



WeProtect
GLOBAL ALLIANCE

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ONLINE: Survivors' Perspectives in Colombia



FUNDACION
Renacer
Contra la violencia sexual

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IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS



[WeProtect Global Alliance](#) brings together experts from government, the private sector and civil society to develop policies and solutions to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The Alliance generates political commitment and practical approaches to make the digital world safe and positive for children, preventing sexual abuse and long-term harm.



[ECPAT International](#) is a global network of civil society organisations working towards the vision of ending the sexual exploitation of children. With over 30 years of experience in engaging with and managing multi-stakeholder processes and alliances across national, regional and global levels; ECPAT is considered to be at the helm of all issues and manifestations pertaining to the sexual exploitation of children. With a Secretariat based in Bangkok (Thailand), driving strategic direction, producing key research and working on global advocacy; together with the on-the-ground efforts of 122 members in 104 countries, the network approach bridges local communities, governments and the private sector; offering a global approach combined with customised national actions.

In recent years, important achievements have been made in the areas of prevention, legislative protection, child participation, research as well as collaboration with private companies in the travel and tourism sector in the fight against the sexual exploitation of children in such context, both at the national level and in the main tourist destinations of the country.



[Fundación Renacer](#) is a non-governmental organisation active since 1988 in Colombia to prevent and eradicate the commercial sexual exploitation of girls, boys and adolescents in any form. The work of Fundación Renacer follows three lines of action: comprehensive care for victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation, prevention and research. This social organisation is a pioneer in the country, due to the development of comprehensive care and protection models and also protection environments, from a rights, gender and differential approach and from multisectoral and inter-institutional actions. Fundación Renacer has managed to develop advocacy actions to strengthen public policies to address these issues and has consolidated strategies in an articulated manner with the government sector, private sector, community, civil society and adolescents and young leaders in various departments, cities and municipalities of Colombia.

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INTRODUCTION

Defining child sexual exploitation and abuse online

Child sexual abuse refers to various sexual activities perpetrated against children (persons under 18), regardless of whether the children are aware that what is happening to them is neither normal nor acceptable. It can be committed by adults or peers and usually involves an individual or group taking advantage of an imbalance of power. It can be committed with or without explicit force, with offenders frequently using authority, power, manipulation, or deception.¹

Child sexual exploitation involves the same abusive actions. However, an additional element must also be present - exchange of something (e.g., money, shelter, material goods, immaterial things like protection or a relationship), or even the mere promise of such.²

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online refers to situations involving digital, Internet and communication technologies at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online includes an evolving range of practices including:



Child sexual abuse material: The production, distribution, dissemination, importing, exporting, offering, selling, possession of, or knowingly obtaining access to child sexual abuse material online (even if the sexual abuse that is depicted in the material was carried out offline).



Grooming children online for sexual purposes: Identifying and/or preparing children via online technology with a view to exploiting them sexually (whether the acts that follow are then carried out online or offline or even not carried out at all).



Live streaming of child sexual abuse: Sexual exploitation which involves the coercion, threat or deception of a child into sexual activities that are transmitted ('streamed') live via the Internet for viewing by others remotely.



Other practices: Related concepts can include online sexual extortion, the non-consensual sharing of self-generated sexual content involving children, unwanted exposure to sexualised content, among others.³

1. Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International. 18.

2. *Ibid.*, 24.

3. ECPAT International. (2020). [Summary Paper: Online Child Sexual Exploitation](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Background

Research about child sexual exploitation and abuse online has received increased attention recently – particularly as our lives shifted further online during responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Research from global north countries is over-represented on this topic, with far fewer studies taking place in low- and middle-income countries. A continuum exists for our online and offline lives which also impacts this issue - with blurred boundaries between our physical and digital worlds. Sexual violence is also taking place in different ways: online, as well as in situations involving online and in-person elements of grooming, facilitation and sharing.

Furthermore, children’s voices about their experiences of these crimes continue to be rarely centralised in the dialogue - there is surprisingly little research directly conveying their experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse online nor the responses they receive. Much of the existing research has also focused on identifying potential risks to children rather than directly measuring the evidence of harm that some have faced. This is understandable, as it’s ethically more complex to conduct research with young people who have experienced harm. Yet fully understanding online harms is important to inform preventions and responses. It must also be remembered that in reality, the vast majority of cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse go unreported, making it difficult to truly determine the scope of this problem in the first place.

Researchers have used qualitative methods like online surveys to examine childhood experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse online – predominantly focused on survivors of child sexual abuse material production. In one such study, approximately half of those who responded felt that the images were associated with specific problems that were different to those caused by the actual abuse. Nearly half of the respondents worried that people would think that they were willing participants or that people would recognise them. Interestingly, in this study, one-third refused to talk about the images and 22% denied that there were images. Three themes were identified from the data: guilt and shame, their ongoing vulnerability and an empowerment dimension the images sometimes brought. An additional study of adult survivors came from the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, who conducted an online survey with 150 female respondents whose child sexual abuse was recorded and/or distributed online. Seventy per cent of that sample also expressed anxieties about being recognised from the images.

A further qualitative study of 20 children who were referred following suspected online sexual abuse found that only 12 were willing to talk about what had happened. The remainder denied that anything had taken place in spite of the fact that there were digital images of their abuse. The interviews with these 12 children indicated that they were very critical of themselves, and often had strong feelings of loyalty towards their offender.

The reluctance to accept, disclose, and attributions of self-blame have been evidenced in other research with children who have experienced online sexual exploitation, both in relation to abuse through sexual image production as well as online grooming. These are important lessons not only for

Children’s voices about their experiences of sexual crimes continue to be rarely centralised in the dialogue - there is surprisingly little research directly conveying their experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse online nor the responses they receive.

research studies with these hard-to-reach populations, but also in relation to the recovery needs of these individuals. Breaking down these common phenomena - which may be heavily internalised - is clearly required.

These studies notwithstanding, qualitative research with children who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse online is still relatively rare. Such children are difficult to both identify and recruit, which in part may reflect the ethical challenges of approaching children directly, and also because many professionals act as gatekeepers to children and are reluctant to approach them for research due to justifiable fears of further traumatisation. Crucially, any such research must also be completed using ethically appropriate and safe techniques for engaging survivors.

However, growing numbers of children are being supported by support services around the world for issues related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Seeking to understand and build on the strengths of such services and address their weaknesses is a priority. Amplifying the voices of young people who have had these experiences is vital for this work.

The increasing problem of child sexual exploitation and abuse online requires detailed, extensive and sustained attention. This is especially the case in middle- and low-income countries, where the issue often lacks visibility and few studies have been conducted to date.

Specific evidence about the quality and effectiveness of support services will enable targeted responses in which governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector can cooperate to address this problem.

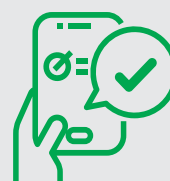
Ensuring that the voices of children who have had experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse online are part of the evidence - as was achieved in this project - enables child-centred and informed approaches that better prevent this issue from occurring, and better support those young people subjected to these crimes.

The project in Colombia

To explore child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Colombia, this project undertook two research activities:



Qualitative one-on-one
'conversations' with young people
who had experienced child sexual
exploitation and abuse online



An online survey of frontline
support workers who were working
with child survivors of sexual
exploitation and abuse

The conversations with young survivors focused on their recommendations for improving prevention and support services for children (not their abuse, as explained below). The approach ensured that the research was informed directly by survivors who were drawing on their own experiences of harm from child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Including their perspectives in the research bridges the conspicuous gaps noted above that sometimes persist in the evidence in this sensitive area.

Surveying frontline support workers aimed to provide a substantial and nuanced understanding of how child sexual exploitation and abuse online is presenting in social support services. Data from these professionals indicates knowledge and perceptions of the problem amongst workers, caregivers and the general public; identifies key vulnerabilities for children; and assesses accessibility of care to support children subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Data from Colombia was presented – alongside data from five other countries involved in the project⁴ to a panel of experts at an online roundtable held on 26th July 2021. Insights from the roundtable helped frame the data in the overall project report and this and other countries' national reports.

4. The project was implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Mexico, Moldova and Peru. This report solely includes the findings of the activities conducted in Colombia. Similar national reports are available for all project countries along with a project report summarising the findings across the six target countries.

METHODOLOGY



Photo by Saul Mercado

Conversations with survivors

The conversations with young survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online are of foremost importance to this project. They were conducted with the intention to shed light on the conspicuous gaps that persist when survivors' perspectives are excluded from work to shape policy and legislation in this area. The conversations explored the survivors' perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of existing support services, and gathered recommendations for improvements.

Rationale

Engaging survivors of child sexual exploitation in research requires substantial care to accommodate a range of ethical considerations.⁵ Such research must place significant value on survivors having the right to safely, actively and meaningfully participate in discourse on issues that impact upon them. Therefore, the design for the survivors' conversations in this project was built on the principle that the participants had, and perceived themselves to have, significant control over the process, including the decisions of what they shared. A range of measures were taken that reinforced that survivors had full control over sharing their perspectives on their terms.

To ensure that the perspectives of young survivors were meaningfully included in this project, ECPAT International developed a comprehensive, participant-centred, ethically sound, and trauma-informed approach to engaging them with the help of an expert who had extensive experience working with survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation. The 'conversations' approach is thus a dialogue with young survivors on issues which matter to them, and which explore their experiences of the support that they received.

Participants were invited to speak freely about their personal experiences of support services through their recovery process and the facilitators used active listening to engage with the young persons and understand their story – exploring particular gaps in understanding and drawing out the detail needed to represent young people's perspectives of these issues. Probing questions eliciting narratives across their experiences were only done responsively and to prompt discussion. This was not a structured interview with set questions – which can feel like an interrogation. Participants were invited to tell only the parts of their story that they wanted to.

The conversations in Colombia were facilitated by two psychologists, a male and a female, all with experience in therapeutic care for child and adolescents survivors of sexual exploitation.

Sample

In Colombia, the facilitators carefully identified possible young people that could be invited to participate. Inclusion criteria included, inter alia, being aged between 18 to 24 years old, having had an experience of online sexual exploitation and abuse before turning 18 years of age as well as a need for participants to have current access to support structures, and for adequate time to have passed since the exploitation occurred.

5. ECPAT International. (2019). [Guidelines for Ethical Research on Sexual Exploitation Involving Children](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Of those identified and reached out to by the facilitators and their networks, nine survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online, 4 young women and 5 young men between the age of 18 to 23 years old, agreed to take part in the conversations. The participants were identified through the work carried out by Fundación Renacer in association with the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare.

Conversations approach

The conversations were carefully planned to be conducted in an interactive and unstructured style, rather than a traditional form of research interview. The advantages of this design are that it is attentive to the nature and sensitivities of the topic, and promotes choice and empowerment, placing high value on the fact that participants have, and perceive themselves to have, significant control over what they share with the researchers.

Participants were also asked if they preferred to take part in conversations one-on-one or in small groups (for example in case they already knew some of the other participants because of participation in the same support groups). The nine young people decided to conduct one-on-one conversations.

Following initial agreement to take part, conversations were then held in two stages – a ‘pre-meeting’ was carried out and then the ‘main conversation’ a few days later. This two-stage process was deliberate, symbolically indicating a trusting relationship controlled by the participant from the outset. The pre-meeting involved explaining the process, answering queries about consent, and seeking any preferences that the facilitators could accommodate in setting up the ‘main conversation’ (e.g. time of day, room and seating preferences, who was present etc.). Arrangements remained flexible and up to the local facilitators and the young people to determine together, also in light of the fast-changing contextual circumstances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Facilitators took every measure to make sure that the survivors felt as comfortable as possible during the course of conversations. The conversational nature, open questions, allowing enough time to respond, regularly giving permission not to respond, all helped shape the outcomes of the conversations. As per the conversations’ approach, the young people were able to contribute verbally, but also encouraged to use a range of visual tools to facilitate the conversations (‘Past, Now, Future’ flip charts, speech/thought bubbles, emoji, drawings, etc.). The possibility of carrying out the conversations in three moments – past, present and future – seemed to be appreciated by the participants as it represented an opportunity to verbalise their empowerment processes. The visual representation method, however, was not applied in all cases, as some of the participants were more comfortable with verbally expressing their thoughts. Their choices were fully accepted and respected.

While the Covid-19 pandemic meant lots of interactions had to be virtual, the researchers were adamant that psychological safety would be hard to maintain in such an approach. Conversations were therefore all held face-to-face.⁶ Although the research did not seek to determine the specifics of the exploitation and/or abuse that the young women were subjected to, in this way the facilitators – trained and experienced in working with trauma – were physically present to provide psychological support if distress was encountered.

6. Some flexibility was needed to adapt to changing movement requirements and Covid-19 safety plans were applied.

Analysis

Following the conversations, the facilitators reflected on what they had heard, their notes, and recordings of the sessions. They developed a brief preliminary report – in Spanish – that focused on specific themes across the seven conversations, such as barriers to disclosing, the quality, usefulness and accessibility of services, and summarised the young women’s recommendations for improvements. This preliminary report was then reviewed and discussed between the facilitators, the project expert, and the ECPAT research team. Once finalised, it was made available to those participants who had indicated they wanted to see the output to offer their feedback and additional inputs.

Ethical considerations

Before beginning the research activity, ECPAT International convened a panel of three global experts for an independent third-party review of the proposed methodology. A detailed research protocol that included mitigations for ethical risks was developed, along with draft tools. Detailed feedback from the panel was accommodated in two rounds of review before the project commenced.

As detailed above, the local facilitators participated in extensive preparations together with the project expert prior to conducting the conversations. Moreover, the process for obtaining informed consent was conducted in two steps – so the young people had time to consider their involvement (not signing consent just prior to commencing) and could control some of the circumstances of the conversations.

Frontline support workers’ survey

The engagement of frontline support workers through completion of a workforce survey was aimed at adding data to ‘flesh out’ a comprehensive picture of child sexual exploitation and abuse online by exploring the perceptions, knowledge and practices influencing disclosure and support provision.

Rationale

Workforce surveys have increasingly been used in research to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of social support systems. Most commonly these surveys are used by health⁷ and social work professions⁸ to measure service delivery effectiveness.

Social support to children who are subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse is generally provided within the broader context of child protection. We therefore developed and delivered a survey for child protection workers. The survey explored perceptions related to the sexual exploitation of children – in general and online; factors related to children’s access to support services; perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of such services; as well as details about the nature of their direct work with children.

7. Magadzire, P M et al. (2014, November). [Frontline health workers as brokers: provider perceptions, experiences and mitigating strategies to improve access to essential medicines in South Africa.](#)

8. Sadeghi, T and Fekjaer, S. (2018). [Frontline workers' competency in activation work.](#) International Journal of Social Welfare. 77-88; Netsayi, M (2019). [Perceptions of frontline social workers on their contributions agenda for social work and social development.](#)

Sample

Fundación Renacer utilised their national contacts to identify organisations supporting children from which to invite staff working at the frontline of providing support.

While the research focus was child sexual exploitation and abuse online, very few services focus exclusively on support for child sexual exploitation and abuse with an online component, or even exclusively on general child sexual exploitation and abuse. The sample therefore included a range of frontline support workers who had supported at least some children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse over the last year.

A convenience sample of 89 Colombian frontline workers was surveyed. The sample should not be considered representative of the diversity of frontline workers in the country, however, attempts to represent different types of services, both in terms of geographic location as well as type of services were made.

In order to be eligible to complete the survey, frontline workers needed to be:

- Over 18 years of age;
- At least last 12 months working in the field of social work, psychology or other social support;
- At least last 12 months managing own case load directly;
- Case load over last 12 months included at least some children;
- Case load over last 12 months included at least some cases of sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

The survey

Self-administered online surveys (emailing a link) have notoriously low participation rates. Thus, the design for this project opted for in-person administration – though using an online tool with limits and designated required items for a clean dataset. While restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic meant the Colombian administrators, staff members from Fundación Renacer, had to support participants remotely via an introductory Zoom or phone call and then remained on standby to support, offer guidance and troubleshoot as the participants completed the survey. The personal connection helped motivate participants to complete the survey. Data collection took place between April-June 2021.

The online survey consisted of 108 multiple choices and short open-answer questions. The draft tool in English language was translated to Spanish and ECPAT International and Fundación Renacer collaborated to check and contextualise the survey, which was then pilot-tested with a small number of frontline workers in the country before being fielded.

The full survey in English and Spanish can be provided on request.

Analysis

Following data collection, data was cleaned, and open-ended responses were translated to English. Survey output was integrated into a custom analytical framework where analysis was then conducted based upon exigent themes and patterns that arose from the data. Qualitative analytical components were then added.

Quantitative and qualitative themes and patterns were explored, with direct (translated) quotes from the open text responses used to illustrate dominant narratives emerging from the quantitative data, along with occasional dissenting views. Care was taken during analysis not to present any qualitative responses that may have identified participants.

It should be noted that the data are not statistically representative of the experiences of all frontline support workers in Colombia. However, the estimates, perceptions and experiences reported here offer valuable insight into the access and quality of social support for Colombian children who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained as an integrated part of the online survey tool. To protect confidentiality, names were not requested at any stage of completing the survey. Care is also taken when presenting qualitative data in this report so that participants are not identifiable by the content of the quotes.

Challenges and limitations

The Covid-19 pandemic meant movement restrictions varied at different times during the data collection period which had an impact both on the survivors' conversations as well as the frontline workers' survey. The facilitators overcame this challenge for the conversations with survivors by conducting the pre-meeting on the phone two weeks before the main conversation.

Survivor conversations were audio-recorded, but transcriptions were not completed – with the intention that as facilitators themselves were producing the preliminary reports, key insights would be easily surmised. However, in hindsight, and as the young people's direct words were a focus, transcriptions would have helped to facilitate direct quotes being incorporated more easily.

The team in Colombia also noted that while the approach to conversations was carefully created to centre the participants, this was challenging for the facilitators to negotiate. The team suggested that key lines of enquiry are maybe considered as a basis for future use of the approach.

Regarding the frontline workers' survey, a limitation occurred as a result of our inclusion criteria. Our intent was to include support workers who worked directly at the frontline (not higher up managers). Thus, a hurdle question sought experience of working directly with children “within the last 12 months.” As data collection occurred in the first half of 2021, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic had restricted some frontline workers from doing direct client work for some time, so it is likely that some of the 40 participants who began the survey but were disqualified by hurdle questions may have been false positives. Weak Internet connections in areas such as La Guajira and the Amazon resulted into difficulties in administering and completing the survey. Connection issues also extended dramatically the time to complete the survey for some respondents, rather than 30 minutes, some reported it had taken them as much as 90 minutes or more to complete.

For some government respondents working from the office at the time, an additional challenge was gaining access to the survey online platform as their work computers blocked access to the website.

Finally, during the data collection period, widespread national protests were occurring and some potential respondents lost their employment. Rescheduling appointments was necessary throughout this time to meet the sample requirements.

FINDINGS



Photo by Yaopey Yong

The perspectives of the young people who had direct experiences of harm from child sexual exploitation and abuse online are the primary data used to structure this report. Quantitative and qualitative data from the surveyed frontline support workers is then integrated amongst their perspectives to enhance a comprehensive picture of the on-the-ground situation for preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Colombia. Public perceptions and beliefs, the knowledge and practices of workers, availability and quality of reporting mechanisms and the resource levels of support services are all presented. The report concludes with recommendations for action – these stem primarily from what the young people told us but are expanded in places with other data and analysis from the project partners.

Trends in child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Colombia

Gender

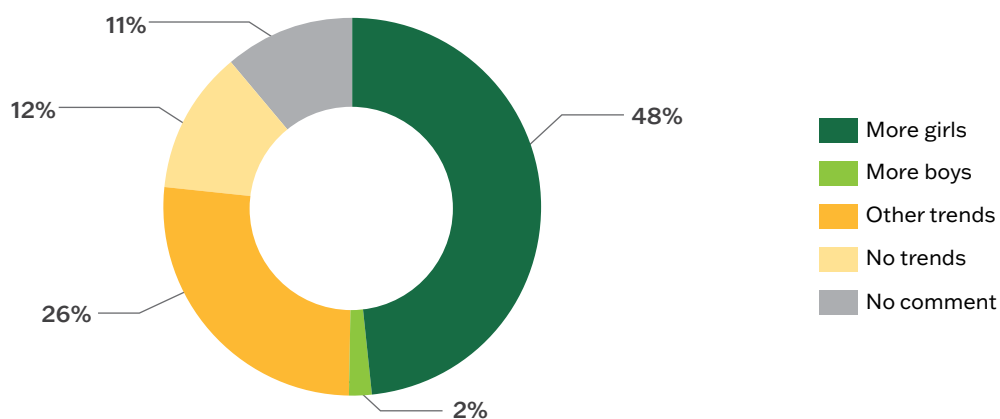
The survey data suggest that there is a higher proportion of girls than boys utilising formal reporting mechanisms and accessing support services in Colombia. In an open question, participants were asked if they thought there were trends related to gender and sexual exploitation (generally and online). Figure 1 shows that almost a half (48%) indicated that they perceived more girls than boys were affected:

“The most reported cases have to do with the females.”⁹

A number of respondents assumed that the low access of support services by boys would probably be because girls are overwhelmingly seen as more at risk in the country – for a full range of concerns, but also for sexual exploitation. One of them commented that:

“The tendency is for the majority of girls to be the most vulnerable to the offenders.”

Figure 1: Gender trends identified by frontline workers (generally and online).



9. Please note that text in green boxes refers to quotes from the young survivors who took part in the conversations. Text in purple boxes refers to the qualitative input shared by frontline workers who completed the survey.

However, it seems that despite the perception that girls are more at risk, boys too are clearly seeking assistance for a range of things, including for child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Indeed, survey data also show that most of the frontline workers had provided some support for boys. Eighty-three percent of the respondents (n=74) said that they had boys among their caseloads and of these, 62 workers (84%) said that they had supported boys for sexual exploitation and abuse online. This was actually quite similar to the participants who had provide support to girls (87%, n=77) and most (n=70) had supported girls related to online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. In line with global research,¹⁰ these numbers confirm that while perspectives might be boys are less impacted, caseloads suggest more boys than is commonly thought are impacted.

On top of that, there were some interesting departures from expectations in the Colombia data. A number of respondents said that “[...] non-binary people are identified” within the support services. They also mentioned that

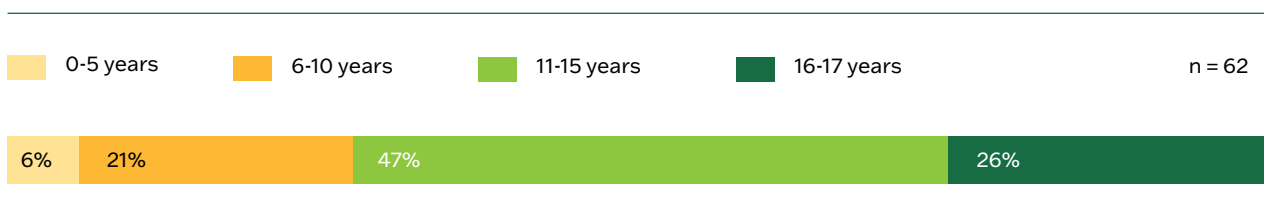
“[...] there are confusions on sexual orientation in many of the children and adolescents served” and that “it is harder for the LGTBTQIA+ population to recognise their vulnerability [to sexual exploitation and abuse].”

These data confirm other research indicating that young people with diverse sexual and gender identities are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.¹¹ In some cases, their diverse status may contribute to risks. Indeed, in the conversations, one young man who identifies himself as gay said that the feeling of loneliness led him into risky situations. He was manipulated by older men and got involved in relationships that he could not identify as abusive due to the need to reaffirm his sexual identity.

Age

The 62 frontline workers who had worked with boys for online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, reported that nearly half (47%) were targeted between the ages of 11-15 years old. The five young men who took part in the conversations were at a similar age to this majority when they were abused (all were between 13 and 17).

Figure 2: Age of boys who had experienced online sexual exploitation.

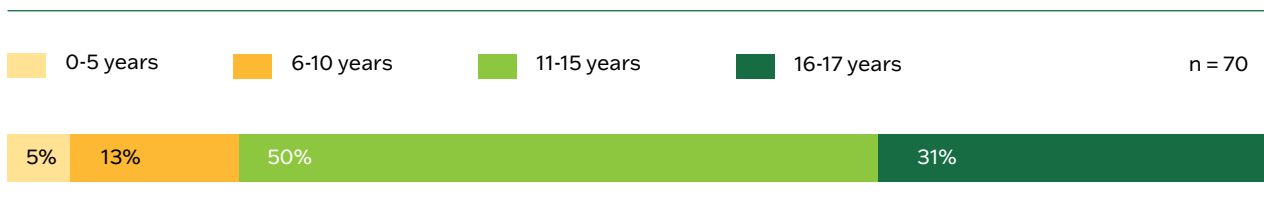


10. ECPAT International. (2021). [Global Boys Initiative: A global review of existing literature on the sexual exploitation of boys](#). ECPAT International.

11. See e.g. ECPAT International. (2021). [Global Boys Initiative: Thailand Report](#). ECPAT International.

Similarly, the 70 frontline workers who had supported girls reported that they tended to be targeted at a similar age, with 50% subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online between 11 and 15.

Figure 3: Age of girls who had experienced online sexual exploitation.



However, the data showed that a greater proportion of the impacted boys were younger. Eighteen percent of the reported cases involving girls involved children under the age of eleven years old, compared with 27% of the cases involving boys. As one worker said, while violence against girls is mostly based on gender, age is what makes boys more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse.

“Yes, there are more women and girls victimised with sexual exploitation; by saying this, I don’t mean to say that there are no cases with boys or men; however, these are evidenced in relation to age, that is, there are more boys compared to adult men.”

Reporting mechanisms

Awareness

Conversations with the young survivors generally illustrated little awareness of the formal reporting mechanisms that are available. During the conversations, all the young people said that they had not received information about where to look for help when they were subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse.

“There is no information on how to report. The girls and boys don’t report, it scares them, because of the process they are going to face [...] One must have support in order to report, someone to accompany the survivor. Family support and psychological help are needed.”

(VoS-COL-06)

They also demonstrated fear of facing the bureaucratic processes often involved in formal reporting mechanisms. Five of the nine young people spoken to had disclosed sexual exploitation to school or community members who, at the time, were in charge of promoting awareness campaigns about this form of violence. The young people said that, once they reached out, these adults not only demonstrated empathy but also acted to end ongoing situations of exploitation and abuse. Non-judgemental attitudes, careful and genuine listening, persistence, patience and friendly treatment

were some of the characteristics mentioned by the young people when describing those who received their disclosures. One young woman said that her family members told her:

“Always count on us, here we will be a family waiting for you so that you can recover.”
(VoS-COL-09)

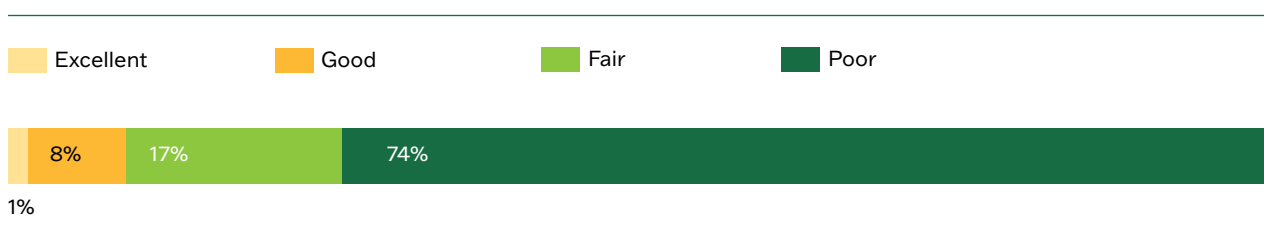
The family and community members acted as mediators between the children and the formal reporting mechanisms, so they could gain access to the support they needed.

Unfortunately, a sense that these issues were well understood was not the rule within the young people’s communities. In fact, in the conversations the young people pointed out the needs to raise awareness and promote knowledge on how to disclose.

“Because I can tell you, if a case happens in the neighbourhood, they choose violence, because they don’t know what else to do. If they call the police, the police in some cases do almost nothing, people make violence justice by their own hands.”
(VoS-COL-05)

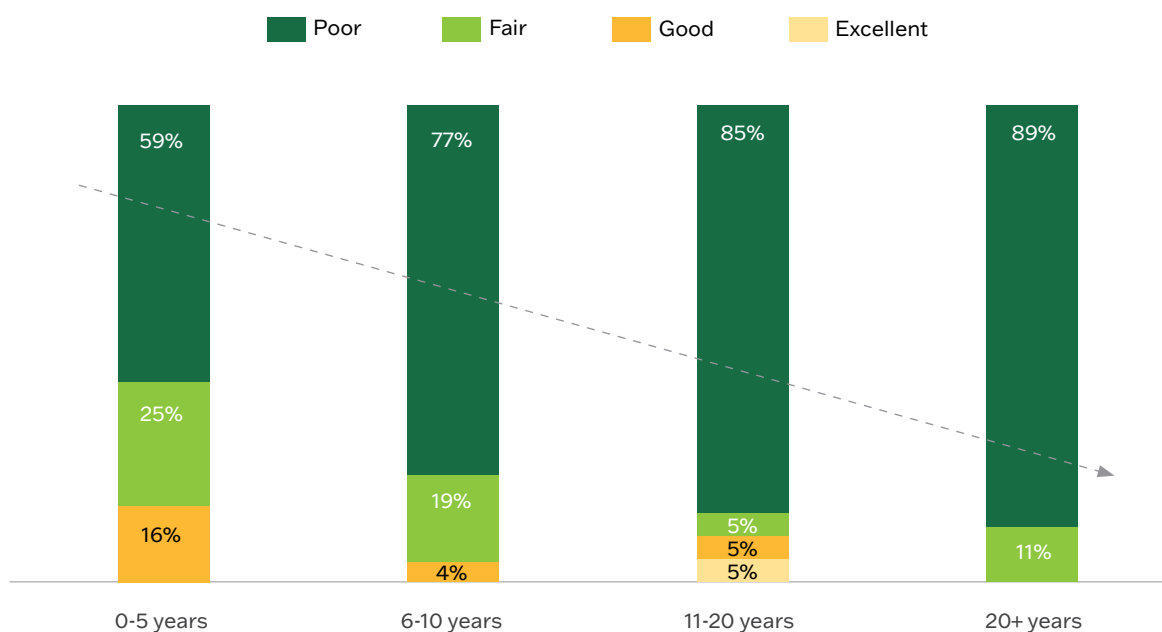
The lack of general public awareness was reiterated by the frontline workers who participated in the survey. When asked about the level of public awareness regarding online forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia, the majority (74%, n=66) considered it “poor”. A smaller fraction of the respondents answered that it was either “fair” (17%, n=15) or “good” (8%, n=7), while only one person (1%) considered it “excellent”. Although this question was not specifically related to the awareness of reporting mechanisms, the fact that most of the frontline workers who responded to the survey believed that there is little awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse online in the first place confirms what survivors explained – that there is likely to be very little knowledge on how to report if it occurs.

Figure 4: Level of public awareness of online child exploitation and abuse, according to the surveyed frontline workers.



An interesting finding was that respondents with more years of work experience were particularly negative about public awareness, as shown in Figure 5 below. This could be an indication that their perceptions about how informed is the society changes over time, as they gain more experience in the field.

Figure 5: Level of public awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse online, according to the surveyed frontline workers by years of experience.



A number of surveyed frontline workers proposed that more education and training is needed in order to increase public awareness in Colombia:

“From the training academy of the universities, there should be a chair covering awareness in this dimension of protection towards children and adolescents.”

In fact, this was a recurrent topic on survey qualitative responses as well as in the conversations. Both sources of data strongly suggest the need for knowledge and skills development amongst frontline support workers on how to identify and work with online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse:

“The challenges in terms of care is training for public servants and identification of cases to ensure they do not get confused with other types of violence. Having the support of reporting portals creates awareness among the police and state agencies to address these problems.”

Another frontline worker said that:

“It is about the lack of knowledge about the crimes classified as sexual violence; it is important to provide support from prevention in order to gradually mitigate cases of sexual violence in a joint manner; this includes the family, the state and the society.”

In the conversations the young people consistently mentioned the need to promote information and prevention on topics related to the use of digital environments. A number of them believe that information about it is not disseminated widely and, as a consequence, it does not reach those who are most at risk of online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

“Knowing about cybercrimes - that would have made me stop a bit and I would have realized that what was happening to me was that I was being the victim of a crime. For us as young people it is important to recognise the strategies that these people use to manipulate and deceive and thus achieve to identify and stop them. Not knowing how they act gives them an advantage to be able to deceive us.”

(VoS-COL-05)

Some young people specifically raised the need to inform parents and adult family members so they become able to educate their children about the risks involved in the use of the Internet. According to one young person, the usage of mobile phones and particularly of social media should be monitored by caregivers, who are the utmost responsible for children’s safety online.

“Parents give their children access to a cell phone to entertain themselves and they use it for other things; it’s a way for exploiters to get closer. Parents need to pay more attention and have more communication with their children. They need to teach them the risks of communicating with strangers; When creating an account on Facebook, how to use it and how to be careful (protect themselves) with social networks.”

(VoS-COL-06)

One young person said that promoting information about this type of violence is useful not only to alert people of the risks, but also to increase the reports:

“The mayor’s office and the government institutions and social organisations must create digital programmes or permanent institutional radio or television spaces where they warn about the risks. More information [means] more cases reported. Community leaders need to be trained to help protecting children. They can identify victims, facilitate victims’ access to institutions.”

(VoS-COL-03)

Barriers to disclosure

Seeking help may be a challenge due to the stigma and judgments surrounding reporting mechanisms and support services. Unfortunately, this stigma can come from those who were supposed to protect and support children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. Fear of being recognised, judged and stigmatised were main barriers to disclosure that came up in the conversations with young people. They described situations where they were blamed by frontline support workers while reporting:

“A cousin sought help for me and I went to the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare. A psychologist who was there offended me and told me that I was the only one to blame for what had happened to me. I started crying, I felt hatred for her. How is it possible that you go to seek help and she tells you: ‘it’s your fault?’, That’s unethical.”

(VoS-COL-04)

Fear of re-victimisation and distrust of formal reporting mechanisms were also mentioned by the young people as barriers to disclosure. They mentioned situations in which they were forced to repeat their statements due to the high turnover of frontline workers, and consistently referred to fears of their abuse and/or exploitation being reduced to a ‘scandal’ as one of the reasons that led them to think:

“it’s better if I don’t report.”

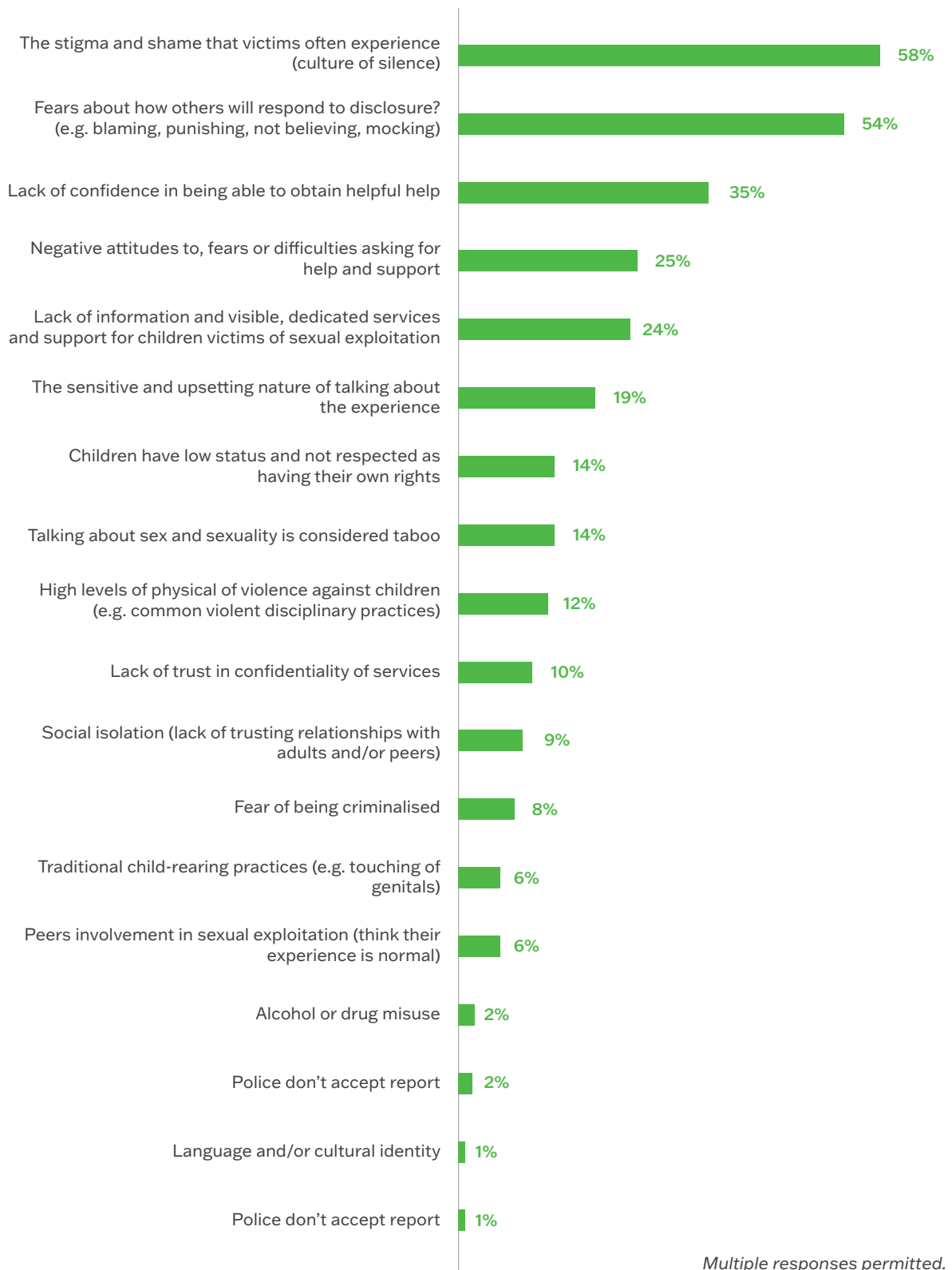
(VoS-COL-01)

“The fear of the report has to do with the fear of scandal. The relevant agencies (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, Police, Courts) need to have more bonding with the victims, more support; victims don’t easily access services; they aren’t well cared for. Officials don’t have empathy, they don’t understand the consequences of violence, they re-victimise them. They lack training. There is no psychological support for girls and boys to come and report.”

(VoS-COL-10)

The barriers to disclosure were also explored in the survey with frontline workers, as indicated in Figure 6. The respondents were presented with a list of 18 factors that could potentially limit children’s disclosure of online sexual exploitation and abuse. By far, the two most commonly selected barriers to reporting were related to a pervasive culture of silence (“the stigma and shame that victims often experience”) at 58% (n=52), and to “fears about how others will respond to disclosure”, (54%, n=48). These accounts confirm the fears of anticipated shame and stigma associated with sexual exploitation and abuse. The attitudes and responses of those people charged with receiving these disclosures may have enormous impacts on children.

Figure 6: Factors that potentially limit children's disclosure.



In the conversations, the young people also mentioned that they feared being threatened and blackmailed by the offenders. One young woman said that over time, children subjected to online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse

“Are trapped in fear of harming their families.”

(VoS-COL-07)

She said that although she recognised the situation of sexual exploitation and abuse and wanted to escape, she could not disclose because the offender threatened her and her family.

Support services

It is essential to understand the perceived quality, usefulness and accessibility of support services related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online. This section presents some insights on these elements, followed by a more detailed overview of the different types of support services provided in Colombia, taking into account both the experiences of young survivors within these services as well as the views of frontline workers providing them.

Usefulness, quality, availability and awareness of support services

All of the young people who engaged in the conversations accessed support services from Fundación Renacer and Colombian Institute of Family Welfare in the city of Cartagena. They said that, once they knew about and accessed the services, the availability of support was very useful for them to recover. One young man said that the psychological support was what helped him the most:

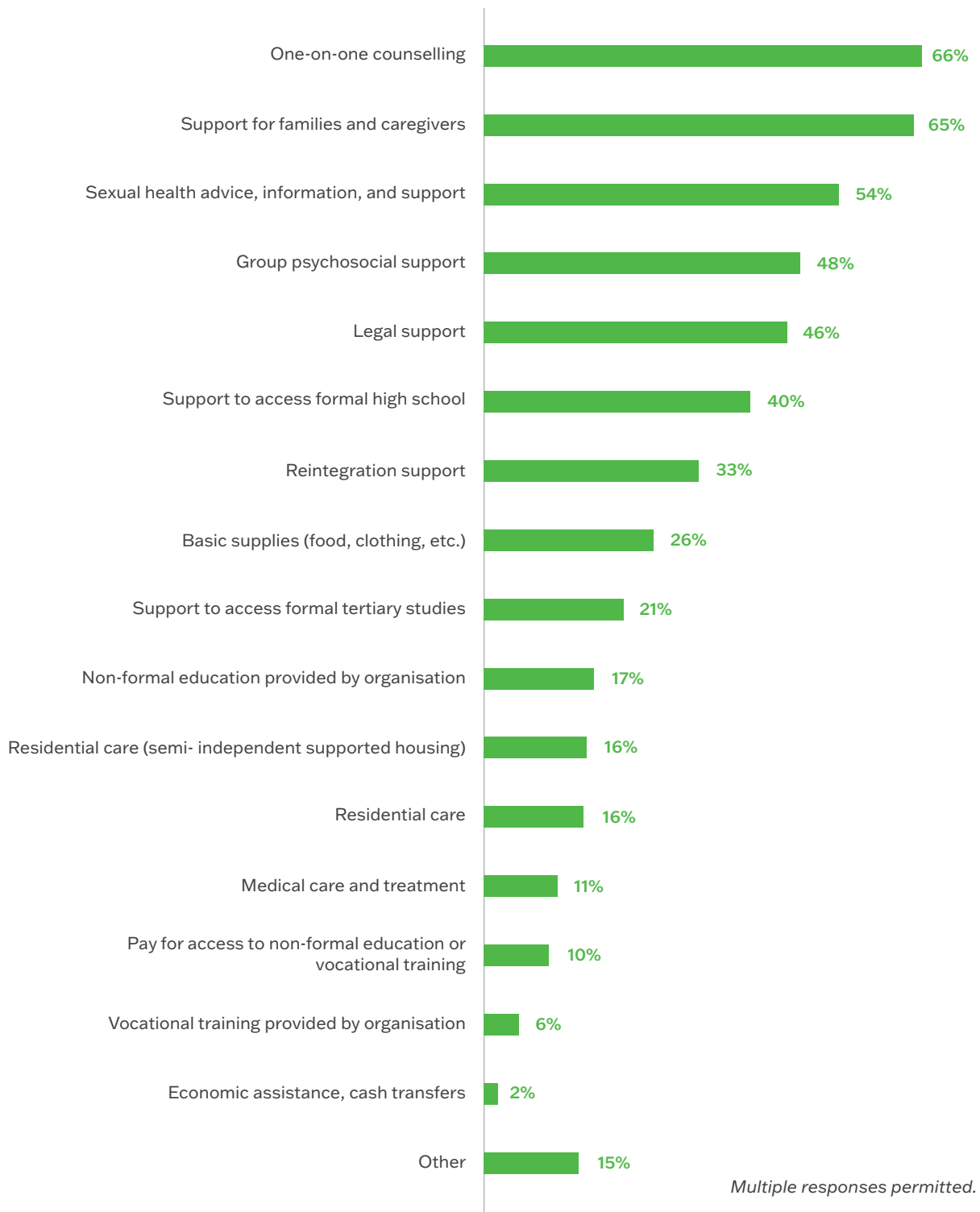
“I came to Renacer through a friend. At first, I didn’t want to come; but I wanted to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The attention was excellent. What helped me the most as a person was the therapeutic part, [learn] how to become a better person, how to love yourself, how to value yourself.”

(VoS-COL-03)

As shown in Figure 7, coincidentally, psychological support was one of the most common services provided by the frontline workers. When asked about the different types of direct support services provided by their organisations to children who have experienced sexual exploitation, two-thirds (66%, n=59) reported offering one-on-one counselling. The other most common service provided was support for families and caregivers (65%, n=58). Describing the type of service provided, one surveyed frontline worker said:

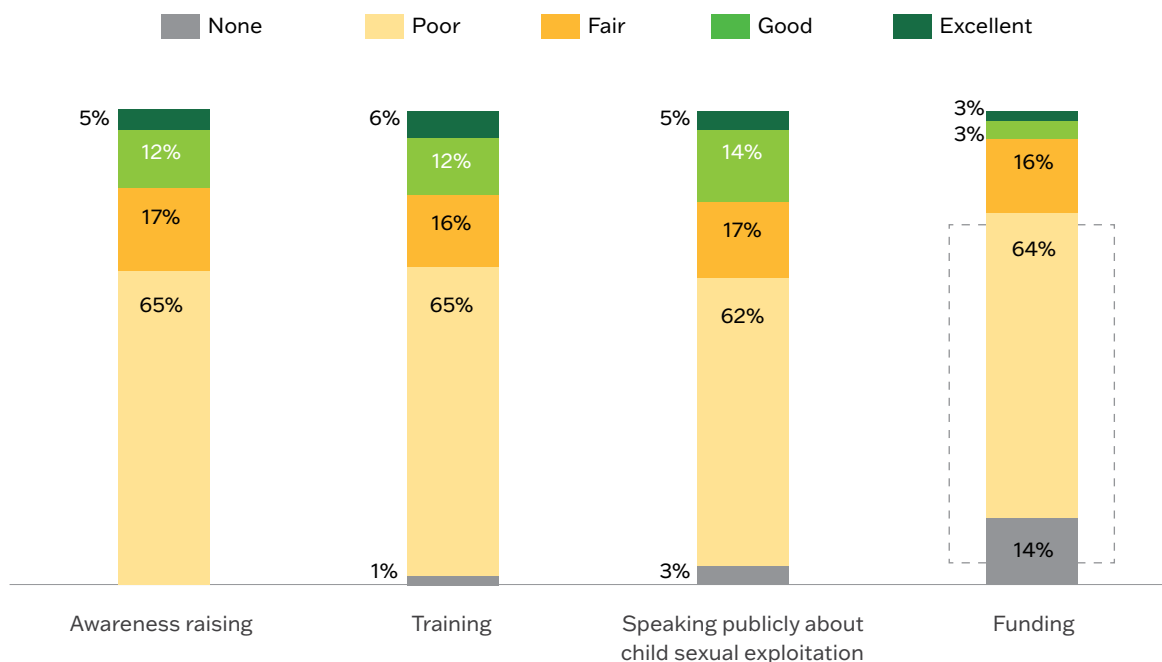
“Counselling is provided; they are later taken to a medical centre, followed by the report to the authorities; rights will be restored, and finally, family members are accompanied to file a complaint with the nation’s attorney general.”

Figure 7: Direct support to children who had experienced sexual exploitation provided by the organisation.



When asked about the quality of government activities to address child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Colombia, frontline workers provided some criticisms, particularly of government financial support. Most of the respondents (78%, n=58) rated the quality of government funding on this topic as either “poor” or non-existent.

Figure 8: Frontline workers’ views on the quality of government activities.



The frontline workers also expressed dissatisfaction with both the availability and quality of medical, psychological, legal and reintegration services for children who have experienced online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia. Responses on medical and psychological services were more positive, with around 26-32% of frontline workers rating the availability and quality of these services as either “good” or “excellent”. However, all four sets of services were rated as “poor” in terms of availability and quality by between 38%-56% of frontline workers, suggesting a broad need for improvement. One of them commented:

“I think there is a long way to go before the quality to respond to the needs of the victims is achieved, together with the proper handling of the information.”

Types of support services

Psychological support

As previously mentioned in this report, psychological support was very much appreciated by the young people who engaged in the conversations. All of them recognised this type of support as key to helping them overcome the impacts of online sexual exploitation and abuse. In the conversations, the young people expressed appreciation and emphasised the importance of these services for survivors in terms of rehabilitation and reintegration. Referring to his psychologist, one young man said:

“She arrived and brightened my life.”

(VoS-COL-07)

They mentioned personal growth, self-acceptance and self-knowledge as the main accomplishments after going through psychological assistance.

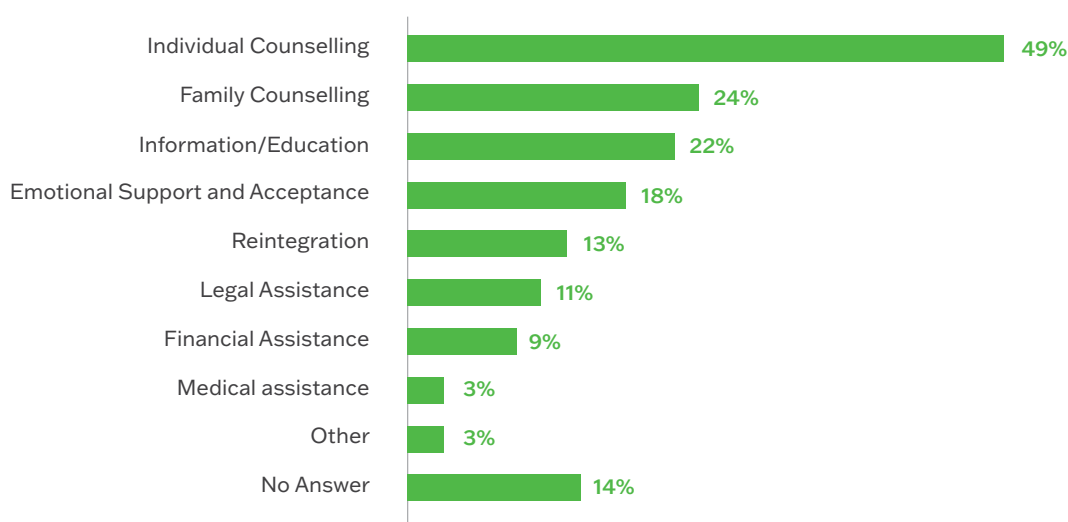
“She [the psychologist] treated me like a human being, she made me understand that I was important, she showed me the things I had to overcome, she touched my heart. We made a good connection, it helped me to tell my mother that I was homosexual, it helped me to be free.”

(VoS-COL-04)

Indeed, surveyed frontline workers said that children who experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse most commonly identified counselling among their biggest needs (49%, n=45). A respondent elaborated that children need

“Psychological assistance - Protective environment where children and adolescents feel safe from their offender.”

Figure 9: Biggest needs that children say that they have, according to frontline workers.



Psychological support was also considered essential by the frontline workers who responded to the survey. In the hypothetical scenarios, counselling/psychotherapy was frequently noted. For example, providing qualitative input on one of the scenarios,¹² a worker said that

“A therapy process would have to be carried out with the adolescent so that she can understand that she was sexually exploited online, taking into account that they used this medium to obtain the material as well as a psychosocial process that allows the adolescent to be in a safe space.”

In Colombia, it was really encouraging to see that in some cases, family members also had access to psychological support. In the conversations, one young woman said that in a family therapy session she could tell her mother about the sexual exploitation that she had been subjected to. Another one mentioned that all members of her support network – including mother, father, siblings and aunt – participated in psychotherapy sessions, which she considered essential for her recovering process as they created a caring and trusting relationship:

“They care about me, but they give me freedom, I can go out alone; they trust me.”
(VoS-COL-17)

A young man mentioned that the psychological support that he and his family received helped them to accept his sexual orientation and understand his situation. Describing the impact of the family therapeutic process, he said:

“Thanks to that, I am who I am.”
(VoS-COL-10)

Commenting about a situation where the family members were not involved, one young person mentioned feeling lonely and, once their father was included in the sessions the situation became better. However, some young people felt that family members could be better supported and monitored, particularly when they lived in other cities or were not motivated to participate in the therapeutic process.

“My family wasn’t there at the beginning, nobody found out. I had no one, I was on the street. Later my father got involved thanks to the intervention of social workers. They improved many things. The involvement of the family changed a lot; however, the families lacked more follow-up after discharge; a telephone call isn’t sufficient.”
(VoS-COL-03)

12. Scenario question: *Bernard, who lives in Australia, pays a 16-year-old in Colombia, Ana, to undress while they are on a video call. Do you believe that Ana is a victim of online child sexual exploitation or abuse? [...] What practical steps would you take if you were the service provider supporting 16-year-old Ana?*

The psychological support services secured the young people's emotional and psychological state in the aftermath of the online sexual exploitation and abuse experiences and were considered essential for their recovery process. It is worth noting, however, that the young people also noted that psychological services are not sufficiently accessible and available to all children who have gone through the experience of online sexual exploitation and abuse:

“There were a lot of children and very few psychologists; more therapy which is more continuous, intense and frequent was needed. A single psychologist had to attend many children. This [having more psychologists] would have helped them to overcome their problems more quickly.”

(VoS-COL-10)

Educational and pedagogical support

When asked what were the biggest problems shared to them by children who experienced sexual exploitation and abuse online, most of the surveyed frontline workers mentioned fear, trauma and anxiety (25%, n=23), followed by social isolation/marginalisation (25%, n=23) and lack of assistance/information/services (18%, n=19). Providing qualitative inputs to the survey about social isolation, one frontline worker commented that it is

“Not easy to go back to school.”

Indeed, this was the case for a number of young people who engaged in the conversations who lost interest in studies after facing such trauma. Some young people mentioned in the conversations that as part of the psychological support that they accessed, they were encouraged to go back to school and to improve their academic performance.

“If they prepare our personal growth, we have a solid basis to go out into the world later on [...] Personally I want to finish school, study interior design or psychology.”

(VoS-COL-10)

Emphasising the importance of the personal growth obtained in her recovery process, one young woman said:

“Apart from studies and professional training, first you have to be a person”

(VoS-COL-03)

The young people highlighted in the conversations the need to strengthen sexual education in schools. One of them described the type of sexual education that she had at school as only focused on avoiding pregnancy, with no mention to the risks involved in the use of the Internet or how to identify a situation of sexual exploitation and abuse.

“Sexuality is not discussed in the family, between parents and their children, at school, with teachers. If sexuality was discussed more frequently, children would not see it as sin, as bad thing and they would not be deceived so easily.”

(VoS-COL-04)

The frontline workers’ survey included a hypothetical scenario involving educational institutions.¹³ A quarter of the frontline workers (26%, n=24) expressed that the school should be informed whenever a child is subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. When asked about the practical steps that should be taken to deal with such situations, one of the respondents answered:

“Psychosocial approach to obtain data on the exploitation situation; report to directors of the Institution; carry out an approach with the family; activate legal channels; awareness so that Carmen is recognised as a victim and establish the relevance those practices.”

The import role that schools could play in preventing child sexual exploitation and abuse online was mentioned in the conversations. One young woman proposed that educational spaces could organise peer support trained by specialised psychologists:

“The school can play an important role; psychologists can train students as peer support. Older students can train children; among young people they understand each other more, but they must be supervised by someone.”

(VoS-COL-01)

Unfortunately, school teachers and the pedagogical staff were mentioned as not supportive of or cooperative with children in their experiences. One young woman told us that she used to go to school to escape from situations of violence within her family, but no one at school was attentive to the changes in her behaviour at the time. She did not know the school psychologist and did not have anyone to talk. School psychologists are often the first point of call for young people and can facilitate referral to other services. Additionally, the education system should work as a protection mechanism for children, enabling a sense of belonging and stability.¹⁴ Without easy access to these professionals, gaining entry to the support structures can be difficult, particularly as children simply do not know how and where to start.

13. Scenario question: *Carmen is a 17-year-old student. Carmen has struggled to make good grades this year and is worried that Juan, a teacher who is a close family friend, will tell Carmen’s dad. Carmen offers to send Juan naked pictures if he promises not to talk to the family. Do you think that Carmen is a victim of online child sexual exploitation or abuse?*

14. London Metropolitan University. (2017). [Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation: Professionals in school settings](#). 5.

Legal support

Even though all nine young people who engaged in the conversations had received legal support, only three mentioned this type of assistance. In all these three cases, the young people said that the legal support helped them to understand that they had been subjected to a form of sexual exploitation and abuse. For instance, one young woman said that the legal support that she received helped her to feel relieved and to recognise herself as a victim, after a long time of self-blaming and self-harming behaviour. In another situation, a young man considered that the police and prosecutors acted diligently, initiating the process of restoration of his rights and prosecuting the offenders, who were arrested for these crimes.

Unfortunately, not all the experiences involving legal support were positive. One young man mentioned that although he did have access to this type of support, he felt left in the dark about the process, as those providing legal services did not communicate often with him or his family.

As shown earlier in this report, in Figure 7, 46% (n=41) of the surveyed frontline workers reported that their organisations offer legal support for children who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse.

Legal assistance was among the very first steps that should be taken, according to the surveyed frontline workers, in all the scenario-based questions, which involved cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse online. When asked about the practical steps to take as service providers to help a fictitious female adolescent subjected to live streaming of child sexual abuse,¹⁵ legal action was raised by 60% of the surveyed frontline workers (n=51). Describing the necessary steps, one respondent listed:

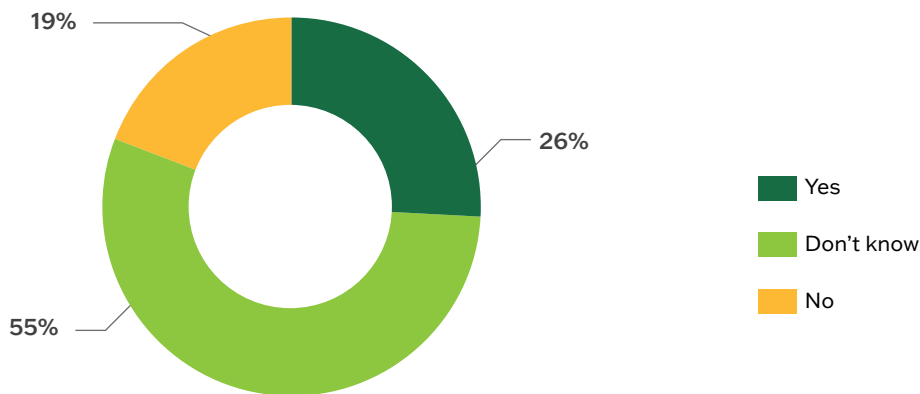
“Immediate activation of the health channels; Initial care; Guidance to the family on legal actions (complaint) and process for the restoration of rights; Referral to psychotherapeutic care.”

15. Scenario question: *Bernard, who lives in Australia, pays a 16-year-old in Colombia, Ana, to undress while they are on a video call. Do you believe that Ana is a victim of online child sexual exploitation or abuse?*

Financial support

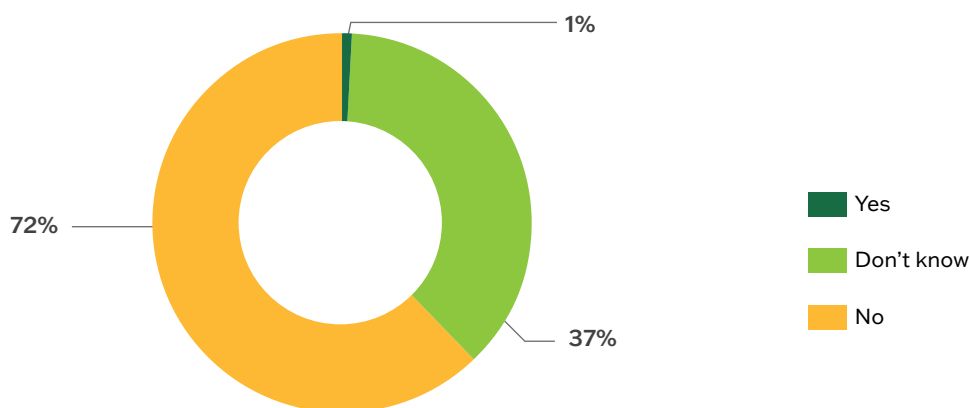
Frontline workers were asked whether child victims of online sexual exploitation and abuse have the possibility to seek formal financial compensation via civil or criminal court proceedings, whether from convicted perpetrators or country-managed funds. More than a half of the respondents (55%, n=49) indicated that they did not know the answer, while 26% (n=23) responded positively. In Colombia, article 11 of the Code of Penal Procedure states that all victims of any crime, once the conviction is final, have the right to receive compensation for the crime suffered.¹⁶

Figure 10: Do child victims of online child sexual exploitation or abuse have the possibility to seek formal financial compensation via civil or criminal court proceedings from convicted perpetrators or country-managed funds?



When asked in the survey if they know of any children who had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse and had received compensation for the crimes they suffered in Colombia, the majority of surveyed frontline workers either indicated that they did not (62%, n=55), or that they didn't know how to answer the question (37%, n=33).

Figure 11: Based on your work experience, do you know if any child subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse have received compensation for the crimes they suffered in Colombia?



The young people who engaged in the conversations did not talk about benefiting or not from financial compensation.

16. Government of Colombia. (2004). Code of Penal Procedure. Law 906 of 2004. Article 11.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Photo by Flavia Carpio

The recommendations presented below are primarily drawn from the conversations with the young people who took part in the conversations. While the survey with frontline workers raised important issues and supported the analysis, this report seeks to privilege the voices and perspectives of survivors. Additional clarification and explanations from the analyses are provided in places from the project partners contributed during the analysis and write-up stage.

Recommendations on reporting mechanisms

1. Promote information and awareness about risks in the online environment related to sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as about reporting mechanisms and available support services when harm occurs.

It is necessary to

“Reach the communities with the message of prevention, recognition of these crimes and promote reporting, allowing more and more people to learn about the issue, commit themselves and support the defence of children’s rights and the report of the offenders.”

(VoS-COL-02)

This recommendation was supported by the surveyed frontline workers. When provided the opportunity to share any last thoughts at the end of the survey, almost a half (45%, n=40) emphasised the lack of general public awareness related to this topic as a major issue in Colombia. One of them said that:

“It is about the lack of knowledge about the crimes classified as sexual violence; it is important to provide support from prevention in order to gradually mitigate cases of sexual violence in a joint manner; this includes the family, the state and the society.”

2. Provide educational programmes for communities and family members about prevention of online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

For all of the young people who engaged in the conversations, the family plays an important role both in the prevention and protection of children. Therefore, it is crucial that family members have the capacity to educate children about the risks of Internet usage. It is also important that they create spaces of dialogue where children feel confident to disclose, and know how to guide children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse in the process of reporting.

“Today it’s easier for the problem to arise because parents ignore the role of educating their children; they don’t see the dangers on social media.”

(VoS-COL-01)

The surveyed frontline workers also mentioned family members need to be better informed in order to prevent such crimes:

“To a large extent, crimes related to technological means give merit to the lack of knowledge from the legal, assistance, and guidance perspective, and the support that the family provides and to prevent children from becoming network victims.”

3. Improve the availability and dissemination of reporting mechanisms, creating child-friendly tools and making use of digital methods.

The reporting mechanisms should be as accessible as possible and available in easy-to-use online formats.

“Information must be increased, the permanent dissemination of digital channels or complaints. Create an easily accessible chat to report or make an application.”

(VoS-COL-10)

In order to create these resources, one frontline worker recommended consulting children to make sure that their needs are taken into account.

“I believe that victims should be heard. Many formulations are made based on the thoughts of some people, without considering the needs of the victims. Resources for the care of children and adolescents are scarce and governments are resorting to stringer campaigns to position themselves politically, and to ensure resources reach the childhood.”

4. Impose legal duties on and promote collaboration with Internet service providers and social media companies.

These requirements ensure that providers will promptly comply with law enforcement requests for takedown of child sexual abuse material as well as to comply promptly with law enforcement requests for information. This will assist investigations into crimes and limit the wide distribution of child sexual abuse material.

In the conversations, young people said that social networks and other digital media do not display any prevention suggestions. According to the young people, they also do not respond to complaints other than sometimes blocking content. They therefore recommend that Internet providers should have visible information on the risks associated to Internet usage.

Recommendations on support services

5. Better promote the availability of a full range of specialised support services for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Any child who goes through such an experience should have access to specialists who can help them. These professionals should be specialised and know the specifics of these cases.

“The care programmes which exist are insufficient, there is a need for more, because there are many children who come to services for help and information, and they don’t know how to talk and who to tell. Care centres should be developed in the most vulnerable sectors.”

(VoS-COL-09)

Lack of specialised support services was also highlighted by one surveyed frontline worker:

“One of the challenges that children and adolescents, victims of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation face is the late psychology support from the health sector due to the poor quality provided by this service and they do not have a professional hired to do so.”

6. Commit financial resources to provide training and capacity building opportunities to law enforcement officers and legal professionals on topics related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Both the young people who engaged in the conversations and the frontline workers who responded to the survey spoke about the need to improve the capacities of service providers.

“Officials don’t have empathy, they don’t understand the consequences of violence, they re-victimise. They lack training.”

(VoS-COL-10)

A surveyed frontline worker emphasised the limited trained professionals:

“The challenges in terms of care is training for public servants and identification of cases to ensure they do not get confused with other types of violence. Having the support of the pages for the reporting purposes creates awareness among the police and state agencies to address these problems.”

7. Improve the investigation and prosecution of online sexual crimes against children.

Law enforcement should improve approaches to conducting investigations of online forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Improvements are needed to ensure offenders are brought to justice and that those who have been subjected to such crimes are able to access compensation and other legal remedies. This would also encourage other children to report sexual abuse and exploitation.

“I believe that for this crime, despite the increased number of victims, the actions implemented are insufficient; the victims are unknown; there is lack of commitment of parents regarding prevention; there is lack of reaction of legal entities for the prosecution of the offenders and this last point involves a series of terrible consequences for the victims, on how much the population believes in the importance of the complaint and increases the probability of having new victims.”



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