

Estimates of childhood exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors



A study of childhood experiences of 18-year-olds in four European countries

CONDUCTED BY

**ECONOMIST
IMPACT**

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Executive summary and key insights

This WeProtect Global Alliance study, conducted by Economist Impact, explores the experiences of 2,000 18-year-olds across four European countries who had regular access to the internet as children to understand their experiences of and exposure to **online sexual harms**¹ during childhood (see Figure 1).² It looks across four different harms and their risk factors to provide evidence on the potential scope, scale and dynamics of child sexual exploitation and abuse online.³ This study builds on the 2021 study Estimates of childhood exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors: A global study of childhood experiences of 18 to 20 years olds to provide country-level insights across France, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland.

Online sexual harms

This study explores childhood experiences of 18-year-olds across four online sexual harms:

Being sent sexually explicit content from an adult they knew or someone they did not know before they were 18.

Being asked to keep part of their sexually explicit online relationship with an adult they knew or someone they did not know before a secret.

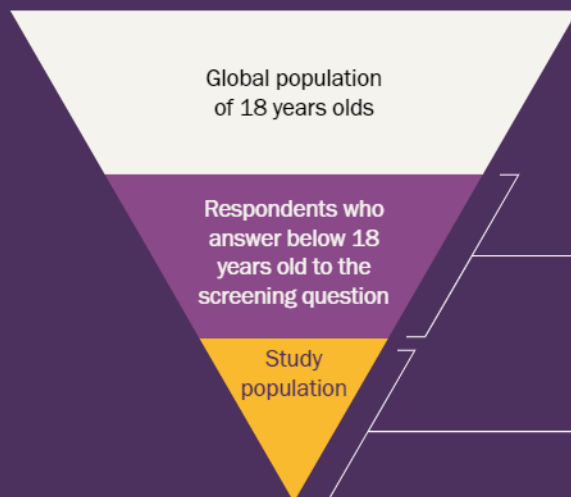
Having sexually explicit images of them shared without consent (by a peer⁴, an adult they knew, or someone they did not know before).

Being asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with (by a peer, an adult they knew, or someone they did not know before).⁵

1. A set of harmful behaviours considered as risk factors for potential or actual child sexual exploitation and abuse online.
2. In this study, regular access to the internet is defined as someone going on the internet (i.e., not watching a friend, family person or other adult use the internet) at least once a week and childhood is defined as the period before the age of 18 years old.
3. Conducting research on online sexual harms and sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood is challenging. Ethical concerns around surveying children, the risks of retraumatisation and sensitivities around sexuality and gender identity can restrict the survey population and the questions asked.
4. In this study, a peer is defined as a person belonging to the same societal group based on age; however, our survey allowed respondents to determine who counted as a peer and who did not. As such, it is possible that respondents included young adults over the age of 18 as peers rather than adults they knew before.
5. See "About the Study: Methodology & Research Design" on page 7 for more information on perpetrator groups and how Economist Impact separated harmful/abusive interactions from potentially positive sexual exploration and experiences between peers.

FIGURE 1

This study explores the experiences of 18-year-olds who had regular access to the Internet as children



Screening question: At what age did you first have regular access to the Internet?
Regular access is defined as “going online yourself on a mobile phone, gaming device or laptop/computer at least once a week. Please answer about personal use (not watching a friend, family person or other adult use the internet).”

18 year olds who had regular access to the Internet as children

Experiences of online sexual harms against children in Europe are very high.

Almost seven in 10 (68%) respondents had experienced at least one of the four online sexual harms considered before the age of 18 (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Respondents’ experiences of online sexual harms by type of sexual harm



Notes: n=2000

Girls are disproportionately affected.

Almost four in five girls (79%) experienced at least one sexual harm during childhood compared with 57% of boys (see Figure 3). Girls were much more likely than boys to experience a stranger or an adult they knew trying to talk to them about sexually explicit topics and to be asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with.



FIGURE 3

Percentage of respondents who experienced each online sexual harm, by gender



Notes: n=2000, boys=973, girls=1005

Children experience their first exposure to sexually explicit content online, on average, just two years after having regular access to the Internet.

According to respondents, the average age that they had regular access to the internet was 11.9 years old. The average age when respondents had their first exposure to sexually explicit content online was at 13.8 years.

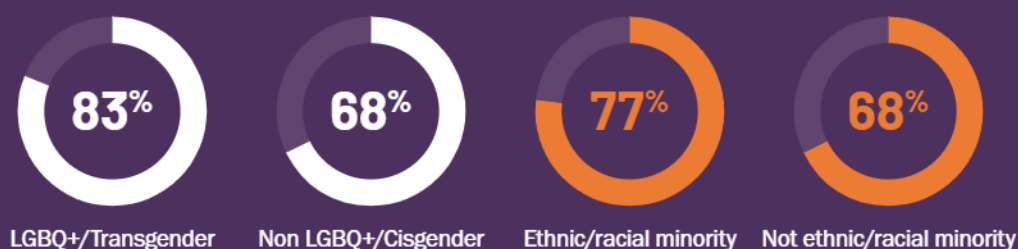


Minorities are more at risk.

Respondents who self-identified as an ethnic or racial minority⁶, LGBQ+⁷, transgender or non-binary⁸ were more likely to have experienced these online sexual harms during childhood (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Respondents' experiences of online sexual harm during childhood disaggregated by characteristic



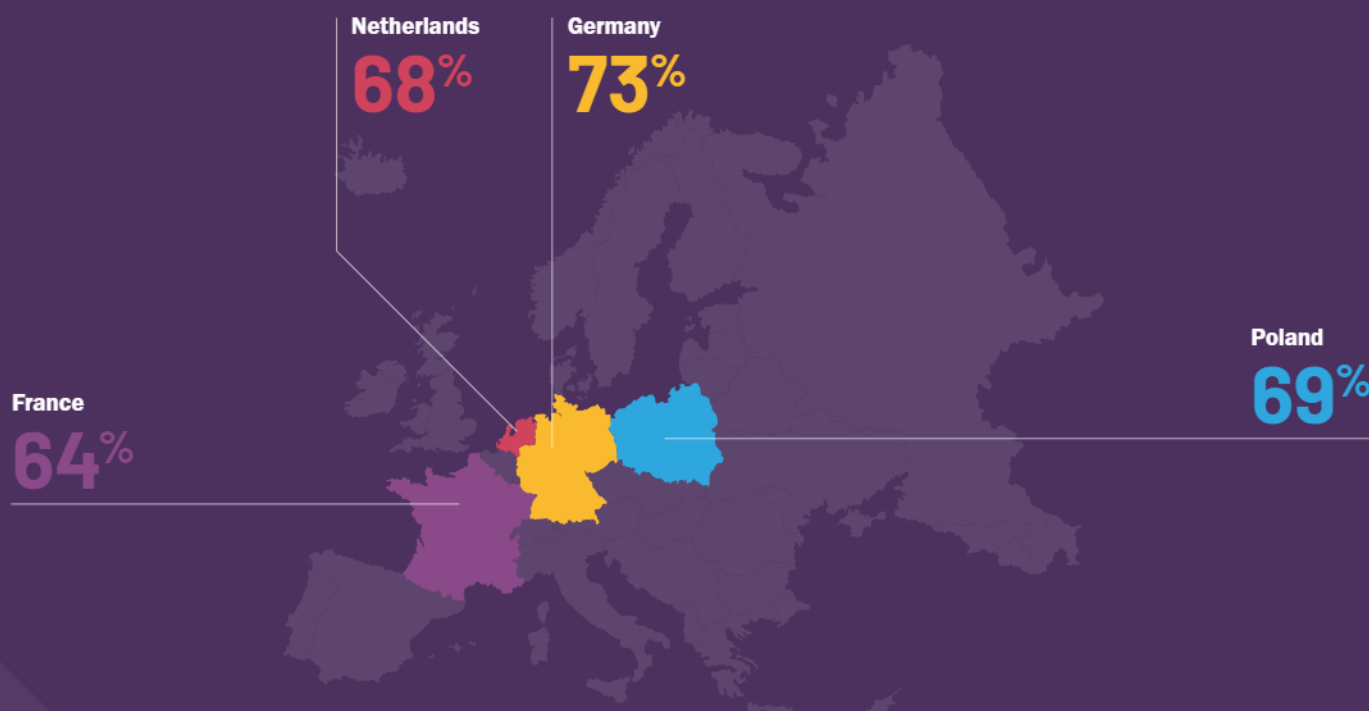
Notes:
Minority n=131, non-minority n=1880
LGBQ+/Transgender n=90, non LGBQ+/Transgender n=1910

Respondents in Germany were most likely to experience online sexual harms during childhood.

73% of German respondents experienced at least one online sexual harm compared with 64% in France.

FIGURE 5

Percentage of respondents who experienced at least one online harm before age 18, by country



Notes: n=500 per country

6. In this study, racial or ethnic minority is defined as being of a race, nationality or ethnicity that is different to that of most people who are living in the respondent's country.
7. In this study, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning (LGBQ+) is defined as being attracted to and/or having sex with, all the time or sometimes, people who identify as the same gender as the respondent.
8. In this study, transgender/non-binary is defined as living or identifying as a different gender than that which the respondent was assigned at birth.

About the study: methodology & research design

Estimates of childhood exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors: A country study of childhood experiences of 18-year-olds in four European countries is based on data gathered through an online survey of 2,000 18-year-olds across Europe who had regular access to the internet as children conducted from February to March 2023. This closed online questionnaire survey asked respondents about:

- Experiences of sexual harms and their risk factors online when under the age of 18;
- Exposure to sexually explicit content online when under the age of 18 and the platforms and devices where that content was encountered;
- Reactions and responses to sexually explicit content experienced online before the age of 18; and
- Access to and familiarity with actions and behaviours to mitigate risks of sexual harms online before the age of 18

The survey was fielded in four languages across four countries⁹—with 500 respondents from each—for analysis.¹⁰ The European regional aggregation was used for analysis of the experiences across genders and other demographic characteristics.

Research on online sexual harms against children presents a unique set of challenges. Economist Impact has included a brief discussion of these challenges and actions we have taken to mitigate the risks and ensure the research is safe and rigorous.

9. France, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland.

10. The aggregated findings were built using the results from the countries included in this study.

Challenges

CHALLENGE

Surveying children about sensitive topics using a remote fielding technique that cannot provide support services to those who might experience trauma or harm or where there could be duty-of-care to report at-risk children.

ACTION

The survey was not fielded to children, but to young adults (age 18) who were asked to look back on their experiences when they were under the age of 18. The survey questionnaire—which was developed for the 2021 global study—received ethical approval from [HML IRB](#) and was reviewed by experts before being fielded.

CHALLENGE

Asking questions about potentially traumatic/harmful experiences without being able to identify respondents' reactions and, if needed, provide support services.

ACTION

The study focuses on online sexual harms that are less likely to cause immediate or long-term trauma or harm to the respondent, and are more likely to occur at the beginning of a possible grooming or abuse process. We do not address each type of online sexual harm that could occur in an online setting.

CHALLENGE

Requiring respondents to remember and report on experiences that could have occurred more than a decade ago.

ACTION

The study population was restricted to 18-year-olds to minimise the time lapse between when the experience occurred and when the survey was fielded. The majority of experiences reported had occurred between the ages of 16 and 18. There is a possibility that, in retrospect, respondents included experiences that they now see as online sexual harms that they might not have considered such during childhood.

CHALLENGE

Separating out harmful/abusive interactions from potentially positive sexual exploration and experiences between peers.

ACTION

The study asks about three perpetrator groups: a peer, an adult the respondent knew already and someone the respondent did not already know. To filter out experiences that might not qualify as online sexual harms, Economist Impact did not include experiences of receiving sexually explicit content from a peer or a peer asking respondents to keep part of their sexually explicit online relationship a secret in our analysis or aggregations. This decision was made to prevent respondents from feeling judged for their sexually explicit or potentially harmful actions taken online. The other two online harms, which specifically ask about actions taken without consent or that made the respondent uncomfortable, have been considered across all three perpetrator groups.¹¹

CHALLENGE

Identifying sub-population experiences and patterns across a limited sample size.

ACTION

The primary goal of this study was to get an initial understanding around experiences of online sexual harms during childhood across European countries and demographics. Given sample size limitations, some of the findings across sub-populations should be considered as starting points. Future research with larger samples are needed to understand differences across demographic groups at a more granular level, especially for LGBTQ+, transgender or non-binary, and disabled groups.¹¹

11. All of the findings included in this study are statistically significant.

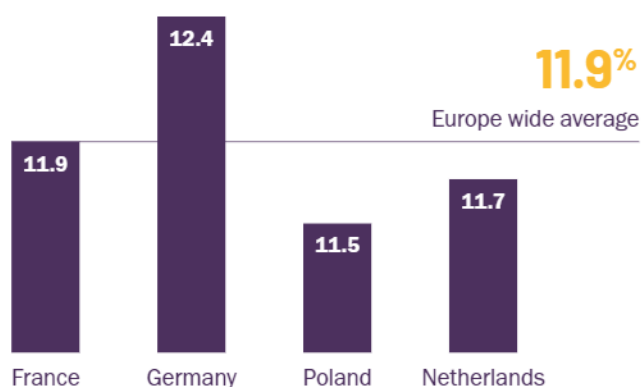
Experiences of online sexual harms during childhood

Online sexual harms against children are occurring across Europe.

As access to personal mobile devices continues to grow—data from the International Telecommunication Unit (ITU) suggest almost universal access to mobile phones across the four European countries included in this study¹²—young people are integrating the internet into every facet of their lives from learning to relationship building to exploring sexuality. The age at which children are starting to regularly use the internet is also falling. Survey respondents, on average, had regular access to the internet at 11.9 years of age, compared with 38% of children aged 11-12 in previous Europe-wide surveys.¹³

FIGURE 6

Average age of access to the
Internet disaggregated by country



Notes: n=500 per country

12. <https://datahub.itu.int/data/?e=POL&i=178&u=per+100+people&c=DEU>

13. <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33731/1/Risks%20and%20safety%20on%20the%20internet%28Isero%29.pdf>

While the internet provides children with opportunities to grow and learn, it can also put children at risk: 68% of respondents across the four European countries included in this study had experienced at least one of the four online sexual harms considered before the age of 18.

The most experienced online sexual harm during childhood was a stranger or a known adult trying to talk about sexually explicit topics or sending sexually explicit content (56%). While 13% of respondents experienced this before the age of nine, exposure is highest among 16- to 18-year-olds (73%).

The second most commonly experienced online sexual harm was respondents being asked to do something sexually explicit that made them uncomfortable (55%). One in three respondents had someone share sexually explicit images and/or videos of them without permission, while 31% of respondents had an adult or someone they did not know ask them to keep part of their online sexually explicit interactions a secret (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7

Respondents' experiences of online sexual harms by type of sexual harm



Notes: n=2000

Country experiences of online sexual harms in childhood.

Disaggregating the survey results by country reveals significant differences in experiences of online sexual harms during childhood across European countries. Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents in Germany experienced at least one type of sexual harm before the age of 18 compared with 69% in Poland, 68% in the Netherlands and 64% in France. 18-year-olds in Germany most commonly encountered an adult they knew or someone they did not know trying to send them sexually explicit content or trying to speak to them about sexually explicit topics (62%) or were asked to do something sexually explicit online that made them feel uncomfortable (65%).

France has significantly lower reported experiences across three of the four online sexual harms assessed compared to the other countries studied: fewer than one-quarter

(24%) of respondents in France experienced an adult they knew or someone they did not know asking them to keep a part of their online sexually explicit interactions a secret compared to one-third of respondents in the Netherlands and Germany (33% and 34% respectively) (see Figure 8)

Interestingly, the age at which respondents received regular access to the internet seems to be unrelated to the levels of online sexual harm experienced during childhood. On average, 18-year-olds in Poland received regular access to the internet nearly a full year earlier than their counterparts in Germany (11.5 years of age and 12.4 years respectively), but respondents in Germany were more than 4% more likely to experience online sexual harms during childhood.

FIGURE 8

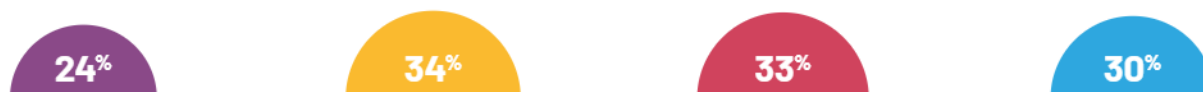
Four harms by country

France Germany Netherlands Poland

Received sexually explicit content from an adult they knew or someone they did not know



Had an adult they knew or someone they did not know ask them to keep a part of their sexually explicit interactions online a secret



Had someone share sexually explicit images and/or videos of them without their permission



Were asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with or did not want to do



Notes: n=2000, n=500 per country

Online sexual harms happen most frequently on personal devices through private channels.

Despite differences in levels of online sexual harm across countries, the means through which harms are perpetrated are similar. Respondents across all four countries reported that, in the majority of cases, online sexual harm happened on mobile devices—four in five (79%) respondents' experiences of online harms happened on their personal mobile phone—through a private channel. All respondents who, before the

age of 18, received sexually explicit material online from an adult they knew or someone they did not know received at least some of this material through either a private video sharing service (54%) or private messaging service (46%). One in five respondents (19%) also received such content through open forum social media, but most online sexual harm against children is happening in private (see Figure 9).

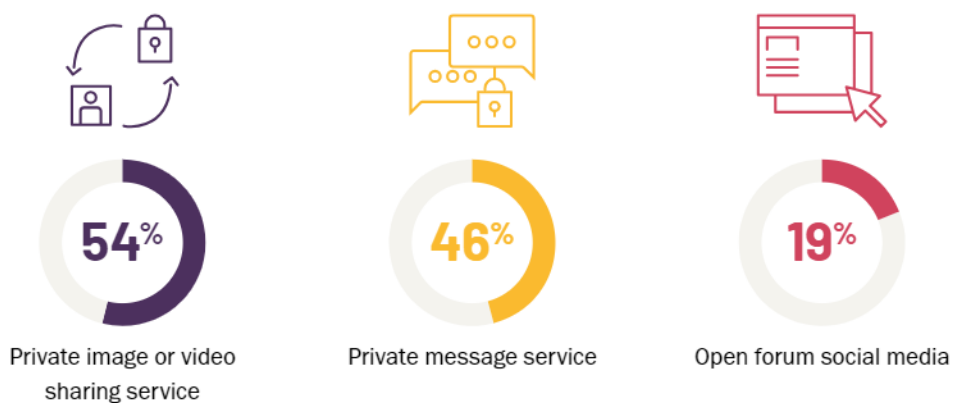
FIGURE 9

Respondents who received sexually-explicit content by type of device and type of platform

Device where respondent received content



Platform where respondent received content



Notes: n=1120

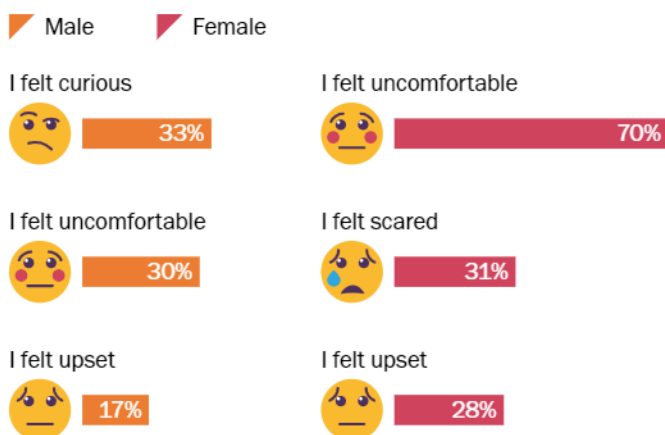
Peer-to-peer interactions

Online sexual interactions between peers are common: three in 10 respondents (31%) across the four countries considered in our study experienced a peer trying to talk to them about sexually explicit topics or sharing sexually explicit content with them online. Interestingly, boys were more likely to experience these types of interactions than girls (34% and 28%, respectively). And, although most respondents experienced negative reactions to these experiences (49% overall felt uncomfortable), boys were more likely to have positive reactions than girls: one in three boys felt curious about these interactions while just 12% of girls did (see Figure 10).

While peer-to-peer online sexual interactions can be an important part of sexual exploration, they can also pose risks. Self-generated sexually explicit content intended for one recipient (e.g., a partner) can end up being shared more widely, both through private messages and in more public fora, without consent. Across our respondents, 14% had experienced peers sharing sexually explicit images and/or videos of them without consent (see Figure 11). Both boys and girls had this experience at almost equal levels.

FIGURE 10

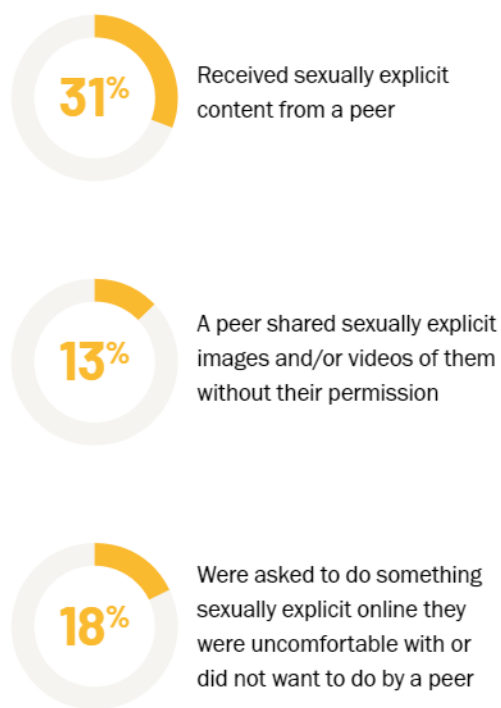
Respondents' reactions to receiving sexually-explicit content online from a peer by gender



Notes: males n=973, females n=1005

FIGURE 11

Peer-to-peer Interactions online



Notes: n=2000

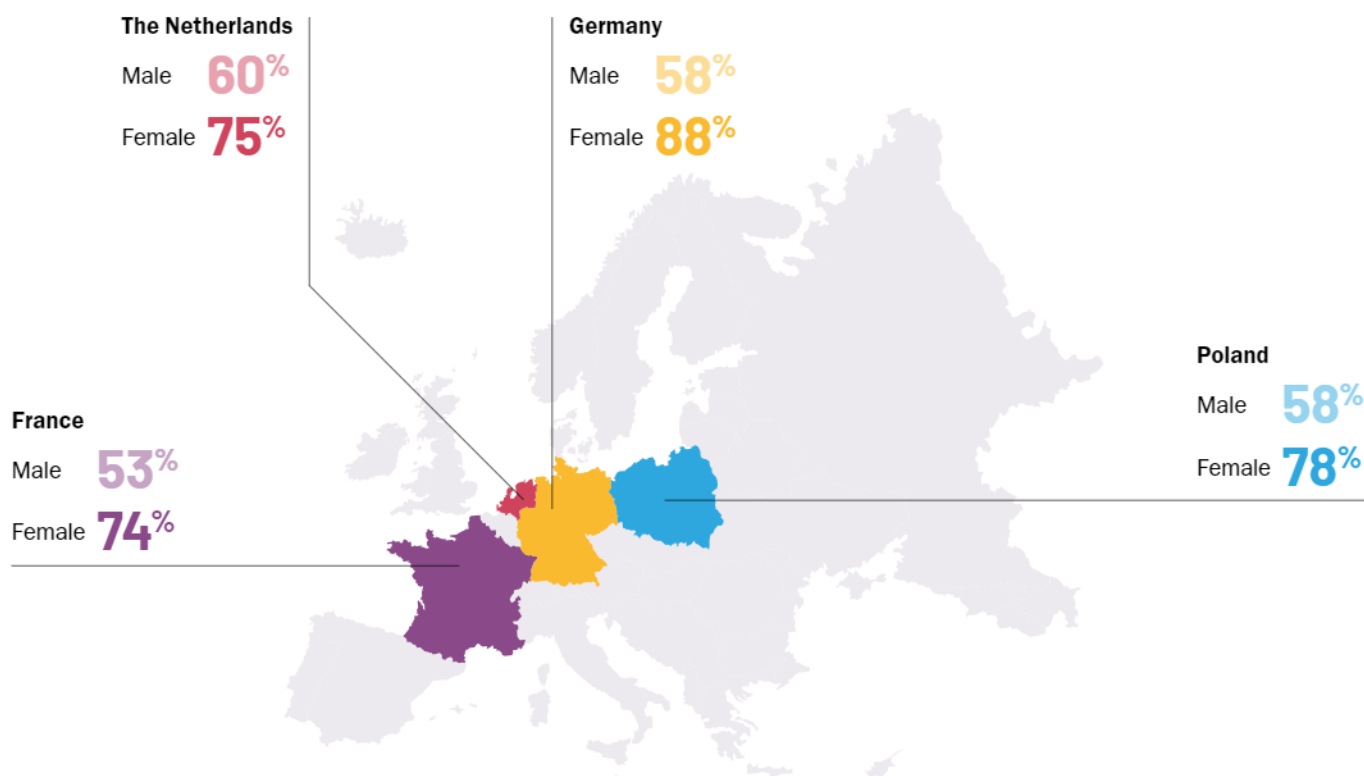
Girls' experiences of online sexual harms

Almost four in five girls (79%) experienced at least one sexual harm during childhood, compared with 57% of boys. The gap in levels of experience between girls and boys is driven by two of the online sexual harms considered in this study. Seven in 10 girls experienced an adult they knew or someone they did not know trying to talk to them about sexual topics or send them sexually explicit material before they turned 18, compared with 40% of boys. Of the female respondents who received such content from someone they did not know, 6% were under the age of nine and 23% were under the age of 12.¹⁴ And there was a 38-percentage-point difference between girls who were asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with and boys who experienced the same (73% vs 35%).

Across the other two online sexual harms considered in the study—being asked to keep online sexually explicit interactions a secret and sharing sexually explicit images and/or videos of the respondent without their consent—there is a much narrower gap between the experiences of girls and boys. One-third of girls were asked to keep a part of their online sexually explicit interactions a secret, compared with 28% of boys, while 35% of girls had someone share sexually explicit images and/or videos of them without their permission, compared with 29% of boys.

FIGURE 12

Males and female experiencing at least one harm, country level



Notes: n=500 per country

14. Respectively, 4% and 15% of the female population sample.

Sexual and ethnic minority experiences of online sexual harms during childhood

Although our survey samples of respondents who self-identified as sexual and/or racial/ethnic minorities were comparatively small, the results confirmed findings from the 2021 survey that these groups are more at risk. Almost nine in 10 (89%) of respondents who self-identified as LGBTQ+ or transgender/non-binary (n=90)¹⁵ experienced at least one online sexual harm during childhood compared with 67% of respondents who did not identify as such. This gap spans all four sexual harms with the percentage point differences between the experiences of an online harm among respondents who self-identified as LGBTQ+ or transgender/non-binary and the experiences of those who did not ranging from 9 to 28 points (see Figure 13).

According to Katarzyna Staciwa of the National Research Institute (NASK) in Poland, “The key finding that I can potentially explain is that minorities—especially sexual minorities—are more at risk. These kids are lacking the opportunity to find answers while talking to their parents. Maybe their parents are just too busy or they are not so open to accepting other forms of sexuality. And since these kids do not have any other choice, they have to look for answers in like-minded online groups, so it’s very possible to find someone there who will find them vulnerable, and who will take advantage of this vulnerability. These kids are isolated and this makes them very susceptible to potential risks.”

Respondents who self-identified as racial and/or ethnic minorities (n=131) were also more likely to experience online sexual harms during childhood than respondents who did not self-identify as such. Three-quarters (79%) of racial and/or ethnic minorities experienced at least one sexual harm before the age of 18, compared with 68% of those who did not self-identify as a racial or ethnic minority. The gaps in levels of experience are particularly evident across two of the online sexual harms considered in the study. Almost three in five (57%) respondents who self-identified as a racial or ethnic minority had someone share sexually explicit images and/or videos of them without their consent compared to one-third of those who did not self-identify as such. And 44% of those who self-identified as racial or ethnic minority had an adult they knew or someone they did not ask them to keep part of their online sexually explicit interactions a secret, compared with three in 10 (31%) respondents who did not self-identify as a racial or ethnic minority (see Figure 14).

According to Julie Verhaar of Terres des Hommes Netherlands, “While we don’t have data specifically on online sexual harms yet, research from the National Rapporteur found that sexual exploitation against children of migrant backgrounds is higher, which could be related to cultural norms and taboo around sex and relationships. In many contexts we also see that these children know less about national or local policies and solutions. They might be specifically targeted as victims because they are less likely to report due to this lack of knowledge and because many of them don’t have high levels of trust in the police and law enforcement.”



15. Please note LGBTQ+ and transgender/non-binary have been aggregated for sampling purposes. The overall sample size of the two categories is of n=90.

FIGURE 13

LGBQ+ and non-binary/transgender respondents experiences of each online sexual harm v cisgender/non-LGBQ+

Self-identified as LGBQ+, non-binary/transgender



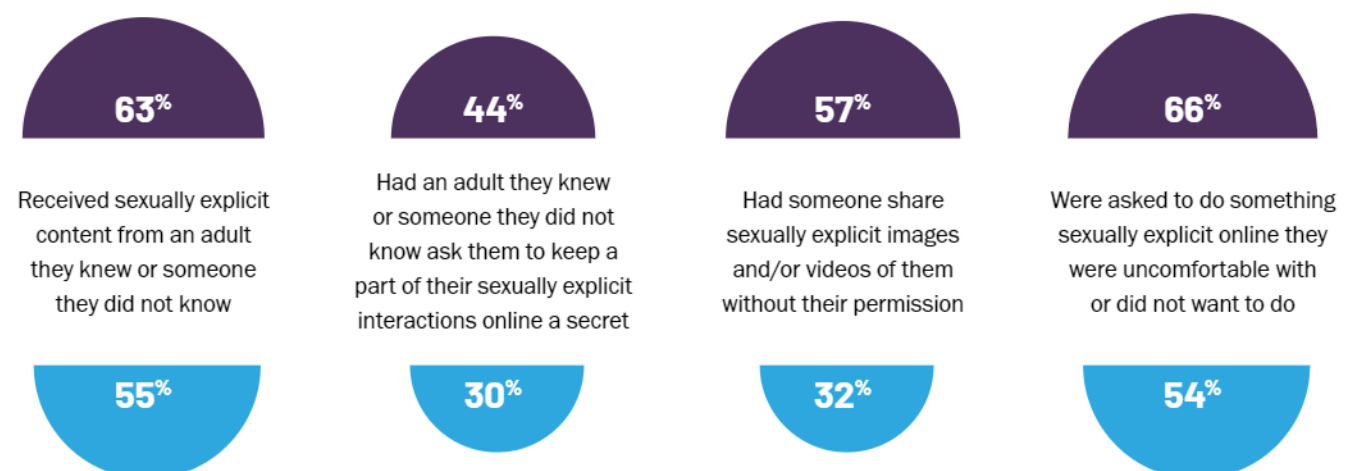
Did not self-identify as LGBQ+, non-binary/transgender

Notes: LGBQ+/transgender n=90, cisgender/non-LGBQ+ n=1910

FIGURE 14

Racial and ethnic minority respondents' experiences of online sexual harms

Self-identified as racial / ethnic minority



Did not self-identify as racial /ethnic minority

Notes: minorities n=131, non-minorities n=1869

The risk-protection gap

Giving children the tools to recognise threats online and feel comfortable using response mechanisms to report and respond to online sexual harms is key to both preventing and responding to online sexual harms. As part of this study, we asked respondents across France, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland to assess the prevention and response mechanisms available to them during childhood.

Across the protection measures considered in the study, respondents had the highest confidence in their own ability to identify messages and/or content that was potentially linked to a harmful or dangerous source. Three in four (74%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement 'When I was under 18, I was able to identify a message or content that was potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source'. A significant number of respondents also had access to a trusted adult that they could go to if they received a message or saw content that was potentially linked to a harmful or dangerous source (70% agreed or strongly agreed) and three in five agreed or strongly agreed that a responsible adult talked to them about online safety related to sex (such as how to deal with people making contact to discuss or share sexually explicit information or images).

There is, however, a clear gap in access to protective measures across the European countries considered: 45% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had a responsible adult who was aware of what they were doing online when they were under 18. This gap is particularly pronounced in Poland, where fewer than half (47%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Poland also trails its European counterparts on respondents having a trusted adult they could go to if they received a message or saw content that was potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source and having a responsible adult talking to them about online safety related to sex (see Figure 15).

Protective measures



Access to a responsible adult that was aware of what they were doing online.



Ability to identify a message and content that was potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source.



Access to a trusted adult if they received a message or saw content that was potentially linked to a dangerous or harmful source.

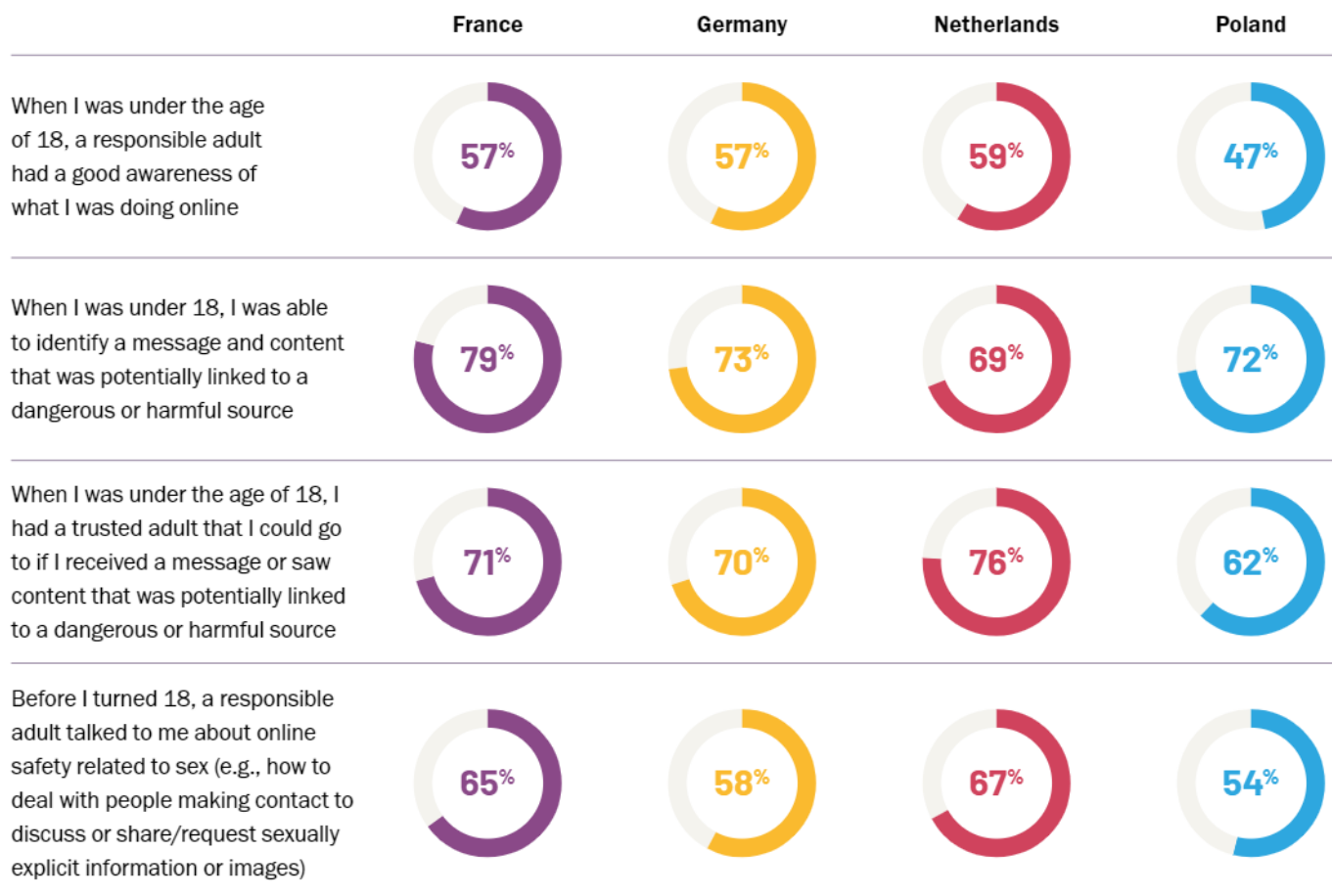


Awareness of harmful sexual interactions online (i.e., a responsible adult had discussed how to deal with people making contact or discuss or share / request sexually explicit information or images).

FIGURE 15

Access to protective measures by country

% who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement



Notes: n=500 per country

Use of response tools and reporting mechanisms.

Respondents' confidence in their own ability to identify harmful or dangerous content also translates into the actions that respondents took when they received sexually explicit material from an adult they knew or someone they did not know. Over four fifths of respondents deleted or blocked the person rather than reporting the problem online (41%) or speaking to a trusted adult (30%). The second most common action (46%) was asking the person to stop contacting them. Notably, just three in 10 (31%) respondents reported changing their privacy settings, which could indicate that children are experiencing online sexual harms despite having the most stringent privacy settings already in place on their devices.

Katarzyna Staciwa says, "I can only agree that it's not very common that someone like a teenager would think about privacy settings before any online action is taken, because usually

you need to make an effort to find them. If they are not easy to find, they won't be used. Teenagers don't have the time or knowledge to dig for the core solutions. And this is the task for online service providers to make it either 'the default' or 'easy to find' privacy settings and to run knowledge campaigns on how to change these settings and to report these incidents. We also need to encourage youth not to delete a conversation or interaction because it is evidence for law enforcement. And it's needed to proceed with criminal proceedings." Julie Verhaar adds, "In a consultation with 141 children across 10 countries, including the Netherlands, children indicated that reporting functions were not always easy or visible. And, those who did report said that nothing ever changed. These children recommended more visible and better reporting mechanisms, as well as a stricter consequence for people that violate the rules."

Conclusion

This study highlights how common online sexual harms against children are in Europe. It exposes vulnerabilities to these online sexual harms by gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, and age, and gaps in protective measures that could help children stay safe online.

Although there are nuances across the four European countries included in the study, the findings make it clear that children are encountering sexually explicit content and online sexual harms at a young age across the continent, minorities are more at risk and children are relying on themselves to prevent further harms rather than turning to technology platforms, law enforcement, trusted adults or their peers.

While conducting research on online sexual harms and sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood is challenging, social media and other digital platforms are ingrained in every facet of children's lives. Children will not stop using these platforms as avenues to explore their sexuality and identity. Without concerted efforts across industry, government and civil society to develop more comprehensive protective measures and provide children and the adults in their lives with the tools to stay safe, threats of online sexual harms during childhood will continue to expand. Understanding how these threats manifest in children's experiences within and across country borders is an important step towards being able to design more effective prevention mechanisms.



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Astrid Helling-Bakkl, World Childhood Foundation Germany

Katarzyna Staciwa, NASK National Research Institute

Julie Verhaar, Terre des Hommes

To see the full list of experts that contributed to the survey questionnaire development, please see the 2021 global [report](#).

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