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The Sexual Exploitation of children through images: non-contact Violence

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Abstract

Sexual violence and the exploitation of children through images involve the depiction of a child engaged in real or simulated sexual activities, or the display of intimate parts of their body for sexual purposes. Both national and international legislation generally refer to such images as pornography (Unicef, 2014).

The term “child pornography or pedpornography” can now be considered inappropriate as it downplays the severity of the abuse. Therefore, the term “child abuse images” is preferred here, as it more accurately reflects the nature of this crime. “Non-contact sexual violence against a child” refers to any form of non-physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct, whether isolated or persistent, that involves unwanted references to any part of the body used for sexual activity or to the child's sexuality, including conduct facilitated by technology.

These include: “exposing a child to sexual abuse and pornography, even through technology; live streaming of a child's sexual abuse; online solicitation; sexual grooming, and so on.” The focus of the intervention is on examining the shift in perspective on the issue, the different types of non-contact violence, the effects on children, and the main risk factors. It also highlights the indicators and sources currently available to measure the phenomenon emphasizing the need to bridge the information gap on this topic. These forms of violence have severe, lasting effects and remain difficult to measure. Bridging current data gaps through systematic and harmonized collection is crucial to guide prevention, strengthen victim support, and protect children in both digital and offline contexts.

This article frames non-contact online sexual violence against children as a continuum that includes child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) grooming, sexting/sexortion, live-streaming abuse, and emerging AI-generated content. These phenomena are situated within the international and EU policy context of the Lanzarote Convention (Council of Europe, 2007) and Directive 2011/92/EU, as well as its trajectory of revision in 2024. At the international level, a set of minimum rules for criminal

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offences, penalties, and cooperation is settled, by supporting cross-border enforcement and information sharing to detect, investigate and combat these forms of violence against children. At the national level, Italy's law enforcement agencies (LEA) provide data and information on this topic on a regular basis, strengthened detection capabilities and enhanced cross-border coordination to prevent harm and improve victim support. Data are also gathered by the national hotline victims' support. LEAs (Polizia di Stato, Carabinieri, Guardia di Finanza) and national child-protection hotlines data are essential for giving the material's transnational nature, but it's also crucial to have a set of minimum common indicators to measure this fast-changing phenomenon.

The article stresses the need for standardized Italian data schemas aligned with the UNICEF-ICVAC (International Classification on Violence Against Children) taxonomy, by providing regular anonymized reporting, and robust data-sharing protocols across LEAs, prosecutors, hotlines, and other relevant sources of data, both at institutional and non-institutional levels. Measuring these emerging forms of violence against children presents unique challenges. These challenges are key both for understanding the current data landscape and identifying entry points for action to address data gaps.

Practical implications include establishing a national cross-agency task force, integrating platform takedown statistics with investigative data, and expanding frontline professional training on grooming, sextortion, and AI-generated content.

Keywords: *Violence against children; sexual exploitation of a child; Csam; Csem; non-contact violence, online sexual violence*

1. Introduction

Over the past years, the notion of "sexual violence", commonly related to the rape of a child, has also been applied to other forms of violence as it is reflected in the developments of the international legal framework. Already in 1989, sexual violence and sexual exploitation of children were recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a serious violation of fundamental rights, in particular of the rights of children to the protection and care necessary for their well-being. The need to protect children against forms of violence that occur with a sexual connotation is also acknowledged by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation, otherwise known as the Lanzarote Convention (2007), requires the criminalisation of all kinds of sexual offences against children, the adoption of specific legislation and measures to prevent sexual violence, to protect child victims and to prosecute perpetrators. The Directive 2011/92/EU, adopted by the European Parliament in 2011 (replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA), aims at combating the sexual violence and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography. In the international legal framework, there is a lack of agreement on the definition of sexual violence against children. One of the main references that has influenced the definitions commonly used in different contexts is the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993), which addresses sexual violence with a multi-dimensional approach. The Lanzarote Convention (2007) also plays a crucial role in expanding the concept of the use of coercion.

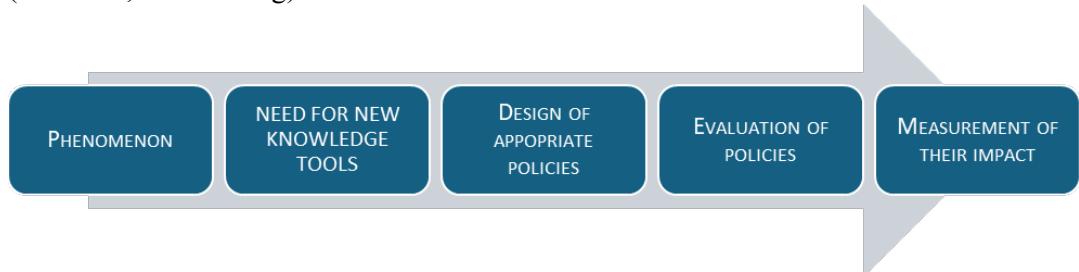
Despite the lack of agreement on the definition of sexual violence against children, it is consolidated the need to use an inclusive definition, considering, in addition to rape, other acts with sexual contacts and acts not involving contacts, as well as a broad idea of coercion.

In this respect, the definition of the International Classification of Violence against Children - ICVAC (UNICEF, 2023), represents the most suitable to be used. “The Sexual violence against a child is any deliberate, unwanted and non-essential sexual act, either completed or attempted, that is perpetrated against a child, including for exploitative purposes, and that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, pain or psychological suffering”.

With the DORA Project – *Data integratiOn for acknowledging Risks And protecting children from violence* – Istat is, for the first time, dedicating specific attention to the phenomenon of violence against children.

An inclusive approach not only strengthens conceptual clarity but also provides a foundation for shaping prevention strategies, guiding social-work interventions, and informing public policies aimed at protecting children more effectively in both online and offline environments.

Reliable data are essential to comprehend the scope of violence against children, to design and evaluate policies aimed at its reduction and elimination, and to capture the dynamic interplay between knowledge needs, resources, political priorities, and social change (Muratore, forthcoming).



2. The online forms of sexual violence

On 6 February 2024, under the EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual violence, the Commission submitted a proposal for a revision¹ of the 2011 Combating Child Sexual Abuse Directive. The revised rules expand the definitions of offences to include new forms of online child sexual violence, and introduce higher penalties and more specific requirements for prevention and assistance to victims. They also set minimum statutes of limitations to allow victims to seek justice effectively. Within the ICVAC framework, the online VAC (violence against children) is placed as a continuum from offline forms of violence, from which it is distinguished by the setting where VAC occurs. The different and new forms of online sexual violence should be considered as just a new setting of well-known forms of violence. However, the cyber sphere also leads to different and unique forms of violence (such as non-consensual intimate image exploitation or doxing) and can amplify the scale of harm compared to violence perpetrated in the physical world.

The online VAC is perpetrated across different cyberspaces, including social media platforms, messaging apps and video games. As the digital environment is constantly evolving, new technologies are bound to give rise to new and diverse manifestations of violence. For example, the metaverse is emerging as a new space for the perpetration of virtual rape and other forms of online VAC. The concept of the metaverse has gained significant attention in recent years, promising digital worlds where users can interact, learn,

¹ Proposal for a revision of the combating child on sexual abuse directive, (2011/93/eu), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-promoting-our-european-way-of-life/file-revision-of-the-combating-child-sexual-abuse-directive>, visited on the 12th of December 2024.

create, and explore. As underlying technologies like generative AI, haptic suits and eye-tracking evolve, it becomes crucial to examine the impact of the metaverse on children's experiences and address the concerns surrounding their online safety. World Health Organisation underlines that the field of online VAC is evolving, but the data are still scarce². Population-based surveys from high-income countries suggest that around one in nine youth experience unwanted online sexual solicitation, although not all of these are threatening or from adults (Madigan et al. 2018). And across seven European countries, one in ten children reports being cyberbullied (Attawell, 2019).

Online child sexual exploitation is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon which is constantly worsening globally. In Italy, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children recorded in 2019 an 87% increase in cases. The perpetrators of these crimes are often unsuspected people who lead ordinary lives and are 70% of the time under the age of 45 years (Polizia di Stato, 2024). In this regard, the progressive anonymisation of the perpetrators arises from the studies. Different types of perpetrators exist, including those commonly considered in a VAC context, such as relatives, acquaintances, and friends. However, the more violence spreads in online space, the more perpetrators can also be anonymous and/or unacquainted.

Detecting and studying online sexual violence against children is very tough for different reasons. First of all, in many cases, children are sexually abused by persons they know and trust, and on whom they are dependent. This makes these crimes particularly difficult to detect and to prevent. Moreover, the introduction of end-to-end encryption, while beneficial in ensuring privacy and security of communications, also facilitates access to secure channels for perpetrators where they can hide their actions from law enforcement, such as trading images and videos. Secondly, this serious crime has wide-ranging and serious life-long consequences for victims that are also very difficult to investigate and measure. In hurting children, these crimes also cause significant and long-term social harm.

The Council of Europe estimates that in Europe, one in five children falls victim to some forms of sexual violence and between 70% and 85% of children know their abuser: the vast majority of children are victims of people they trust. Moreover, about 1/3 of abused children never tell anyone, because of shame, fear of not being believed or simply because they don't recognise the violence. It also happens that children don't know who to tell (European Parliament 2024).

At present, the commercial sexual exploitation online, involving the dissemination of the acts of sexual violence on the internet, represents a higher concern at the global level. An alarming escalation in child sexual violence online is revealed by the fourth Global Threat Assessment Report (2023), which provides critical insights into the threats children face online in 2023. In fact, the report shows an 87% increase in reported child sexual violence material, and Conversations with children on social gaming platforms can escalate into high-risk grooming situations within 19 seconds. Sexual violence and sexual exploitation of children can take multiple forms, and they can occur both online (e.g. forcing a child to engage in sexual activities via live streaming) and offline (e.g. engaging in sexual

² In this regard the health sector plays an important role in generating data about health issues and risk factors through population-based surveys which measure exposure to violence. Existing large-scale surveys include, e.g., the Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS), Demographic Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and other dedicated surveys such as the Violence Against Children Survey (VACS).

activities with a child or causing a child to participate in child prostitution). Most of the victims are girls: in the same vein, girls presented higher mean scores in cyberbullying victimisation and online grooming and in problematic Internet use. To combat and prevent online sexual violence, concrete actions have been implemented at the European level. Europol, for example, supports law enforcement cooperation among Member States to form a united front against (online) sexual exploitation of children in the EU and beyond. Eurojust supports judicial cooperation among Member States to facilitate the prosecution of child sexual violence perpetrators in cross-border cases. Furthermore, INHOPE is a network of hotlines combating online child sexual violence material, which analyses and reports illegal content. It is also worth quoting WePROTECT Global Alliance (2023), which develops political and practical solutions to make the digital world safe for children and seeks to prevent online sexual violence and long-term harm. Finally, the Internet Watch Foundation, co-funded by the EU, provides a hotline for reporting online sexual violence content globally and raises awareness through prevention campaigns.

3. Non-contact sexual violence against a child: child sexual exploitation material, grooming and other forms of violence

3.1 From Child Pornography to child sexual exploitation material

According to the ICVAC definition, “non-contact sexual violence against a child” refers to any form of verbal or non-verbal non-physical conduct, whether isolated or persistent, that involves unwanted references to any part of the body used for sexual activity or to the sexuality of the child, including conduct facilitated via technology. The forms of non-contact sexual violence against a child include: sexual harassment, including via information and communication technologies (ICTs); exposure child to sexual exploitation and pornography, including via ICTs; live streaming sexual exploitation of a child; online solicitation; sexual grooming, including cyber-grooming; sexual bullying and/or unwanted sexual jokes, taunts or comments; exposing of sexual organs sexual extortion; coercing and blackmailing a child for sexual purposes; non-consensual image-taking of the sexual organs of or sexual activities with a child, including when amounting to sexual violence.

So, the sexual violence and exploitation of children through images involves the representation of a child engaged in real or simulated sexual activities or of his or her sexual body parts for a sexual purpose. National and international legislation usually refers to such images as pornography (UNICEF, 2014). The term ‘child pornography’ is almost universally used to refer to recorded images of children made the subject of sexual violence for the very purpose of producing such materials. However, numerous institutions concerned with children’s rights have criticized this term as inappropriate (i.e. INHOPE, Save the Children) as it downplays the seriousness of the violence. They therefore prefer to use the term ‘child abuse images or material’, which more accurately reflects the nature of this crime. Child exploitation images are a visual record of sexual violence on a child and constitute evidence of a crime committed; the children who appear in these images are subjected to degrading, abusive and humiliating actions of a criminal nature. In some of the images, they are beaten or burned or subjected to sexual depravity that includes torture. When they are forced to pose in sexually charged scenes with other individuals (who may be other children), they are subjected to coercion and manipulation, which leaves marks on the psyche. No image of child sexual abuse (‘pornographic’ image) has ever really been produced without suffering or exploitation of the child (Save the Children, 2009).

The ICVAC standardized categories with operational definitions and the disaggregating variables are applicable to diverse types of data sources, including administrative records,

dedicated surveys on violence against children, and generic surveys that incorporate questions on such violence. Data on technology-facilitated violence against children can be produced through these different data sources and by various stakeholders.

3.2 Child sexual exploitation material and live streaming of child sexual abuse

One of the earliest references to child exploitation material is provided by the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which refers to “the exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and material”. However, no definition of this term is provided. The Budapest Convention contains the term ‘child pornography’, which is defined as ‘pornographic material that visually depicts: (a) a minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct [sexually explicit conduct is defined in the same way as in the Lanzarote Convention] (b) a person appearing to be a minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct; (c) realistic images representing a minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct’. The Lanzarote Convention of 2007 uses the term ‘child pornography’, which is defined as ‘any material that visually depicts a child engaged in real or simulated sexually explicit conduct or any depiction of a child’s sexual organs for primarily sexual purposes’.

The International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol) defines child pornography as: “...the consequence of the exploitation or sexual abuse perpetrated against a child. It can be defined as any means of depicting or promoting sexual abuse of a child, including print and/or audio, centered on sex acts or the genital organs of children.”

According to the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS), child pornography is procuring, arranging, facilitating or controlling a child for the purposes of creating child pornography and/or possessing, disseminating, broadcasting, transmitting, exhibiting or selling child pornography.

Regardless of the content of the picture, each time that an image of a child is accessed for a sexual purpose, it victimizes the individual concerned. It is difficult to be precise about the extent of child sexual exploitation images, especially with the transposition of the phenomenon on the Internet. But all available evidence points to it being a major and growing problem. At any one time, there are estimated to be more than one million pornographic images of children on the Internet, with 200 new images posted daily (Chawki, 2021).

In 2022, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC, 2024) received more than 31.8 million reports of Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA) around the world through its Cyber Tip line, an increase from 21.7 million reports in 2020. Each report is an instance of apparent CSEA comprising one or more unique pieces of content. While the increase is partially attributable to better detection methods, international agencies, including INTERPOL, have expressed concern that CSEA continues to expand in scale and severity, potentially overwhelming law enforcement's ability to respond effectively. It is possible to distinguish the material in:

- Child sexual abuse material – CSAM. It refers to imagery or videos which show a person who is a child and engaged in or is depicted as being engaged in explicit sexual activity.
- Child Sexual Exploitation Material – CSEM. It refers to sexualized content depicting minors that is exploitative in nature but does not fall within the classification of nationally illegal child sexual abuse material (CSAM). The nature of CSEM can make it more

challenging to identify and investigate. Furthermore, across many countries in Europe and beyond, the legislation does not properly define or address CSEM (INHOPE, 2022).

We can even distinguish between Non-Consensual Intimate Imagery (NCII) and Self-generated Child Sexual Abuse Material (SGEM). SGEM is sexually explicit content created by and featuring children below the age of eighteen. These images can be taken and shared intentionally by minors, but are in many cases a result of online grooming or sextortion. NCII and SGEM are often interchangeable, while self-generated content can refer to both consensually and non-consensually produced intimate images. In 2023, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF, 2023) investigated its first report of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) generated by artificial intelligence (AI). The technology is fast, and accurate images usually fit the text description very well. Many images can be generated at once. These AI CSAM can be so convincing that they are indistinguishable from real images.

Moreover, there is the live online child sexual exploitation that often represents a dual violence against the child. She/he is coerced to participate in sexual activities, alone or with other persons—an act that already constitutes sexual exploitation. The sexual activity is, at the same time, transmitted live through ICT and watched by others remotely. Live online child sexual exploitation is often transmitted to viewers through ‘streaming’ over the Internet (Ecpat, 2022). Importantly for the viewer, streaming leaves no trace on the device, because no file is downloaded; when the streaming is stopped, the child sexual exploitation material is gone, unless the offender deliberately records it. This increases the perception of the offender’s impunity and creates specific challenges for post-event investigation, particularly relating to the recovery of evidence and the identification of victims and offenders. Live streaming may also be referred to as “on-demand child sexual exploitation” (Ecpat, 2016).

3.3 The online solicitation of children for sexual purposes: Online Grooming, Sexting, Sextortion and coercing and blackmailing a child for sexual purposes

The grooming of children for sexual exploitation is a premeditated behavior that commences with sexual offenders choosing a location or target area likely to be attractive to children. Social networking sites have become a relevant element in the child grooming process. Online grooming refers to the process of establishing/building a relationship with a child, either in person or using the Internet or other digital technologies to facilitate either online or offline sexual contact with that person (Ecpat, 2020; O’ Connell, 2003; Howitt, 1995). The most common definitions of grooming use the term ‘paedophile’ to describe perpetrators and people accused of initiating sexual activity with children (Craven et al, 2006; Choo, 2009).

Child grooming is a process that begins with sexual predators choosing a place that may be attractive to children (Lang and Frenzel, 1988). Perpetrators take a special interest in the child victim and make him or her feel special, with the intention of creating a bond to gain the child’s trust. As noted by Terry and Tallon (2004: 22), a “methodical and deliberate tactic to engage a victim in sex involves a process that initially introduces the victim to the idea of sex and then gradually involves the victim in sexual activity”. The Internet allows perpetrators to make contact with children and even disguise themselves as children in cyberspace to secure their trust and cooperation, and after a period, introduce a sexual element into the online conversation and finally arrange a physical meeting (Choo, 2009). So, grooming usually precedes sexual exploitation, whether it takes place online or offline, but new technologies provide offenders with easy access to children and enlarge the

possibilities for manipulative interaction through interactive channels, allowing free access to children.

In addition to grooming, the predators may use the flaming, a system used by paedophiles in chat rooms, consisting of the use of explicit and scurrilous language, likely to affect minors on the network psychologically. Recent research has found that victims often act consensually, aware that they are communicating with adult strangers, and avoid confronting reference adults (parents, teachers) about such experiences (Senato della Repubblica, 2020). Moreover, sexting is the term used to describe the sending of sexually suggestive or explicit messages or photographs, typically via mobile phone, and sextortion is a kind of blackmail. The perpetrator demands sexual favors, money, or other benefits under the threat of sharing intimate or sexually explicit material. When carried out against children, sexual extortion involves a process whereby children or young people are coerced into continuing to produce sexual material and/or told to perform distressing acts under threat of exposure to others of the material that depicts them. (Ecpat, 2016). Although sexual coercion and sextortion of minors also happen for financial gain, in the majority of cases, the aim is to obtain new sexual exploitation materials.

4. The data available in Italy

4.1 Sources of data and methods

Focusing on cases or victims whose violence has been reported, some data on non-contact sexual violence against children are provided in Italy by the law enforcement agencies and by the specialized helplines for children. Here are considered the latest available data, taking into account that statistics from the Interforce Informatic System (SDI) database are annually collected and released by the Ministry of Interior and Istat, allowing analysis of time series, while data from the Service Postal Police and Communications (C.N.C.P.O.) are available only occasionally, in reports. The 1.96.96 Listening and Counselling helpline and 114 Childhood Emergency helpline release data about their activities in a dedicated report annually.

4.2 Data from the law enforcement agencies

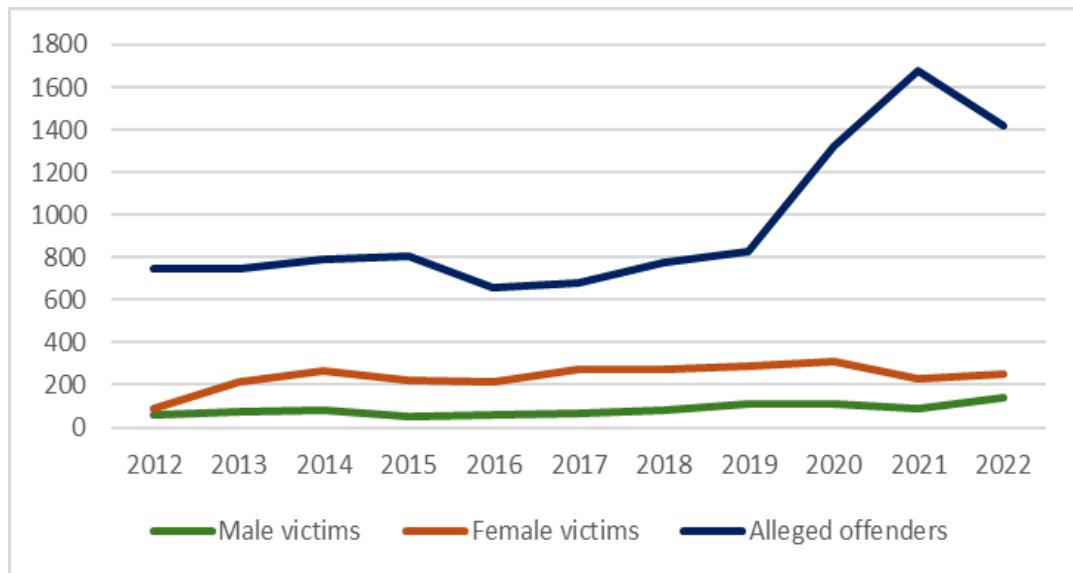
Looking at the statistics from the Ministry of Interior, in 2022 (latest available data), the Law enforcement identified 248 victims of female sex and 143 male (respectively 63.4% and 36.6% of the total) with reference to the crime defined in the Italian penal code as child pornography and possession of paedo-pornographic materials.

Among them, in 2022, there were 129 victims aged 0-13 (66.7% girls) and 112 aged 14-17 (74.1% girls). The rest of the identified victims were aged 18 and over (150 victims, i.e. 38.4% of all victims), although they were children when the violence occurred. Looking at the data over the last 10 years confirms that over time, the majority of victims are girls.

The number of alleged offenders of this crime is greatly higher than the number of identified victims, reflecting the additional difficulties of reaching the victims, even in cases of disclosure of violence and the fact that for this kind of crime, the investigations detect

multiple perpetrators. The sex of perpetrators is in almost all cases male: in 2022, only 6.8% of the total are female, and this quota has always been below 10% over the last 10 years.

Figure 1. Number of victims of all ages and alleged offenders of “child pornography and possession of paedo-pornographic materials” by law enforcement. Years 2012-2022



Source: Istat, Ministry of Interior, SDI-SSD.

https://esploradati.istat.it/databrowser/#/en/dw/categories/IT1_Z0840JUS_1.0/JUS_CRIMINAL/DCCV_AUTVITTPS/IT1_73_230_DF_DCCV_AUTVITTPS_3,1,0

In Italy, revealing intimate images without consent was recognised as a crime in 2019. Since then, the relative share of female victims still represents the majority of cases, despite having decreased over time. In 2022, the number of minor victims of this crime was 171, in particular 117 girls and 54 boys.

It is worth mentioning that in Italy, since 2008, there has been a special body, the National Centre for combating online pedophilia (Centro Nazionale per il Contrastio alla Pedofilia Online - C.N.C.P.O.). The mission of the Centre is to systematically monitor websites that disseminate CSAM. However, statistics about the results of the C.N.C.P.O.’s activities are not publicly available.

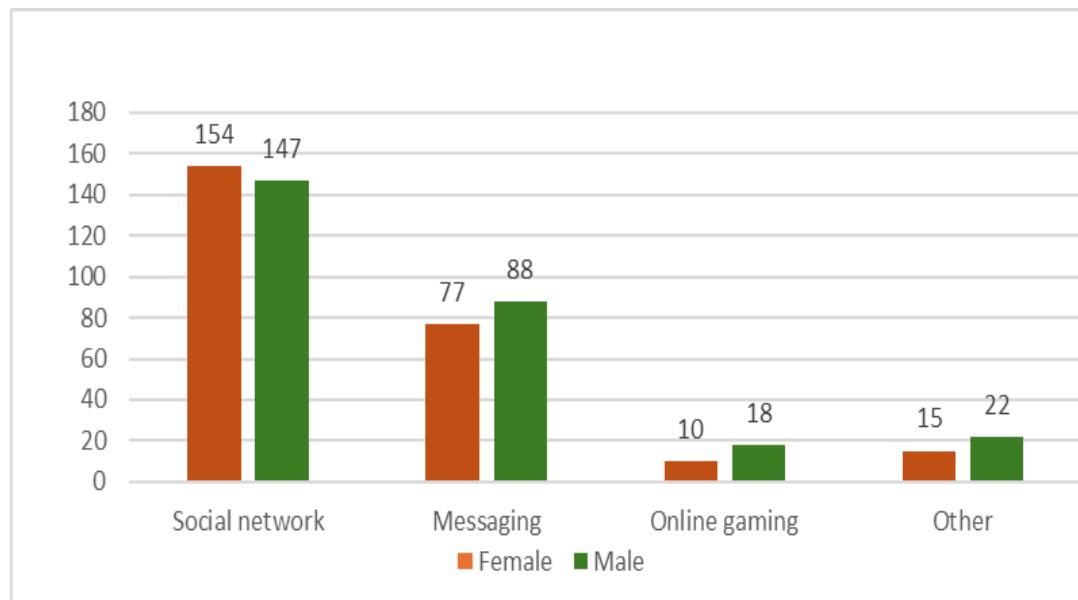
Some information is realised in a Report issued in 2022 by the C.N.C.P.O. – Servizio Polizia Postale e delle Comunicazioni, with the contribution of Save the Children Italia (C.N.C.P.O., Save the Children Italia, 2022). The analysis considers data referring to 2021 and includes several forms of sexual violence such as CSAM, corruption of a minor, exploitation and abetting prostitution.

Data highlights that in 2021, cases identified by the authorities sharply increased compared to the previous year, due to the increased use of the Internet following the Covid-19 pandemic: 5,316 cases in 2021 versus 3,243 in 2020, with an increase of 47%.

The perpetrators of the exchange of CSAM were 1,421, and among them, authorities identified 208 groomers (15% of the total), based on their modus operandi, typically patient and manipulatory, trapping the child in a pseudo-sentimental relation. Among the groomers,

the Police identified 49 minors, especially boys. Children receiving sexualised contacts from a groomer on the web were 531 in 2021. The majority of them were aged between 10 and 13 (306 children), followed by those aged 14-16 (193), while 32 children were aged less than 9. In this case, there were no significant differences between boys and girls.

Figure 2. Children aged 0-17 victims of online grooming by channel of contact and sex. Year 2021



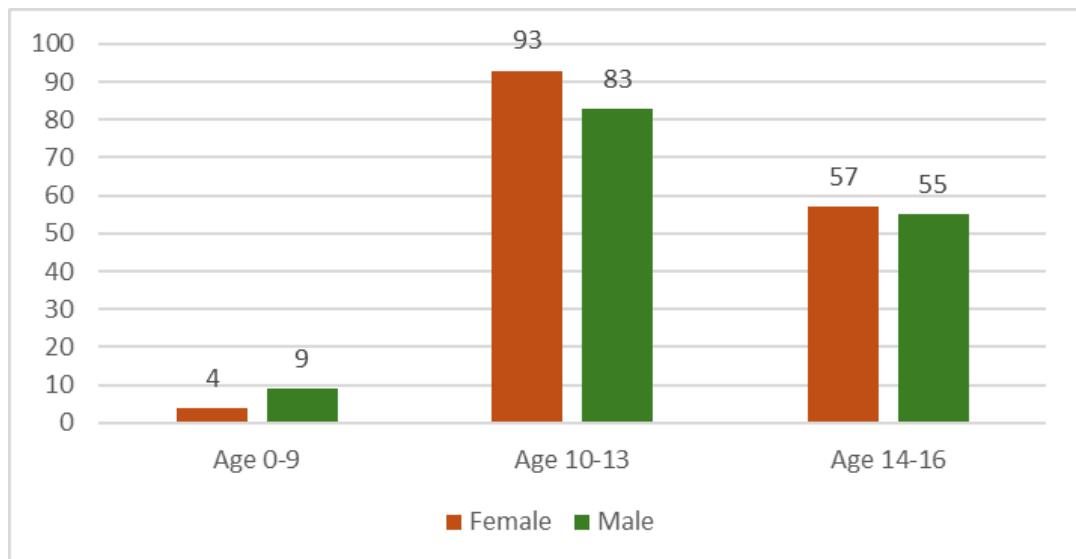
Source: Ministry of Interior – Service Postal Police and Communications
<https://www.savethechildren.it/cosa-facciamo/pubblicazioni/labuso-sessuale-online-danno-di-minori-il-dossier>

According to the report, children using the Internet appear to be more at risk when using social networks. In particular, the report underlines the relatively high number of children aged 10-13 contacted by groomers on social networks, even though, according to the provisions of the European Union GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation³) and the policies of the main social networks, the use of these services should be prohibited to children under 13. It is also underlined the emerging risk represented by online gaming, designed for children and raising the attention of groomers who take advantage of the related

³ [Regulation \(EU\) 2016/679](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC.

chat, messaging and offering services, giving the possibility to have further advantages to offer to children.

Figure 3. Children aged 0-17 victims of grooming on social networks by age and sex. Year 2021



Source: Ministry of Interior – Service Postal Police and Communications

<https://www.savethechildren.it/cosa-facciamo/pubblicazioni/labuso-sessuale-online-danno-di-minori-il-dossier>

4.3 Data from the specialized helplines for children

These forms of violence have harmful and long-lasting consequences on the children. Some signs of the caused distress are visible on the data from the helplines dedicated to the support of children: the 1.96.96 Listening and Counselling helpline and the 114 Childhood Emergency helpline. These services receive, among their requests for help, some that are due in particular to such kinds of sexual violence, reflecting the difficult situation that the involved minors have to face. Data from these sources are not systematically released. However, some information is available in occasional analyses.

Between 2015 and March 2023 (Telefono Azzurro, 2023), there were 526 children followed by the 1.96.96 Listening and Counselling helpline due to online exploitation, while 417 were helped by the 114 hotline for the same reason in the same period.

In 2022, ‘online violence’ concerned 29 children, followed by the Counselling helpline and 69 children by the 114 helpline. Children supported by the Counselling helpline reported as reasons to ask for help (in total 30 motivations) sexting (13), sextortion (12), grooming (3), CSAM (1) and sexual harassment (1). Among the requests for help to the 114 Emergency helpline, there were more often cases of CSAM (26), grooming (21), sextortion (12), sexting (11), sexual harassment (5) and exposure to online sexual content (2).

Girls are involved more often (55.6% and 58%). Not-binary children were only 3.7% among those followed by the Counselling helpline. The biggest group of children involved are those

aged 15-18 (61% and 48%), followed by children aged 11-14 (39% and 36%). There is only a minority of children aged 0-10 among those followed by the 114 helpline (16%). Based on the Counselling helpline, the alleged perpetrator was an adult stranger in 22% of cases, a friend or acquaintance in 17%. In 7% of cases, the age of the perpetrator was unknown, while it was a minor in 14%, and an adult in 10%. For 56% of cases, followed by the 114 helpline, the perpetrator was an acquaintance, while for the rest (44%), an adult stranger.

As UNICEF-ICVAC (United Nations Children's Fund, 2025) underlines it is important to consider that the nature of violent acts facilitated through technology may be dependent on the use of ICTs, while others may be enabled or assisted by the use of ICTs. This means that, in practice, any violent act in the ICVAC that does not require physical contact, as for example "exposure of a child to other violent experiences", may qualify as technology-facilitated violence against children when facilitated through ICTs. Another important element when measuring technology facilitated violence against children is the setting where the violent act occurs (such as social media, social gaming platforms, discussions forums, dark web and other digital spaces). These considerations underscore the importance of applying both ICVAC categories and disaggregating variables in order to accurately identify and analyse technology-facilitated violence against children across the varying nature of violent acts.

5. Conclusion

Non-contact forms of violence, such as grooming, sextortion, online harassment, and the dissemination of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), are uniquely challenging to identify and address due to their non-physical nature and the use of digital platforms that can obscure the activities of perpetrators.

The fight against non-contact sexual violence against children relies heavily on the availability, quality, and comparability of data. It's extremely important to understand the scale of the problem, and comprehensive data collection is essential for grasping the prevalence and patterns of non-contact sexual violence. Current data highlight an alarming increase in online violence, but gaps remain, particularly in capturing less visible forms of exploitation, such as live-streamed sexual exploitation or self-generated CSAM. Without accurate data, it is difficult to prioritize resources or develop effective interventions.

Moreover, it is fundamental to enhance detection and prevention. The dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of digital sexual violence necessitates real-time data collection and analysis. Also, we need to raise awareness and guide interventions among stakeholders to understand risks to children, while using data to empower families and communities to recognize and report non-contact sexual violence.

As seen before, data reveal that certain groups, particularly adolescent girls, are at higher risk of non-contact sexual violence. However, boys and younger children are also targeted, especially in online environments. Detailed data on victim demographics and their interactions with perpetrators are critical for tailoring support and prevention efforts to the specific vulnerabilities of each group.

At the end, non-contact sexual violence, particularly when facilitated by digital platforms, often transcends national boundaries. Harmonized data collection and sharing between

countries are essential for tracking perpetrators and dismantling international networks of sexual exploitation.

The analysis of data from the available sources does not allow for an exhaustive measurement either of the adequate indicators or of the phenomenon of non-contact violence against children. The measurements currently available are fragmented. They help to identify only certain forms and provide an initial understanding of the phenomenon, but often capture only its visible part—the “tip of the iceberg.”

Methodological tools are required to address the multifaceted nature of violence against children—online and offline, in family, school, and social contexts—while considering risk factors and digital influences. These tools should be scientifically rigorous and based on high-quality data, integrating different sources such as direct surveys with minors, dedicated modules within existing surveys, administrative data, and systematic monitoring of online violence. In conclusion, the collection and analysis of data are not merely supportive tools but foundational elements in addressing non-contact sexual violence against children. This implies micro, meso and macro impacts for practitioners and policy-makers.

At the micro-level, this collection must adopt common indicators and a measurable description of the phenomenon by collecting comparable data in order to observe the phenomenon over time and identify changes in space using microdata for cross-country comparisons. At the meso level, accurate, timely, and comprehensive data empower all stakeholders and practitioners to understand the scope of the problem, develop evidence-based interventions, and protect children effectively in an increasingly digital world.

At the macro level, investing in robust data systems and international collaboration is not just an option but a necessity in combating this growing form of violence. Properly informing policymakers so that they can take timely and appropriate action is the only way to reduce the hidden and frightening nature of the phenomenon.

Authors contributions

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