

**Online Child Abuse Prevention:
Best-Practices for Parents, Communities, and Governments**

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Childhood maltreatment is a pervasive societal ill that consists of the omission of caregiving (i.e., neglect) and the commission of harm (i.e., abuse) (Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010) that has been linked to a wide array of negative physical and mental health outcomes (Cicchetti & Toth, 2016). The global prevalence of child maltreatment has been estimated at 500 million to 1.5 billion children enduring a form of violence in the world (ACPF, 2021). While there has been extensive research examining childhood maltreatment, there have been three major weaknesses in this research: 1) the vast majority of research has been conducted in high-income countries, 2) the complex role of culture in clinical presentation and treatment is not clearly examined, and 3) the persistent difficulty in defining child maltreatment.

The present paper examines the public health crisis that is Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) from a global perspective with the goal of offering insight into best-practices at the parent-, community-, and governmental-level. The paper begins with an examination of global child sexual abuse, proceeds into the added complexity of OCSEA, and continues to the growing rates of internet and social media use throughout the world. Finally, the efforts by the international community to respond, reduce, and eliminate all forms of child sexual violence are covered.

Global Child Sexual Abuse

In 2017, an estimated that 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls experience sexual abuse in childhood (YWCA.org) with over 91% of the sexual abuse perpetrated by a family member or

close friend (CDC, 2020). UNICEF (2020a) estimated 121 million children throughout the world performed sexual acts during their childhood. Importantly, these rates of child sexual abuse differ greatly throughout the world with regions of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia ranging from 7 to 13% of girls aged 15-19 having experienced sexual violence (Know Violence in Childhood, 2017; see Figure 1). Unfortunately, researchers understand the true rate of child sexual abuse is considerably higher than what is reported because perpetrators are often trusted by the children, children fear retaliation from the perpetrator, and children are confused about how to deal with the abuse. In addition, the likelihood of child sexual abuse increases in communities with growing population, for children from low socioeconomic status, those with absent parents, children with disabilities, and children experiencing migration, especially forced migration. Finally, the legal existence of child marriage further perpetuates the risk of child sexual abuse (Singh et al., 2014). These acts of sexual violence against children clearly contradict the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) with Article 34 demanding that states “protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse,” as well as the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (OPSC).

Global Online Child Sexual Abuse

The frequency and impact of child sexual abuse presented above is frightening. However, the introduction of technology, primarily the internet and social media, has exponentially worsened the problem and has drastically altered the way parents, communities, and governments must engage with and address OCSEA (Carr, 2019). The internet provides availability for two types of perpetrations: 1) child pornography and 2) child sexual exploitation that can be perpetrated by two types of offenders: 1) those who create and distribute child sexual

abuse content, and 2) those who purchase this content or seek vulnerable children to abuse online (Mitchell et al., 2014). Child sexual exploitation includes engaging in sexually suggestive language, sharing sexually suggestive photos and videos, sexual grooming behaviors (i.e., sexual chatting, online solicitation), and live online child sexual abuse (i.e., “live streaming,” “on-demand child sexual abuse”). As the internet and social media have become more available and widespread, rates of online sharing of child sexual abuse content skyrocketed beyond national review capabilities such that content far exceeds law enforcement investigations. For example, Meta (i.e., Facebook) reported 27 million suspected cases of child abuse in 2021 to a USA clearinghouse (Keller, 2022). Additionally, it is estimated that 1 in 9 children have experienced online solicitation, though this rate appears to be dropping (Madigan et al., 2018). The addition of technology adds several additional complexities to the already difficult nature of child sexual abuse. First, the online nature of child sexual abuse provides anonymity to offenders. Due to this anonymity, it is exceedingly rare for child sex offenders to be identified, arrested, prosecuted, or punished for their offenses (UNICEF, 2016). Second, many national laws do not clearly codify legal protections for children online, which creates even greater difficulty in punishing offenders if identified (Quayle, 2020).

Global Internet Access and Use

Access to the internet and social media has transformed the lives of people throughout the world. The internet provides children with the opportunity to explore a wide variety of information to expand their knowledge of the world and intellectual possibilities (O’Connell, 2004). Internet access continues to grow with an estimated 5 billion internet users worldwide (i.e., 63% of the global population), up from under 20% in 2005 (see Figure 2). Regionally, Asia has the most online users at 2.8 billion and Europe is next with over 744 million. Of these 5 billion world-

wide internet users, 4.65 billion are social media users (Statista Research Department, 2022). As for youth access to the internet, 33% of school-aged children in the world have access to the internet at home with large distinctions based on the income of the country. For example, 86% of school-aged children have access to the internet in high income countries compared to 60% in upper-middle income countries, 14% in lower-middle countries, and 6% in low-income countries. In addition, contrasts between availability of the internet for urban and rural communities with no difference in high-income countries (88% in both) compared to upper-middle income (77% to 42%), lower-middle income (21% to 7%), and low-income (10% to 3%) (UNICEF, 2020b). These disparities reinforce the limitations of research that has been primarily conducted in high-income countries, but also should serve to emphasize the impending increase in OCSEA as communities face increased rates of internet access and internet-based offenders in coming years.

International Response to Online Child Sexual Abuse

International leadership has responded to the online child sexual abuse crisis with collaborations to identify research initiatives and possible interventions to best position the necessary response to protect the world's children. For instance, in 2012 the EU and United States initiated the Global Alliance against Child Sexual Abuse Online with 54 countries joining the initiative. The initiative expanded to form the WeProtect Global Alliance with over 80 governments, 20 global technology companies, and 24 NGOs. Together, WeProtect formed a Model National Response (MNR) aimed at supporting countries to best respond to OCSEA (WeProtect, 2016). The MNR aims to empower countries to take 3 initial steps in addressing OCSEA: 1) assess current responses and identify gaps in those responses, 2) prioritize national responses to address gaps, and 3) support international cooperation. Possibly of greatest

importance has been the recognition that OCSEA is not confined to national jurisdictions. International collaborations, such as the Council of Europe and the African Child Policy Forum, continue to build networks aimed at protecting children. Importantly, the MNR does not suggest that there is one pathway to identifying, disrupting, and eliminating OCSEA in the world. Rather, each level of society is provided opportunities to play a part in the protecting children of the world.

Parental/Familial Interventions

Parents and caregivers have an essential role in providing the first line of defense in protecting children. Research has consistently demonstrated that the strongest protective factor for children is to have actively engaged parents who utilize positive parenting practices to discuss internet experiences and the likely issues that can be experienced online within the framework of respect and interest in the child rather than focusing on internet restriction or punishment (Cho et al., 2005). Even though adolescents begin to shift their primary support from parents to peers as they grow older, adolescents continue to report a desire for parents to be involved in their lives. Unfortunately, adolescents also report a perception that parents can become less capable of understanding and providing the necessary support to them as they begin dealing with more complex problems, such as sexual content and behaviors. An additional limitation for parental support of children has been the shift from internet and social media use from computers to cell phones. This transition in device creates greater difficulty for parents to monitor activities, potentially block content, or limit the availability of the internet. In addition to the role of parents and caregivers, the familial unit, especially similarly-aged siblings and cousins, can fulfill the role as ‘protector’ for other children, especially for younger children or

those who they perceive as more vulnerable. This desire to protect and the understanding of risk online may suggest that siblings and cousins can supplement support for vulnerable children.

Community-level Interventions

Communities must develop child protection strategies that emphasize supporting and empowering youth to be prepared for the possibility of OCSEA. There is evidence that community norms and expectations can place greater risk on children. For example, community members in Cambodia and Vietnam reported low awareness of online grooming that likely reduces community understanding and support for children who have experienced sexual violence (Davey, 2017). The most effective and easily accessed community-level support for children is through the school system, where children spend a large portion of their time when away from their home. Educational settings are an apt environment to provide information and strategies to large groups of children that prepares children for the risks of online activities. These school-based programs must incorporate active participation of children and adolescents to increase engagement and retention of information. There is consistent evidence that these school-based programs (at least in high-income countries) are effective at impacting children's knowledge of child sexual abuse and risks but there is less evidence for any actual changes in behavior change (Walsh et al., 2015). For example, the i-SAFE program in the United States that is delivered by teachers during the school day focused on internet safety, including managing risk with online 'friends' and identifying predatory behavior. While children in the program recalled the safety messages and increased their conversation with parents and friends about online risks, there were no changes in online behavior (Mishna et al., 2014). Thus, school-based programs have demonstrated some meaningful changes in attitudes but behavioral changes remain harder to alter.

Governmental Interventions

As discussed above, one of the most important roles for governments in addressing OCSEA, is the facilitation of inter-governmental cooperation. In 2001, a treaty created by the Council of Europe's Convention of Cybercrime was ratified by non-EU countries that defined online child pornography, introduced a unified legislation framework, and improved cooperation between member states (Council of Europe, 2001). While the importance of inter-governmental collaboration and action cannot be understated, specific governments have much they can do to reduce OCSEA. First, governments should adopt international standards for enforceable laws to protect children from violence. Second, governments must develop clear plans to assess the prevalence of OCSEA, identify indicators of successful intervention, and establish a budget that addresses the need for both financial and human capital. Third, governments must establish referral systems to report violence against children that are welcoming, efficient, and effective for children and their families (ACPF, 2021). Some specific efforts that have proven to be successful in reducing OCSEA include: blocking specific phrases from internet search engines that reduced online searches by 67% (Steel, 2015), and a web crawler from the Canadian Centre for Child Protection that was able to identify online images and videos suspected of child sexual abuse, which drastically reduced the amount of these images and videos online. Governments are best served by efforts that utilize primary prevention (stopping crime before it occurs), secondary prevention (identifying individuals at high risk of perpetration), and tertiary prevention (intervening with known offenders) (Brantingham & Faust, 1976).

Conclusions

OCSEA is a problem that is only growing in magnitude as technology continues to expand its central role throughout the world. While internet and social media offer many

advantages to society, and especially children, the damage can also be immense. Efforts must balance deterrence, prevention, and prosecution of offenders while simultaneously empowering children to protect themselves, as well as their peers. To achieve this protection of children we must combine efforts within the family, as well as at the community, national, and international level. Only with collaboration and engagement of all players can we hope to appropriately protect children to achieve a life of fulfillment and safety.

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Figure 1.

Global prevalence rates of sexual violence by region for girls

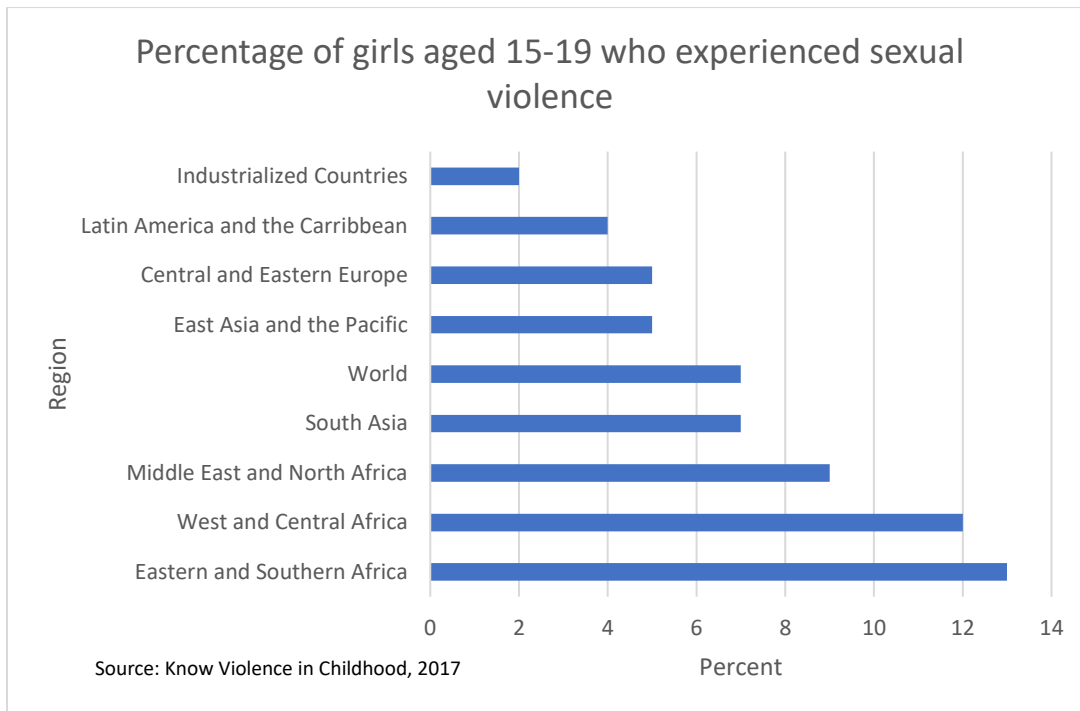


Figure 2.

Global Internet Usage from 2005 to 2021

