Protect Children

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TELL ME MORE ABOUT TECH

CSAM Perpetrator Research Report

Findings from a Survey of CSAM Perpetrators on Digital Platform Use and Design

Prepared by
Protect Children

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Ofcom

Contents

Content warning
This report discusses topics that some readers may find distressing, including child sexual abuse and exploitation, paedophilia, self-harm and suicide, violence, gore, animal cruelty, death, murder, torture, and drug abuse. Reader discretion is advised.

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Ofcom Foreword

Child sexual abuse and exploitation is an appalling crime, which has lasting and lifelong effects for victims and survivors. As the UK's online safety regulator, tackling the spread of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online is one of Ofcom's top priorities.

To thwart this criminal activity, we must first understand and confront its scale. The National Crime Agency estimates there are between 710,000 and 840,000 adults in the UK who pose some form of sexual threat to children.

Given the enormity and urgency of this challenge, it is vital that we equip ourselves with the best possible evidence, intelligence and insights to inform our work.

First and foremost, Ofcom speaks regularly to victims and survivors of harm as well as their loved ones. I have heard deeply moving testimonies from people who have bravely shared their stories and experiences. Not only are these conversations a humbling reminder of the gravity of the work we undertake each day, but they are invaluable in informing our policies and approach.

We also commission and carry out research to explore how harms manifest online – helping us understand not only the harm caused to victims and survivors, but also how perpetrators operate in the online world. It is crucial to understand patterns of behaviour by perpetrators so we can design targeted safety measures to protect users, reduce risks, and identify early opportunities for prevention of harm.

We identified a notable gap in research about how perpetrators are using online services to exploit children. To strengthen our evidence, we commissioned Protect Children, a global expert in this field of research, to carry out an anonymous survey among perpetrators who have used known keyword terms to search for CSAM on the dark web. Participants took part voluntarily and were not remunerated.

The survey was made available in several different languages, acknowledging the borderless nature of child sexual abuse and exploitation. This supports our collaborative approach internationally, where we work with partners through our Global Online Safety Regulators Network and other law enforcement agencies and bodies, many of whom are listed in the acknowledgments section of the report.

The report reveals important insights that will help inform our work to protect children online. It identifies, for example: a connection between early accidental exposure to CSAM content and how this can quickly escalate to intentional searching; how perpetrators are accessing CSAM content across multiple online environments – not just the dark web; and how widely accessible AI tools are being used by perpetrators to generate CSAM content with minimal effort.

The findings will provide crucial evidence to help us, and our partner agencies around the globe, to develop effective and targeted protection measures to prevent the spread of CSAM - building on our work in implementing the Online Safety Act in the UK.

Since our Illegal Harms Code, which came into force in March 2025, services have had clear duties to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation and to prevent perpetrators from sharing child sexual abuse material. This includes introducing perceptual hash matching to detect known child sexual abuse images, and URL detection to identify links that we know contain known CSAM content.

The measures in our Protection of Children Code are also designed to prevent children from accessing harmful content, such as pornography, which we know can act as a pathway to viewing further extreme material, including in some cases, CSAM.

We have also already taken enforcement action against some of the most problematic file-sharing and file-storage services used by perpetrators.

But we know that more needs to be done.

We have published a further consultation on additional safety measures, which include proposals for platforms to ban users found to be sharing CSAM, and to detect CSAM that has not previously been hashed. Our plans also include strengthened protections for children against grooming which would require tech firms to put in place highly effective age checks, so that children cannot be contacted online by adult strangers. Our final decisions are expected in the autumn.

Keeping children safe from abuse and exploitation online is a collective global effort. By enforcing the safety measures under the Act, by commissioning pioneering research - such as this report - and by sharing intelligence with law enforcement, charities and other expert bodies in this field, Ofcom is determined to play its part in standing up for children, victims and survivors and tackling the growing crisis of online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Almudena Lara, Online Safety Policy Development Director (Ofcom)

Introduction

Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is a severe and growing threat to children's rights and safety. Each year, millions of images and videos depicting sexual abuse circulate online, causing profound and long-lasting harm to victims and survivors.[1] Despite efforts to tackle the threat, the scale and accessibility of CSAM online continues to pose a major global challenge.

The expansion of the internet has fundamentally reshaped this crime. Digital technologies have enabled perpetrators to access, share, and conceal CSAM with unprecedented ease, increasing both the volume and impact of CSAM. Online platforms therefore play a central role in both risk and prevention, as platform design choices, technical features, and safety measures can either reduce opportunities for abuse or create environments in which harm is exacerbated.

Protecting children effectively requires a clear understanding of how CSAM perpetrators operate in digital environments. However, evidence on how they navigate the online ecosystem remains limited, particularly in relation to the technologies, platforms, and technical features that shape access and behaviour. Key gaps remain in understanding how people discover CSAM, how they move between platforms, and how technological developments influence these processes.

Generating this knowledge is essential in order to design effective interventions. However, obtaining these insights is not straightforward. Research methods such as interviews with children and victims, or analyses of platform data and content, cannot reveal how perpetrators search for, store, or generate CSAM, nor the pathways through which they first encounter such material. In addition, given the rapid pace of technological development, interviews with convicted perpetrators may not capture current patterns of engagement with emerging platforms and tools. As a result, up to date and practice-relevant insights can only be obtained by hearing directly from individuals who are actively seeking CSAM.

To generate this evidence, we conducted an anonymous self-report survey of adults actively seeking CSAM online. The survey was presented globally to people searching for CSAM on a dark web search engine, which enabled us to engage with a population that is typically difficult to reach. The survey explored patterns of CSAM use, engagement with digital platforms, and experiences with deterrence and disruption measures.

This study builds on Protect Children's ongoing research with active CSAM perpetrators since 2020. Across projects, including ReDirection and 2KNOW, more

[1] CyberTipline Report (NCMEC, 2024).

than 93,000 survey responses have been collected, strengthening the methodological foundation and expertise underpinning the present research.

In addition to its research aims, the survey also acted as a preventive intervention by encouraging people searching for CSAM to reflect on their behaviour and to seek help. At the end of the survey, respondents were signposted to perpetration prevention resources, including ReDirection, Stop It Now, and Help Wanted. More than 2,200 respondents clicked through to the ReDirection program after completing the survey. Several respondents reported that completing the survey prompted them to reconsider their behaviour or motivated them to seek support.

"After this survey I am putting my device away for a while. Thanks"

"The survey is a good idea. I believe people that suffer from it should seek actual help"

"I'm determined to stop this once and for all"

This report presents findings from **20,592 survey responses**, offering rare and direct insight into CSAM perpetrator behaviour, attitudes, and technological practices. The results are organised across six thematic sections, covering perpetrator pathways, accessibility and platform use, platform design and features, the role of emerging technologies, deterrence and disruption measures, and intersecting harms.

Together, the findings provide critical evidence on how technology shapes access to CSAM and where intervention can most effectively reduce harm to children. Conducted in a global and borderless online context, the research does not assess the effectiveness of any single national legal or regulatory regime. Similarly, where platforms have been named, this is based on information provided in response to the survey and any views expressed on platforms are those of respondents and not Protect Children or Ofcom, and should not be taken as statements of actual prevalence of CSAM on particular platforms. The findings aim to inform stronger prevention strategies, more effective regulation of digital platforms, and policies that uphold children's rights online.

Methodology

Study Design & Survey Instrument

Study Design | We conducted a global, anonymous self-report survey of adults actively searching for CSAM on the dark web. The survey aimed to investigate perpetration pathways, technology use, deterrence experiences, and related online risks. In addition to its research objectives, the survey served as a preventive intervention, disrupting CSAM-searching behaviour and offering respondents an opportunity to reflect on their actions and access perpetration-prevention resources to stop engaging with CSAM.

Survey Instrument | The survey consists of 54 questions, including multiple-choice (both single-select and multi-select), open-ended, and rating scale questions. The survey was available in 24 global languages, covering all continents. Most survey questions were optional, except for the inclusion criteria, and some questions were shown only if respondents selected specific previous options. As a result, the number of responses varies across items. For multi-select questions, the number of responses may be higher than the number of respondents who answered the question. Where data is presented in the report, the survey question is highlighted, e.g., "Q1".

Note: For the full survey questions and data tables, see the Data Annex.

Survey Development | The survey was developed by Protect Children and Ofcom and informed by consultations with stakeholders. Online focus group interviews were conducted on 4 and 5 March 2025 with 36 participants representing law enforcement, civil society, academia, policymakers, regulators, and the private sector. Insights from these discussions shaped the survey domains and question design.

Recruitment

We distributed the survey to CSAM seekers through a targeted intervention on Ahmia.fi, a globally used dark web search engine. Ahmia.fi permanently blocks search results for queries containing CSAM-related terms and instead displays links to surveys and to preventive resources. The search filtering is based on a list of 1,265 keywords in multiple languages, developed from user search behaviour and input from law enforcement. This approach allowed us to reach active CSAM perpetrators at the moment of risk.

Ethics & Data Quality

Ethics | The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region, Finland (Statement 67/2025). It adheres to the highest ethical standards for research with human participants. Before participating, respondents

were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, their rights in relation to participation and data processing, and the protections for anonymity and data security, and they provided informed consent.

Data Quality Assurance | Several procedures were implemented to ensure the integrity of the dataset:

- Only respondents who met the inclusion criteria (over 18 years old and having searched for or viewed CSAM) were able to respond to the survey.
- We reviewed completion times to identify any rushed or disengaged responses. Although some participants completed the survey quickly, their answers were consistent with those from longer sessions. Short times mainly reflected partial completions, and no responses were excluded based on completion time.
- We evaluated the consistency of responses over time and found that results remained stable throughout the data collection period.
- We compared the dataset to findings from earlier surveys conducted by Protect Children using similar methodology and found the results to be consistent.
- We removed participants from analysis who reported responding dishonestly.

Limitations | The study has certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings:

- The survey relies on anonymous self-report data from a self-selecting population, which may limit the representativeness of the sample and introduce reporting biases. Despite efforts to ensure clarity and anonymity, responses may still be influenced by social desirability, misunderstandings, or recall bias.
- Given the sensitivity of the study population, demographic data collection was deliberately limited. Only age range and gender were asked at the start of the survey, with additional demographic questions offered optionally at the end. As a result, only a small subset of respondents provided extra demographic information, which limits understanding of the wider sample.
- All survey questions were optional, resulting in varying response rates across items and smaller, uneven subsamples for certain analyses.

Use of Respondent Quotes | The report includes selected quotes from respondents to illustrate key themes and provide additional contextual insight. Quotes originally submitted in languages other than English have been translated into English. In some cases, quotes have been lightly edited to improve clarity and readability, while preserving their original meaning. Some quotes may include statements that are factually inaccurate or reflect respondents' perceptions or misunderstandings, for example in relation to specific platforms or services. Some quotes may include offensive language or terminology. Any views expressed in the quotes are those of the respondents and do not represent the views of Protect Children or Ofcom.

Sample

The survey targeted adults aged 18 years or older who had previously searched for or viewed CSAM. **Participation was voluntary and respondents did not receive any compensation.** Between 4 June 2025 and 18 January 2026, the survey was accessed 310,145 times, and 48,119 submissions were started. If participants reported being under 18 (n = 11,206) or reported they had never searched for or viewed CSAM (n = 15,497), they were not able to continue the survey and were instead directed to appropriate support resources. 21,416 respondents completed the survey. Responses were excluded from analysis if, in response to the honesty check question at the end of the survey, participants indicated that they had not answered honestly (n = 824), resulting in a final analytical sample of 20,592 respondents (see **Table 1**).

Table 1: Sample

	N	%
Survey started	48,119	100 %
Participation stopped [a] or excluded from analysis [b]	27,527	57 %
Under 18 years old [a]	*11,206*	*23 %*
Reported no CSAM use [a]	*15,497*	*32 %*
Reported dishonest responding [b]	*824*	*2 %*
Final analytical sample	20,592	43 %

Sample Characteristics

Age & Gender | Respondents were predominantly young adult men. Nearly half (45%) reported to be aged 18 to 24 years, and around a third (30%) aged 25 to 34 years. Three quarters of respondents (76%) identified as male. Smaller proportions identified as female (10%), non-binary (7%), or another gender identity (7%). See **Table 2** for the full sample characteristics.

Note: Further sociodemographic questions were offered optionally at the end of the survey. As a result, response rates for these items were substantially lower. The results from these items should therefore be interpreted with caution, as their representativeness in relation to the full sample cannot be established. The following analysis is based only on the subset of respondents who answered each question.

Education & Employment | Most respondents who answered this question reported being employed or self-employed (32%) or being a student (28%), while 33% reported being out of work. Over a third of respondents reported having completed tertiary education (37%), including a bachelor's (22%) or graduate degree (master's, PhD, M.D) (15%). Another third (35%) reported that their highest completed level of education was high school or equivalent, and 28% had less than a high school degree.

Relationships & Social Life | Among respondents who answered the optional question on relationships, around two thirds (65%) reported being single. One quarter were in a relationship (15%) or married or in a common law relationship (11%). Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with their social life. 34% rated it as poor or fair and 66% as good, very good, or excellent.

Physical & Mental Health | Respondents were asked to self-rate their physical and mental health. 30% of respondents reported poor or fair physical health, while 70% reported good to excellent physical health. Similar patterns were seen with mental health, with 30% of respondents reporting poor or fair mental health, while 70% rated their mental health good to excellent.

Location & Language | Among respondents who gave information on their location (14% of the sample), 32% reported living in Asia, 27% in Europe, 15% in North America, 11% in Africa, 10% in South America, and 5% in Oceania. The survey was available in 24 languages. Around two thirds of respondents (69%, n = 14,271) completed the survey in English. At least one thousand responses were received in Portuguese (6%, n = 1,197), Russian (5%, n = 1,105), and Spanish (5%, n = 1,021). Smaller numbers of responses were collected in the other languages. See **Table** 3 for the full breakdown of responses by language.

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

	n	%
Age Q2		
18-24	9239	45%
25-34	6264	30%
35-44	2807	14%
45-54	1126	5%
55-64	574	3%
65+	582	3%
Gender Q3		
Man	13298	76%
Woman	1728	10%
Non-binary	1189	7%
Other	1285	7%
Current employment Q52		
Employed or self-employed	1037	32%
Student	920	28%
Looking for work	390	12%
Unemployed	320	10%
Retired	216	7%
Unable to work	356	11%
Highest level of education Q53		
Less than high school	817	28%
High school degree	1016	35%
Bachelor's degree	648	22%
Graduate degree	448	15%
Continent Q54		
Africa	326	11%
Asia	1005	32%
Europe	846	27%
North America	476	15%
Oceania	141	5%
South America	312	10%

	n	%
Relationship status Q55		
Single	1929	65%
Relationship	435	15%
Married	331	11%
Widowed	146	5%
Divorced	127	4%
Self-rated social life Q56		
Poor	571	18%
Fair	521	16%
Good	1005	32%
Very good	536	17%
Excellent	545	17%
Self-rated physical health Q56		
Poor	468	15%
Fair	473	15%
Good	1015	33%
Very good	603	19%
Excellent	573	18%
Self-rated mental health Q56		
Poor	450	15%
Fair	454	15%
Good	978	32%
Very good	545	18%
Excellent	603	20%

Table 3: Language of survey responses

Language	n	%
English	14,271	69,30 %
Portuguese	1,197	5,81 %
Russian	1,105	5,37 %
Spanish	1,021	4,96 %
Arabic	781	3,79 %
French	543	2,64 %
Japanese	372	1,81 %
Hindi	322	1,56 %
Chinese Simplified	238	1,16 %
Farsi	184	0,89 %
German	180	0,87 %
Italian	111	0,54 %
Chinese Traditional	74	0,36 %
Ukrainian	71	0,34 %
Polish	59	0,29 %
Dutch	19	0,09 %
Greek	13	0,06 %
Swedish	8	0,04 %
Tamil	7	0,03 %
Finnish	7	0,03 %
Nepali	4	0,02 %
Croatian	3	0,01 %
Serbian	1	0,00 %
Bosnian	1	0,00 %
Total	**20,592**	**100%**

Overview of Key Findings

This section provides a summary of the main results. The detailed analyses and full reporting of the data are presented in the following section. These findings reflect the experiences of perpetrators globally. While this means they are not indicators of the effectiveness of any single national legal or regulatory regime, they provide rarely heard perspectives that enable the design of effective interventions.

Note: Click on each heading below to navigate directly to the corresponding section for the full results.

1. Perpetration Pathways: Early Exposure and Search Behaviour

- Many respondents were first exposed to CSAM at a very young age. By age ten, 13% had seen CSAM. Three in five (59%) had seen CSAM by age 18.
- Nearly half of respondents (46%) were first exposed to CSAM unintentionally, mostly by seeing it online without having searched for it (24%).
- More than half of respondents started searching for CSAM in childhood. By age 10, 12% had searched for CSAM. By age 18, 57% had searched for CSAM.
- Most respondents (88%) reported viewing CSAM depicting girls, and three in ten (29 %) reported viewing violent CSAM.

2. Accessibility of CSAM & Platforms Used to Find CSAM

- Respondents report using dark web and open web platforms at similar levels, with 63% reporting that they tend to search for CSAM on dark web platforms and 61% reporting that they tend to search on open web platforms.
- The open web platforms that respondents most commonly reported using to search for CSAM were search engines (27%) and pornography sites (22%).
- Perceptions of accessibility of CSAM were mixed. One third (33%) felt CSAM has become harder to access, particularly in the past five years, due to site shutdowns, moderation, policing, and paywalls. However, 44% perceived no change, and 23% believed access had become easier.

3. Platform Design: Features that Impact Accessibility

- Platform design features influenced respondents' platform choices. Most respondents reported avoiding platforms with features that undermined their privacy and security, such as age limits and strict sign-ups.
- Three in five respondents (61%) reported using security measures, mostly VPNs, when searching for, viewing, sharing, or storing CSAM.
- Nearly half (46%) reported storing CSAM, most commonly on personal devices, followed by cloud storage services and external storage device.

4. Emerging Technologies: The Role of AI and New Tools

- Three in ten respondents (29%) reported that they have viewed AI-generated CSAM. However, three in five respondents (61%) were not able to distinguish AI-generated imagery, so this may be understated.
- One in ten respondents (10%) reported that they have created AI-generated CSAM. Creators often reported that they learnt how to generate AI-CSAM through trial and error, using openly accessible and easy to use tools.
- One in five respondents (19%) reported that they have commissioned or produced AI-generated CSAM for profit.
- One in four respondents (25%) reported that they have used immersive technologies for purposes related to child sexual abuse.

5. Deterrence & Disruption: Interrupting and Changing Behaviour

- One in three respondents (34%) recalled encountering a warning message when searching for CSAM. Warning messages were most commonly recalled on open-web search engines.
- Responses to warning messages varied. Although many respondents reported to be indifferent or ignore the messages, around one in three said the messages prompted them to reflect on or change their behaviour.
- One in five respondents (19%) reported having been sanctioned or banned from a platform.

6. Intersecting Harms: CSAM within the Wider Online Risk Landscape

- CSAM use often co-occurred with other harms. Nearly half of respondents reported encountering or seeking other illegal or harmful content online, most commonly animal cruelty, self-harm and suicide, and extreme violence.
- Two in five respondents (39%) reported that algorithms on online platforms, mostly social media, recommended them harmful or sexual content that they did not search for. This refers to content that the respondent considered harmful or sexual and does not necessarily refer to illegal content.

Results

1. Perpetration Pathways: Early Exposure and Search Behaviour

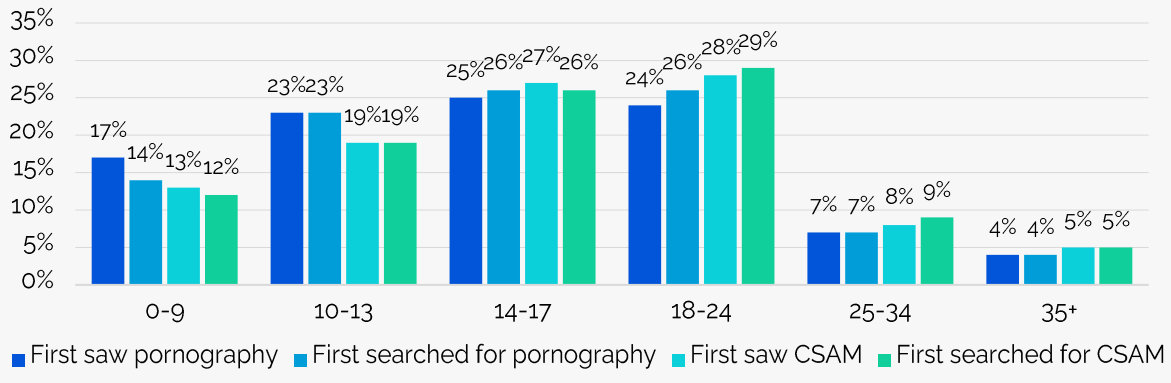
Previous research finds that many CSAM perpetrators are first exposed to CSAM at a young age.[2] Understanding how perpetrators first encounter sexual content and how they begin searching for CSAM is important for identifying early risk factors and intervention points. This section examines how and when respondents were first exposed to pornography and CSAM, as well as the characteristics of the CSAM that respondents search for and view.

AGE AT FIRST EXPOSURE

Three in five respondents were first exposed to CSAM before turning 18

Most respondents reported that they were children when they were first exposed to both pornography and CSAM. Before turning ten, 17% of respondents had seen pornography, and 13% had seen CSAM. By 14, these figures more than doubled: 40% had seen pornography and 32% had seen CSAM. By age 18, two in three respondents (65%) had seen pornography, and three in five (59%) had seen CSAM. It was rare for respondents to have first seen it after turning 25, with only one in ten respondents reporting first seeing pornography (11%) and CSAM (13%) when they were 25 years or older (see **Figure 1**). Q6

Figure 1: Age at first exposure to and search for pornography and CSAM



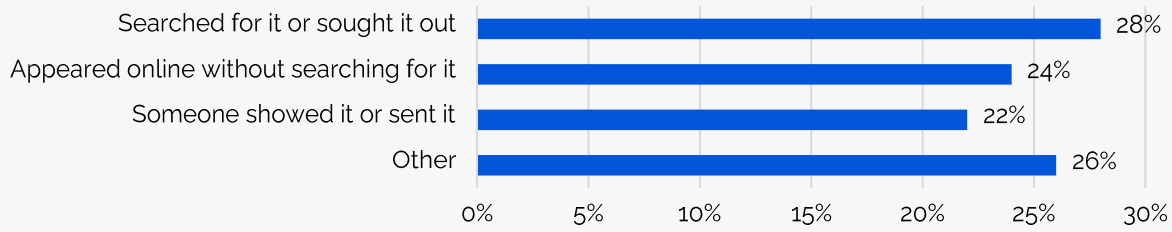
Q6: At what age did you first see adult pornography and sexual images or videos of children? And at what age did you first intentionally search for it? (n = 19,183)

[2] CSAM Users in the Dark Web: ReDirection Survey Report (Protect Children 2021); Viewing Child Sexual Abuse Material for the First Time: Findings From an Anonymous Survey of Internet Users (Napier et al., 2025).

Nearly half of respondents were first exposed to CSAM unintentionally

When asked how they first encountered CSAM, nearly half of respondents (46%) reported that they were first exposed to CSAM unintentionally, either by encountering it online without searching for it (24%) or through being shown or sent the material by someone else (22%), mostly by a friend. Three in ten respondents (28%) reported that they actively searched for or deliberately sought out the material. See **Figure 2**. Q8

Figure 2: How respondents first encountered CSAM

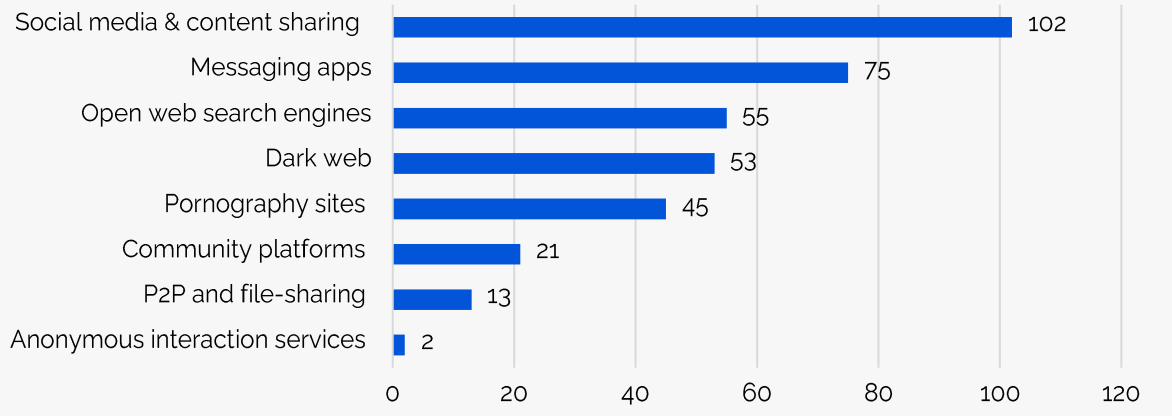


Q8: How and where did you first see sexual images or videos of children? (n = 11,348)

Of the respondents who reported that they were first exposed to CSAM online without having searched for it, many reported that they first unintentionally encountered CSAM on a social media or content sharing platform. Others reported that they first encountered it on a messaging app. See **Figure 3**. Q8

Figure 3: Online platforms where respondents first unintentionally saw CSAM

Analysis of n = 713 open-ended responses of respondents who answered, 'It appeared online without me searching for it, on what platform?' to Q8: How and where did you first see sexual images or videos of children? (n = 11,348)



Social networking & content sharing platforms (n = 102)	**Dark web (n = 53)**	**Peer-to-peer and file-sharing networks (n = 13)**
Twitter (n = 32)	Dark web (n = 21)	Ares (n = 4)
Facebook (n = 24)	Tor (n =18)	Kazaa (n = 3)
Instagram (n = 17)	Deep web (n = 5)	LimeWire (n = 3)
TikTok (n = 15)	Torch search engine (n = 4)	Torrent (n = 2)
YouTube (n = 10)	Ahmia (n = 3)	Other (n = 1)[3]
	Onion (n = 2)	

[3] Please note that throughout the report, references to platforms by a single respondent have been excluded.

VK (n = 10) Odnoklassniki (n = 4) **Messaging apps (n = 75)** Telegram (n = 63) WhatsApp (n = 11) Other (n = 1) **Open web search engines (n = 55)** Google (n = 55) Other (n = 1)	**Pornography sites (n = 45)** XVideos (n = 12) Pornhub (n = 12) XNXX (n = 9) XHamster (n = 8) TikTok 18+ (n = 4) **Community platforms (n = 21)** Discord (n = 12) Reddit (n = 6) 4chan (n = 3)	**Anonymous interaction services (n = 2)** Omegle (n = 2)

- AGE AT FIRST SEARCH

More than half of respondents started searching for pornography and CSAM before age 18

Not only were respondents young when they were first exposed to sexual content, but they were also young when they first intentionally searched for it. Over half of respondents started searching for pornography and CSAM before age 18. By age ten, 14% of respondents had actively searched for pornography, and 12% had searched for CSAM. By age 14, 38% had searched for pornography and 31% had searched for CSAM. 64% had searched for pornography and 57% had searched for CSAM by age 18. See **Table 4**. Q6

Table 4: Age at first exposure to and search for pornography and CSAM

Q6: At what age did you first see adult pornography and sexual images or videos of children? And at what age did you first intentionally search for it? (n = 19,183)

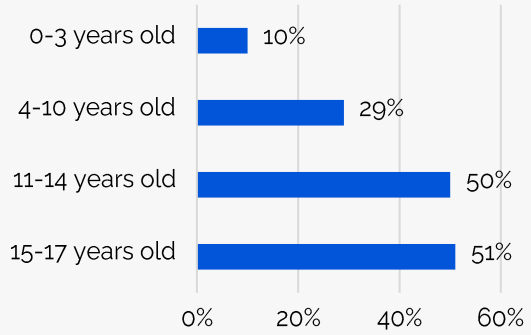
	Seen pornography	Searched for pornography	Seen CSAM	Searched for CSAM
By age 10	17 %	14%	13 %	12%
By age 14	40 %	38 %	32 %	31 %
By age 18	65 %	64 %	59 %	57 %

- TYPE OF CSAM VIEWED

Respondents mostly view CSAM depicting girls aged 11 to 17 years

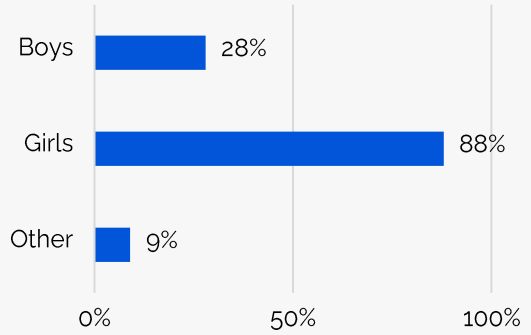
The majority of respondents reported viewing material involving children aged 11 to 17. 50% of respondents view material depicting 11–14-year-olds and 51% view material depicting 15-17-year-olds. Q12 A substantial proportion reported viewing content involving much younger children: three in ten (29%) viewed material depicting children aged 4-10, and one in ten (10%) reported viewing material depicting infants and toddlers aged 0-3 (see **Figure 4**). Q12 Nine in ten respondents (88%) indicated that the CSAM they viewed involved girls and nearly three in ten (28%) reported viewing CSAM involving boys, with two in ten (19%) reporting viewing both girls and boys (see **Figure 5**). Q13

Figure 4: Age of children depicted



Q12: What age are the children in the content you typically view? (n = 14,283, selected answers: 20,137)

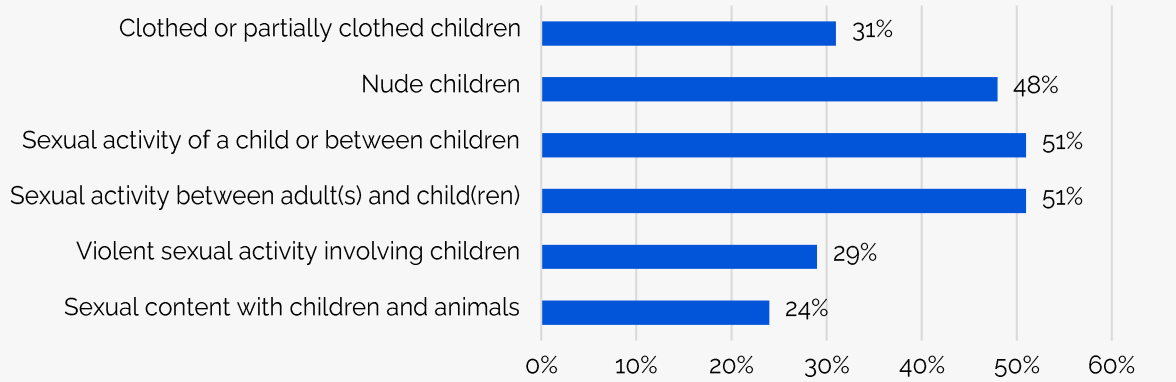
Figure 5: Gender of children depicted



Q13: What gender are the children in the content you typically view? (n = 14,436, selected answers: 17,935)

In terms of the severity of CSAM that respondents viewed, most respondents reported searching for or viewing material depicting sexual activity of a child or between children (51%), sexual activity between adults and children (51%), or nude children (48%). 31% reported viewing content of clothed or partially clothed children. Nearly three in ten (29%) view violent sexual activity involving children, and nearly a quarter (24%) view sexual content involving children and animals (see **Figure 6**). Q14

Figure 6: Severity of CSAM engaged with



Q14: What is the usual type of content you search for or view? (n = 12,733, selected answers: 29,864)

Key Takeaways

- **Early exposure to pornography is a risk factor.** Many respondents reported first seeing pornography at a very young age. Research finds that exposure to sexual content in childhood is significantly associated with later harmful sexual behaviour,[4] suggesting that early exposure to pornography may increase vulnerability to escalation towards more extreme or illegal material, including CSAM.
- **Early and unintentional exposure to CSAM is prevalent.** A notable proportion of respondents reported very early exposure to CSAM, and many respondents were first exposed unintentionally. Exposure to CSAM in childhood, especially unintentional online exposure, is particularly concerning and may be seen as an adverse childhood experience. It may reinforce harmful sexual interests and increase the risk of subsequent harmful and illegal sexual behaviours.[5]
- **The findings underscore the need for robust measures to prevent both deliberate and unintentional exposure** to pornography and CSAM online, particularly among children and adolescents. The findings also highlight that adolescence is a critical period for intervention, as many respondents began actively searching for CSAM before the age of 18.
- **Respondents reported viewing a wide spectrum of victim ages.** While respondents primarily reported viewing CSAM depicting early to mid-adolescents, the sample also reported a broad range of victim ages, including infants and very young children, indicating severe risk.
- **CSAM is a gendered issue.** Consistent with previous research,[6] CSAM consumption disproportionately involves girls, reflecting broader patterns of sexual exploitation and gendered vulnerability.
- **Many respondents view very severe abuse material.** In total, more than one in three respondents (36%) reported viewing CSAM involving violence (29%), CSAM involving animals (24%), or both (18%).

[4] Exposure to sexual content and problematic sexual behaviors in children and adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis (Mori et al., 2023).
[5] Viewing Child Sexual Abuse Material for the First Time: Findings From an Anonymous Survey of Internet Users (Napier et al., 2025).
[6] CSAM Users in the Dark Web: Protecting Children Through Prevention (Protect Children, 2021).

2. Accessibility of CSAM & Platforms Used to Find CSAM

The online availability of CSAM is shaped by platform design and broader technological development. This section examines the platforms respondents tend to use to access CSAM and presents their perceptions of how accessibility has changed over time.

PLATFORMS USED TO ACCESS CSAM

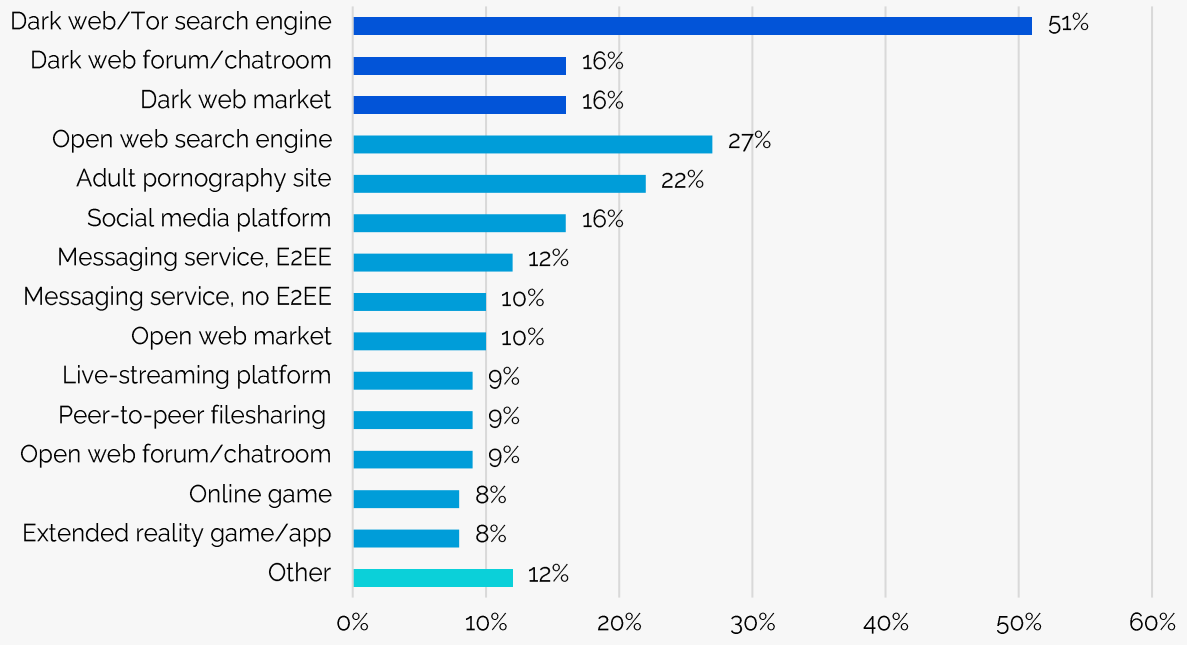
Respondents reported accessing CSAM through a range of platforms across both the dark web and the open web

When asked which platforms they tend to use to search for and view CSAM, 63% of respondents reported typically using dark web platforms, while 61% reported typically using open web platforms (see **Figure 7**). Some overlap exists as respondents could, and often did, select multiple platform types, with an average of 2.4 platform types chosen per respondent. Q16

Around half of respondents (51%) reported that they typically search for CSAM on a dark web or Tor search engine. Fewer reported using dark web forums or chatrooms (16%), and dark web marketplaces (16%). Q16

Note: The survey was disseminated via a dark web search engine. As a result, respondents who use dark web search engines may be overrepresented in the sample.

Figure 7: Types of platforms used to access CSAM



Q16: On which platforms do you tend to search for and view sexual images or videos of children? Specify which platform. (n = 11,841, selected answers: 27,817)

Just over a quarter of respondents (27%) reported that they tend to search for CSAM on open web search engines. Pornography websites (22%) and social media platforms (16%) were also commonly reported as platforms they usually use to seek CSAM. As were end-to-end encrypted (12%) and non-encrypted (10%) messaging services. [Q16] Specific platforms mentioned by respondents in open-ended answers are presented in **Table 5**. These responses reflect where respondents reported searching for CSAM; they do not indicate whether CSAM was necessarily found on or hosted by these platforms, nor whether searches were successful.

Table 5: Open web platforms on which respondents tend to search for CSAM

Examples from n = 1,109 open-ended responses to Q16: On which platforms do you tend to search for and view sexual images or videos of children? Specify which platform. (n = 11,841, selected answers: 27,817).

Note: As these examples are drawn from respondents' descriptions, platforms may appear in multiple categories, and some may be inaccurately categorised.

Platform type	Platforms mentioned at least twice in open-ended responses
Open web search engine (27%)	Google, Yandex, DuckDuckGo, Bing
Adult pornography sites (22%)	Pornhub, XHamster, Xvideos, TokioMotion
Social media platforms (16%)	Telegram, X/Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, VK, YouTube
Messaging service, end-to-end encrypted (12%)	Telegram, WhatsApp, Messenger, Discord, Signal
Messaging service, not end-to-end encrypted (10%)	Telegram, Snapchat, Discord, Zangi
Live-streaming platforms (9%)	Twitch
Peer-to-peer filesharing websites (9%)	The Pirate Bay
Open web forums or chatrooms (9%)	Reddit, 4chan
Online games (8%)	Roblox, Free Fire
Other (12%)	AI generators

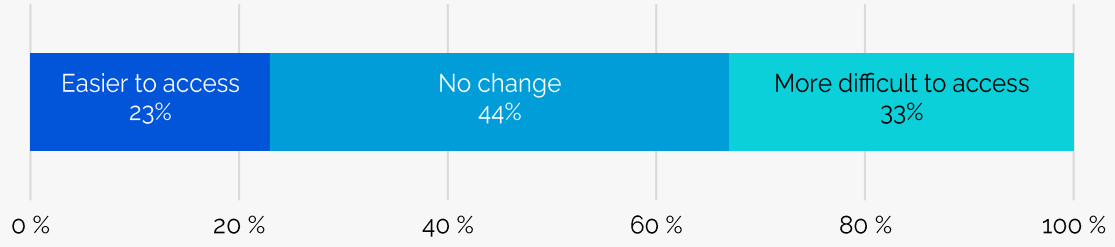
- VIEWS ON ACCESSIBILITY OF CSAM

A third of respondents reported that CSAM has become more difficult to access, while nearly half perceived no change

When asked about changes in the online accessibility of CSAM over time, respondents reported mixed views (see **Figure 8**). One third of respondents (33%) reported that CSAM had become more difficult to access, while a larger portion did not perceive increased difficulty. Nearly half of respondents (44%) said they had noticed no change, and nearly a quarter (23%) believed that CSAM had become easier to access. [Q42]

While the survey question did not specify a time frame, respondents were asked to elaborate on when the perceived changes happened. Respondents who thought access had become more difficult mostly described this happening over the past decade: *"It was different in the 2010-s. It was much more easy, I suppose"*, *"Got more difficult in 2018"*, and *"Feels like back in quarantine it was a lot easier"*. Respondents especially noted changes in the last five years: *"I think access is more difficult now, at least there is not as much of free pics or videos than it was even 5 years ago"*, and *"2-3 years ago it was very easy"*.

Figure 8: Perceptions of change in CSAM accessibility



Q42: Have you noticed any change in the ability to access sexual content of children online? How and when has it changed? (n = 7,729)

Respondents most commonly attributed the increased difficulty to the shutdown of websites and platforms, stricter moderation on mainstream services, stronger policing efforts, and the growing use of paywalls, digital currencies, and registration requirements (see **Table 6**). Some respondents emphasised that despite access becoming more difficult, it had not been eliminated entirely: *"it is harder to find, but I never failed to find it"*. Q42

Table 6: Factors contributing to reduced accessibility of CSAM

Based on n = 204 open-ended responses from respondents who indicated that CSAM has become more difficult to access in response to Q42 (n = 7,729).

Category	Description	Example responses
Increased site and platform takedowns	Respondents described websites being removed more quickly and more extensively than in the past.	*"When I first started I found so many sites but they continue to get taken down"* *"around a year or so ago, a lot of sites got nuked"* *"cp sites have been taken down faster"* *"now some of the websites of [CSAM] on tor were taken down"*
Stronger platform moderation	Respondents reported greater content monitoring and removal on mainstream platforms.	*"in the past 6 mo it has become harder to find free csam on mainstream sites"* *"websites have become more aware of how pervasive the issue is"* *"well pornhub in like 2020 had bunch of child porn"*
Strengthened law enforcement and policing efforts	Respondents attributed reduced access to improved policing and investigative capabilities, particularly on the dark web.	*"Police have also improved their combat capabilities within Tor"* *"Seems like a lot of sites have been scrubbed from the internet. I wouldn't be surprised if most sites that remain are ran by Police of some sort"*
Increased access barriers such as paywalls and registration	Respondents described stricter registration requirements, paywalls, and cryptocurrency payments limiting access.	*"many more websites demand strict registration and bitcoin to view content"* *"Not much free content"* *"Honestly I'm not looking very hard, but Limewire and even YouTube had things*

		wide open. Now even with Tor, everything is sign up and pay first" *"my access is only limited by my lack of economic and financial resources, including digital currencies"*

Of the 44% of respondents who reported not noticing a change in the accessibility of CSAM online, some acknowledged seeing increased enforcement efforts but saw these as having little overall impact. As one respondent noted: *"Recently some sites got down, but new sites pop up really fast"*.

Among the 23% of respondents who reported that CSAM had become easier to access, many attributed this to a perceived increase in the overall amount of CSAM: *"its all over the normal web"*, *"its almost everywhere"*. Others mentioned the greater ease in locating content online: *"It used to be nearly impossible, now it's two clicks away, well, maybe three."*, *"more easy to find like veryyy easy"*, *"It is WAY too easy"*, "*it has been absurdly easy to find that sh*t"*. Some respondents also noted a rise in the severity of the material encountered: *"it has become more graphic and extreme"*. Respondents most often linked the increased accessibility to mainstream social media platforms, where content could be found through sellers, groups, or algorithmic recommendations with little active searching. Others pointed to faster internet speeds and the rise of AI tools as factors that have lowered barriers to access (see **Table 7**). Q42

Table 7: Factors contributing to increased accessibility of CSAM

Based on n = 138 open-ended responses from respondents who indicated that CSAM has become easier to access in response to Q42 (n = 7,729).

Category	Description	Example responses
Greater availability on social media and messaging platforms	Respondents described easier discovery and exchange of CSAM through widely used social and messaging platforms.	*"via social media"* *"Telegram is just too easy",* *"i can simply go to Instagram and look for video link sellers they even now run their ads. i dont even have to search for them they just pop up"* *"from telegram"* *"its very easy to find on twitter or reddit"* *"its on discord openly"* *"its almost everywhere u cant see it lets start from Instagram...."* *"a lot of games and social media websites ez to find what i want on it ,and unreal content there is less control on it"*
Expansion and evolution of dark web content and infrastructure	Respondents reported growth in the number of sites, onion links, and anonymous networks,	*"there are now more sites on Tor and it is easier to find them"*

	improving discoverability for experienced users.	*"because of the existence of anonymous and uncensored networks… since the 2010's years"* *"i know a bit of how to use dark web so its easy now"* *"need experience with the dark web surfing that's it"*
Reduced need for dark web access	Some respondents stated that CSAM is increasingly accessible on the open web, reducing reliance on specialised tools.	*"Most of the time, I'm no longer forced to enter the dark web and take security measures solely from file-sharing applications."* *"you dont even need to go to Tor anymore. the clear web has everything."*
Online peer exchange	Respondents described online platforms facilitating contact with other perpetrators, enabling trading and sharing.	*"on Telegram I just have to find someone who has it, say 'let's trade,' and I have it"* *"From 2020 to present I have a much easier time finding like minded individuals"*
Broader technological developments lowering access barriers	Respondents linked increased accessibility to wider technological changes, including faster internet speeds, VPN use, end-to-end encrypted services, and AI tools.	*"with AI, of course"* *"thanks to signal"* *"high speed internet the last 10-15 years has made it way easier"* *"vpn"*

Key Takeaways

- **CSAM access spans multiple online environments.** Respondents reported searching for CSAM across many different online platforms, mostly through dark web and open web search engines and adult pornography sites. This underlines the breadth of platforms misused to access CSAM, highlighting the need for a multifaceted approach to prevention and disruption.
- **Accessibility of CSAM is a key driver of abuse.** The wide accessibility of CSAM online is a key situational factor that drives online child sexual abuse and exploitation.[7] The possibility to anonymously disseminate CSAM on the internet, combined with the growing presence of children in online platforms that lack sufficient safeguarding mechanisms, facilitates exposure to violent material and multiplies opportunities to offend.
- **Some perpetrators perceive the digital environment as permissive.** Despite significant efforts to regulate online platforms and tackle online child sexual abuse and exploitation, many perpetrators still view the digital ecosystem as a place where accessing and disseminating CSAM is easy, possible, and largely unrestricted.

[7] What Drives Online CSA Offending? Understanding Motivations, Facilitators, Situational Factors, and Barriers (Protect Children, 2024).

3. Platform Design: Features that Impact Accessibility

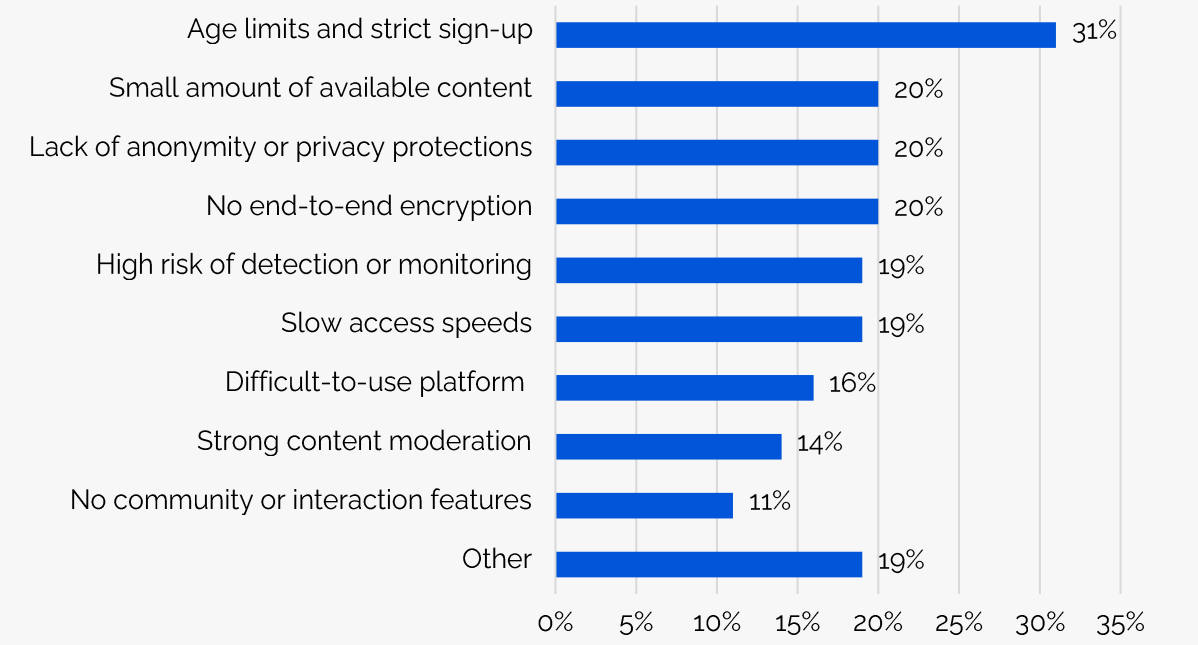
Platform design can either facilitate or prevent access to CSAM. This section examines the deterrence potential of technical and design features, security measures that respondents use to avoid detection, and how respondents store CSAM, providing insight into how platform design can shape behaviour.

- PLATFORMS FEATURES THAT RESPONDENTS AVOID

Respondents prioritise privacy and security when choosing platforms

When asked which platform or app features they avoid or dislike when searching for CSAM, respondents selected an average of 1.9 features each, highlighting that multiple factors influence platform choice (see **Figure 9**). Q19 The majority reported avoiding features that undermined their privacy and security. Specifically, 31% avoided platforms with age limits and strict sign-up procedures, 20% avoided platforms without anonymity protections, and another 20% avoided platforms lacking end-to-end encryption. In addition, 19% avoided platforms they perceived as having a high risk of monitoring or detection. Q19 When asked which single feature would be most likely to stop them from using a platform to search for CSAM, age limits and strict registration ranked highest at 21%. Q20

Figure 9: Features on platforms and apps that respondents avoid



Q19: Which platform/app features do you avoid or dislike when searching for sexual images or videos of children? (n = 8,799, selected answers: 16,714)

One in five respondents (20%) reported that they avoid platforms that have a small amount of CSAM available, and 14% avoided platforms with strong moderation or frequent content removal. Q19

Respondents also avoided platforms with technical or usability issues. Slow access speeds (19%) and difficult-to-use interfaces (16%) deterred respondents, showing that poor performance or design can reduce engagement even when not intended as security measures. Q19

Social and community features affected choices for some respondents, with 11% avoiding platforms that lacked forums, messaging, or other interaction features. Q19

In addition, 19% of respondents avoided platforms due to other factors, including paywalls or costs to access content: *"pay to view"*, *"no free content"*, suggesting that financial barriers may also influence engagement. Q19

- USE OF SECURITY MEASURES

Three in five respondents use security measures

A majority of respondents (61%) reported that they use security measures when searching for, viewing, sharing, or storing CSAM. The most common methods, based on open-ended responses (n = 888), were using VPNs: *"vpn"*, or the Tor browser: *"tor itself increases security"*, *"I usually use the TOR network"*. Some respondents reported using private browsing or separate devices: *"I use private mode so that there is no trace left in the browser history"*, *"I change the internet connection"*, *"i use an old modify laptop"*, and *"a burner laptop"*. The remaining 39% reported not using any security measures. Q18

- STORING CSAM

Nearly half of respondents store CSAM, often using personal devices and cloud storage

Almost half of respondents (46%) reported that they file or store CSAM in some way. The most common storage location was a personal device (20%), followed by cloud storage services (16%) and external storage devices (12%). A further 11% reported storing CSAM on other platforms or devices. Open-ended responses provide insight into how storage practices vary across these categories (see **Table 8**). Q17

Table 8: Platforms and devices used to store CSAM

Analysis of n = 216 open-ended responses of respondents who answered 'Yes' to Q17 Do you file or store sexual images or videos of children? If yes, on which platforms or devices? (n = 9,414, selected answers: 10,559)

Personal device	Cloud storage service
Respondents who reported storing CSAM on personal devices mentioned phones (n = 44), laptops (n = 13), desktop computers (n = 7), and tablets (n = 1).	Respondents who reported storing CSAM on cloud storage services mentioned Google Drive (n = 10), Mega (n = 4), and Dropbox (n = 3).
External storage device	**Other**
Respondents who reported storing CSAM on external storage devices mentioned USB drives (n = 14) and external hard drives (n = 6).	Respondents who reported storing CSAM on other platforms mentioned end-to-end encrypted messaging services, including Telegram (n = 10), and encryption tools such as encrypted containers or volumes (n = 3).

More than half of respondents (54%) reported that they do not store CSAM, largely citing concerns over illegality and risk of detection. For example: *"cant risk it"*, *"it's not safe to leave this on your phone"*, *"I am not a f***ing idiot. Dear god, I would never save any of it. I would rather never be able to find it again than save it"*. One respondent reported that they only view or stream CSAM, explaining that: *"although there is no such thing as risk free viewing"*, they *"try not to download anything"*. Q17

Additionally, some respondents said they avoid storing CSAM in an attempt to avoid escalating their behaviour: *"I have deleted them all as i am doing my best to remove any attraction or ability to view the behaviour "*, and *"i try quiting every single time so i never save this awful evil trash"*. Q17

Key Takeaways

- **Perpetrators prioritise privacy and security when choosing platforms.** Respondents reported that features limiting privacy or security can deter them from using a platform or app, with age verification and strict sign-up requirements most commonly avoided. This suggests that perpetrators actively select platforms where they can maintain anonymity.
- **Use of additional security measures varies.** Three in five respondents reported using tools such as VPNs or the Tor browser to stay undetected. However, a significant minority, two in five respondents don't use any additional security measures.
- **Storage services represent a safeguarding gap.** Nearly half of respondents reported that they store CSAM, mostly on personal devices and cloud storage services. This highlights gaps in detection efforts on storage services, which enable the collection and accumulation of CSAM, hindering its removal from the internet.

4. Emerging Technologies: The Role of AI and New Tools

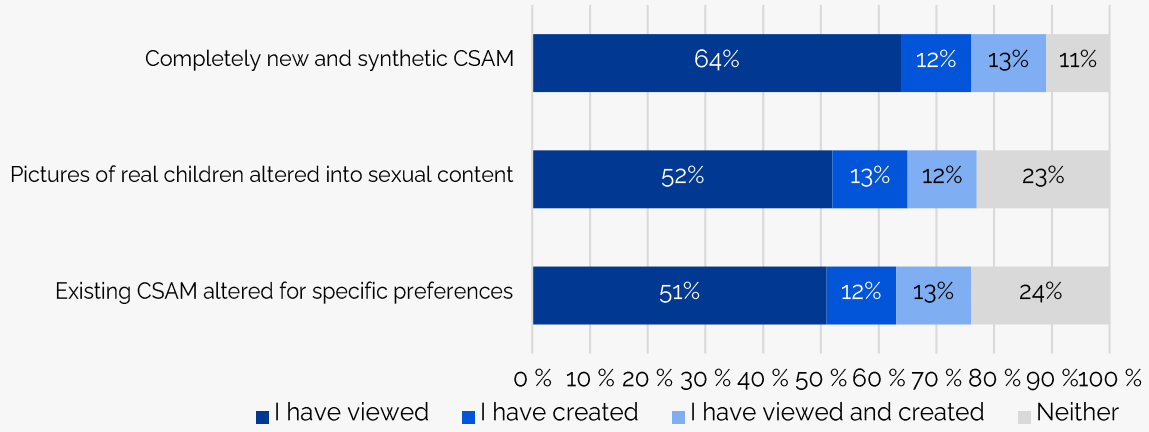
Emerging technologies are reshaping the production, distribution, and consumption of CSAM. AI is increasingly being used to create photo-realistic CSAM.[8] AI-generated CSAM causes significant harm even when no real child is directly involved, as it sexualises and objectifies children, sustains demand for abusive material, and reinforces harmful fantasies.[9] This section examines the use of AI-generated CSAM and extended reality technologies.

- VIEWING AI-GENERATED CSAM

Three in ten respondents have viewed AI-CSAM

More than one in three respondents (35%) reported that they have viewed or created AI-generated CSAM, with three in ten (29%) having viewed it. Q34 This figure is likely to be an underestimate, as three in five respondents (61%) reported that they could not, or were unsure if they could, distinguish AI-generated from real imagery, suggesting that some may view AI-CSAM without recognising it. Q38 Among respondents who reported viewing AI-CSAM, most (77%) said the content was entirely AI-generated. 64% reported viewing AI-CSAM created by altering images of real children, and 64% reported viewing AI-CSAM derived from existing CSAM that had been modified to suite specific preferences (see **Figure 10**). Q36

Figure 10: Type of AI-CSAM viewed and created



Q36: What type of AI-generated sexual images or videos of children have you viewed or created? (n = 2,602)

[8] In 2025, the Internet Watch Foundation reported a 26,362% annual increase in photo-realistic AI-CSAM. AI becoming 'child sexual abuse machine' adding to 'dangerous' record levels of online abuse, IWF warns (Internet Watch Foundation, 2026).
[9] AI Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material -- What's the Harm? (Ó Ciardha et al., 2025).

One in ten respondents have created AI-CSAM, learning through trial and error using open-access tools

One in ten (10%) respondents reported that they have created AI-generated CSAM. [Q34] The type of AI-CSAM created was evenly split between fully AI-generated content, altered images of real children, and existing CSAM modified to suit specific preferences (see **Figure 10**). [Q36]

Among the 10% of respondents who create AI-CSAM, [Q34] many described the process of generating AI-CSAM as easy. The availability of free, open-access image generation tools with few or no safeguards, combined with minimal technical skill requirements, meant that generating AI-CSAM was widely perceived as a low-barrier activity. Most respondents reported that they had taught themselves to create AI-CSAM: *"learned by myself"*, *"through trial and error"*. Many underscored that little to no technical knowledge was needed, describing the process as *"simple"*, *"nothing to learn"*, *"straightforward"*, or something they *"just tried"*. [Q35]

Respondents emphasised the abundance of tools available, referring to *"multiple tools"*, *"various image generators"*, and *"a lot of different websites"*. **Table 9** presents the specific AI tools mentioned by respondents. Several highlighted how easily these tools could be found and used, often without encountering meaningful restrictions, for example, *"I searched and clicked on the 1st option"*, *"I've used a lot of different websites to create AI-generated CSAM. Unfortunately it is very easy to find image generators that don't have any restrictions or ones that are easy to bypass"*. [Q35]

Table 9: AI tools reportedly used by respondents to create CSAM

Analysis of n = 151 open-ended responses to Q35: What tools do you use to create AI-generated sexual images or videos of children? How did you learn to use these tools? (n = 151)

AI tools		
Unnamed AI image generator (n = 31)	Grok (n = 4)	Pixiv AI (n = 2)
Stable Diffusion (n = 13)	Telegram bot (n = 3)	SeaArt.AI (n = 2)
ChatGPT (n = 7)	Unnamed nudify app (n = 3)	
Perchance (n = 5)	Local/self-hosted model (n = 3)	28 other AI tools were mentioned once each.
Dark web site (n = 4)	Sora (n = 2)	

Over half of AI-CSAM users are involved in the AI-CSAM economy

More than half of respondents who reported viewing or creating AI-CSAM (54%), representing approximately 19% of the total sample, were involved in commissioning or producing AI-generated CSAM for profit, indicating the presence of an emerging AI-CSAM economy. On the demand side, one third of AI-CSAM users (34%) reported asking someone to create AI-generated CSAM, and 16% reported paying for it. On the supply side, 13% said they had been asked to generate CSAM, and 8% reported receiving payment for doing so. [Q37]

- ATTITUDES TOWARDS AI-GENERATED CSAM

Respondents expressed mixed attitudes towards AI-CSAM

Respondents reported divided views on the use of AI to generate CSAM. When asked whether AI-generated CSAM is more ethical than recorded CSAM, 28% agreed or strongly agreed, while 40% disagreed and 32% neither agreed nor disagreed. Q38 Attitudes towards consuming AI-CSAM were similarly split. Nearly one quarter of respondents (23%) reported that they like viewing AI-generated CSAM as much as or more than real CSAM, while 32% were neutral and 45% disagreed. Q38 This indicates that for a small but significant group, AI-CSAM is not merely a substitute but a content form with comparable or greater appeal.

- RISKS OF AI-GENERATED CSAM

Respondents warn of risks of escalation linked to AI-CSAM

Respondents warned about significant risks related to AI-CSAM, with some describing it as a *"gateway"*, potentially escalating fantasies into action, with the *"novelty eventually wearing off and the need to see the real thing growing"*. One respondent shared: *"AI opens the door to even unhealthier fantasies and therefore increases the risks of translating them into action"*. Q39

- USE OF IMMERSIVE TECHNOLOGIES

One in four respondents use immersive technologies for purposes related to child sexual abuse

Emerging immersive technologies are also being used in ways that facilitate child sexual abuse. One quarter of respondents (25%) reported having used extended reality (XR) technologies for at least one purpose related to child sexual abuse. This included using XR to contact other perpetrators (12%), to contact children (11%), and to create, view, or share CSAM (9%). Respondents could select multiple options. Q41

Open-ended responses suggest that immersive environments are being used to access CSAM, simulate or enact sexual interactions, and in some cases commercialise abuse: *"I've provided services to 'wear' a 'lolicon'[10] avatar in the game VRChat and virtually pretend to be a little girl for someone so they can fulfil their fantasy in a somewhat more ethical way, virtually"*. Q41

[10] A term used to refer to drawn or digital media, such as manga, anime, or games, that features sexualised underage characters.

Key Takeaways

- **Use of AI-CSAM may be higher than the data suggests.** AI-generated images can now be virtually indistinguishable from real images, and respondents themselves are unsure whether they can distinguish them. Therefore, the 29% of respondents who reported having viewed AI-CSAM is likely to be an underestimate.
- **The barriers to creating AI-CSAM are exceptionally low.** With minimal effort, perpetrators can identify tools and experiment with prompts to rapidly produce harmful content. The ease of this process contributes to the growing prevalence of CSAM and makes victim identification and content removal even more challenging. The findings highlight the need for more robust safeguards and proactive measures within generative AI platforms to prevent misuse.
- **Many respondents are actively involved in the AI-CSAM economy.** The findings suggest that AI-CSAM is not only being generated individually, but is also being commissioned, exchanged, and monetised through interactions between users, creating strong incentives for production and circulation. The finding also points to a potential prevention opportunity, as the transfer of money between users could be investigated or disrupted to reduce the distribution of AI-CSAM.
- **Extended reality is diversifying CSAM offending by providing an immersive experience.** It is likely that realistic and immersive nature of new technologies may lower barriers to offending behaviour and facilitate contact with children.

5. Deterrence & Disruption: Interrupting and Changing Behaviour

Deterrence measures aim to disrupt harmful behaviour at the point of search or access. Research suggests that well-designed deterrence messages can reduce engagement with CSAM and offer a scalable approach to online CSAM prevention.[11] This section examines respondents' recalled encounters with warning messages and their reactions to them, as well as experiences of sanctions or bans.

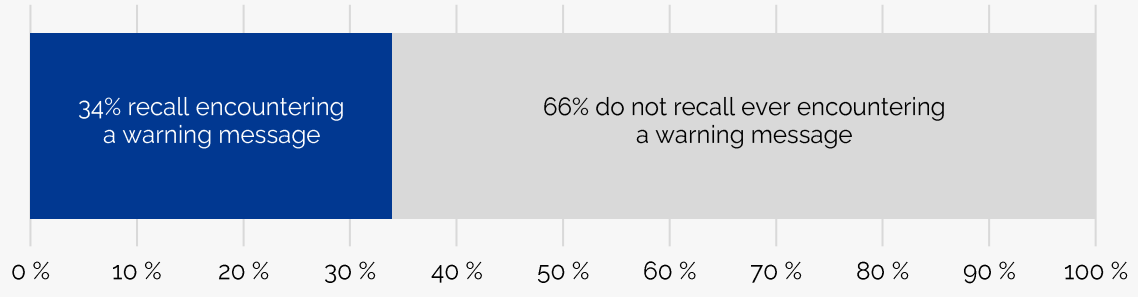
- RECALLED ENCOUNTERS WITH WARNING MESSAGES

One in three respondents recall encountering a warning message

Around a third of respondents (34%) reported having seen a warning when searching for CSAM (see **Figure 11**). Respondents most commonly recall encountering warnings on open web search engines and browsers, particularly Google, and dark web search engines, most notably Ahmia.fi. Respondents also recalled encountering warnings on pornography websites and social media platforms, and less frequently on messaging services, AI apps, and cloud storage services. A group of respondents described encountering warnings across nearly all platforms or sites they used: *"everywhere"*, *"all locations"*. **Table 10** presents the platforms where respondents recall encountering warning messages. Q43

Note: This question captures respondents' recollection of warning messages. A lack of recall does not necessarily indicate that a warning was not encountered.

Figure 11: Recalled encounters with online warning messages



Q43: Have you ever encountered warning messages when searching for sexual content of children? (n = 7,658)

[11] Effects of Automated Messages on Internet Users Attempting to Access "Barely Legal" Pornography (Prichard et al., 2021); reThink Chatbot evaluation (Scanlan et al., 2024); Warning messages to prevent illegal sharing of sexual images: Results of a randomised controlled experiment (Prichard et al., 2022); The effect of therapeutic and deterrent messages on Internet users attempting to access 'barely legal' pornography (Prichard et al., 2024); Online Warning Messages for CSAM Prevention: Evidence and Practice Mapping (Protect Children, 2025).

Table 10: Platforms on which respondents recall encountering warning messages

Analysis of n = 380 open-ended responses of respondents who answered 'Yes, on what type of site or app?' to Q43: Have you ever encountered warning messages when searching for sexual content of children? (n = 7,658)

Platform category	Platform category
Open web search engines and browsers (n = 145) → Google (n = 106) → Bing (n = 2) **Dark web search engines and Tor sites (n = 94)** → Ahmia.fi (n = 44) **Pornography sites (n = 31)** → Pornhub (n = 18) → Xhamster (n = 2) **Social media platforms (n = 25)** → Instagram (n = 11) → Facebook (n = 6) → Tiktok (n =5) → X (n = 4) → YouTube (n = 3)	**Messaging apps (n = 8)** → Telegram (n = 7) **AI apps and services (n = 4)** **Cloud storage (n = 3)** → Mega (n = 3) **Forums (n = 3)** **Splash pages on removed sites (n = 3)** **Multiple platforms or everywhere (n = 23)**

REACTIONS TO WARNING MESSAGES

Those who encountered warning messages had mixed reactions

Encounters with online warning messages provoked a variety of reactions, including indifference; behavioural change or reflection; and emotions such as guilt, shame, fear, and anger (see **Table 11**). A notable subset of respondents reported that warnings led to concrete behavioural changes, such as stopping searching for CSAM, leaving the site, or seeking help. Even when warnings did not immediately stop behaviour, they often prompted reflection or raised awareness about the illegality and harm of CSAM. One respondent describes how they ignored the messages at first, but repeated exposure led to behavioural change: *"I usually ignore them, but recently decided to listen because I became concerned about my habits"*. Q44

Table 11: Reactions to warning messages

Analysis of n = 669 open-ended responses to Q44: How did you react to the warning message? Did it change your thoughts, feelings, or behaviours?

Reaction	Quotes
Indifference or ignoring the message (n = 196) Many respondents reported that they ignored or dismissed the warning messages.	*"No reaction", "Ignored them"* *"I didn't really feel anything, I looked for curiosity not sexual gratification"*
Behavioural change or reflection (n = 181) Many respondents reported that warnings directly led to changes in their behaviour, such as stopping searching for CSAM, leaving the	*"It scared me at first but then all I felt was shame and remorse. It made me think for a second about getting help. So I began to search for resources related to changing my behaviours"* *"Yes, I always have felt really bad about seeing all these things. That helps snap me out of searching"*

site, or seeking help. Even if they ignored them at first, repeated exposure could result in behavioural change.	*"It makes me reflect and many times I stop doing it"* *"I have researched places that could provide help."*
Emotional reactions (n = 77) Several respondents described experiencing guilt, shame, anxiety, or fear in response to warnings, highlighting the potential of warning messages to provoke self-reflection.	*"It makes me feel ashamed and guilty"* *"I was terrified of my devices for days. I thought the FBI was going to break my door down."* *"It got me worried about getting caught, but not enough to stop. God, do I want to stop."*
Anger or frustration (n = 26) Some respondents reacted with anger, frustration, or dismissiveness.	*"It just made me angry"* *"F**k! NO"* *"No and I was even surprised to see that the sites were hypocrites, only providing warnings on the surface web versions of the sites but they actually have dark web sites where they shamelessly promote this content."*
Other reactions (n = 52) Other reactions included doubting the effectiveness of warnings and displaying cognitive distortions that their behaviour is not harmful.	*"No, because again, I'm at a morally neutral point, I'm not supporting it, just viewing it"* *"Not much, when one is with that intent, a warning probably isn't going to stop it"* *"It was ironic, because some apps warn you, but the same algorithm recommends inappropriate content. You don't even need to search; the videos just appear."*

- PLATFORM SANCTIONS AND BANS

Most respondents had never been banned from an online platform

Most respondents reported that they had never been sanctioned or banned from an online platform. Overall, one in five (19%) reported that they had experienced a sanction or ban.

Respondents who reported using open web platforms to search for CSAM were more likely to report having been sanctioned or banned. Notably, 40% of those who reported using online games, and 29% of those who reported using social media platforms, reported that they had previously been sanctioned or banned from a platform. Nevertheless, across all platform types, the majority of respondents reported that they had never experienced such sanctions.

Respondents who had experienced account bans largely described being banned for searching for CSAM; sharing or posting links to CSAM; sharing pornography; or for contacting children. Q45

Key Takeaways

- **Recalled encounters with warning messages were rare.** A third of respondents recalled having encountered a warning message when searching for CSAM. This could indicate that warning messages are not implemented widely, or that perpetrators are using search terms that do not trigger warnings. Alternatively, it is possible that perpetrators do see the warnings, but do not recognise them or recall seeing them. This suggests that existing warning messages could be improved to strengthen their visibility, memorability, and impact.
- **The implementation of warning messages is not widespread.** Warning messages were mostly recalled on search engines, while fewer respondents recalled encountering them on pornography sites, social media platforms, and messaging apps, despite these platforms being used to search for CSAM. Few respondents recalled warnings on AI apps, despite many reporting using AI platforms to generate CSAM. Similarly, warnings were rarely recalled in cloud storage services, despite many respondents using these services to store CSAM. These findings highlight opportunities to expand and/or strengthen interventions across a wider range of platforms.
- **Perpetrators are largely unreached by platform enforcement.** Despite engaging in harmful and often illegal behaviours that likely violate the terms of service of many online platforms, most respondents, regardless of the platforms they used, said they had not been detected and reported no direct consequences from platforms, highlighting weaknesses in enforcement and moderation. Respondents who reported using online games were the most likely to report having experienced sanctions.

6. Intersecting Harms: CSAM within the Wider Online Risk Landscape

Engagement with CSAM often occurs alongside engagement with other forms of harmful or illegal online content. This section examines how CSAM is situated within the broader risk environment by exploring respondents' encounters with other harmful material and the role of algorithmic recommendation systems in shaping pathways into harm.

- OTHER ILLEGAL AND HARMFUL CONTENT

Respondents commonly encounter other illegal and harmful content online

Nearly half of respondents (49%) reported that they had encountered or searched for illegal or harmful content online, other than CSAM. The types of content most commonly mentioned includes animal cruelty, self-harm and suicide, death and murder, and gore. Q22

A third of respondents (33%) reported having unintentionally or accidentally encountered other forms of illegal or harmful material. Many described *"stumbl[ing] across it"* online, without having searched for it. Others described that they had encountered it when searching for CSAM: *"when i was trying to search for [CSAM] i did get to site which showed image of people after their death"*. Q22

Around one in five respondents (19%) reported that they have deliberately sought out other illegal and harmful content. One respondent noted: *"[I have searched for…] All of what you said above, My morbid curiosity is kinda ruining me"*. Q22

Respondents described in open-ended responses the type of illegal or harmful content they had either encountered or deliberately sought. **Table 12** presents the types of illegal or harmful content that respondents describe encountering and deliberately seeking. The content they report having unintentionally encountered was similar to the content they report having searched for. Q22

Table 12: Type of illegal or harmful content encountered and sought by respondents

Analysis of n = 636 open-ended responses of respondents who answered 'Yes, I have encountered:' or 'Yes, I have searched for:' to Q22: Have you ever encountered other illegal or harmful content online, such as animal cruelty, hate/terror, suicide/self-harm? Which? (n = 8,570, selected answers: 8,921)

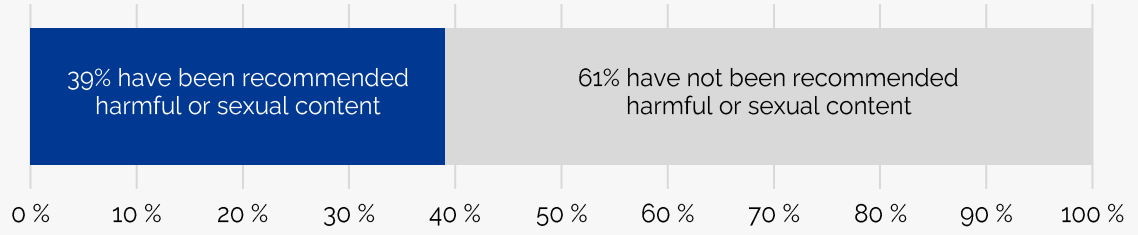
Reported encountered content (n = 456)	Reported sought content (n = 180)
Animal cruelty, bestiality (n = 84)	Animal cruelty, bestiality (n = 33)
Self-harm, suicide (n = 80)	Self-harm, suicide (n = 29)
Everything, all or most of the above (n = 74)	Death, murder, torture, execution (n = 25)
Death, murder, torture, execution (n = 67)	Gore (n = 20)

Gore (n = 60)	Violent or illegal pornography, rape (n = 18)
Terror (n = 37)	Violence (n = 8)
Hate (n = 30)	Everything, all or most of the above (n = 11)
Violent or illegal pornography, rape (n = 23)	Terror (n = 6)
Violence (n = 23)	Hate (n = 4)
Necrophilia (n = 7)	Weapons (n = 4)
Drug abuse (n = 6)	Drug abuse (n = 3)
Weapons (n = 1)	Necrophilia (n = 2)
Ineligible response (n = 126)	Ineligible response (n = 63)

Two in five respondents reported that algorithms recommend them harmful and sexual content

Nearly two in five respondents (39%) reported that they had been recommended harmful or sexual content they had not searched for by an algorithm on an online platform (see **Figure 12**). This refers to content that the respondent considered harmful or sexual and does not necessarily refer to illegal content. Q21

Figure 12: Experiences of receiving algorithmically recommended harmful or sexual content



Q21: Have you ever been recommended harmful or sexual content that you haven't searched for by an algorithm on an online platform? (n = 8,547)

When asked where they had been recommended content they considered harmful or sexual, respondents primarily mentioned social media platforms, followed by pornography websites, the dark web, open web search engines and browsers, messaging apps, and online games (see

Table 13). Several respondents noted that they had been recommended content by algorithms on multiple platforms, or everywhere online: *"Too many to list"*, *"every social media will start showing you what you want to see after a day or so of using it due to the platforms showing videos that we watch often"*. Q21

Some respondents noted that the type of content recommended to them tended to be implicitly harmful or catered towards sexual interest in children: *"The algorithm on Threads has evolved in such a way that I'm repeatedly shown images of minors. Usually not directly sexual but subtly implying"*, *"Instagram and Youtube, once you watch a video about a kid in a suspicious pose the algorithm flood you with more"*. Q21

Table 13: Platforms where respondents had been recommended harmful or sexual content they hadn't search for

Analysis of n = 408 open-ended responses of respondents who answered 'Yes, on which platform?' to Q21: Have you ever been recommended harmful or sexual content that you haven't searched for by an algorithm on an online platform? (n = 8,547)

Platforms	
Social media platforms (n = 172) Instagram (n = 69) Facebook (n = 33) X (n = 27) TikTok (n = 23) YouTube (n = 23) Reddit (n = 10) Snapchat (n = 8) Discord (n = 7) VK (n = 4) Omegle (n = 3) Threads (n = 2) **Pornography websites (n = 42)** Pornhub (n = 23) Xhamster (n = 7) **Dark web (n = 32)**	**Search engines and browsers (n = 31)** Google (n = 27) Yandex (n = 5) Bing (n = 2) **Messaging apps (n = 29)** Telegram (n = 27) WhatsApp (n = 4) **Online games (n = 7)** Free Fire (n = 3) Roblox (n = 3) **Other (n = 25)** Everywhere (n = 19) Hanime TV (n = 2) Imageboards (n = 2)

Key Takeaways

- **CSAM is often encountered alongside other forms of illegal or harmful online content.** CSAM viewing seems to intersect with both exposure to and intentional use of other extremely violent material, most commonly animal abuse and bestiality, self-harm and suicide, and content depicting death.
- **Algorithms expose users to legal but harmful content involving children.** The results show that platform recommendation systems, designed to maximise user engagement, may surface content that features children. Repeated exposure to such material may normalise the sexualisation of children and reinforce cognitive distortions, potentially increasing the likelihood that some users progress towards searching for CSAM.

Conclusion

This report presents findings from a survey of active and anonymous CSAM perpetrators, offering rare empirical insight into perpetrator behaviour within the digital ecosystem. Conducted in a global and borderless online context, the research does not assess the effectiveness of any single national legal or regulatory regime, but instead highlights patterns of perpetrator behaviour and, crucially, identifies opportunities for prevention to reduce harm to children.

The evidence presented in this report makes it clear that many children and young people are encountering CSAM and other illegal and harmful content online at a remarkably young age. In many cases, this exposure does not begin with deliberate intent to seek out illegal material, and respondents frequently describe stumbling across CSAM unintentionally and being recommended harmful content online. CSAM should not be accessible to anyone, particularly not to children, and certainly not by accident.

At the same time, the data also raises concerns about the young age at which many respondents started actively searching. More than half of respondents reported that they began searching for CSAM while under the age of 18. While some online sexual exploration may reflect developmentally typical behaviour, accessing illegal and exploitative material is fundamentally different and carries significant risks for both victims and young people themselves. This underscores the importance of robust and effective age assurance measures to prevent children from accessing age-inappropriate sexual content, alongside stronger measures to prevent access to illegal content for users of all ages.

The findings are a reminder that access to CSAM is not confined to hidden corners of the internet. Respondents reported using mainstream search engines, pornography sites, social media platforms and messaging apps alongside dark web services to access CSAM. The online environment facilitates perpetration, particularly where anonymity, privacy, and minimal moderation reduce the perceived risk of detection. Many respondents do not use additional security measures, while others store CSAM on their devices or on cloud storage services, demonstrating a perception that platforms provide sufficient protection to act without consequences. The lack of effective behavioural nudges and direct sanctions contributes to a sense of permissiveness online, underscoring the potential impact of even modest increases in moderation, deterrence, and detection.

Recalled exposure to warning messages was largely concentrated on search engines and was rare on social media, messaging apps, AI platforms, and cloud storage services. This is despite these being platforms that respondents claim to use to access, generate, and store CSAM. The report presents evidence that warning messages can have preventive potential, as many respondents reported changing their behaviour when met with such a warning. There is a need to better understand

the role of warning messages as part of a situational crime prevention strategy, and to strengthen the effectiveness of existing messages. Research being conducted by Protect Children to evaluate the effectiveness of deterrence messages in this context aims to inform this area.

The report provides insight into how generative AI is reshaping and exacerbating CSAM perpetration. AI lowers technical barriers for producing harmful content, increasing the overall volume of material and may reduce ethical thresholds for engagement, with some respondents describing AI content as more ethical than recorded CSAM. Monetisation adds a further incentive, potentially drawing in individuals who might not otherwise engage in CSAM-related offences. Respondents also described AI-generated content as a "gateway" to more extreme material, and prior research suggests that viewing CSAM can be associated with subsequent contact offences.[12] This risk is amplified by the fact that many respondents cannot distinguish AI-generated imagery from real images, meaning the psychological and behavioural impacts may be comparable. Respondents reported little difficulty in locating and using tools to generate such material, including nudification applications designed specifically to create sexually explicit images, tools that carry exceptionally high risks of misuse. These findings underscore the urgent need to address the absence of effective safeguards in generative AI tools and to embed safety-by-design principles at the earliest stages of technological development, to prevent harm before it occurs.

Finally, the study itself demonstrates the preventive potential of digital interventions and engagement. For some respondents, participating in the survey created a moment of reflection, prompting them to disengage from harmful behaviour or seek support. Over two thousand respondents engaged with a linked prevention resource, reinforcing the value of interventions that reach perpetrators at critical moments and offer pathways to change.

Together, these findings provide detailed evidence of the mechanisms enabling online child sexual abuse and exploitation and identify tangible opportunities to reduce risk. Urgent action is required to strengthen safeguards, implement safety-by-design principles, expand effective moderation, and deploy evidence-based digital interventions that prevent abuse before it escalates.

[12] Risk Factors for Child Sexual Abuse Material Users Contacting Children Online: Results of an Anonymous Multilingual Survey on the Dark Web (Insoll et al., 2022)