



Online Sexual Violence Against Adolescents in Brazil

**Mapping Vulnerability
Factors and Risk Dynamics**



Summary

Introduction	06
Introduction	07
Research Methodology	11
PART I: When the Data reveal the scenario (2024)	13
PART II: What the Numbers Don't capture (2024–2025)	16
PART III: Where the Problem fully reveals itself (2025–2026)	22
Research Findings — PART III: Interviews with perpetrators and survivors	26
Integrated Analytical Conclusion: a comparative analysis of the findings	46
When Protection Fails at predictable moments	48
When exposure shapes perceptions and behaviors	50
Conclusion	52
References	56
Technical Details	58

Introduction

ChildFund is a civil society organization dedicated to promoting and defending the rights of children, adolescents, and their families, with the goal of expanding opportunities, strengthening potential, and reducing vulnerabilities and social deprivation. It operates directly in 23 countries, with its reach extending to more than 60 through its global network of partnerships.

Our mission is to protect the interests, rights, and well-being of children, adolescents, youth, and adults in vulnerable situations. ChildFund believes that all people—especially children and adolescents—have the right to be protected from all forms of threats to their physical, psychological, and moral integrity, as well as from neglect and exploitation.

ChildFund's global advocacy cause is the prevention of violence against children and adolescents in digital environments, especially child sexual abuse and exploitation.

As more children access the internet and spend more time online without adult supervision, the number of reports of online sexual abuse and exploitation is skyrocketing. The online sexual exploitation and abuse of children—or the online production and publication of images depicting the sexual abuse and exploitation of children—is one of the fastest-growing crimes in the world, according to INTERPOL.

The figures underscore the urgency of preventive measures and awareness-raising efforts to protect children from online violence. In this regard, ChildFund Brazil, in line with its global strategy, presents through this study previously unpublished information on the dangers of the online world for children and adolescents, contributing to the development of more effective preventive and intervention measures.

Mauricio Cunha

Country Director



Introduction

When Risk Takes on New Forms

Online sexual violence against adolescents is emerging today as one of the most complex forms of violence. It is a phenomenon that is growing as digital life expands and that requires responses that keep pace with its evolution.

Wider access to the internet, constant presence in digital environments, and the intensification of technology-mediated interactions create significant opportunities for development. But at the same time, they expose children and adolescents to risks that are increasingly subtle, dynamic, and difficult to detect.

Understanding these dynamics—which involve individual, family, social, technological, and cultural factors—is an essential step toward addressing the problem. This is especially true in the Brazilian context, marked by regional inequalities, disparities in access, and structural gaps in protection.

A New Milestone and New Challenges

This debate takes on even greater relevance following the passage of Law No. 15,211/2025, known as the Digital Statute for Children and Adolescents (ECA DIGITAL), which has been in effect since March 2026.

The new legislation marks an important milestone by updating the system of rights protections to reflect the digital reality. Among the measures established, the following stand out:

- stricter age verification mechanisms;
- strengthened parental supervision;
- prompt removal of illegal content;
- more restrictive default security settings.

By seeking to align protections from the physical world with those in the digital environment, the Digital ECA expands the ability to prevent violations, hold perpetrators accountable, and drive structural changes in how platforms operate.

But there is one key point: no legislation acts alone.

Digital protection requires ongoing coordination among the government, technology companies, families, civil society organizations, and academia.

What We Still Need to Achieve

Despite the progress made, structural challenges persist that limit the effectiveness of these efforts.

The absence of continuous, comparable national systems for collecting data on online risks and harm prevents accurate assessments. Without consistent data:

- patterns are not identified;
- trends go unnoticed;
- the most vulnerable populations remain invisible.

This gap weakens public policies, reduces investments, and limits the ability to advocate for and prioritize the issue.

There is yet another significant silence: that of children and adolescents themselves.

Historically, their voices have been largely excluded from policy-making, which undermines a true understanding of their lived experiences and creates a disconnect between solutions and concrete needs.

Listen to understand. Understand to protect.

It was against this backdrop that ChildFund conducted a comprehensive national survey, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to deepen understanding of online sexual violence in the country.

In the first phase, conducted in 2024, nearly 9,000 adolescents from all regions of Brazil were interviewed.

More than just numbers, this listening process provided access to perceptions, experiences, and meanings that are often missing from traditional studies.

Subsequently, focus groups delved deeper into these findings, revealing how adolescents perceive risks, cope with situations of vulnerability, and develop self-protection strategies in the digital environment.

Looking at the Phenomenon

To help advance in understanding of the problem, the study incorporated a first-of-its-kind step in Brazil: interviews with perpetrators and survivors of online sexual violence.





Conducted with ethical rigor, institutional support, and collaboration from experts, this approach allowed for the exploration of rarely examined dimensions, such as:

- motivations;
- contexts;
- recruitment dynamics;
- behavioral patterns;

By bringing together different perspectives—from adolescents, experts, survivors, and perpetrators—the research builds a 360-degree view of the phenomenon.

This perspective is essential for identifying vulnerabilities, understanding risk mechanisms, and guiding more effective prevention strategies.

Regarding the choice of terms

Throughout this document, the terms “perpetrators of sexual violence” and “survivors” are used for their ethical consistency and alignment with international literature.

The choice of “perpetrators” reinforces active accountability for the violence, highlighting power dynamics, coercion, and abuse of trust.

The use of “survivors,” on the other hand, acknowledges paths of resistance and recovery, avoiding the reduction of these individuals to the status of victims and helping to reduce stigma.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Understanding an Invisible Phenomenon

Investigating online sexual violence requires depth, active listening, and multiple perspectives.

For this reason, the study was structured in three complementary stages.

THE RESEARCH PATH

From understanding the scope of the problem to gaining deep insight in order to translate it into action.



Each step reveals an essential piece of the puzzle for understanding the problem in its entirety and building effective solutions.

**TOGETHER, WE ARE MAKING PROGRESS IN
PROTECTING CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS IN THE
DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT.**

PART I: When the Data Reveals the Big Picture (2024)

Before we could understand the stories, we had to grasp the scale of the phenomenon.

The first phase of the study was based on quantitative methods, gathering responses from 8,436 adolescents aged 13 to 18 across the country.

Data collection took place between April and September 2024 through an online *survey* distributed with the support of 30 civil society organizations partnering with ChildFund, reaching different regions and contexts across Brazil.

National reach, diverse realities

The mobilization strategy made it possible to reach adolescents from:

- public and private schools;
- different races and ethnicities;
- various socioeconomic levels;
- different family situations.

This diversity is essential because, in the digital environment, risk is distributed unevenly.

What Was Asked and Why

The questionnaire consisted of **27 closed-ended questions**, organized into two main sections.

1. Who are these adolescents

- age;
- race;
- gender;
- family income;
- level of education;
- household composition.

This first category helps us understand the context

2. How they experience the digital environment

The second section delves into their relationship with the internet. Here, the focus is not only on usage but also on their experience.

The following were investigated:

- digital habits;
- types of devices and apps used;
- perceived situations of insecurity;
- times of greatest vulnerability;
- presence (or absence) of parental monitoring;
- identification of attempts at or instances of online abuse;
- environments where suspicious behavior is most common (such as games and social media);
- knowledge of ways to seek help.

Identifying Patterns in Responses

By compiling this set of data, the *survey* makes it possible to identify patterns of behavior, exposure, and risk on a national scale.

It is from this data that essential questions begin to emerge:

- When does the risk increase?
- Where does it occur most frequently?
- Who is most at risk, and why?

These answers do not solve the problem, but they are the starting point for understanding it.

Why is this step important?

Quantitative analysis sets the stage. It quantifies the phenomenon, identifies trends, and guides our perspective. But on its own, it doesn't explain everything, because behind every piece of data lies an experience. And that is precisely what the next steps aim to reveal.



PART II: What the Numbers Don't Capture (2024–2025)

2.1 – When Listening Deepens What the Data Reveals

The second phase of the study adopted a qualitative approach, bringing together 49 adolescents in five in-person focus groups.

The sessions took place at public and private schools in the municipalities of **Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais; Vespasiano, Minas Gerais; Orós, Ceará; and Milagres, Ceará**, encompassing different social and geographical contexts.

More than just geographic diversity, the aim was to capture a diversity of experiences.

Creating space for reality to emerge

Each group consisted of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 who were participating in ChildFund projects and supported by partner organizations in Minas Gerais and Ceará.

The samples included adolescents of different:

- ages;
- genders;
- races;
- sexual orientations.

But what sets this phase apart is not just who participated, but how they participated.

The conversations were led by psychologists in discussion groups that prioritized a safe, welcoming, and non-judgmental environment.

When Speaking Is More Important Than Answering

Although there was a script of questions about online experiences, the format prioritized spontaneity.

The teens weren't guided toward specific answers; they were invited to speak freely. And in that space, the following emerged:

- perceptions of risk;
- situations of insecurity;
- concrete experiences of exposure and harm;
- their own self-protection strategies.
- Topics that often do not appear in structured questionnaires.

Ethical care based on principle

All sessions were conducted with the formal consent of the families and adolescents.

Every detail of the process was designed to ensure:

- emotional safety;
- confidentiality;
- no exposure among peers;
- prevention of any form of revictimization.

The interviewers worked with constant attention to the protection of the participants, ensuring that each account was treated with respect, dignity, and responsibility.

Turning Words into Evidence

In total, **3.38 hours of recordings (203 minutes)** were analyzed, subsequently transcribed, and organized by school.

This material was then processed using natural language processing techniques to identify emotional patterns associated with the reported experiences.

The following emotions were considered:

fear | anger | sadness | joy | optimism



The analysis was conducted using tools such as SpaCy, NLTK, and Transformers, which made it possible to transform subjective accounts into structured data.



What Emotions Help Reveal

Identifying emotions helps measure the intensity of lived experiences.

In statements such as “that’s so frustrating,” for example, it is possible to associate the emotion with the frustration caused by digital interruptions, revealing how seemingly everyday aspects also impact the online experience.

This type of analysis broadens our understanding of the digital environment beyond explicit risks.

What Emerges When We Truly Listen

Based on this analysis, it was possible to identify relevant patterns related to:

- online and offline behaviors;
- digital habits and preferences;
- protection mechanisms;
- perceptions of insecurity;
- forms of online violence;
- risks associated with fake platforms and profiles;
- emotional experiences in the digital environment;



Why This Step Matters

Focus groups complement the quantitative data from the previous step. By listening to children and adolescents, we gain a better understanding of:

the context | the nuances | their lived experiences

It is at this level that the problem ceases to be merely statistical and comes to be understood in its human dimension.

2.2 - Turning statements into evidence

To enhance the analytical rigor of the study, we conducted a systematic review of **1,581 scientific articles** on online sexual violence against children and adolescents.

The discussions were recorded (with consent) and subsequently analyzed using natural language processing techniques.

The search considered specific combinations of terms related to the digital environment, childhood, and sexual exploitation, enabling the compilation of a robust, international knowledge base.

Each article was entered into a database, compiling information such as:

- title;
- authorship;
- abstract;
- keywords;
- year of publication;
- source;
- DOI (Digital Object Identifier): a code that identifies digital documents.

Generally, every article published in newspapers or journals has a DOI.

Turning Volume into Evidence

The analysis of this material was conducted using advanced natural language processing techniques, including:

- text extraction and normalization;
- translation;
- tokenization;
- lemmatization.

Based on this processing, it was possible to identify patterns of recurrence and relevance of terms associated with online violence, such as *cyberbullying*, *sexting*, and *sextortion*.

The relevance of the articles was determined not only by the presence of these terms but also by their frequency, position, and density within the content.

This refinement allowed us to move beyond quantity and focus on the quality of the evidence.



From Knowledge to Action

Among the materials analyzed, **the 50** most relevant **articles** were selected to inform the identification of public policies aimed at combating online violence.

Based on these articles, 74 public initiatives were mapped. Each was analyzed according to two fundamental criteria:

- effectiveness in international contexts;
- alignment with the Brazilian context.

PART III: Where the Problem Is Fully Revealed (2025–2026)

Listening to What Is Rarely Said

The third stage of this study represents an unprecedented milestone in the country.

For the first time, a national study has incorporated direct interviews with perpetrators and survivors of online sexual violence, decisively broadening our understanding of the phenomenon.

This methodological choice deepens our knowledge and breaks the silence.

Rigor, Ethics, and Responsibility

To ensure the proper conduct of such a sensitive phase, the process was carried out in partnership with the Institute of Technology and Human Dignity and with leading academic institutions, such as the Federal University of Paraná.

The collaboration involved outreach projects and specialized centers focused on public safety and forensic science, ensuring that each stage was guided by:

- strict ethical principles;
- the fundamentals of forensic psychology;
- guidelines for the comprehensive protection of children.

The difficulty of accessing what is hidden

One of the greatest challenges was arranging interviews with individuals convicted of sexual crimes against children and adolescents.

The process required months of coordination with the justice and public safety systems, including:

- sending official letters;
- attempts to cooperate with courts;
- negotiations with specialized courts.

The successive refusals were not merely operational obstacles; they reveal a structural difficulty within the Brazilian system in integrating scientific research into the prison context.

The final authorization was granted by a Criminal Enforcement Court in the Federal District.

It was this authorization that made it possible to access one of the most hidden and critical aspects of this phenomenon.

Inside the system, outside the statistics

Interviews with perpetrators were conducted in a maximum-security prison, in a supervised setting and with psychological support.

This precaution was essential for two reasons:

- to ensure the researchers' safety;
- to ensure that the interviewees understood the purpose of the research and felt comfortable sharing their life stories.

The result is a unique body of material: accounts that help us understand the motivations, justifications, and contexts underpinning acts of violence in the digital environment.



Giving a Voice to Those Who Rebuild

At the same time, the study sought to hear from survivors of online sexual violence.

Recognizing the emotional complexity involved, access was facilitated through mental health organizations—an approach that respects these individuals' time, safety, and autonomy.

This approach enabled the participation of individuals who felt ready to share their experiences, actively contributing to the construction of knowledge.

When Opposing Perspectives Shape the Same Truth

By bringing together such distinct voices—perpetrators and survivors—this stage establishes a truly comprehensive approach.

A perspective that does not oversimplify the problem but addresses it in all its complexity. The process highlighted:

- institutional challenges;
- ethical limitations;
- deep human tensions.

But above all, it demonstrated that understanding this phenomenon requires methodological courage and social responsibility.

What this stage makes possible

By integrating different perspectives, the study provides fundamental insights for:

- identifying behavioral patterns;
- map structural vulnerabilities;
- understand the dynamics of recruitment;
- guide more effective public policies;
- strengthen prevention strategies;

This methodology broadens the scope of the research by examining the phenomenon through different lenses and perspectives, thereby enhancing our understanding to enable more precise protection.

RESEARCH FINDINGS – PART III: INTERVIEWS WITH PERPETRATORS AND SURVIVOR-

3.1 What the Interviews with Perpetrators Help Reveal

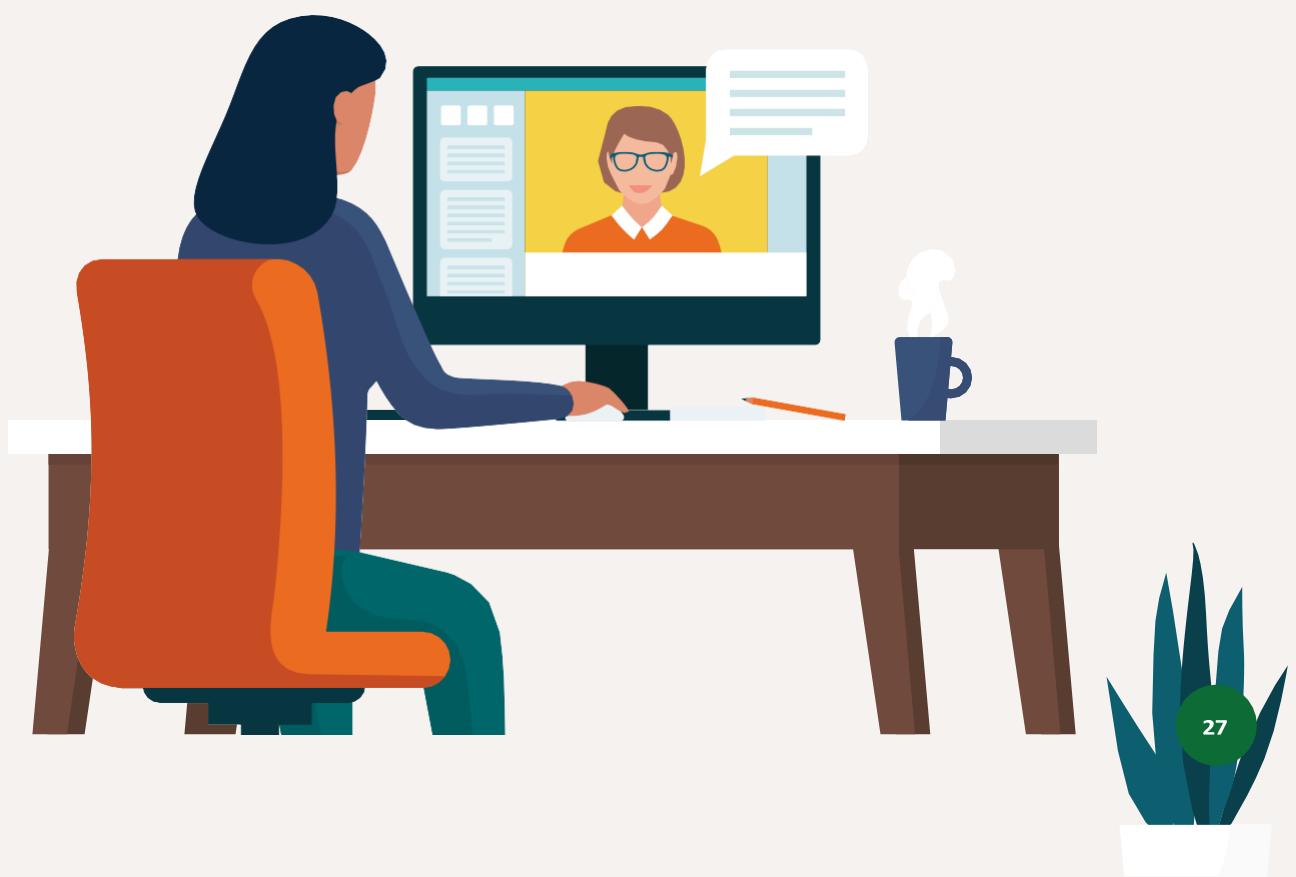
The qualitative analysis of the interviews with the three perpetrators allowed us to identify important patterns in their life trajectories, family contexts, early experiences with sexuality, and relationship with digital technologies. Viewed collectively, these elements show how individual, social, and environmental factors do not act in isolation but combine over time to shape criminal trajectories related to online sexual violence against children and adolescents.

Organizing the findings into a comparative table makes it possible to observe, more clearly, both the points of convergence and the particularities of each case. This cross-referenced analysis helps us understand how these trajectories are formed, sustained, and expressed in different contexts.

Although the interviewees differ in terms of generation, education, and socioeconomic background, their narratives reveal recurring structural elements. Among these, the following stand out:

- early exposure to pornography;
- the absence of family dialogue about sexuality;
- traumatic childhood experiences;
- intensive, unsupervised use of digital technologies;

The comparative analysis thus shows that different trajectories can converge into similar delinquent behaviors—not because they are identical, but because they develop against a backdrop of shared vulnerabilities, even though these are shaped by specific contexts.



Comparative Table: Profiles of Interviewed Perpetrators

PART 1) PATHWAYS AND CONTEXTS

Dimensions analyzed	B. – 25 years	P. – 56 years	S. – 33 years
Family context during childhood	Religious family, strict environment, and lack of dialogue about sexuality; reports no physical abuse.	Childhood marked by domestic violence; alcoholic and aggressive father; extremely unstable environment.	Experienced and witnessed domestic violence; had an abusive, alcoholic father; had fragile family ties.
First exposure to pornography	At age nine, he found pornographic DVDs and began consuming them alone, in secret.	Around the age of ten, he was exposed to pornography while watching his brother; he also reports sexual abuse by an uncle.	At age eight, he was exposed to pornography on videos rented by his father; began exploring his sexuality with his cousin.
Educational and professional background	Completed high school; heavily involved in online gaming; no structured career path.	Retired professor with a Ph.D.; previously served as a youth religious leader; established professional career.	Degree in Graphic Design; studied medicine for four years; unstable career path, with multiple job changes.
Relationship with technology and the internet	Heavy use since childhood, focused on online games; progression to increasingly extreme pornographic content; reports compulsive behavior.	Frequent use of WhatsApp to communicate with teenagers; storage of a large volume of images; self-taught digital skills.	Intense involvement with online games, chat rooms, and social media; perception of the internet as an unregulated environment ("lawless land").
Perceived psychological patterns	Increasing sexual compulsion; episodes of self-harm; recurring feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation.	Cognitive distortions regarding consent and boundaries; compulsion toward specific body parts; need for emotional validation.	Conflicts related to sexual identity; history of childhood abuse; difficulty setting boundaries and recognizing risks.

PART 2 — DYNAMICS OF ENGAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Dimensions Analyzed	B. – 25 years	P. – 56 years	S. – 33 years
Pattern of approach among survivors	A close relationship with my niece in a trusting family environment; distorted interpretations of her behavior.	Emotional involvement with teenagers at church; constant conversations, sending and receiving photos.	It began through online games; contact shifted to Discord and WhatsApp; he exploited the minor's anonymity and trust.
Brief description of the crime	Sexual acts against his 13-year-old niece while supervising her; prior consumption of child pornography.	Exchanged intimate photos with several teenagers; more than 400 images found on his devices.	Exchanged nude photos with a 13-year-old boy; the interaction lasted for more than ten days and was discovered by the victim's mother.
Level of acknowledgment of the crime	Shows remorse but still offers justifications ("she found it funny").	He acknowledges the crime and speaks of a "breach of trust," but downplays it by saying he believed it was not a crime.	He acknowledges the vulnerability of the digital environment; he understands that there should be more control; he shows belated reflection.
Recommendations made by the perpetrators themselves	Advocates for strict parental control and parental presence in the digital world; education in schools about risks.	States: "WhatsApp should not be freely accessible to children"; daily monitoring is necessary.	Advocates for platform regulation and age verification; warns against children's unrestricted access to 18+ games.

When patterns begin in childhood and evolve in silence

The interviews indicate that early exposure to pornography, especially when it occurs without adult guidance, can significantly influence the psychosexual development of children, adolescents, and young adults. This type of experience tends to serve as a milestone in personal development, as it can influence how a person comes to understand the body, desire, emotional relationships, and sexuality throughout their life.

According to the accounts, this exposure occurs as early as childhood and takes place in isolation and in secret, contributing to the formation of distorted perceptions regarding:

consent | boundaries | emotional relationships

When technology amplifies and shapes behavior

Another central focus of the analysis is the role of digital technologies. More than just expanding access, the online environment acts as a structuring element of behavior. In the accounts, the internet appears as:

- a constant source of stimuli;
- a space of anonymity;
- an environment easily accessible to children and adolescents.

This combination fosters the intensification and continuation of inappropriate practices.

In the words of S. (an interviewed perpetrator):

“In my mind, the internet is a lawless land. Sharing intimate images is common.”



This statement highlights a critical point: the normalization of such behaviors directly contributes to a distorted perception of risk and severity.

In all three cases, the digital environment served as a space for escalation, where inappropriate behaviors progressively intensified until they culminated in crimes.

From Exposure to Compulsion

The accounts also point to consistent patterns of sexual compulsion, especially in the cases of B. and S., which are often associated with unidentified or untreated psychological distress throughout their youth.

B. reports that, from age 14 to 22, “he only delved deeper into pornography,” describing a progressive increase in the intensity of the content he consumed and a growing sense of loss of control.

In his own words:

“For me, what was
repulsive began to feel
natural—a compulsion.”

This account points to a process of desensitization—a recurring characteristic in compulsive patterns—in which boundaries are progressively pushed.



Family Environments: Where Silence and Violence Coexist

In the realm of family experiences, recurring patterns emerge of:

- domestic violence;
- emotional neglect;
- a lack of dialogue about sexuality.

P. recalls that “it was always beatings; I never talked to him,” referring to her alcoholic father. **S.**, for her part, reports having witnessed frequent assaults against her mother.

From a sociological perspective, these contexts undermine socialization processes, hinder the establishment of boundaries, and encourage the replacement of family role models with distorted lessons learned in the digital environment.

Distortions that underpin behavior

The interviews reveal recurring mechanisms, such as:

- minimization;
- rationalization;
- cognitive distortions.

In some cases, a shift in responsibility is observed, with a reinterpretation of the facts to downplay the severity of the actions.

B. states that “she was flirting with me,” while **P.** reports that she believed that “grabbing her breasts wasn’t a crime.”

These statements exemplify what Born (2005) identifies as a recurring pattern: reinterpretation of the facts in a way that reduces one’s own responsibility.

Although some interviewees later acknowledge the seriousness of their actions, their justifications reveal distorted perceptions of consent and boundaries, especially when interactions occur in contexts of closeness, trust, or authority.

A pattern that runs through different stories

Despite individual differences, the trajectories analyzed converge on a central point: violence does not arise in isolation; it is constructed over time. It develops at the intersection of:

- lack of mediation;
- early exposure;
- emotional vulnerabilities;
- unsupervised digital environments.

Understanding this process is essential, because it is throughout this journey—and not just in the final act—that prevention becomes possible.

When Trust Becomes Access

Another key finding concerns the strategic use of trusting relationships as a gateway to gaining access to children and adolescents.

Emotional, familial, or institutional bonds are used to facilitate access to victims, replicating classic dynamics of power and control, now mediated by the digital environment.

P. describes how his position in the church allowed him to get close to young people who looked up to him:

“They gave me the best they had, because they thought I was looking out for them.”

This pattern has already been described in the literature. According to Judith Herman (1997), sexual abuse is often structured as a relationship of power and control, masked by care, closeness, and acceptance.

The accounts confirm that, in the digital environment, this dynamic does not disappear—it adapts.

When the digital environment breaks down barriers and increases risk

The digital dimension introduces new elements to this dynamic. Among them are:

- a sense of anonymity;
- ease of approach;
- low supervision;
- the possibility of identity simulation.

S. describes how she identified children and adolescents based on certain signs
Subtle:

“Their nicknames already gave a clue to their age... it’s easy to find young kids.”

He also notes the shift in online gaming interactions toward private platforms, such as Discord and WhatsApp.

This trend follows a certain logic: the greater the intimacy, the less surveillance.

A well-known pattern that has now been amplified

This process is widely described in the literature as *grooming*. In the accounts analyzed, it appears consistently, structured in the following stages:



1. initial approach;

2. building a bond and trust;

3. intensification of interaction;

4. exchange of images;

5. escalation to coercion or abuse.

The digital environment creates new patterns for the perpetration of violence, increasing its speed, reach, and capacity for anonymity.

When Remorse Comes Too Late

It is significant to note that, although all three interviewees demonstrate some level of remorse, this acknowledgment arises, for the most part, after punishment and in the context of incarceration, rather than as a result of prior awareness of the impact of their actions.

P. states:

“Today I am aware of the mental and emotional scars I caused.”

B., on the other hand, reports having found a path to self-reflection through reading the Bible.

Nevertheless, elements of self-justification remain, indicating the need for psychosocial interventions aimed at fostering accountability and reshaping perceptions of consent.

The absence of education as a risk factor

Another recurring element is the lack of sexual and digital education throughout development.

The absence of guidance contributes to:

- difficulty in recognizing risks;
- confusion between what is legal and what is illegal;
- a limited understanding of boundaries.

This finding reinforces the idea that prevention is not limited to protecting victims but also involves preventing the recurrence of abusive behaviors.

When the Environment Becomes Vulnerable

The interviews indicate that the digital environment, without regulation and oversight, can become a highly vulnerable space.

The interviewees themselves point out structural flaws, highlighting:

- lack of monitoring;
- early access to technologies;
- weak protections for minors;

P. warns:

“Giving a cell phone too early is giving criminals a chance to destroy your children.”

What these voices—though belated—reveal

There is a key point in this set of statements: the recommendations come from people who have walked these paths and, as a result, clearly reveal where the systems fail. They point to the need for:

- strengthening parental supervision;
- structured digital education;
- holding platforms accountable;
- effective regulation of the online environment.



A Call for Coordinated Action

This body of evidence underscores the urgency of robust public policies aligned with the Digital Statute for Children and Adolescents.

But above all, it points to a central principle: **digital protection is not the responsibility of a single actor.**

It requires coordination among families, schools, the government, the technology sector, and civil society.

Interviews with survivors

The interviews with three survivors offer a sensitive overview of experiences of online sexual violence during childhood and adolescence.

More than just individual accounts, they reveal structural elements that help us understand:

- the dynamics of the crimes;
- the lasting emotional impacts;
- and the factors contributing to vulnerability.

Despite the differences between the trajectories, there are recurring patterns, such as:

- a lack of family dialogue about sexuality;
- lack of digital supervision;
- lack of awareness of online risks;
- low perception of danger;
- perpetrators' use of emotional manipulation.

When Vulnerability Meets Opportunity

A comparative analysis of these profiles allows us to identify intersections that directly align with the literature on child development and digital sexual exploitation.

Both classic and contemporary studies indicate that experiences such as loneliness, emotional deprivation, and emotional fragility significantly increase the vulnerability of children and adolescents to coercion and manipulation in the online environment.

In this context, *grooming* acts as a central mechanism: a gradual process of building rapport that fills emotional gaps and facilitates exploitation.

When the risk goes unrecognized

The literature also shows that the lack of critical digital literacy and protective mechanisms, both in the family and institutional settings, compromises the ability to identify risky situations.

Without this repertoire, children and teens have a harder time:

- recognize boundaries;
- identify abusive practices;
- react or seek help.



Without this repertoire, the power imbalance between victim and perpetrator intensifies—not only because of the control exerted, but also because of the lack of tools to resist.

When the Blame Falls on the Victim

Another recurring element in the accounts is self-blame for the violence suffered. This phenomenon, widely described in the literature, is associated with feelings of:

- guilt;
- shame;
- internalization of responsibility;

These perceptions are often reinforced by:

- social norms;
- moralizing discourse;
- dynamics inherent to trauma.

(Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Herman, 1992; Banyard et al., 2010)



In the digital environment, this process can be exacerbated by the perception of “participation,” even when coercion is involved. In such cases, guilt acts as a silencing mechanism, preventing reporting and prolonging the violence.

What these stories bring to light

Analyzing these experiences comparatively allows us to go beyond individual cases.

It allows us to identify structural patterns that underpin the phenomenon of digital sexual exploitation. As noted by international organizations and the specialized literature (WHO, 2016; UNICEF, 2021), this approach contributes to:

- deepen understanding of the problem;
- strengthen evidence-based responses;
- guide public prevention policies;
- improve trauma-sensitive psychosocial support programs;
- develop more effective educational strategies;

The digital environment is not neutral

The reports underscore that the digital environment is permeated by inequalities and power imbalances that exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities.

In this context, factors such as weak family bonds, neglect, and a lack of guidance not only facilitate perpetrators’ actions but also make it difficult to stop the violence early on.

The following comparative table illustrates this.

PROFILES OF SURVIVORS

Dimensions Analyzed	Survivor A (22 years old)	Survivor B (46 years old)	Survivor C (38 years old)
Age at the time of the crime	17–19 years	15 years	12–14 years
Family background	A strict religious family with little communication; a controlling and emotionally distant environment.	A family that dismissed her account; a permissive environment regarding technology use; a history of domestic abuse.	Parents were present, but there was no digital supervision and no discussion about sexuality.
First exposure to technology	Between the ages of 12 and 13, without supervision.	At age 15, with intensive use of video games and the internet during the early morning hours.	Between ages 11 and 12, with unrestricted access to a computer and social media.
The abuser's approach	Emotional conversations via Facebook and WhatsApp, involving emotional manipulation and threats.	Approach by an uncle via MSN, involving the sending of pornography and sexual coercion.	Seductive conversations via Orkut, quickly escalating to blackmail and threats.
Type of violence suffered	Virtual rape* with blackmail; prolonged emotional control lasting two years.	Intrafamilial sexual abuse, with recording and distribution of images.	Coercion to send intimate images and prolonged threats.
Emotional reaction during the abuse	Fear, anxiety, and depression; silence enforced by fear of family disapproval.	Deep suffering, confusion, and guilt; lasting impacts on mental health in adulthood.	Self-anger, guilt, fear of being discovered, and emotional isolation.
Barriers to reporting	Strict family norms, lack of dialogue, and fear of judgment.	Her complaint was not validated by her parents; an emotionally invalidating environment.	Lack of guidance and absence of safe channels to seek help.

*Virtual rape is a type of sexual violence committed over the internet, in which the perpetrator, without direct physical contact, coerces, threatens, or induces the victim to perform lewd or sexual acts, usually through video calls or messages.

When Violence Takes Root and Remains Invisible

Interviews with survivors reveal key insights into how online sexual violence takes root and persists in the daily lives of children and adolescents.

In all cases, two factors emerge as decisive: a lack of parental digital supervision and a lack of sex and digital education.

These factors significantly increase vulnerability.

A key point emerges: **knowing how to use technology does not mean knowing how to protect oneself in the digital environment.**

Technical proficiency does not replace the emotional and critical skills needed to recognize manipulation.

When a relationship is used as a tool for control

The power dynamics evident in the accounts show that violence is not limited to the act itself, but is constructed over the course of the relationship. The perpetrators exploited:

- emotional vulnerabilities;
- situations of loneliness;
- the need to belong;

In the case of survivor **A**, the abuser occupied a symbolic role of listening and providing affection that was absent in the family environment.

In the cases of **B** and **C**, the following were explored:

- sexual curiosity;
- insecurity;
- lack of guidance.

The relationship is used as a tool of control, often associated with blackmail and threats.

In this process, the violence goes beyond the sending of images, involving:

- psychological control;
- constant pressure;
- erosion of autonomy.

The impact that does not end with the end of the abuse

The effects extend into adulthood, including:

- depression;
- anxiety;
- personality disorders;
- troubles with trust;
- impairments in self-image;

Survivor **B** states:

**“I was considered a liar.
That destroyed me.”**

This statement highlights a critical point: trauma stems not only from the violence suffered but also from the lack of support.

Survivor **C** reinforces this point:

“I thought I was wrong; I was angry at myself.”

Here, the impact shifts to self-image and persists over time.

When a lack of support prolongs the harm

The outcome of violence depends on the response of the environment.

When there is support, it is possible to break the cycle. When there isn't, silence perpetuates the harm for years or decades.

What this evidence demands

The findings underscore the need for integrated policies that link:

- school;
- family;
- the government;
- the technology sector;

Online sexual violence thrives not only in unregulated digital environments, but also in contexts where children face, on their own, experiences for which they are not emotionally prepared.

**When someone listens,
there is a chance to stop the
violence.**

**When there is no
listening, silence
perpetuates the harm.**

INTEGRATED ANALYTICAL CONCLUSION: A COMPARATIVE READING OF THE FINDINGS

The Digital Ecosystem as a Risk Framework and the Mechanisms of Grooming

The data indicate that online games, social media, and messaging apps are the environments where adolescents report feeling the most unsafe and where interactive sexual violence occurs most frequently.

Notable findings include:

- 41% of adolescents reported interacting with strangers;
- 55% of these interactions occurred on messaging apps.

More than just exposure, these figures reveal patterns.

Interviews with perpetrators confirm that these environments are strategically exploited:

- games → points of contact
- social media → deepening the bond
- private messages → escalation of abuse



The risk, therefore, lies not only in the time spent online, but in the lack of mediation and in the architecture of the platforms, which encourages:

- accelerated trust;
- migration between environments;
- concealment of behavior.

The problem isn't just being online. It's being online without supervision, without guidance, and in environments that foster quick trust and low vigilance.

Grooming: The Mechanism Underpinning the Process

Grooming emerges as a structural element. But more than simply identifying its existence, the analysis of the interviews allows for an in-depth understanding of how it works.

It is a gradual, intentional, and relational process, sustained by affection, active listening, emotional validation, and the simulation of closeness among peers.

The perpetrators' accounts reveal sophisticated adaptation strategies, such as:

- adapting language;
- use of fake profiles;
- modulation of behavior;
- use of tools such as voice changers.

The goal is to appear to be part of the victim's world.

This dynamic is linked to the data: teenagers who use more apps and spend more time online are at significantly higher risk, with the risk being as high as 8.09 times greater among 17–18-year-olds.

Vulnerability Vulnerability	Statistical Data (Quantitative)	Qualitative Report	Analytical Conclusion
Grooming Mechanism	41% of adolescents interact with suspicious strangers, with WhatsApp and Telegram accounting for 55% of these interactions.	Former abuser S. reports that contact begins in video games (such as GTA 5), shifts to Discord to “sort out game-related issues,” and ends on WhatsApp for intimate exchanges.	Gaming platforms function as a “bridge of trust,” while private messaging apps serve to escalate sexual abuse.

WHEN PROTECTION FAILS AT PREDICTABLE MOMENTS

Nighttime as a Time of Vulnerability

Online insecurity is **2.26 times higher** at night, especially in games and on social media. This pattern is directly related to:

- less supervision;
- greater isolation;
- greater emotional vulnerability.

The nighttime thus functions as a space with less protection and greater exposure.

Vulnerability Vulnerability	Statistical Data (Quantitative)	Qualitative Report	Analytical Conclusion
Night/Early Morning	Online insecurity is 2.26 times higher during this period, especially in games and on social media.	Perpetrator B. reports consuming pornography in the early hours of the morning; survivor B. describes conversations with strangers between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m.	The lack of nighttime supervision contributes both to the development of compulsive behaviors and to the victim's vulnerability without an immediate support network.



Silence as a Social Construct

Although more than **50% of adolescents** report receiving some guidance, only **6%** know how to report online violence.

This data reveals a fundamental flaw. Silence is not merely an individual phenomenon; it is produced by:

- fear of judgment;
- a lack of dialogue;
- restrictive family environments.

In this scenario, the abuser fills the void, offering a listening ear and closeness.

Vulnerability Vulnerability	Statistical Data (Quantitative)	Qualitative	Analytical Conclusion
Barriers to Dialogue	Dialogue with parents reduces insecurity, but only 6% know how to report abuse.	Survivor A. remained silent for two years out of fear of family judgment; perpetrator P. states that young people sought him out due to a lack of dialogue with their parents.	Rigid family environments, lacking open dialogue, create a “relational vacuum” that can be filled by the abuser, who uses fear and guilt as mechanisms to silence victims.

WHEN EXPOSURE SHAPES PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIORS

Pornography as a Cross-Cutting Risk Factor

All perpetrators reported exposure as early as childhood, which is consistent with the finding that **43% of adolescents** have already accessed sexual content online. This exposure may:

- influence perceptions of consent;
- alter boundaries in relationships;
- contribute to desensitization processes.

This process can be understood in light of trauma theory and the socialization of sexual violence (Herman, 1992).

Vulnerability Vulnerability	Statistical Data (Quantitative)	Qualitative	Analytical Conclusion
Access to Pornograph y	43% of adolescents report exposure to sexual content online without prior interaction.	Perpetrators (B. and P.) began consuming pornography at ages nine and ten; B. states that “most crimes begin with the consumption of pornography.”	Early exposure can desensitize individuals and contribute to the normalization of sexual exploitation, in addition to acting as a trigger for compulsive behaviors.

Vulnerability Is Not Uniform: Victim Profiles and the Gender Dimension

The data indicate that girls are **1.08 times more likely** to experience online sexual violence and report negative feelings more frequently in focus groups. However, the qualitative analysis shows that boys are also victims, especially in the contexts of gaming and intrafamilial abuse.

Violence, therefore, is intersected by:

- gender;
- age;
- social context;
- digital usage patterns;

Furthermore, the selection of victims is not random; it involves the perpetrator's strategic adaptation to identified vulnerabilities.

Vulnerability Vulnerability	Statistical Data (Quantitative)	Qualitative	Analytical Conclusion
Profile (gender and digital usage)	Girls are 1.08 times more at risk; 17–18-year-old adolescents who use multiple apps are 8.09 times more likely to be victimized.	The perpetrator, S. , reports using tools to alter his voice and adapt to the victims' digital environment.	The choice of victims is not random: it involves the perpetrator's strategic adaptation to the victim's context, exploiting vulnerabilities and digital usage patterns.

A Cross-Cutting Warning
The risk is not random. It arises where protection fails.

CONCLUSION

From Understanding the Data to Transformative Action

The integration of quantitative data, qualitative narratives, and normative analysis highlights that online sexual violence is a systemic and multifactorial phenomenon.

It does not stem solely from internet use, but from the intersection of:

- permissive digital architectures;
- family silence;
- educational gaps;
- social inequalities;
- fragmented institutional responses.

Why Isolated Responses Don't Work

The findings demonstrate that strategies focused exclusively on technical control or criminal accountability are insufficient.

Effective prevention requires a comprehensive approach based on:

- critical digital education;
- ongoing intergenerational dialogue;
- strengthening family and community bonds;
- the creation of safe spaces for listening and support.

Evidence shows that environments with a supportive presence and guidance reduce vulnerability, while silence and digital neglect increase risks.

When Support Transforms Life Paths

The reports indicate that shelter plays a decisive role in:

- breaking cycles of violence;
- reducing the impact of trauma;
- restoring autonomy.

Its absence, on the other hand, prolongs the harm.

A Changing Landscape and a Collective Challenge

The research shows that online sexual violence unfolds in an environment of rapid technological change.

In this context, the asymmetry between children's and adults' knowledge intensifies, driven by the logic of digital platforms.

Given this, it is essential to strengthen shared responsibility among:

- the government;
- families;
- schools;
- technology companies;
- civil society;



Comprehensive protection cannot be limited to the physical world. It must effectively extend to the digital environment.

From the legal framework to actual implementation

The progress made on the Digital Statute for Children and Adolescents is significant, but its effectiveness depends on:

- concrete implementation;
- continuous monitoring;
- intersectoral coordination.

Without these elements, the legal framework risks failing to translate into real protection.

Institutional Commitment

ChildFund reaffirms its longstanding commitment to defending the rights of children and adolescents, with efforts structured along three fronts:

- advocacy and policy influence;
- production and dissemination of evidence;
- strengthening social programs and projects.

A collective commitment

The findings of this study show that addressing online sexual violence requires more than one-off responses; it demands the development of an ethic of prevention based on listening, shared responsibility, and ongoing action.

Protecting children and adolescents in the digital environment means protecting the present and securing the future. It is a collective commitment. And it is to this commitment that ChildFund remains dedicated: learning, advocating, and taking action so that the internet is, in fact, a space of development, safety, and dignity for all children.

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Technical Details

Concept and Production:
ChildFund Brazil

Field Support/Interviews
Institute of Technology and Human Dignity

Analysis Support:
**Intelligent Data-Driven Decision-Making Systems
(SITDOD)**

Graphic Design and Layout
UP Business

May 2026

