

# POLICY BRIEF: A Holistic Approach to Fighting the Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children

Author: Kirsten Mettler, Policy Intern, ChildFund

## Introduction

In 2021 alone, over 84.9 million images, videos, and other content<sup>i</sup> featuring children in suspected situations of sexual exploitation and abuse were submitted to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). This marked a 35% increase from reports in 2020 and a 73% increase when compared to 2019.<sup>ii</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the risks young people face online. Many young people were required to spend increased amounts of time on the internet, often with limited or no supervision, leaving them unprepared to navigate online spaces safely. A holistic response—one that involves multiple sectors and stakeholders and works with and for children, adolescents, and youth in various life stages—is necessary. Such a response would include efforts that address the root causes of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSEAC), educate children and their families about online safety, and provide trauma-informed response services that remove victims from harmful situations and offer victim-centered support and access to justice.

OSEAC can have detrimental, long-term impacts on children’s development and well-being, increasing their risk of depression, substance abuse, heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Survivors may be stigmatized by their community and socially isolated, leading to difficulties in accessing education<sup>iii</sup> and future employment. Obstacles in permanently removing child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) can lead to survivors experiencing re-traumatization throughout their life. Additionally, many victims of OSEAC also experience offline forms of violence, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse.<sup>iv</sup> All those under the age of 18, and youth, are vulnerable to OSEAC. However, once youth reach the legal age of consent, the mechanisms to prevent and respond to this abuse may differ based on laws that only protect

## Whole-of-Government Solutions to OSEAC

A wide range of interrelated factors increase children’s and adolescents’ risks of experiencing OSEAC, and young people need similarly interrelated responses to prevent their exploitation and assist in their recovery. Children facing familial abuse and neglect, mental health issues, social isolation, identity-based discrimination, and poverty may be more at risk for OSEAC.<sup>v</sup> Gender is also a factor: The Internet Watch Foundation’s 2020 report found that 93% of reported URLs contained CSAM featuring girls.<sup>vi</sup> Marginalized identities compound risk, with girls from ethnic minority groups and those who identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or transgender facing increased risk of experiencing harassment.<sup>vii</sup> Boys are also subject to OSEAC, but social stigmas around masculinity and sexuality often contribute to underreporting.<sup>viii</sup> Holistic efforts that consider these diverse risk factors are required to fully prevent and address OSEAC. For example, education is needed for prevention—improving young people’s digital literacy and expanding access to sex education programs can increase their awareness of online risks and their understanding of consent and self-protection skills. Supporting families’ and adolescents’ economic security can lessen the risk of financially motivated OSEAC. Adequately funding law enforcement to conduct OSEAC investigations is also critical, as many perpetrators are repeat offenders.

Furthermore, OSEAC survivors often need an interconnected, culturally and context informed series of interventions. These include victim-centered and trauma-informed support during the reporting and investigation process and while navigating the justice system, as well as mental health and psychosocial support services. Survivors may also require placement in family-based care if it is in their best interests to be removed from their current living situation, and assured privacy, respect and dignity throughout the process that limits their exposure to social stigmas associated with victimization.<sup>ix</sup> OSEAC will not be fully addressed until victims and survivors have access to interventions that address all their needs. A whole child approach would integrate U.S. government programs, policies, and funding to help children and adolescents reach their full potential. ChildFund utilizes a life-stages approach that tailors interventions to meet young people’s needs across three development stages, from 0-5, between 6-14 and 15-24 years. Finally, the whole child approach recognizes the importance of young people’s participation and aims to elevate their voices in policy discussions and programs.

## Definitions

**OSEAC:** “all acts of a sexually exploitative nature carried out against a child that have...a connection to the online environment,” including the production and online distribution of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), livestreaming of sexual exploitation and abuse, grooming and sextortion.<sup>x</sup>

**Grooming:** “the process of establishing/building a relationship with a child either in person or through the use of the Internet or other digital technologies to facilitate either online or offline sexual contact with that person.”

**Sextortion:** “the blackmailing of a person with the help of self-generated images of that person in order to extort sexual favors, money, or other benefits from her/him under the threat of sharing the material beyond the consent of the depicted person (e.g. posting images on social media).”<sup>xi</sup>

## Gaps and Challenges

Actors in both the foreign assistance and domestic space too often operate independently and in issue area silos. In many cases, implementing agencies have varying mandates and funding sources, and predetermined funding allocations make it difficult for these agencies to coordinate with one another. This approach is especially troubling for issues like OSEAC, where impacts permeate throughout various aspects of a young person's life, including their mental and physical health, self-esteem, familial and social relationships, housing security, education access, and future employability.

A whole child approach to U.S foreign and domestic policy would address children's and adolescents' wide-ranging needs and ensure that they are key partners in developing solutions to address those needs. Young people are not a homogenous group; they represent a wide range of diverse voices, experiences and identities, and can bring a unique perspective to online safety solutions that can produce sustainable, positive change.

## Policy Recommendations

**1. Enhanced coordination:** Greater interagency coordination and collaboration is needed to prevent and address OSEAC — including in the collection and analysis of quality, comprehensive data on prevalence, risk factors, and evidence-based practices. Designating an OSEAC coordinator within the White House Domestic Policy Council would improve government efforts to make the internet a safer place for children.

**2. Engaging youth:** Children, youth, and survivors must be integrated into discussions on ending OSEAC at all levels, from school boards to global forums. Young people are experts on their own lives and bringing them into OSEAC discussions will create opportunities for them to provide their own ideas and solutions and to become better educated and empowered to protect themselves from harm.

**3. Funding:** OSEAC continues to increase exponentially, leaving investigatory agencies, law enforcement and service providers overwhelmed. Robust, flexible funding is needed now to ensure that children and adolescents' holistic needs are being met throughout various intervention stages: from prevention and investigation, to response and healing.

**4. Legislative action:** Legislation needs to adapt to the current realities of OSEAC, and the END Child Exploitation Act (S.365/H.R.1198) is a helpful step forward. The bill would extend the time that telecommunication companies must retain the data contained in reports they submit to NCMEC's CyberTipline from 90 days to 180 days.<sup>xii</sup> This would improve law enforcement's capacity to pursue cases and utilize this critical data to identify survivors and connect them with appropriate services.

**5. COVID-19 response:** Around 1.2 billion children in 186 countries faced in-person school disruptions due to COVID-19, with many students' education moving online.<sup>xiii</sup> Agencies already overwhelmed by OSEAC concerns were suddenly flooded with requests. Anti-OSEAC efforts must be adequately funded in response to the pandemic and trends of increased screentime among children and adolescents.

## Conclusion

Online safety is a growing concern for young people, and existing services are woefully under-resourced. Tackling OSEAC will require strong collaboration from a wide range of stakeholders within and outside the government. Through a common sense, whole-of-government approach, children and adolescents' multidimensional needs can be addressed, both online and off. Instances of OSEAC are rising around the world—and the time to act is now.

**For more information, contact Danielle Lilly DLilly@ChildFund.org.**

### Young People's Participation in the Philippines

In the Philippines, ChildFund implemented Project Children AWARE, which brought together youth ages 15 to 24 years old to train as session facilitators. These youth leaders then led other youth in holistic trainings on socio-emotional learning, mental health and psychosocial support, and advocacy and communications strategies. The advocacy of these young people has already motivated significant change, with three barangays (districts) passing anti-OSEAC legislation during their council meetings because of youth advocacy.

i National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (2021). Cybertipline. Retrieved from <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline>

ii Ibid.

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v May-Chahal, C. et al (2017). Rapid Evidence Assessment: Characteristics and vulnerabilities of victims of online-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation. University of Lancaster. Retrieved from [https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw\\_94742-10.pdf](https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw_94742-10.pdf); Dedae-Escoton, V. et al (2020). A Study on Online Sexual Exploitation of Children for Aftercare Reintegration. International Justice Mission. Retrieved from [https://osec.ijm.org/documents/19/1JM-Aftercare-Reintegration\\_research-2021.pdf](https://osec.ijm.org/documents/19/1JM-Aftercare-Reintegration_research-2021.pdf); WeProtect Global Alliance. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on Online Child Sexual Exploitation. Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5630f48de4b00a75476ecf0a/t/5ebc58d038eb072b909874ca/1589401809129/Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Online-Child-Sexual-Exploitation.pdf>.

vi Internet Watch Foundation. (2021). The Annual 2020 Report. Retrieved from <https://annualreport2020.iwf.org.uk/trends/international/overview>.

vii PLAN International. (2020). Free to be online? Girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment. Retrieved from <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2022/02/sotwgr2020-commsreport-en-2.pdf>.

viii End Violence Against Children, INTERPOL, & UNICEF. (2021). Disrupting Harm in Kenya: evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Retrieved from <https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/DH%20Kenya%20Report.pdf>.

ix Dedae-Escoton, V. et al (2020). A Study on Online Sexual Exploitation of Children for Aftercare Reintegration. International Justice Mission. Retrieved from [https://osec.ijm.org/documents/19/1JM-Aftercare-Reintegration\\_research-2021.pdf](https://osec.ijm.org/documents/19/1JM-Aftercare-Reintegration_research-2021.pdf); End Violence Against Children, INTERPOL, & UNICEF. (2021). Disrupting Harm in Kenya: evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Retrieved from <https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/DH%20Kenya%20Report.pdf>; International Justice Mission. (2020). Online Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Philippines: Analysis and Recommendations for Governments, Industry, and Civil Society. Retrieved from [https://ijmstorage.live.blob.core.windows.net/ijmna/documents/studies/Final-Public-Full-Report-5\\_20\\_2020\\_2021-02-05-055439.pdf](https://ijmstorage.live.blob.core.windows.net/ijmna/documents/studies/Final-Public-Full-Report-5_20_2020_2021-02-05-055439.pdf).

x Interagency Working Group in Luxembourg. (2016). Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Retrieved from <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Terminology-guidelines-396922-EN-1.pdf>;

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xii The END Child Exploitation Act (2021). bill. Retrieved from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1198/text?r=96&s=1>.

xiii Li, C., & Lalani, F. (2021, April 29). The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how. World Economic Forum.