



PROTECTING CHILDREN IN THAILAND FROM ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: THE WAY FORWARD

In the past year alone, nine percent of 12-17-year-old internet users in Thailand were victims of grave instances of online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSEA). While recent work to reform legislation and develop policy responses to the crime are commendable, support is needed to improve awareness, knowledge and skills related to OCSEA within the child protection sector in Thailand. The Thai government, public institutions, frontline workers, industry, and caregivers can all do more to respond to OCSEA and disrupt the harm it is causing to children.

Recommended actions

Disrupting Harm in Thailand makes a series of detailed and evidence-based recommendations based on the key research insights.

Act

- Appoint a government body to centralise and lead on OCSEA response and prevention, assign tasks, and allocate resources; this role can be filled by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.
- Create a streamlined chain of command for investigating OCSEA and a national database to track cases. This will help focus resources, improve evidence sharing among relevant sectors, and enhance international cooperation. Establish clear guidelines on case referrals between agencies involved in case investigation and create a monitoring system to make sure the guidelines are followed.
- Ensure the procedures in Criminal Procedure Code Act around child-friendly justice are implemented in practice.
- Expand and resource multi-disciplinary teams across the country – for example, involving social workers in the investigation process. Interviews with child victims indicate the participation of multi-disciplinary teams during the investigation and court process can reduce victims' anxiety.
- Create a standard information package to inform victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA, which includes OCSEA) and their caregivers on all the relevant procedures and rights – including their right to compensation – to enable them to make informed decisions during the justice seeking process.
- Amend the legislation on child sexual abuse material to explicitly cover depictions of a child's body for sexual purposes and include materials that depict a person appearing to be a child engaged in sexually explicit conduct.
- Explicitly criminalise specific OCSEA-related crimes, such as child sexual abuse material, live-streaming of child sexual abuse, online grooming, and sexual extortion. This could be done by adopting and enforcing the legislative proposal on OCSEA that was drafted by the Majestic Group, which is a sub-committee created to review OCSEA related laws.
- Introduce legislation and policy that will ensure social media platforms and other internet service providers are actively contributing to the safety of children on their platforms through removal of access to child sexual abuse materials, detection and reporting of incidents, and through prompt compliance with law enforcement requests for information.
- Connect to INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database to enhance response and remove duplication of work by law enforcement.

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Educate

- Adapt existing awareness and education programmes about sexual exploitation and abuse to explain the role technology might play in facilitating it. Ensure these awareness programmes have universal reach, including out-of-school children, and those living in marginalised and remote communities.
- Improve caregivers' understanding of children's online activities, through community-based awareness and evidence-based education programmes that help caregivers recognise the risks – and benefits – of online tools. Teach them how to be involved and supportive of a child's internet use and how to foster open dialogue when a child faces dangers or harm online.
- Promote awareness of OCSEA to the private sector to ensure ICT companies have a better understanding of the risks children face and what they can do to combat OCSEA.
- Increase awareness-raising efforts about helplines as a reporting and help-seeking mechanism for OCSEA. An important pre-requisite for this is ensuring that helplines are well-resourced, and that frontline support staff are regularly trained and supported and can therefore provide children with a high level of support.
- Strengthen the capacities of existing internet hotlines or child sexual abuse material reporting portals, such as the non-governmental organisation Thai Hotline. Make all the formal reporting mechanisms – online and offline – accessible to children and develop adequate mechanisms to protect their anonymity if needed.
- Train police officers – especially at local levels – about the overlaps between online and in-person forms of CSEA, inform them about the provisions of law that can be used to bring charges in cases, and ensure linkages with child protection services.
- Train all justice actors on how to handle OCSEA cases and deliver child-friendly justice.

Fund

- Institutionalise and financially support technical training on OCSEA for police officers, prosecutors, judges/magistrates, lawyers, courtroom staff, child protection officers, medical staff, frontline social workers, and teachers, to ensure they are regularly up to date on the rapidly evolving threats.
- Improve the capacity of the social service workforce to identify children that have experienced OCSEA or are at risk.
- Operationalise the guidelines related to the establishment of a Victim Fund, which include supporting children and their caregivers with free legal aid, temporary housing, psychological services, and transportation.
- Leverage the fact that children rely on their interpersonal networks to disclose abuse by creating more community-level resources to facilitate disclosure and reporting. For example, programmes where trained community members are educated on the relevant criminal justice processes, and on how to listen to and support children (via safeguarding policies in schools, sport clubs or faith-based organisations) and their families with the reporting and help-seeking process.

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Key insights

Disrupting Harm in Thailand outlines six key research insights:

1. In the past year alone, nine percent of internet-users aged 12-17 in Thailand were victims of grave instances of online sexual exploitation and abuse. This includes blackmailing children to engage in sexual activities, sharing their sexual images without permission, or coercing them to engage in sexual activities through promises of money or gifts. Scaled to the population, this represents an estimated 400,000 children in Thailand who were subjected to any of these harms in the span of just one year.
2. According to the household survey, offenders of OCSEA are most often people already known to the child. These can be friends or acquaintances of the child (both peers and adults) but also romantic partners and family members. Individuals, unknown to the child, accounted for around one-fifth of cases. These crimes can happen while children spend time online or in person but involving technology.
3. Among children who were subjected to OCSEA through social media, the most common platforms were Facebook or Facebook Messenger, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram.
4. Children who were subjected to OCSEA-related crimes tend to confide in people within their interpersonal networks, particularly their mothers. Caregivers and children are reluctant to turn to formal reporting mechanisms like hotlines, helplines, or the police.
5. The law enforcement, justice, and social support systems currently lack capacity, and resources to respond to cases of OCSEA. Much can and must be done to build this capacity through specific actions outlined in this brief as well as capacitation of public officials and justice professionals.
6. Implementation of laws pertaining to OCSEA in Thailand need to be strengthened. Awareness generation among stakeholder constituencies on international instruments and standards pertaining to OCSEA must be accelerated.

The full report and complete list of recommendations can be found [here](#).

About Disrupting Harm

Disrupting Harm in Thailand is part of an unprecedented large-scale multi-country research project into OCSEA that draws on the research expertise of ECPAT, INTERPOL, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, and their networks of both national and global partners. It is supported by the [Fund to End Violence Against Children](#), through its Safe Online initiative and focuses on 13 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia.

Data collection took place from early 2020 through to early 2021 with the cooperation of the Government of Thailand and a wide range of public bodies and other organisations active in the country. A comprehensive

analysis was made of the legislation, policy and systems addressing OCSEA in Thailand. A range of statistical data was gathered for 2017–2019. Surveys were conducted with internet-using children, their caregivers and front-line service providers from the private and voluntary sectors. Interviews were held with high-level government officials, law enforcement officials, justice professionals, and child victims of OCSEA and their caregivers. All the information was then analysed and triangulated. The analysis for *Disrupting Harm in Thailand* was finalised in July 2021. The recommendations were discussed further at a national consultation on 16 July 2021.