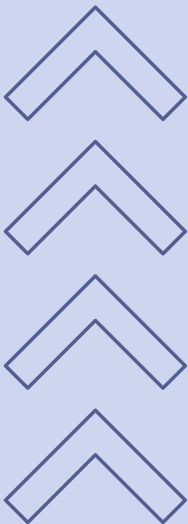# SOCIAL MEDIA FACILITATED TRAFFICKING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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»»»» EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media platforms, while widely used by children and young people, are increasingly exploited for harmful activities that compromise their safety and well-being. Despite heightened attention to youth engagement on these platforms, there is limited research on how social media facilitates different types of exploitation linked to modern slavery. This report presents key findings from exploratory research aimed at better understanding the ways social media is used to exploit young people. It also evaluates the preparedness of relevant stakeholders to respond effectively to these challenges. The findings emphasise the urgent need for targeted measures to safeguard young users and strengthen response frameworks among stakeholders.

KEY FINDINGS

Social media usage and prevalence in the exploitation of children and young people:

- Social media is leveraged at every stage of the exploitation process, serving various functions from initial contact to sustained control of victims.
- Offenders use social media both actively and passively—some directly target potential victims, while others use it to glamorise lavish lifestyles that may attract them.
- In cases of criminal exploitation involving minors, such as 'county lines' drug supply networks, social media is often used for coercive control, including continuous messaging with threatening images or videos.
- Perceptions of social media's role in exploitation varied across groups, with law enforcement agencies reporting higher rates of use than non-governmental organisations.
- Different platforms are used strategically across the exploitation process; for example, YouTube is often used for glamorisation, while Snapchat is used for real-time monitoring and control.
- Social media's low-cost, low-risk environment enables offenders to reach potential victims globally with minimal effort or detection. Anonymity and the difficulty of tracking further reduce the chances of identification and prosecution.
- Access to affordable devices and the internet expands social media use among young people, increasing their exposure to violence and exploitation. According to practitioners, many minors have a limited perception of online risks, heightening their vulnerability to exploitation.

Preparedness to respond:

- Most participants indicated that their organisations are inadequately prepared to address social media's role in the exploitation of children and young people.
- There is a widespread lack of professional awareness and expertise regarding social media-facilitated exploitation.
- Participants highlighted insufficient legislation and called for a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation to enhance understanding, data management, and record-keeping.
- Limited collaboration with social media companies was identified as a major barrier to identifying and protecting at-risk youth effectively.

NEXT STEPS

To enhance responses to the role of social media in facilitating the exploitation of children and young people, further collaborative research is essential in the following areas:

1. Gaining deeper insights into social media usage patterns related to exploitation.
2. Strengthening engagement with social media companies.
3. Developing mechanisms for early identification of at-risk youth.

⟫⟫⟫⟫ PROJECT DESIGN

*This study was developed in collaboration with a steering group that included representatives from non-governmental organisations supporting child victims of exploitation and members of law enforcement agencies. The research team also consulted individuals with lived experiences of exploitation. These stakeholders and individuals contributed to shaping the study and were further involved in developing the key conclusions and recommendations presented in this report.

≫≫≫ **INTRODUCTION**

Social media has become a central part of daily life for children and young people, with 97% of UK households with children aged 0-18 having internet access at home (Ofcom, 2023). This widespread connectivity has fuelled increased social media use among young people, making it a primary mode of communication (Ofcom, 2023). While social media platforms have transformed how young people connect, they have also introduced new threats to their safety and well-being (Europol, 2019; NCA, 2021, 2023; UNODC, 2020). The rapid evolution of social media technology, coupled with limited detection and prevention mechanisms, has decreased protective factors, heightening risks related to trafficking and exploitation (UNICEF, 2021).

Research reveals that a significant portion of trafficking victims are recruited through social media (Europol, 2019; NCA, 2021, 2023; UNODC, 2020; Polaris, 2018). Traffickers exploit the anonymity, global reach, and accessibility of social media to target, groom, and exploit vulnerable individuals (Sarkar, 2015; Lewis & Llewellyn, 2019). They continually adapt tactics to leverage new features on social platforms, expanding their reach while minimising the risk of detection and enhancing profit opportunities (Europol, 2021; OSCE, 2020). Social media plays a crucial role in identifying and recruiting victims, maintaining control over them during exploitation, and exerting influence even after they have left exploitative situations (Campana, 2022; OSCE, 2020).

The UK's Online Safety Act 2023 has intensified focus on the role of social media in child exploitation, mandating social media companies to identify, report, and mitigate online harms, including child trafficking and exploitation. This legislation's emphasis on accountability underscores the urgent need for improved safety measures. Alongside the Act, Ofcom's forthcoming guidelines on children's access to online platforms and the development of new protection codes for children, expected by Summer 2025, reflect a growing commitment to safeguarding young users (Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2024). However, despite platform policies requiring users to be at least 13 years old—such as Instagram's new teen accounts for ages 13-15 (UK Safer Internet Centre, 2024)—the absence of adequate age verification allows younger children to bypass these restrictions (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2013). Moreover, collaboration between platforms and enforcement authorities remains challenging (Campana, 2022), as some platforms avoid accountability by claiming a neutral role in online interactions (Salter, 2017).

The high adoption of social media by children, coupled with limited digital literacy and fragmented regulatory frameworks, complicates the implementation of effective prevention and intervention strategies. Professionals face difficulties in identifying, investigating, and prosecuting cases due to the rapid changes in online spaces, anonymity, legal constraints, encryption, and limited cooperation from social media companies (Campana, 2022; UNODC, 2020). Privacy laws and restrictions on tools like web crawlers in certain countries, coupled with the vast volume of online ads and the use of anonymising tools, make tracking perpetrators challenging. Additionally, encrypted communication, limited monitoring of red-flag content related to sexual or labour exploitation, insufficient national enforcement units, and limited expertise within police forces all represent significant hurdles in the fight against online human trafficking.

⟩⟩⟩⟩ AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To contribute to more innovative and collaborative research to examine, respond to, and address the vulnerability stemming from Social Media-Facilitated Trafficking (SMFT) of children and young people, this project aimed to

1)   Advance the empirical understanding of social media usage and prevalence in the trafficking of children and young people.

2)   Assess the readiness of key stakeholders to respond effectively to social media's role in the trafficking and exploitation of children and young people.

3)   Identify effective interventions to counteract the risks posed by social media in facilitating exploitation.

>>>>> METHODOLOGY

Given the study's exploratory nature and the topic's sensitivity, a two-stage qualitative research approach was adopted.

STAGE 1

In the first stage of the process, a qualitative survey was designed, piloted, and distributed through targeted networks across England and Wales. Fifty-one participants from law enforcement agencies (n=21) and other governmental organisations, such as social services (n=11) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (n=19), completed it. The survey consisted of a mix of

1) closed questions exploring
   - the usage and prevalence of social media in the trafficking and exploitation of children and young people, and
   - the preparedness of professionals and organisations to respond to this form of exploitation.
2) open questions gathering participants' views on
   - challenges experienced in responding to the SMFT of children and young people,
   - facilitators that enable and promote the use of social media in the trafficking and exploitation of children and young people, and
   - opportunities for intervention.

STAGE 2

The second stage of the project aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how social media is utilised in the trafficking and exploitation of children and young people, as well as to identify the enabling factors, facilitators, challenges, and potential interventions. A focus group with eight practitioners from law enforcement agencies and non-governmental organisations was conducted. The focus group discussion was structured around the survey findings and the analysis of five non-governmental organisations' case files concerning the exploitation of children. To preserve anonymity and promote discussion on current and past cases of child exploitation (and the role of social media in such cases), the conversation was not recorded in any way. Instead, notes were taken by two members of the research team and later compared. Findings from the focus group were integrated into the ones from the survey.

>>>>> FINDINGS

Findings are presented according to the three study's objectives. All focus group members and survey respondents are referred to as project participants.

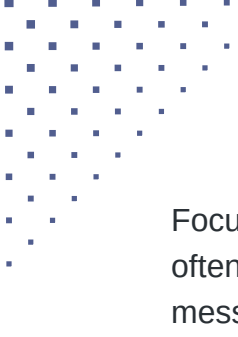## SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND PREVALENCE IN THE TRAFFICKING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Participants reached a consensus regarding the use of social media throughout all stages of criminal activity. Between 60% and 80% of survey respondents agreed that social media is frequently or very frequently utilised to profile, target, and recruit victims, as well as to groom them, build trust, deceive, exploit, and control them. However, social media serves varied purposes at different stages of crime, including victim targeting, deception, and control. Additionally, focus group discussions revealed distinct differences in how social media is employed in cases of sexual exploitation compared to criminal exploitation.

VICTIM TARGETING

Participants, along with the case files reviewed during the focus groups, indicated that offenders frequently use social media to target victims. Offenders employ social media in two primary ways: (i) to glamorise lavish lifestyles to attract potential victims and (ii) to identify and reach out to these individuals. Case file data show that publicly accessible social media accounts (with little to no privacy settings) and shared online connections make it easier to identify vulnerable individuals and facilitate initial contact between exploiters and their victims.

DECEPTION

Data indicates that social media—specifically its messaging features—plays a crucial role in building trust between offenders and their targets. Case file analysis reveals that the ability to communicate easily and frequently with minors enables offenders to learn about their hobbies, interests, and personal lives. This information is then exploited to foster trust and manipulate the children into engaging in acts that ultimately lead to their exploitation.

Focus group participants noted that in instances of child sexual exploitation, offenders often deceive minors into sharing compromising images or videos through social media or messaging apps. In the context of county lines, offenders utilise videos that glamorise certain lifestyles to persuade minors that earning money is easy. Over time, these children are progressively coerced into participating in criminal activities.

CONTROL

In instances of criminal exploitation, social media serves as a powerful mechanism for maintaining constant control over victims. Participants reported that minors involved in county lines receive violent videos and images throughout the day—such as depictions of other children being harmed or images of trap houses—serving as threats of potential violence against them. Focus group participants emphasised that children and young people can receive messages from their exploiters at any time, day or night, which creates a sense of obligation to check and respond to avoid negative repercussions.

Moreover, social media apps like Snapchat enhance this controlling dynamic through features such as geolocation, the instant deletion of messages, and notifications indicating when a message has been read. In cases of child sexual exploitation, offenders also leverage social media as a tool of coercion, threatening to post compromising images, videos, or personal information if victims do not comply with their demands.

PREVALENCE

Participants expressed differing perceptions regarding the prevalence of social media usage in the exploitation of children and young people. Survey data revealed that while 70% of law enforcement participants reported encountering social media in 50% or more of the cases they responded to in the past year, most NGO participants (53%) noted that social media was involved in less than 25% of the cases they addressed. Despite these variations, participants agreed that different apps serve distinct purposes at various stages of exploitation. For example, YouTube was frequently identified as a platform used to glamorise certain lifestyles and attract children and young people, particularly in county lines cases. At the same time, Snapchat was seen as a key tool for exerting ongoing control over victims.

From a criminological perspective, participants noted that one significant reason for the prevalence of social media in the exploitation of minors is its low-effort and low-risk nature for offenders. Social media platforms provide access to a vast pool of potential victims worldwide, greatly reducing the effort and cost typically associated with recruitment. As one participant remarked, social media facilitates quick "scanning and testing" of victims' vulnerabilities, thereby minimising the time needed to recruit them. The likelihood of

identification and prosecution remains low due to the challenges of monitoring and regulating social media sites, including tracking activities and profiles. Additionally, survey participants highlighted the anonymity afforded by social media, which complicates efforts for both victims and law enforcement to discern the identities behind profiles, thereby hindering the identification of offenders and other children at risk.

Access and affordability were identified as significant factors contributing to the widespread use of social media among children and young people, according to survey participants. They noted that social media platforms provide minors with a sense of belonging and the opportunity to pursue their desires. This, combined with young people's often low perception of risk and the challenges parents and guardians face in monitoring online activity, heightens their vulnerability to victimisation.

Focus group participants further emphasised that social media facilitates greater access to and exposure to violent content, leading to the normalisation of such material as well as certain cultures and lifestyles. This normalisation can further increase the risks faced by children and young people.

STAKEHOLDERS' READINESS TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY TO SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN THE TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Survey data revealed that, overall, participants felt they had a solid understanding of the risks and threats that social media poses in the trafficking and exploitation of children and young people (see Figure 1). However, they acknowledged that, at an organisational level, the role of social media in these issues is not well comprehended (see Figure 2).
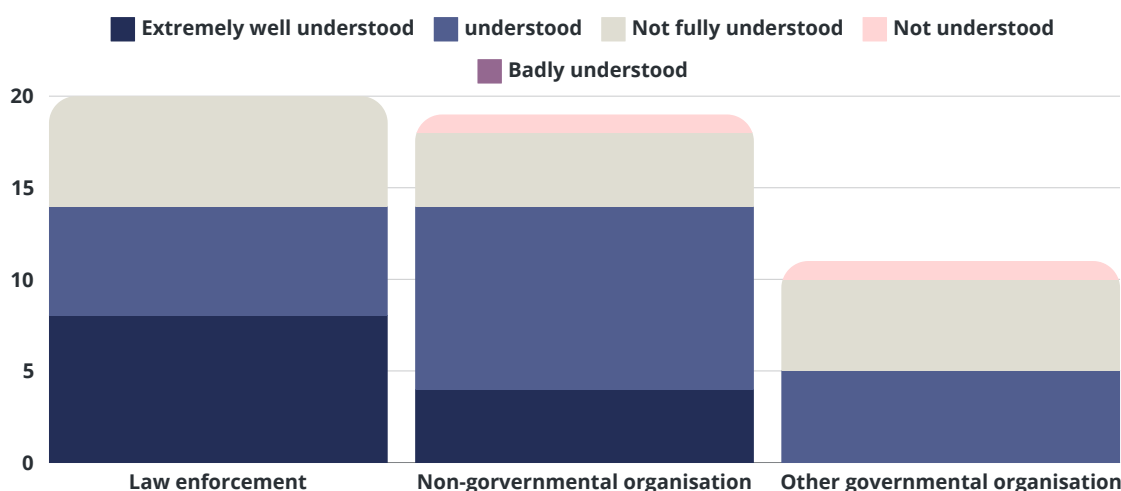

Figure 1. Professional perception of risks and threats posed by social media in the trafficking and exploitation of children and young people
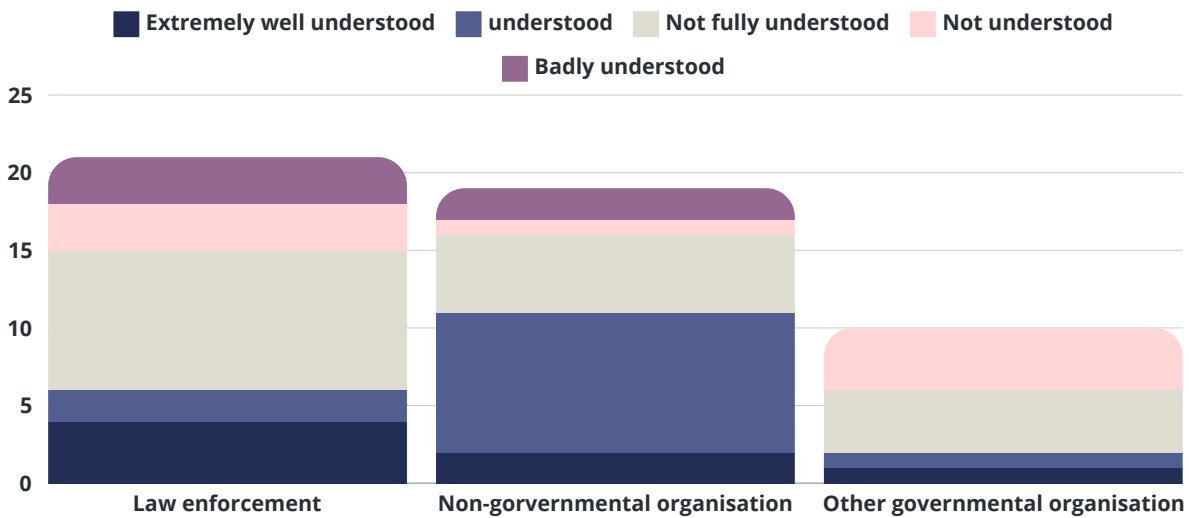
Figure 2. Organisational understanding of the role of social media in the trafficking and exploitation of children and young people

Participants, particularly those from law enforcement agencies and governmental organisations, expressed concerns that their organisations are ill-prepared to effectively respond to Social Media-Facilitated Trafficking (SMFT) of children and young people (see Figure 3).
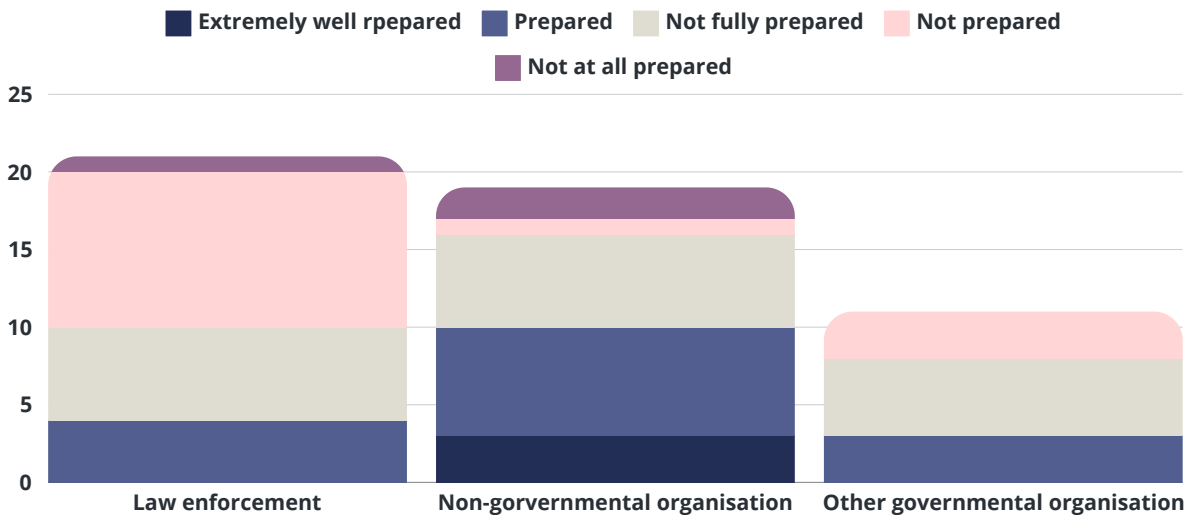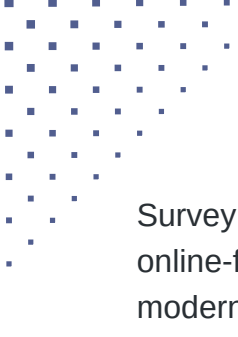

Figure 3. Organisational preparedness to respond to social media-facilitated trafficking and exploitation of children and young people

Survey data revealed that 47% of participants had not received any training related to online-facilitated trafficking, even if such training was part of a broader program on modern slavery. Among those who had received some training (n=27), the majority (n=22) found it helpful. Additionally, the survey indicated that 66% of participants' organisations have established protocols and formal procedures for responding to the trafficking and exploitation of children and young people. However, seven participants deemed these protocols unhelpful or irrelevant in addressing Social Media-Facilitated Trafficking (SMFT), and twelve participants were unsure whether any protocols existed.

Responses to open-ended survey questions and discussions in the focus group highlighted several challenges organisations face when responding to social media-facilitated exploitation of children and young people. Participants pointed out a lack of resources and capabilities, along with limited training and professional expertise at the organisational level. This issue is compounded by a general lack of institutional awareness and understanding. Focus group participants discussed how inadequate legislation and regulations hinder their ability to respond effectively. Despite recent advancements in legislation, such as the Online Safety Act 2023, there was consensus among focus group members regarding its limitations in addressing emerging online threats. Specifically, the focus on sexual abuse without adequate consideration of other controlling and exploitative behaviours was noted as a significant shortcoming.

The lack of engagement with social media companies emerged as another critical challenge. While focus group participants reported some successes in interacting with specific platforms, they emphasised that collaboration and intelligence sharing with these companies is generally difficult. From a law enforcement perspective, this presents challenges in gathering evidence for prosecutions. Participants noted that victims of exploitation are often reluctant to engage with law enforcement or provide their devices and accounts, further complicating efforts to prosecute offences and identify other at-risk individuals.

Moreover, survey participants highlighted the dynamic nature of apps, which continuously evolve to offer new features, such as enhanced privacy settings, geolocation capabilities, and message deletion options. Focus group participants expressed concern that these adaptations allow offenders to exploit these tools more effectively, making it increasingly difficult for stakeholders to proactively identify risks and respond to instances of exploitation.

INTERVENTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNTERACT THE RISKS POSED BY SOCIAL MEDIA IN FACILITATING EXPLOITATION

Participants acknowledged that while certain factors—such as going missing, being an asylum seeker, school disengagement, or school expulsion—can serve as warning signs, social media-facilitated trafficking of children and young people is a structural and complex issue. Consequently, no single intervention can effectively address it on its own. Instead, a comprehensive approach is necessary to tackle this multifaceted problem. Participants emphasised the importance of a national and coordinated strategy that encompasses training, education, awareness-raising, engagement with social media companies, and legislative measures.

There was consensus on the need for enhanced education and awareness as a preventive strategy. Participants called for a coordinated approach that includes evaluative measures to assess the effectiveness of awareness campaigns and educational programs targeted at children, young people and their guardians (including schools and parents).

Moreover, participants highlighted the necessity for formal agreements between agencies and social media companies to improve the identification of at-risk children and young people. They pointed out the current absence of standardised mechanisms for reporting concerns and a lack of professional understanding regarding what, how, and to whom such concerns should be reported. During the focus group discussions, there was a shared belief in the need for a centralised reporting platform that would facilitate the effective identification of vulnerable children and enable a more coordinated response.

While survey participants expressed the need for better control and monitoring of social media profiles (n=20), some focus group members voiced concerns about such interventions. Although there was agreement on the corporate responsibility of social media companies to foster safe online environments, participants worried that monitoring by parents or guardians could have unintended consequences, potentially making it harder to detect problems. They suggested that, in addition to proactive discussions with social media companies to implement better preventive measures, there is a critical need to create supportive environments where minors feel comfortable discussing their online interactions with guardians.

LIMITATIONS

The findings presented in this report offer a preliminary insight into the ways social media is utilised in the exploitation of children and young people. However, further collaborative research is essential to develop a more comprehensive evidence-based understanding of this issue, which can subsequently inform policy and practice interventions. It is important to note that while the methodology aimed to encompass all forms of exploitation, the prevalence of child criminal exploitation within the child protection discourse in the UK led respondents and participants to concentrate more on issues related to criminal child exploitation, particularly county lines, rather than sexual exploitation.

>>>> RECOMMENDATIONS

Three key recommendations have been identified based on the data and findings outlined in this report.

FURTHER RESEARCH SHOULD BE CONDUCTED TO ENHANCE INSIGHT AND BUILD MORE EVIDENCE-BASED KNOWLEDGE INTO SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE.

The findings indicated notable differences in how social media is utilised in cases of sexual exploitation versus criminal exploitation, underscoring the evolving nature of apps and their roles in facilitating crime. Future research and prevention strategies should take these differences into account, providing evidence-based insights into the specific features of social media apps most frequently employed in these criminal activities. Additionally, there should be a focus on understanding how social media is leveraged to target children and young people. To effectively develop preventive strategies and conduct research, a youth-centred perspective is essential. This approach should prioritise the views, needs, concerns, and attitudes of children and young people regarding digital tools. Furthermore, a more comprehensive assessment of practitioners' understanding of social media's role in crime is necessary. This will enhance their education and inform awareness-raising campaigns and training programs tailored for various professionals, including law enforcement and educators in primary and secondary schools.

IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

The widespread use of social media among children and young people, coupled with the insufficient involvement of social media companies in preventive and safeguarding measures, heightens their risk of exploitation. Additionally, existing legal and regulatory frameworks regarding the responsibilities of online platforms in relation to trafficking-related activities remain inadequate and fragmented. Addressing this issue necessitates a collaborative approach, where technology companies recognise their duty to protect children from online harm and actively develop effective detection and prevention tools. Policymakers, Ofcom, practitioners, and researchers should seek mechanisms and opportunities to create productive working agreements with tech companies. Moreover, further research into legal frameworks and digital vulnerabilities is essential to provide evidence-based insights that can guide the drafting of online platforms' terms and conditions, as well as legislation and regulations aimed at preventing exploitation and reducing online vulnerabilities.

DEVELOPMENT OF EVIDENCE-BASED EARLY-IDENTIFICATION MECHANISMS FOR PREVENTION AND EARLY DETECTION OF CHILDREN AT RISK OF EXPLOITATION

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should actively seek opportunities for enhanced engagement and collaboration with schools and service providers to more effectively and swiftly identify children and young people at risk. While some participants highlighted the necessity of reporting mechanisms and information-sharing platforms, further research is needed to assess the feasibility and challenges of implementing such strategies. Despite the corporate responsibility of social media companies to foster safer online environments, additional efforts should be made to create supportive spaces where minors feel comfortable discussing their online interactions with guardians and trusted adults. Future research should also focus on interventions that promote resilience and mitigate the risk of exploitation.

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