered serious enough to report.⁵ Additionally, distorted feelings of guilt and shame experienced by child victims have been found to be reasons for nondisclosure.⁶

In Finland, crimes of sexual violence against children brought to the attention of the authorities have clearly increased in recent years.

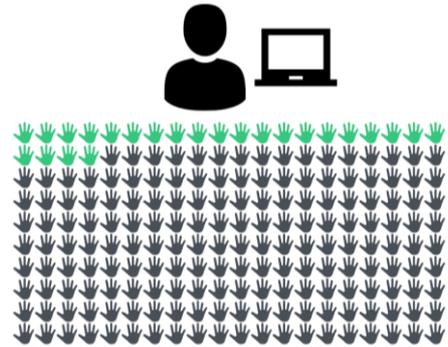
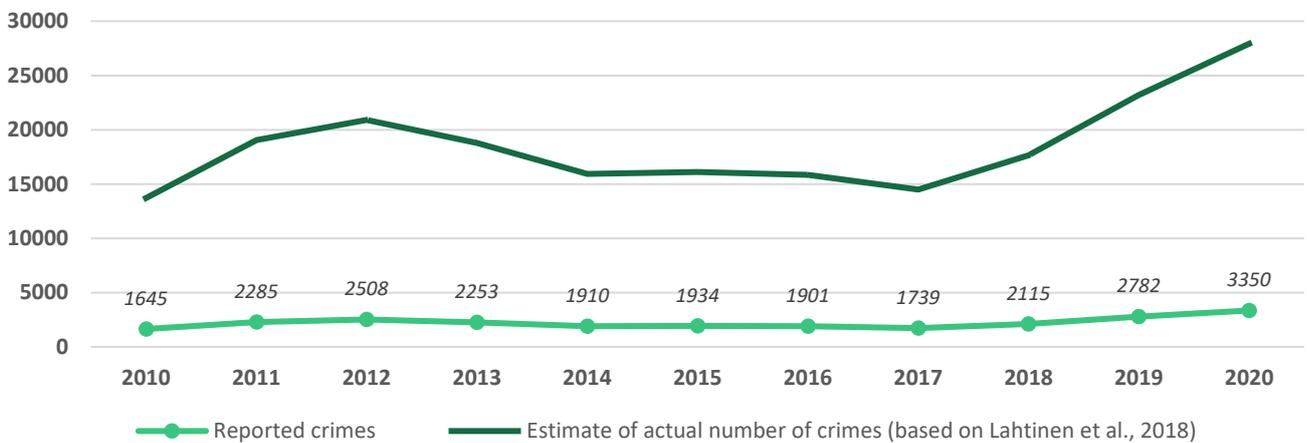


Figure 2: Reported crimes of sexual violence against children in Finland compared to an estimate of the actual number of offences based on research data indicating that only 12% of such crimes are reported.⁷



Source: Statistics Finland

With the development of technology, hundreds of children can fall victim to one offender. Online crimes of sexual violence against children occur both nationally and internationally. Two criminal cases which emerged in Finland in 2021 involve perpetrators suspected of committing online crimes of sexual violence against more than eighty children,⁸ and against up to two hundred children.⁹ Investigations into both large-scale criminal cases are still pending, and the investigation of online crimes of sexual violence against children is often slow and challenging. In recent years, Finland has invested in and developed the investigation of crimes of sexual violence against children and the training of paediatric investigators as part of the Barnahus project funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.¹⁰

4 Lahtinen, H.-M., Laitila, A., Korkman, J., & Ellonen, N. (2018). Children's disclosures of sexual abuse in a population-based sample. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 76, 84-94.

5 Lahtinen, H.-M., Laitila, A., Korkman, J., & Ellonen, N. (2018). Children's disclosures of sexual abuse in a population-based sample. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 76, 84-94.

6 ECPAT International & WeProtect Global Alliance, *Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online: Survivors' Perspectives* (2022) p. 60.

7 The statistics cover 20 offences from the Finnish Criminal Code (93/1889), three of which may also include offenses of sexual violence against adults, as these are not separated in the source material. 17: 18§1 / 1-3, 17: 18§2 concerning the dissemination of CSAM and its attempt also applies to other images demonstrating violence or bestiality. 20: 2§1 / 1-5, 20: 2§2 concerning aggravated rape and its attempt also applies to victims other than children. 20: 5§1 / 1-4, 20: 5§3 concerning sexual exploitation and its attempt also applies to victims other than children.

8 Helsingin Sanomat, 'Satakuntalaista miestä epäillään yli 80 lapsen kohdistuneista seksuaalirikoksista' (18.11.2021) <https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000008415036.html>.

9 Helsingin Sanomat, '20-vuotiaasta keski-suomalaisista miestä epäillään mahdollisesti jopa kahdensadan alakoulu-ikäisen lapsen hyväksikäytöstä' (29.7.2021) <https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000008157298.html>.

10 Miia Lehtinen & Maria Rossi, 'Käsikirja Lapsiin Kohdistuvien Väkivalta- ja Seksuaalirikosten Tutkintaan' (13.1.2022)

<https://poliisi.fi/documents/25235045/33939256/K%C3%A4sikirja-lapsiin-kohdistuvien-v%C3%A4kivalta-ja-seksuaalirikosten-tutkintaan-web.pdf/01b971f6-8ebb-eb54-dd97-6c1663d616b3/K%C3%A4sikirja-lapsiin-kohdistuvien-v%C3%A4kivalta-ja-seksuaalirikosten-tutkintaan-web.pdf?t=1642679496880>.

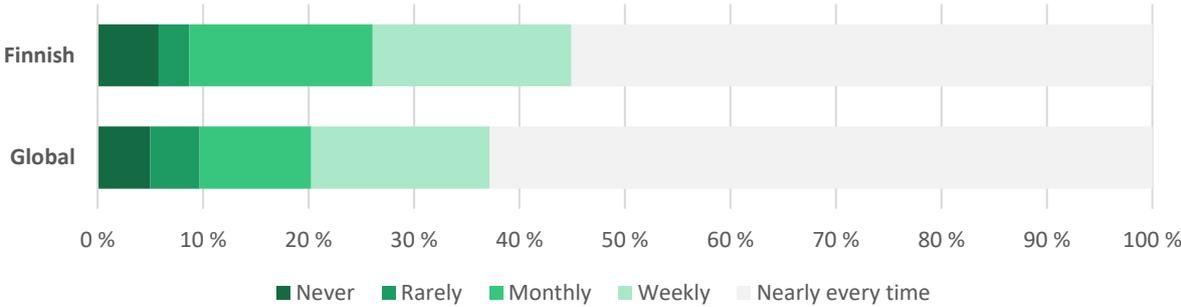
Study indicates prevalence of high-risk offenders in Finland

There is no precise data on the number of individuals who search for and use CSAM online. However, with the explosive growth of CSAM in recent years, it can be assumed that the number of users of CSAM is significant and unfortunately increasing. Since 2020, Protect Children has been conducting research on individuals who search for CSAM on the dark web (in the anonymous Tor network).¹¹ By January 2022, over 15,000 individual CSAM users have responded to the research surveys, which were innovated by the organisation’s experts. Over one hundred respondents (N=103) have answered the survey in Finnish.

Based on preliminary analysis, the Finnish respondents to the survey appear to differ from the respondents in other language areas. Finns were more likely than other respondents to report having sought direct contact with children online after viewing CSAM. 45% of Finnish respondents say that they have sought direct contact with a child, while 37% of respondents in other language areas say that they have sought contact.¹²

Figure 3: Finnish respondents to Protect Children’s research survey differ from respondents in other language areas.

“How often after viewing CSAM/illegal violent material have you sought direct contact with children through online platforms (chat or other)?”



Source: Protect Children / Suojellaan Lapsia ry., 2022



45% of Finnish respondents have sought direct contact with a child after viewing CSAM

The study shows that a large proportion of Finnish individuals searching for and viewing CSAM are at high risk of committing other crimes of sexual violence against children. CSAM users do not just view the material – many also seek direct contact with children afterwards.

¹¹ Protect Children, ‘ReDirection project’ <https://protectchildren.fi/redirection/>. For more information: Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valkonen, *CSAM Users in the Dark Web: Protecting Children Through Prevention* (Protect Children, 2021) available here: <https://suojellaanlapsia.fi/2021/09/23/redirection-survey-report/>.
¹² The data will be analysed further, and no certain conclusions can be drawn from the preliminary results.

What can we do?

Crimes of sexual violence against children must be prevented by all possible means. Investigating and convicting perpetrators is extremely important, but the focus must also be increasingly on prevention. From the child's rights perspective, it is fundamental to prevent crimes of sexual violence against children before they occur. Stronger preventive work must focus both on providing digital safety skills education for children and on deterring possible offenders.

Individuals who are concerned about their own behaviour and use of CSAM must have access to low-threshold support already at an early stage, before committing a crime. Protect Children experts, together with psychologist, Nina Nurminen, and psychologist, psychotherapist Mikko Ylipekka (Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency), have produced the ReDirection Self-Help Program for individuals who use CSAM.¹³ The ReDirection Self-Help Program is available anonymously on the dark web and on the Helsinki University Hospital website on the surface web. The anonymous, rehabilitative Program is available in English and Spanish, and a Finnish translation of the program will be completed during 2022. The goal is to translate the Program also into Russian and Norwegian during 2022–2023.

Approximately 50% of the respondents to Protect Children's 'Help us to help you' survey stated that they want to stop their use of CSAM. The ReDirection Self-Help Program is the first step in changing harmful behaviour toward a better, crime-free life.¹⁴



50% of respondents want to stop using CSAM.

Sexual violence is never the victim's fault – the perpetrator is always responsible. Unfortunately, online crimes of sexual violence are on the rise in Finland, as technology enables an offender to contact several children at the same time. We have a responsibility to take all measures to keep children safe online. It is essential that we teach children basic digital safety skills before they start to use digital devices independently. Protect Children specialists have developed and produced the 'Early is Best' digital safety skills model and teaching material for children aged 5-9; their parents; and professionals working with children.¹⁵ These materials help to teach children how to navigate difficult situations online, identify risks, and how to react to stay safe. The presence of an adult and regular conversations about the digital daily life between a child and a safe adult enable discussion of even difficult issues. Every child has the right to have the knowledge and skills to move safely in digital traffic and the skills on how to act in confusing and frightening situations they may come across online.

Children become victims of crimes of sexual violence all over the world. To ensure the effective protection of children in Finland and worldwide:

- Perpetrators and potential offenders should be provided with low-threshold support to change behaviour and stop the use of child sexual abuse material as early as possible.
- Every child has a right to information and children should be taught digital safety skills at an early age – already before they start using digital devices independently.

¹³ ReDirection Self-Help Program (Protect Children / Suojellaan Lapsia, 2021) <https://www.mielenterveystalo.fi/aikuiset/itsehoito-ja-oppaat/itsehoito/redirection/Pages/default.aspx>.

¹⁴ For more information: Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valkonen, *CSAM Users in the Dark Web: Protecting Children Through Prevention* (Protect Children, 2021) available here: <https://suojellaanlapsia.fi/2021/09/23/redirection-survey-report/>.

¹⁵ Protect Children, 'Online Road Safety' <https://protectchildren.fi/online-road-safety/>.