

# INTO THE LIGHT

Executive Summary to <https://intothelight.childlight.org>

Childlight global index of child sexual exploitation  
and abuse prevalence



# Foreword

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Child sexual exploitation and abuse is a global health pandemic. It occurs in every country, is growing exponentially and is global in nature. However, this is a hidden pandemic, one that has been ignored and pushed to the side for far too long because the reality is often too difficult to contemplate.

Having worked globally as a police officer for over 30 years, I have witnessed the true horror and growth of child sexual exploitation. Enabled by technology and a lack of regulation, it has been allowed to pervade every part of our communities, both online and offline. Those working across the sector know this from anecdotal information and experience. Whilst this insight is helpful, it has not been sufficient to drive systematic change across the child protection sector. We need evidence that is indisputable so the problem can no longer be ignored, denied or unhelpfully conflated with issues such as privacy and freedom of speech.

Childlight has been established to take a data-driven, evidence-based approach to understanding the true prevalence and nature of child sexual exploitation and to use that data and evidence to drive transformational and sustainable change to safeguard children globally.

We do not underestimate this task. Data on child sexual exploitation and abuse differs in quality around the world; data foundations are inconsistent, definitions differ and, frankly, transparency is not what it should be.

I am, therefore, indebted to the support provided by the Human Dignity Foundation in establishing Childlight at the University of Edinburgh. This has allowed us to move at pace and benefit from the support of world-leading researchers and experts across the field to undertake this complex challenge.

Our *Into the Light Index*, the world's first estimate of the scale of this haunting problem, is a preliminary attempt to produce a global picture based on what Childlight researchers have been able to discover in partnership with others leading the fields of data, law enforcement and safeguarding. Whilst many gaps and inconsistencies remain, it provides a baseline by which we can measure the sector's progress in understanding the true scale and nature of child sexual exploitation and abuse. As the data improves and we build our knowledge, we expect to provide more reliable country-by-country estimates and expand into other areas of child sexual exploitation and abuse, both online and offline.

This Index is intended to drive research that enhances our knowledge and understanding of the problem. More importantly, it is intended to have impact by raising awareness and providing frontline workers, policymakers and governments information by which they can make better informed decisions on safeguarding children globally from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Our assessment that at least 300 million children per year are subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse must serve as a wake-up call. So too our evidence that as many as one in nine men in parts of the world have sexually offended online against children – and that many would also go on to commit sexual contact offences with children if they believed it could be kept secret.

And yet paradoxically, this coincides with the roll out of end-to-end encryption on major file-sharing platforms that are increasingly used to secretly share sexual images of children. Just when more than ever we need to shine a light to protect our most vulnerable children, with reports of child sexual exploitation and abuse material being filed once every second, lights are being turned off. If encryption of file sharing is to be the norm, a balance clearly must be struck that meets the desire for privacy for all users, with adequate proactive detection of child sexual abuse material online. Make no mistake: online child sexual exploitation and abuse exists because it is allowed to exist. With sufficient will, it is preventable.

## Independent Audit



### Sir Bernard Silverman

Chair of the Childlight Technical Sub-Committee, Emeritus Professor at the Universities of Oxford and Bristol and former chief scientific adviser to the UK Home Office

I am delighted that Childlight have given me the opportunity to review the Index. I would make a number of observations. The process for selecting the surveys and other source data is properly set out. The data obtained from these sources is tabulated and has been released in a form which, in principle, can allow the analysis to be reproduced or other analyses to be carried out.

The algorithms and code for producing the final estimates have also been published. Confidence intervals, measuring the degree of uncertainty or certainty, for the various estimates have been produced and are included in the written account. It should be understood that these are conditional on the figures fed in from the original surveys and sources, and on the particular statistical model used to produce the estimates.

The report contains clear narrative caveats where appropriate, for example to explain the issues around differing definitions in different jurisdictions as well as in the surveys themselves, and around an approach that combines incidents of varying severity in the estimates.

Also to be commended is the way that estimates are not given at any inappropriate granular level, thereby obviating the need for inappropriate extrapolation or the production of estimates with very wide error bars.

Overall, the work has been carried out to a high professional standard.

# Introduction

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Data matters because it forms the foundation of a robust child protection sector, without which we cannot keep children safe or prevent violence from occurring in the first instance. Yet this sector is characterised by lack of data, multiple data sources, differing definitions and lack of data access, especially relating to child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA).

This is a major inhibitor to developing more effective and evidence-driven prevention and response strategies and policies. Without data and analysis, programmes are more difficult to design, deliver and evaluate; evidence is difficult to generate and credibly defend; narratives and definitions that frame the issue are difficult to construct; policy is difficult to advocate for; and funding is difficult to access. Without high-quality data that can guide policy and programmes, children continue to be at risk for child sexual exploitation and abuse; and perpetrators have impunity.

This challenge led to the establishment of Childlight, a fully-resourced global data institute anchored in academia at the University of Edinburgh. Childlight is proud to introduce this first edition of the ***Into the Light Index***, our inaugural annual index on the prevalence of CSEA globally. Our aim is to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the prevalence and nature of CSEA globally, providing policymakers and practitioners with reliable, relevant, and current data by which to make better-informed and focused decisions to safeguard children and prevent abuse from ever happening.

## About the Into the Light Index

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Childlight is a global data institute. We believe that no child should live their life in the darkness of Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA).

We also believe in the power of data to catalyse action and make meaningful change. Data gives us the evidence base for what works to protect children but also to stop abuse from ever happening.

However, we also know that data in the area of CSEA has challenges. It is not always of good quality, and is held by many organisations and in many different ways. Sometimes the data does not even exist at all.

The *Into the Light Index* is one of Childlight's contributions to resolving these challenges. This first Index is a way to bring together different types of data from around the world and see what picture it paints. We have brought together data from national surveys, research and practice to give our estimates of the prevalence of online CSEA victims and offenders, and the scale and nature of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online. We intend to track and update this data over time, to show what does and doesn't work to protect children and prevent abuse.

Our hope is that the *Into the Light Index* is used to catalyse change, whether that is through changing policy or legislation, getting the funding and people in place – or even simply by evidencing the horror of the scale of abuse.

# Using the Into the Light Index

You can access the *Into the Light Index* data through both a dedicated microsite ( [see the microsite](#) 🚀 ) and through a more detailed companion report ( [see the companion report](#) 🚀 ). We have three different measures (“Indicators”) in this first iteration, that explore the prevalence of Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA)<sup>1</sup>, that measure victimisation, perpetration and the scale and nature of child sexual abuse material online globally.

You can delve into each of these three Indicators to read more about each Indicator, view the data itself, and understand more about what the Indicator is telling us. Depending on the Indicator, you can see the data as a map, a chart or a data table, and navigate into different levels of the data to explore more. If it is relevant and useful to you, we also have provided detailed technical notes to explain the methods, quality checks and assurance behind each Indicator, should you wish to reproduce similar analysis yourselves.

The three Indicators in this inaugural *Into the Light Index* are:

**Indicator 1: Global Prevalence of OCSEA Victimisation** measures the percentage of victims within the general population. Data estimates show both lifetime prevalence (ever during childhood) and past year prevalence and where possible this is broken down by male and female prevalence estimates. In addition to an overall past year estimate, there are four main sub-categories of types of OCSEA victimisation that we were able to calculate from the data: online solicitation; non-consensual taking, sharing and exposure to sexual images and videos; online sexual exploitation; and sexual extortion.

**Indicator 2: Prevalence of OCSEA Perpetration** measures the percentage of perpetrators in the general population. Indicator 2 is based on a cutting-edge study that has used a new survey with a representative sample of men over the age of 18 in Australia, the UK and the US to better understand the prevalence and nature of perpetration of OCSEA.

**Indicator 3: Global Scale and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse Material Online (CSAM)** including images, image collections and videos that are shared online globally. It measures different aspects of the nature of CSAM globally, such as where across the world content is hosted, what we know about victim-survivors from the analysis of CSAM, and how long detected CSAM remains online after removal has been requested.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the *Into the Light Index* we use the umbrella term ‘Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse’ or ‘OCSEA’ to refer to the range of all types of sexually abuse and exploitative behaviours that occur either online or through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). We are also a part of the core team for the global work to update the Terminology Guidelines (commonly referred to as the Luxembourg Terminology Guidelines). Once these updated guidelines are complete, we will adopt the recommended terminology. In the meantime, we have used OCSEA as this is the term we have assessed to be used most frequently throughout the regions represented by data in this report. The current Terminology Guidelines can be found here: <https://ecpat.org/luxembourg-guidelines/>



# Main Index Findings

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Our inaugural *Into the Light Index* brings these three Indicators and their respective data sources together, to see new insights emerging on the scale and nature of OCSEA that have been obscured previously by viewing data in silos.

Indeed, our findings are stark:

- OCSEA is prevalent in every country where it is measured
- 300 million+ children under the age of 18<sup>2</sup> have been affected by online child sexual exploitation and abuse in the last 12 months
- 1 in 8 children globally have been subjected to online solicitation in the last 12 months, such as unwanted sexual talk, which can include non-consensual sexting, unwanted sexual questions and unwanted sexual act requests by adults or other youths
- 1 in 8 children have experienced non-consensual taking, sharing and/or exposure to sexual images and videos in the last 12 months
- 11% of men in the United States, 7% of men in the UK and 7.5% of men in Australia report that they have engaged in online behaviours at some point in their lifetime that could be classed as online child sexual abuse offending

The numbers are huge. But behind every number is a child. Children across families, communities and schools, online and in person. Indeed, some of you reading this report are likely to be survivors of abuse yourselves.

Because of this scale, we believe that CSEA should be treated like a global pandemic. We see the change that can be made quickly, and how countries and organisations can come together, when there is a worldwide health emergency such as AIDS or COVID-19. A public health approach to not just responding to but preventing CSEA is required; we owe that to our children.

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<sup>2</sup> See UNICEF for global population figures of children under the age of 18: <https://data.unicef.org/how-many/how-many-children-under-18-are-in-the-world/>

Key findings across our Indicators show:

- The Middle East and North Africa region receives the highest CSAM hosting notices/reports per population size, 9 per 1,000 people. This is more than any other region according to the limited data available, but it is lacking in all sources of OCSEA data overall.
- North America and Western Europe are two UNICEF regions where CSAM rate is also high, from multiple CSAM data sources, and is also where image-based CSEA victimisation and OCSEA perpetration prevalence estimates are higher.
- Eastern Europe and Central Asia reports one of the highest prevalence estimates of non-consensual taking, sharing and exposure to sexual images and videos than other UNICEF regions.
- Asia – specifically South Asia, and East Asia and Pacific regions – have the highest total number of CSAM reports when combining the four major global data sources. In addition, over 1 in 10 children in the East Asia and Pacific region report past year online sexual solicitation, whereas representative prevalence data is severely lacking in the South Asia region.
- The prevalence of online solicitation is highly reported by children in the East and Southern Africa and West and Central Africa regions and, with internet penetration lower in these regions, they represent potential future hotspots for growing OCSEA victimisation.
- There appears to be no statistically significant difference between the experiences of girls and boys with respect to online sexual victimisation from representative surveys. However, girls appear more in child sexual abuse material online according to all of the data sources which provided this analysis.
- Overall, there is a lack of report/removal notice data for CSAM for all parts of Africa and this, combined with lack of prevalence data for the Middle East and North Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, suggests these are regions for further study and support.

If you create, collate or work with relevant data, we welcome your support to strengthen the data foundations of OCSEA victimisation prevalence data. This includes filling gaps in the data, as well as developing standardised reliable and valid instruments and minimum standards for reporting prevalence estimates. Specifically, we recommend that:

- More gender-disaggregated data is needed for all the sub-types of OCSEA
- There is a requirement for the data organisations to move towards more harmonised assessment categories and criteria in the analysis of CSAM
- More prevalence data is needed, specifically in regions where evidence is limited or non-existent
- More coordination and support is required between actors around removal of content online

This is not to say that data owners and users are complacent and not already aware of these challenges. For example, we know that there are significant efforts underway in North America and Western Europe to enhance legislation pertaining to OCSEA as well as primary prevention efforts. These efforts should be promoted as a priority.

You can find a more detailed assessment and analysis of our data across the three Indicators, in a detailed companion report here: <https://childlight.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/into-the-light.pdf>

# Data Transparency, Quality, and Reproducibility

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Transparency, quality assurance and reproducibility represent key strategic areas for Childlight and for improving the rigour and robustness of data in this field. All our studies at Childlight have publicly registered protocols on the Open Science Framework (OSF) detailing the study methods, quality assurance processes and potential pathways to impact. Similarly, all our Indicators include detailed technical notes on how the data was collected/synthesised, how the Indicator was calculated and presented, as well as details on the quality assurance mechanisms. For reproducibility, we archive full datasets as open access where possible for others to review, test, challenge and build on our research.

To improve data quality and minimise any bias, each of the Indicators has been reviewed by senior technical advisors and data owners as well as the index advisory committee. We have had the Index independently audited by a senior statistician (Sir Bernard Silverman, see “Independent Audit” above). Confidence intervals accompany all prevalence data (e.g. Indicators 1 and 2) for readers to understand the uncertainty around each estimate. For reproducibility, we have also made available the data tables that underpin the microsite graphics, as well as the R code (i.e., programming code for data testing, manipulation, and analysis) for the meta-analysis.

## What’s Next for the Into the Light Index

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This is our first *Into the Light Index*, which we will grow and evolve over time and should be seen as a baseline. The field still has a long way to go – especially in the measurement of OCSEA – to improve our understanding of prevalence. The first iteration presents our findings at a regional rather than country-by-country level. This reflects current data limitations and is intended to better match how many current CSEA response and prevention organisations are structured and organise their work in terms of child protection system strengthening. We consider this first iteration a baseline, not just in terms of findings but also in understanding what data exists to begin with, and how useful it is.

We have deliberately focused on the prevalence of online CSEA as this is an area with the least complete data picture, and, therefore, where we think the Index can provide the most immediate impact to others. We have chosen to share what we know now in the hope that you find it useful, rather than wait until there is a perfect, complete picture.

We know that as well as data being incomplete and unreliable, in many places it simply is not available. Within the detail of our *Index* and analysis, we have data for more than one Indicator in 57 of 195 UN-recognised countries – of differing levels of coverage, quality and confidence. Over the next iterations of our *Index*, we expect to not just enhance the current Indicators, but to fill the gaps in our collective knowledge and even test new Indicators. The next *Index* iteration will also expand to cover all forms of CSEA, not just online exploitation and abuse.

We have more data and more detail that we will release over the coming months, across languages. However, if there is something specific that you need now, because children can’t wait.



# What Can You Do?

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We know that you are as appalled as we are at the scale of these initial findings, which are just a piece of the data puzzle. However, we ask that you take that horror and turn it to action:

- If you work with data, help us to enhance the Index and fill the gaps in data
- If you have data, knowledge or insight that can improve our collective understanding, please share it
- If you are in a position to set or influence legislation, policy and funding, use this data to inform your plans and recommendations
- If you have questions on the scale or nature of CSEA and need data to shift the dial, get in touch with us
- If you feel powerless, make noise about what you are confronted with

And finally, if you work with children to keep them safe and secure, let us know how we can help you and your amazing work around the world.

To get in touch, email: [childlight@ed.ac.uk](mailto:childlight@ed.ac.uk)

To access the dedicated *Into the Light Index* microsite:

<https://intothelight.childlight.org>

To access the detailed companion report:

<https://childlight.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/into-the-light.pdf>

To access the data and technical notes:

<https://datashare.ed.ac.uk/handle/10283/8770>

To find out more about Childlight: [www.childlight.org](http://www.childlight.org)

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**Behind every number is a child. If you or someone you know needs support for child sexual exploitation and abuse, or if you are concerned that you might hurt a child, please visit Child Helpline International or brave movement or Stop it now**

**If you see harmful imagery or content online concerning a child, please report it to NCMEC, INHOPE, IWF or C3P**

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