Youth Justice Board
Bwrdd Cyfiawnder Ieuenctid

Online harms affecting children: Evidence Pack

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Definitions

Child/Children

Refers to people under 18 years old, which aligns with United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and legal definition of a child in the UK [1, 2].

Cyberbullying

A form of bullying that involves the use of digital technologies to intentionally and repeatedly harm another person. It is also referred to as online bullying.

Harmful sexual behaviour

The term 'harmful sexual behaviour' describes a continuum of behaviours displayed by children under 18, ranging from those considered 'inappropriate' at a particular age or developmental stage to 'problematic', 'abusive' and 'violent' behaviours.

Intimate Image Abuse

The taking or sharing of sexual images or videos of a person, or the threat to do so, without consent. This can include physical or digital images, as well as edited or fake visual materials of a person (e.g., deepfakes generated by artificial intelligence) that convincingly imitates a real person [3]. Other terms, if involving children, may include child sexual abuse material or indecent images of children.

Misogyny

Hostile or discriminatory beliefs and behaviours directed towards women and girls, both online and offline. Misogyny can include rape myths, sexist stereotypes, harmful masculine norms, and hypermasculinity.

Online Harms

The government defines online harms as "user generated content or behaviour that is illegal or could cause significant physical or psychological harm to a person" [4]. Online harms encompass both illegal activities and lawful content that causes harm. This includes, for example, online abuse and harassment, exploitation, sexual or violent content, misinformation, promotion of dangerous behaviours, hate crime and hate speech, and extremism.

Terrorism and Violent Extremist Content

Refers to online content that promotes hateful and harmful extreme views. This includes content that promotes or depicts violent extremism and websites created by terrorist or extremist groups.

Violence Against Women and Girls

The government in England defines violence against women and girls (VAWG) as "an umbrella term used to describe a variety of different crimes that are known to disproportionately impact women and girls". These crimes include, for example, domestic abuse, sexual offences, harassment, stalking, revenge-porn, so–called 'honour'–based abuses (such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so–called 'honour' killings),

and other forms of violence. Increasingly, this also includes online and technology-facilitated forms of abuse[1].

In Wales, this is referred to as violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDSAV).

Violent Non-state Actors

Organisations or individuals that engage in illegal violence to pursue political, ideological, or economic objectives. They may include terrorist or criminal organisation.

A note on language

This evidence pack uses non-stigmatising language consistent with the Child First evidence base (e.g., "children displaying harmful behaviours online") unless directly quoting policies, data sources or research.

[1] This may be a digital manifestation of offline abuse (i.e., cyber-enabled) or newer cyber-dependent forms.

1. Summary

This pack aims to synthesise current research, statistics and policy developments on online harms affecting children, with a focus on implications for youth justice policy and practice in England and Wales.

The evidence shows that online harms are intersecting and shaped by both online and offline vulnerabilities. Children's engagement with digital technologies is central to their social life, but it also leaves them exposed to a wide range of harms, including:

- Cyberbullying, often overlapping with offline bullying and associated with emotional distress and externalising behaviours.
- Online sexual harms, including sexual harassment, intimate image abuse and exposure to harmful sexual content, with girls disproportionally affected.
- Online radicalisation, where exposure to extremist content interacts with offline vulnerabilities and children seeking belonging.
- Criminal and sexual exploitation enabled through online grooming and coercion.

Children can be both victims and perpetrators of online harm. This creates tension between safeguarding responses and unnecessary criminalisation, particularly in relation to image-sharing offences.

Platform design features influence and enhance vulnerabilities, rather than online harm being solely a result of individual behaviour. Algorithms, private messaging and encrypted spaces are some examples of features that can amplify violent, misogynistic and extremist content and enable grooming and exploitation. The evidence also highlights the heightened vulnerability of girls in the online environment, who are disproportionately exposed to sexual harms, coercion and exploitation.

The digital landscape is rapidly evolving, and policy and practice are struggling to respond at pace. Additionally, traditional protective factors, such as general parental supervision, appear less effective online. This increases the vulnerability of children, particularly those with pre-existing and overlapping vulnerabilities such as mental health needs, neurodivergence, experience of trauma, and social isolation.

Evidence of what works remains scarce but promising approaches include:

- Safety-by-design and teen-by-default platform measures.
- Early intervention and harm-reduction responses that avoid unnecessary criminalisation.
- Media and gaming literacy, relationship-based and gender-sensitive programmes.
- Strength-based interventions that promote belonging, critical thinking and positive identity building.

In conclusion, youth justice policy and practice must better integrate children's digital lives into assessment and intervention, invest in workforce capability, and strengthen partnership working. Safeguarding children online cannot sit with families or services alone, it requires coordinated action across youth justice, health, education, technology companies and regulators to reduce harm at source and promote positive outcomes.

2. Introduction

The internet and digital technologies have profoundly transformed children's everyday lives. For many children, online interactions are now a core part of their social life, with nearly 7 in 10 children in the UK using online services to help them feel closer to their friends [5]. This has been accelerated by widespread smartphone use and the COVID-19 pandemic [6], which has significant implications for children's safety, behaviour, and involvement with the youth justice system.

The increase in children's digital use has been accompanied by a rise in associated harms and vulnerabilities, including exposure to violent content, sexual abuse, cyberbullying, grooming, and exploitation [7, 8]. In some cases, children may themselves be involved, actively or inadvertently, in perpetrating online harms against others, placing them at risk of criminalisation. Research suggests that a significant proportion of perpetrators (44%) of online abuse against children are children themselves, often within peer, family or social networks [9]. The most recent Children, Violence and Vulnerability survey by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) also found that 62% of children in England and Wales who reported engaging in real-world violence had participated in online conversations about harming others [7].

The importance of understanding children's online activity has been reinforced by the publication of the Southport Inquiry Phase 1 Report [10]. The Inquiry highlighted serious systemic failures to sufficiently scrutinise and respond to concerning online behaviour, and its findings underline the critical role online activity can play in signalling harm and vulnerability.

At the same time, the Online Safety Act 2023 introduces new duties on online platforms to reduce illegal content and protect children from harm [11] However, concerns and challenges remain around enforcement and the extent to which legislative protections translate into meaningful safety for children in a rapidly evolving landscape.

This evidence pack aims to explore what is known about children's exposure to and involvement in online harms and the implications for youth justice policy and practice.

3. The role of social media

A recent Ofcom report highlighted that 96% of children aged 5-7 in the UK go online, rising to more than 99% among 12-15-year-olds [5]. This includes using social media and playing online games [6]. With the widespread use of social media, encountering violent and other harmful content has also become a common experience for children, endangering their safety online and wellbeing. The YEF's 2025 Children, Violence and Vulnerability survey identified that [7]:

- 70% of surveyed children aged 13-17 in England and Wales reported encountering violent content on social media in the last 12 months. This is a significant increase from 2022, when 55% of children said they had seen violent content online.
- Over four in five had seen conversations about harming specific groups (e.g., migrants, people from a specific ethnic background or gender identity).
- 84% of children involved in perpetrating serious real-world violence stated they had engaged in online discussions about harming certain groups of people.
- 65% reported they had changed their behaviour to keep safe after encountering violent content online (e.g., avoiding places or altering routines).
- Whilst exposure to harmful or violent content generally becomes less frequent with age, content portraying violence against women and girls increases with age.

What impact does social media have on children?

Children (13-17 years old) who see online content promoting violence against women and girls, or sexual violence, are more likely to become accepting of sexually aggressive behaviours. This link is stronger than for other types of online violent content (e.g., physical fights), underlining the vulnerability of girls becoming victimised as a result [12].

Online echo chambers may reinforce exposure by repeatedly presenting similar views [13]. The YEF's 2025 Children, Violence and Vulnerability survey also indicates that online hostility towards marginalised groups is now part of many children's everyday online experiences, which can normalise prejudice and increase perceived threat in communities [7].

Such findings highlight that exposure to violent content on social media is not only prevalent but can also alter a child's perception of safety and influence their behaviour offline. This is important as children's experience of violence, either as a perpetrator or victim, has been identified as an important driver of weapon carrying, suggesting there may be an overlap between problematic social media use and offline experiences of violence [7].

Broader harms are also reported in the literature. For example, children experiencing anxiety and trauma from seeing peers or family members being harmed online, school avoidance through glamourised "on the road" content, and girls being targeted for sexual exploitation after engaging with online content.

Pathways from online content to harm

Social media can act as a catalyst or trigger for violence and other problematic behaviours among a minority of children. The dynamics of online engagement further facilitate these risks by creating environments where harmful behaviours are socially rewarded. While platforms cannot control intentions of individual users, they do create the opportunities for this to happen through the features they provide (i.e., technological affordances) and the lack of robust safeguarding measures.

Social media platforms implement design elements that maximise user growth and engagement. Features such as likes and streak rewards act as variable reward systems, encouraging users to repeatedly check platforms in anticipation of social feedback (e.g., approval or recognition), which children are particularly sensitive to. Evidence has shown that these design strategies are deliberately employed to influence users' behaviours, despite clear conflicts between commercial goals and children's safety [14]. These features, combined with individual vulnerabilities (e.g., low self-esteem) and social influences (e.g., peer pressure), can contribute to problematic and addictive patterns of social media use [15].

The heavy use of social media among children and adults (aged 15-36) increases the chances of seeing online content that promotes hate or violence. This is particularly true for young people who post frequently, argue online, or have previously been targeted by online hate. Lower self-control also increases risk, while general adult supervision or online monitoring does not appear to offer much protection [13].

Key social media design features that contribute to harm include:

- **Algorithms:**
    - **Content recommendation systems** are designed to maximise user engagement by automatically personalising and recommending content based on users' previous views, interactions (e.g., likes), and the behaviour of similar users [14, 15]. This allows users to view content that aligns with their preferences without them having to actively search for it, increasing engagement and time spent online. However, evidence suggests that such algorithms prioritise and amplify violent and harmful content to boost engagement, sometimes deliberately presenting it in a gamified or humorous format that appeals to children [16, 17]. Repeated exposure to harmful content promoted by these algorithms may contribute to the normalisation of harmful attitudes and behaviours among children. Algorithms also increase the visibility of dangerous challenges[2], which have been associated with serious harm and fatalities among children [18].

25% of children reported[3] that violent content was promoted to them by social media platforms, whereas only 6% of children actively searched for this type of content [17].

[2] Examples of dangerous viral social media trends include the 'blackout' challenge, where users are encouraged to intentionally restrict their breathing or choke themselves until they lose consciousness, and 'chroming', where users inhale toxic fumes from household products.

[3] Findings drawn from a nationally representative survey of 10,387 children aged 13-17 in England and Wales.

    - **Friend suggestion systems** recommend potential new contacts to users based on several factors such as mutual friends, shared networks, and profile information (e.g., similar interests or schools attended) [14, 19]. These algorithms may expose children to individuals who may harass or groom them.

- **Infinite Scrolling**: This feature allows users to explore a continual stream of curated content without having to actively search, resulting in a smooth and frictionless experience [14, 15]. The lack of stopping points or time limits, often by default, means users can spend an excessive amount of time scrolling through content without realising it. This prolonged exposure may increase the likelihood of users encountering harmful content.
- **Direct messaging:** The private chat feature on many platforms reduces visibility and moderation of interactions between users, especially with end-to-end encryption. This creates an opportunity for perpetrators, who may appear as trustworthy "friends" or legitimate companies, to directly contact children in order to groom, harass, or exploit them [14].
- **Notifications**: Push notifications prompt users to check their social media profile, creating a sense of urgency to keep up to date with the latest activities such as new messages, comments, likes and friend requests. This maintains user engagement but can lead to compulsive checking, even if the content is harmful (e.g., hurtful comments) [14, 15].
- **Popularity metrics**: Interface metrics such as follower counts, views, shares, saves, comments, and likes are used by social media platforms to highlight the popularity of users and content. These social rewards amplify children's desire for peer validation and social acceptance, potentially driving them to create or share extreme or harmful content, or participate in dangerous challenges, to gain attention and popularity online [14, 15, 20].

Evidence gap: It remains unclear whether major technology companies are taking effective action to protect children following the implementation of the UK's online safety laws, and how enforcement measures are being implemented in practice. In March 2026, Ofcom reported that many popular platforms were still failing to properly enforce minimum age policies and thereby putting children at risk of harm [21].

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

While there is little academic evidence relating to AI and how it may be utilised to harm children, there are emerging concerns about children's interactions with AI chatbots, which have evolved in recent years to realistically mimic human-like interactions. Research estimates that 67% of children aged 15-17 in the UK use AI chatbots for advice, emotional support, or companionship [22]. However, these chatbots may provide children with inaccurate or harmful information, reinforce problematic behaviours, and encourage violence towards others[4].

According to the National Crime Agency (NCA), **generative AI (GenAI) heightens current risks** by broadening both the extent and impact of harm, without introducing

[4] Several lawsuits have been filed in the USA against the AI chatbot platform **Character.ai** for allegedly encouraging children to harm themselves and kill others.

entirely new threats. They warn that as the technology evolves and becomes more widely available, GenAI is increasingly being used in Serious Organised Crime, particularly in relation to child sexual abuse [23]. In 2024, online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) accounted for at least 42% of all recorded CSAE offences in England and Wales, up from 35% in 2023, with evidence showing that AI-generated imagery[5,6] is contributing to the increase of child sexual abuse material online [24]. These images are becoming increasingly realistic and causing **real, repeated and long-lasting harm** to children [22].

Additionally, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism recently published a report identifying threats, opportunities and policy frameworks for countering "violent non-state actors". Some of the concerns raised for which AI may be maliciously used include[7]:

- Evade and circumvent content moderation efforts by manipulating harmful content, such as terrorist and violent extremist content.
- Tailor propaganda content. This includes the creation of "deepfakes", but also audio recreations and voice-overs. For example, GenAI was used to create pop music promoting antisemitic and racist ideologies during the summer 2024 disturbances in the UK.
- Tailor recruitment and radicalisation efforts by creating chatbots used in social media or gaming platforms, which can lead users (including children) to more extreme and dangerous content.
- Help plan attacks by facilitating operational ideas and making harmful information more available (e.g., bomb making, 3D printed weapons).

[5] GenAI tools available on popular social media platforms (e.g., Grok on X) have been misused to produce and share child sexual abuse material, highlighting the relative ease with which such content can be created to harm children. In January 2026, Ofcom launched a formal investigation into X under the Online Safety Act following these concerns.

[6] Perpetrators are using GenAI tools to revictimise children by manipulating pre-existing child sexual abuse material.

[7] For further information and recommendations made for private and public sector organisations, refer to the report available here.

4. Online harms

The following section provides an overview of the issues surrounding online harms affecting children. It draws on a range of definitions, research evidence, and official statistics to build a structured understanding of the types of online harms, their prevalence, impact, and the legislative context in the UK.

4.1 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, alongside traditional (offline) bullying, has been labelled a major public health concern by the United Nations due to its detrimental effects on the emotional, psychological, physical, and social wellbeing of children [25]. This issue is compounded by the rapid advancement of technology, which continues to alter the nature of cyberbullying, amplifying its reach and facilitating the emergence of new harms. While cyberbullying lacks a legal definition in the UK, the literature often describes it as:

> an intentional and repeated act of aggression carried out with the use of electronic devices, where an imbalance of power leaves the victim (individual or group) unable to defend themselves [20, 26].

Cyberbullying can take place on social media, gaming sites, virtual reality environments, and messaging platforms, and is associated with a range of harmful behaviours such as harassment, sharing images without consent (including GenAI content)[8], doxxing[9], trolling or masquerading[10] [26, 27].

In the TES Safeguarding report (2025), 66% of school staff and governors across the UK cited cyberbullying as the most common online safeguarding issue they face [28].

Cyberbullying, traditional bullying and other harms

Cyberbullying is often regarded as an extension of traditional bullying due to the strong relationship between the two, with most victims typically experiencing both, and the two types sharing several key characteristics (Table 1) [29]. Evidence from cross-sectional and longitudinal studies conducted in Spain and the USA, respectively, has further linked cyberbullying to other harmful behaviours, including sexual harassment and dating abuse[11], with evidence indicating an overlap between these harms [30, 31].

Involvement in cyberbullying, as a perpetrator or both victim and perpetrator, has also been associated with an increased risk of physical aggression (e.g., fighting) and weapon carrying in teenage children [32, 33]. Longitudinal findings from the USA suggest that

[8] Includes the sharing violent and sexually explicit images.

[9] Doxxing refers to exposing individual's identifiable information (e.g., home address) online without their consent to harass, intimidate or harm them.

[10] Masquerading refers to posing as another person or creating a fake profile to harass others online.

children who engage in cyberbullying are significantly more likely to carry weapons one year later, potentially as a means for intimidation, whilst cyberbullying victimisation alone does not predict weapon carrying. However, children with a history of weapon carrying were more likely to become victims of cyberbullying, rather than perpetrating cyberbullying themselves. Interestingly, these associations tended to disappear after the two- or three-year follow-up marks, possibly due to a general trend of reduced weapon carrying and cyberbullying as children age [32].

Evidence gaps: There is currently limited UK-based evidence on the link between cyberbullying and broader harmful behaviours, with most studies conducted in the USA.

***Table 1. Characteristics of traditional bullying and cyberbullying** [27, 34].*

	Traditional bullying	Cyberbullying
Intentional Harm	X	X
Repetition	X	X
Power imbalance between victim and bully	X	X
Perpetrator anonymity		X
Can occur any time (24/7)		X
Can occur in private or personal spaces		X
Permanence of harmful content		X
More visible to authority figures	X	
Harm can be widely shared and amplified		X

Why do children engage in cyberbullying?

- **Peer pressure and social norms** that perpetuate cyberbullying may increase risk of participation [35].
- **Individual risk factors** such moral disengagement, decreased empathy, envy, prejudicial beliefs, and impulsivity [36, 37].
- **Contextual factors** such as challenging family dynamics, trauma, breakdown of friendships or romantic relationships, and negative school environments (e.g., poor teacher-student relationships) [35, 36, 38].
- **The online environment itself heightens the risk of cyberbullying** by offering anonymity, reduced accountability, and a perceived lack of consequences. Increased time spent online further amplifies the risk of children being exposed to harmful behaviours and opportunities for engaging in them [38, 39].
- **Past experiences of bullying** (traditional and/or online) may lead to some children engaging in bullying themselves for revenge or self-protection [37, 40].

The scale of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying Victimisation:

- Evidence from national surveys in England and Wales suggest that 8 to 21% of children aged 9 to 16 experience cyberbullying [26, 41, 42]. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) (2022/23)[12], for example, reported that around 19% of children aged 10 to 15 experienced an online bullying behaviour (~ 847,000 children) [43].
- Girls are disproportionally affected by cyberbullying compared with boys [26, 41, 44]. Data from Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) survey for England (2021/22), involving children aged 11, 13 and 15, showed that 23% of girls, compared with 18% of boys, reported being victims of cyberbullying [41].

Cyberbullying is one of the most frequent forms of cyberviolence against women and girls (CVAWG)[13], recognised by the UN Human Rights council in Resolution 29/14 (2015) as a form of violence against women.

Cyberbullying Perpetration:

- HBSC survey data for England (2021/22) found that around 12% of children reported cyberbullying others, a 10% increase from 2018 [41]. Meanwhile, studies across USA and Europe have shown that the prevalence rates for cyberbullying perpetration among children is heterogeneous[14], ranging from 3 to 39% [37].

- **Evidence gaps:**
    - Evidence on the relationship between ethnicity and cyberbullying varies. While data from the CSEW (2022/23) found that Asian or Asian British children experience less cyberbullying than White and Black or Black British children [43], other survey findings have highlighted that children perceive their experiences of cyberbullying to be linked to their ethnicity [26, 35, 43].
    - Indicative findings from surveys and cross-sectional research in England suggest that children with special educational needs, disabilities, those identifying as LGBTQ+, and those from lower income families or single-parent households may face a higher risk of cyberbullying, although evidence in these areas remains limited [41, 45, 46].

The impact of cyberbullying on children

- **Emotional and psychological impacts**: Children may experience sadness, embarrassment, anger, social isolation, and perceived loss of control, which can lead to depressive symptoms, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. In

[12] The most recent ONS publication (2025) does not include data on bullying experiences among children, therefore the previous Crime Survey for England and Wales dataset (2024) is reported in this pack.

[13] Other common forms of cyberviolence against women and girls include cyberstalking, cyberharassment, online gender-based hate speech, and non-consensual intimate image abuse.

[14] Estimating the prevalence of cyberbullying perpetration among children is challenging, partly due to online anonymity, the lack of social accountability and differences in definitions.

severe cases, this may increase the risk of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts [47–49].

- **Behavioural impacts:** There may be an escalation of externalising behaviours in some children such as substance misuse, risky sexual behaviours, aggression, and delinquency [37, 38].
- **Educational impacts:** Victimisation is associated with lower academic performance and school avoidance or withdrawal [26, 35, 38].
- **Victim-perpetrator dynamics**: Some victims may engage in bullying behaviours themselves, highlighting the cycle of harm created [37, 38, 40].
- **Impacts on perpetrators**: Also associated with adverse outcomes, including poor mental health, loneliness, lower self-esteem, and engagement in antisocial and risk-taking behaviours [27, 40, 50]. This can impact social experiences and educational attainment [37, 51].

Cyberbullying: the law and safeguarding

- Cyberbullying itself is not a criminal offence in the UK, and therefore not directly captured in youth justice data. However, some activities may be **illegal** and require police involvement.
- This includes incidents where cyberbullying involves threats or fear of violence, harassment or stalking, the posting of indecent or offensive messages, or intimate image abuse. It may also include creating fake profiles or stealing someone's identity to commit harm or fraud, encouraging or assisting in serious self-harm, and targeting an individual based on their protected characteristics.
- Such actions may be addressed under a range of existing UK legislation, including the Malicious Communications Act 1988, Protection from Harassment Act 1997, Protection of Children Act 1978, Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, Sexual Offences Act 2003, and the Online Safety Act 2023.
- Schools, under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, are required to have a behaviour policy outlining how they will address bullying, which must be disseminated to all learners, staff and parents. This act also provides headteachers with the power to regulate the conduct of learners outside school premises[15] and provides school staff a defence for the confiscation of items. These measures are particularly relevant to cyberbullying, which can have significant impacts on children's educational experiences.
- If cyberbullying poses a serious risk of harm to individuals or may include any criminal activity, headteachers may need to inform the police.

[15] Applicable to state schools only.

4.2 Online sexual harms

Online environments can amplify sexual related risks for children and cause serious harms that negatively affect their wellbeing and outcomes. Online sexual harms encompass a wide range of behaviours (Table 2), many of which overlap.

It is important to understand some sexual behaviours and interactions that occur online may be developmentally appropriate for children rather than problematic or harmful [52]. Distinguishing between harmful and non-harmful sexual behaviours displayed by children, both online and offline, is critical in ensuring that safeguarding measures are proportionate and effective.

Ofsted's 2021 review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges found sexual harassment, including online, to be widespread. Nearly 90% of girls and 50% of boys reported that they or their peers had received unwanted explicit pictures or videos [53].

Table 2: Examples of online sexual harms and their characteristics.

	Description	Examples of behaviours
Online sexual harassment	Unwanted or non-consensual sexual conduct that takes place across digital platforms, including social media and gaming environments [20, 54].	• Sharing or taking sexual images or videos of an individual without consent • Making sexual comments or content about others • Persistently sending unwanted sexual messages, requests, or content (e.g., sexual images or pornography) • Spreading sexual rumours online • Sending people sexual threats or blackmailing them • Coercing people into sexual conversations, sharing sexual images, or engaging in other sexual behaviours
Intimate image abuse	The non-consensual creation, sharing, or threat to share intimate images or video of an individual.	• Sharing sexual images (nude or semi-nude) without consent • Taking or creating sexual images of a person without consent • Coercing or tricking an individual to take, share and/or forward images • Threatening to share sexual images
Cyberflashing	Sending unsolicited sexually explicit images, often of genitalia, through digital devices.	• Sending sexually explicit images or videos via social media, dating apps or Bluetooth • AI-generated or digitally manipulated sexually explicit content

Online sexual coercion and exploitation	The use of pressure, manipulation, deception, or threats to obtain sexual content or engage in sexual activities online.	• Pressuring a person to take and/or send sexual content • Blackmailing ("sextortion") • Exploiting an individual's vulnerabilities to obtain sexual content or engage in sexual activities
Exposure to online harmful or extreme sexual content	Encountering inappropriate or violent sexual content online.	• Receiving sexual content without consent • View, share, and/or discuss sexual content (e.g., images of peers or pornography) within peer groups

Youth Justice Data on Sexual Offences in England and Wales

- In the year ending March 2025, 54% of all proven sexual offences[16] committed by children aged 10-17 were related to indecent or extreme pornographic images or videos (Figure 1)[17,18].
- The majority of these offences, including attempts and threats, were related to the creation of indecent images of children (45%), followed by sending indecent communications (16%), disclosure or distribution of indecent images (14%), possession of prohibited or extreme pornographic images (12%), possession of indecent images of a child (10%), and voyeurism/upskirting (2%).
- 97% of all proven sexual offences were carried out by boys.

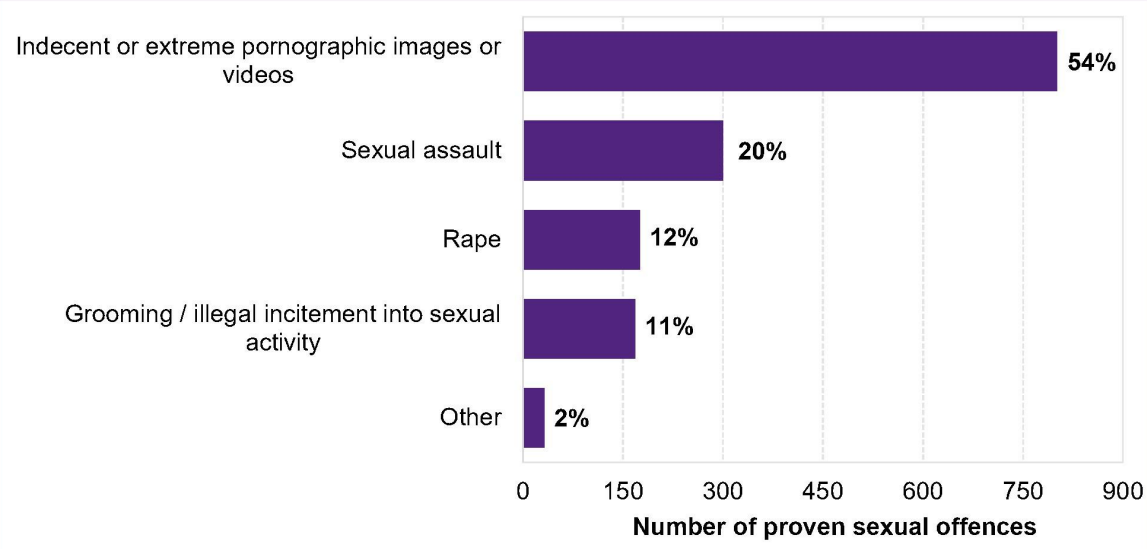


Figure 1. Proven sexual offences by subcategory, year ending March 2025. ***Source**: Youth Justice Board.*

[16] A proven offence is one which results in a caution or court sentence.

[17] Rape offences include rape, attempted rape, conspiracy to commit rape, and aid and abetting rape.

[18] The 'Other' category is largely comprised of offences relating to indecent exposure but also includes a range of other sexual offences such as engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child or person with a mental disorder, observing a person carrying out a private act, and commissioning sexual activity.

Understanding intimate image abuse among children

The following section on online sexual harms focuses on intimate image abuse among children due to its increasing normalisation and implications for the youth justice system. Sexual harms involving adult perpetrators and exposure to pornography are not examined in further detail as they fall outside the scope of this review (Annex 1).

Technology has transformed the way children form romantic relationships and explore their sexuality. Sharing flirty or sexual messages and images online[19] has now become a common feature of dating in the digital age and is often regarded as a new form of intimacy [55, 56]. However, such behaviours carry a significant risk of personal and long-lasting harm, particularly when intimate images are shared without consent, including loss of control, violations of privacy and sexual autonomy, and experiences of coercion.

> Intimate image abuse[20] involves the production, sharing, or reproduction of intimate images or videos **without** the individual's consent. This abuse often takes place online, including public forums, group chats, one-to-one messaging, live streams, or through private social media accounts. It may be carried out by more than one child and/or may involve multiple children being victimised.

Evolving threats: Deepfakes

- Deepfakes are images, videos or audios that are generated or manipulated using AI.
- It is becoming more difficult to discern deepfakes from real media, especially for children, and there are concerns that human detection of deepfakes will be almost impossible in the next few years [57].
- Deepfake technology can be used to create sexually explicit content depicting individuals without their consent, a form of intimate image abuse, including child sexual abuse material.
- The use of deepfakes to produce content of this nature is **illegal** [58].
- Deepfake intimate image abuse disproportionately affects women and girls [59].
- With the increasing accessibility of GenAI tools, there are growing concerns that children may use this technology to create sexually explicit images of their peers.
- **Emerging concerns from practitioners:** Children have reported that responses from professionals (e.g., police and school staff) to fake or manipulated images of them are often insufficient and sometime even dismissive, reflecting a lack of understanding of the significant and long-lasting impacts these images can have on children[21].

[19] The sharing or receiving sexually explicit messages, images or videos is commonly referred to as "sexting" or "sending nudes".

[20] Intimate image abuse is sometimes referred to as 'image-based sexual harassment and abuse' or 'revenge porn'. The latter term, however, often fails to accurate capture the motivations and contexts underlying such incidents.

[21] Information shared by practitioners and researchers in the YJB working with girls' practitioner forum session on *online harms and their impact on children* (February 2026).

The scale of intimate image abuse

- **Intimate image abuse victimisation:**
    - Evidence from UK studies involving children aged 13 to 17 and meta-analyses of international studies suggest that between 5 to 27% of children have received a 'sext'[22] without consent [43, 54, 56, 60–62].
    - Non-consensual forwarding of intimate images is frequently reported by children, with international studies estimating that 8.4% of children have had a sext forwarded without their consent [62]. In the UK, reported rates among 13 to 17 year olds vary between 4 to 19% for the non-consensual sharing of intimate images [56, 60].
    - Pressure, coercion and threats are associated with intimate image sharing among children, with European studies, including UK, reporting victimisation rates ranging from 3% to 33% [54, 56, 60, 63].
- **Intimate image abuse perpetration:** Systematic reviews and meta-analyses of international studies involving children report prevalence rates ranging of 4 to 12% for the non-consensual forwarding of sexts and around 15% for the sending of sexts without consent [61, 62].

Drivers of intimate image sharing among children

- Children may share intimate images for many reasons, including intimacy, validation, social status, peer pressure, bullying, or extortion[23] [55, 64].
- Intimate image sharing is often seen by children as a "normal" or "expected" part of dating. While this may reflect current social-cultural norms and occur with consent, it is illegal, can mask pressure or harmful expectations, and can lead to significant harm [54, 55, 64].
- **Girls are more likely than boys to be coerced or pressured into sharing images and to experience significant negative impacts** [55, 56]. They are more likely to receive unsolicited sexually explicit images, more requests for intimate images, to be victim-blamed, and to have their intimate images taken or shared without consent [54–56].
- Boys generally experience less pressure to share intimate images of themselves and may do so to elicit sexual arousal or explicitly express their intention [40]. When boys share unsolicited images of themselves or they are 'leaked' it is not always received negatively [40, 41].
- **Older children are more likely than younger children to experience intimate image abuse**, with the likelihood of sending, receiving and forwarding 'sexts' all increasing with age [61–63].

Revealing Reality (2021) found that, in the UK, girls were more likely than boys to have their intimate images redistributed without consent (24% vs. 9%) [56].

[22] A 'sext' is a sexually explicit message, image or video shared digitally.

[23] Threatening to share intimate images or videos for money or something else is a form of online blackmail known as 'sextortion'.

- **Evidence gaps:**
  - There is very limited evidence examining whether ethnicity is associated with intimate image abuse victimisation among children. The small number of studies conducted to date, predominately in the United States and Canada, have produced variable findings [65].
  - While there is some indication that children from sexual and gender minority groups are at higher risk of experiencing intimate image abuse, the evidence base is still limited, particularly for England and Wales [66, 67].
  - The role of other vulnerability factors such as adverse childhood experiences and socioeconomic status in intimate image abuse victimisation remains limited.

The impact of intimate image abuse on children

- **Emotional and psychological impacts:** Children have often reported initially feeling disgusted, shocked, and fearful when receiving unsolicited intimate images or finding out that their own images have been taken or shared without consent. These feelings are often accompanied by other responses, such as sadness, humiliation, low self-esteem, self-blame, and a diminished sense of control [55, 56, 68].
  - Some children may laugh the incident off or describe it as "funny", particularly within peer-contexts, while others display very minimal reactions [56, 68]. Such responses may reflect coping mechanisms or desensitisation rather than the absence of harm.
  - **Evidence suggests that girls experience more emotional distress** compared with boys when they receive unsolicited images, have their images shared, or are pressured to share images [68].
- **Severe psychological impact:** Children are at increased risk of anxiety and depression, and in some cases, this may lead to more severe outcomes, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or suicidal thoughts [68, 69].
- **Behavioural impacts:** In some children, the distress caused by intimate image abuse may lead to externalising behaviours such as substance misuse and engagement in risky sexual behaviours [68, 69].
- **Social impact:** Victimised children may be bullied (online and offline), sexually harassed, publicly shamed (often via social media), ostracised, or lose friendships or familial ties. Victims are often blamed for their abuse, and some may even face disciplinary punishment from schools or the criminal justice system [55, 68, 69].
  - **The social repercussions are often more severe and long-lasting for girls**, who disproportionately experience sexual harassment, sexualised name-calling (i.e., "slut-shaming"), and reputational damage. In contrast, studies have reported that incidents affecting boys are more likely to involve light-hearted banter or even praise from peers. [55, 56, 68, 69]
- **Educational impact:** Intimate image abuse can hinder a child's academic performance and lead to some withdrawing from school or switching schools due to stigma, bullying and other safety concerns [68, 69].

Intimate Image Abuse: the law and safeguarding

- It is a criminal offence to produce, possess, or distribute any 'indecent' images[24] of a child (under 18). The legal framework governing these offences is contained with the Protection of Children Act 1978 and Sexual Offences Act 2003, which was established to protect children from adults who seek to sexually abuse or exploit them [70, 71].
- The Online Safety Act 2023 introduced four new criminal offences relating to sharing or threatening to share intimate images without consent (section 188), which were inserted into the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (section 66B) [11, 71].
- These offences are also applicable to children, meaning that if they create, possess, or share any intimate images of themselves or their peers they would be acting unlawfully.
- This may place children who consensually produce or share intimate images at risk of criminalisation [72, 73].
- However, these laws do not reflect the rapid developments in technology and the ways in which children interact with one another socially and romantically online.
- While the police will investigate most cases involving the production and sharing of intimate images by children, where there are no aggravating features (e.g., coercion, exploitation or threats) or concerning background factors, they will proceed with a supportive approach for children rather than criminal sanctions [74].
- The Home Office introduced Outcome 21 in 2016, enabling police to handle sexting offences (and other offence types) among children without criminalising them [74]. If the production and sharing of intimate images between children is consensual and there is no evidence of abuse or aggravating features, police may issue an Outcome 21 as a proportionate response.
- Concerningly, HMIP inspections of several Youth Justice Services (YJSs) found that Outcome 21 was sometimes used inappropriately by the police for serious crimes, including rape and sexual penetration, and that none of these cases were referred to YJSs for joint decision-making. The police also often failed to share children's previous criminal histories, making it difficult for YJSs to identify patterns of concerning behaviour and provide appropriate interventions [75].

Knowledge gap among children: Practitioners have reported that many school-aged children in England and Wales lack understanding of image-sharing laws, which has contributed towards this behaviour becoming normalised. Thus, it is important that resources are developed to educate children about the production and sharing of intimate images and to decrease the risk of inadvertent criminal behaviours.

Knowledge gap among professionals: The inappropriate application of Outcome 21 for serious offences involving children [75], alongside limited understanding among professionals of the importance of joint decision making and information sharing, highlights the need for clearer guidance and training.

[24] Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is often used to describe indecent images of children. It is now the preferred term for this instead of *child pornography*, as it more accurately reflects the nature of the crime and harm experienced by victims.

4.3 Online radicalisation

The scale of children involved in terrorism offences

- **The number of children arrested for terrorism offences in England and Wales continues to increase.** In the year ending September 2025, 53 children were arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000 and subsequent legislation; one of the arrests was linked to Palestine Action[25]. Excluding arrests connected to Palestine Action, children accounted for 20% of all terrorism-related arrests (52 of 256). Whilst this proportion is similar to previous years, the number of children involved is the highest on record [76].
- The YJB was notified of 12 children charged with terrorism offences in the year 2023/24. None of the incidents reported involved multiple children and 92% (11 out of 12) of them had **no previous cautions or convictions** [77].

PREVENT Data [78]

- Prevent is a national programme aimed at preventing individuals from becoming engaged in terrorism through radicalisation. Where a Prevent referral progresses and an individual is assessed as being at genuine risk of radicalisation, their case may be considered by a 'Channel panel' for tailored multi-agency support.
- Children aged 11-15 in England and Wales made up the largest group of Prevent referrals in the year ending March 2025, accounting for 36% (3,192 of 8,759) where age was known. This is a decrease from previous years, reversing the recent upward trend. Children aged 16-17 were the next largest group (13%; 1,178 referrals).
- As cases progressed through Prevent, 11–15-year-olds continued to be the most common age group (38% of those discussed at Channel Panels, 39% adopted as Channel cases).
- Children aged 11-15 had the highest referral levels in most concern categories. They accounted for 35% of Extremist Right-Wing ideology referrals, 23% of Islamist-extremism, and over half of referrals linked to "fascination with extreme violence". 18-21-year-olds were the most common group for InCel[26] and Left-Wing Extremism referrals.
- Referrals spiked sharply in August 2024 following the Southport attack and between January and March 2025 during the public trial for the Southport case.

How do children get radicalised online

> Online radicalisation is the process of adopting extreme beliefs or ideologies, or a willingness to commit violence via engaging with online content.

[25] The proscription of Palestine Action in 2025 has significantly impacted terrorism arrest figures. In the year ending September 2025, 1,630 of 1,886 terrorism-related arrests were linked to Palestine Action, a 660% increase from the previous year [76].

[26] InCel refers to "Involuntary Celibacy", an online subculture part of the manosphere tethered in harmful gender roles and misogyny.

Exposure to terrorist and violent extremist content alone does not explain violence, and real-world associations and offline realities of children must also be considered when understanding the radicalisation process. For example, if the child has offline associations with racist or delinquent peers [79]. However, a UK Government study suggests that the internet plays an increasingly significant role in the radicalisation of children and young adults (15-25 years old) [80].

The internet facilitates online radicalisation via three main mechanisms [80, 81]:

1. Information provision.
2. Amplifying group polarisation.
3. Legitimising extreme ideology and violence through echoing.

Does online radicalisation lead to offline violence?

While the internet has become the **dominant gateway** to radicalisation, particularly for children, it is often associated with lower levels of operational capability for serious harm when compared to traditional face-to-face radicalisation [80, 82]. This is explained by:

- When radicalisation happens mainly online, there is usually less evidence of readiness or ability to cause serious harm. Compared with situations where offline influences are involved, online-only involvement tends to reflect lower levels of intent and capability, and more distance from real-world violence [80].
- Online activity can sometimes give early warning signs of harmful thinking or intentions, which means concerns can be identified early and support or intervention can take place before harm occurs [80].
- Some research suggests the internet's role may be exaggerated as in some cases, online extremist behaviour reflects attention-seeking or “showing off” offline, rather than a serious commitment to acting violently offline [82]. This is to say that not all children who engage in extremist content online will engage in violent behaviour offline, but rather their online activity might be a signifier for their own personal struggles and may be in need of further support.

Vulnerability factors

Research reinforces that **online radicalisation rarely occurs in isolation**, but rather it interacts with pre-existing individual and psychosocial vulnerabilities. Offline push factors (such as disillusionment with the political system or social isolation) can also increase the impact of extreme online messages on radicalisation. International evidence, including UK, suggests that **early childhood experiences and family situations impacts the process of radicalisation** [81, 83].

Individual factors

Individual vulnerabilities often relate to a children’s psychological state and their search for identity and purpose. It is important to reiterate that having one or more of the following vulnerabilities does not mean that children will become radicalised, but rather that they are more vulnerable to influences online which may lead to harmful beliefs and behaviours.

- Psychological vulnerabilities: **depression, aggression and lack of empathy** are the main individual factors identified with higher vulnerability to becoming radicalised online [83]. Some research has also identified **neurodivergence** and **personality disorder/difficulties** with a higher likelihood of online radicalisation [80].
- "**Quest for significance**": research suggests that children who feel **alienated and hopeless** may turn to extremist ideologies to gain a sense of perceived importance and identity [84, 85]. Extremist groups offer a powerful sense of belonging which some children may struggle to find elsewhere [85].
- Children experiencing high levels of **self-uncertainty** may be drawn to extremist groups because they offer a clear, unambiguous worldview and a rigid social hierarchy that reduces personal doubt [83, 85, 86].
- Extremist groups offer **thrill and adventure**. Some children describe the adrenaline rush of antisocial behaviour as a pull factor towards extremist groups [85].

Behavioural factors

Additionally, behavioural factors are also important. A study examining the behaviour of American children and young people online (aged 15-25) found that [13]:

- **How children behave online matters.** Active users of social media (e.g., comment on posts, share pictures, etc.), those that have greater networks (e.g., more friends on Facebook, followers on Instagram, etc.), and who engage with a wider range of platforms are more vulnerable to become victims of cyberhate. In turn, they are more likely to engage in cyberhate themselves.
- **Traditional forms of protection are largely ineffective in online environments.** There is little evidence that guardianship, such as strong family ties or living with others, reduces exposure to online content advocating violence.
- **Evidence gap:** There are mixed findings on the role of guardianship, as traditional "guardianship" proxies show limited effect; research should **model specific protective practices** (e.g., co-viewing, active mediation, game/server literacy) rather than coarse living-arrangement indicators [13].

Societal and environmental factors

Radicalisation is heavily influenced by the social context in which children live and the grievances they perceive.

- **Experiences of discrimination and victimisation** are common among children and young people who have been radicalised. These experiences can lead to feelings of personal or group injustice, which they may use to justify violence as "rightful" responses [83].
- **Perceptions of relative group deprivation** (the belief that one's group is worse off than others) **and a realistic or symbolic threats** (the belief that another group threatens one's welfare or values) are stronger predictors of radicalisation than personal treatment alone [83].
- **Schools can play an important role in preventing radicalisation**. A school environment perceived as unsafe or non-democratic (e.g., students feel they lack a

voice, face unfair treatment, etc.) erodes trust and legitimises extremist attitudes which can contribute to radicalisation [84].

- Challenging home environments may increase the vulnerability of a child to seek alternative connections online [86].
- **Parents and teachers often lack the media-gaming literacy to intervene effectively** [87].

The digital and gaming environment

Online spaces have become critical hubs for both incidental contact and purposeful engagement with extremist ideologies.

- **Social bonding through gaming**. Online gaming platforms (e.g., Roblox, Discord) provide a social space where children may be groomed into extremist ideologies [80, 86]. Some extremist organisations have also been known to imitate the aesthetics of certain games in their propaganda [80].
- **Radicalisation often involves a hybrid of online and offline experiences**. Online interactions can lead to offline behavioural changes, such as a child shouting extremist slogans at school [86].
- **Contact with terrorist and violent extremist content is often facilitated by personalisation mechanisms on social media.** Children who have interacted with extremist material once are already more likely to be fed content that reinforces extremist worldviews [88].

Evolving threats: Virtual Reality [89]

- Virtual reality technology has increasingly blurred the boundaries between physical and digital experiences, while also presenting new risks for children online.
- Evidence has shown that immersive gaming and virtual reality platforms are being used by perpetrators to groom and exploit children, including through exposure to extremist content and radicalisation.
- Children also encounter harmful sexual content, rape threats, and racist abuse in these environments.
- The anonymity afforded by these platforms, alongside limited adult supervision, contributes to manifestation of harmful behaviours in some children, including cyberbullying, violence, and hate speech.
- Harms experienced by children in immersive and virtual environments may feel more real than those encountered in conventional, less immersive online environments.

Radicalisation: the law and safeguarding

- The Terrorism Act 2000 defines terrorism as "the use or threat of action where all three following elements are satisfied":
  - **Actions** must be: serious violence against a person, serious damage to property, endangering a person's life, creating a serious risk to public health or safety, or serious interference with or disruption of an electronic system.
  - **Purpose**: the use or threat must be designed to influence a government (or international government organisation) or to intimidate the public (or a section of the public).
  - **Cause**: must be made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial, or ideological cause.
- Children who are exposed to, or engage with, multiple types of extremist content online may fall outside of the definition in legislation relying on a clearly articulated "cause" or ideology. The experiences and appropriate support for these children is an evidence gap that requires further investigation.
- The criminal responsibility does not differentiate between children over ten and adults, although legislation in sentencing may be different.
- The Crime and Policing Act 2026 introduces new Youth Diversion Orders (YDOs), an early intervention tool focused on terrorism-related risks, including online radicalisation. The YDOs aims to disrupt children's involvement in terrorism-related activity at an earlier phase and divert them from the wider criminal justice system [90]. The legislation is expected to come into force from autumn 2026, with operational implementation subject to national oversight and readiness planning.

4.4 Technology facilitated exploitation

Criminal Exploitation

The UK Government's Guidance on County Lines indicates that technology and online platforms play a significant role in how criminal exploitation (including county lines) is initiated, maintained and escalated [91]:

- Digital environments (e.g., social media, gaming sites, messaging apps, and immersive and virtual reality environments) are used to target and groom victims into criminal exploitation.
- **Glamourisation of gang culture via social media.** A small number of individuals use social media to glamourise gang involvement, drug selling and weapon carrying, which can present these activities as aspirational and increase the vulnerability of children who may want to emulate them.
- **Escalation of real-world violence**. Taunting, threats and rivalries played out online are associated with increased risk of retaliation and offline violence, especially when the content receives high engagement (i.e., high number of views, likes, shares).
- Online exposure to images of wealth and status linked to drugs and criminal activity may increase the vulnerability of children to become exploited, particularly of children experiencing social, economic and emotional hardship.
- Technology enables recruitment beyond proximity and face-to-face contact. It may also be used to monitor, track or control victims which increases their fear and dependence, making it harder for children to disengage or seek help.
- Online grooming is facilitated by creating false trust with children and vulnerable adults, including through perceived friendships or romantic relationships, to draw them into exploitation.

Sexual exploitation

Research suggests that technology is a common tool to groom and control victims [92]. Previous section explores other sexual online harms, and there are common overlaps with criminal exploitation on how technology is utilised.

    - **Evidence gap:** there is a lack of empirical UK studies investigating the relationship between technology and the sexual exploitation of children; thus, its prevalence is difficult to determine. There is also little evidence on the impact of current legislation on victims of exploitation.

- **Children with experience of sexual exploitation tend to know their recruiter.** However, a systematic review on the recruitment strategies into sex trafficking could not identify a consistent pattern across contexts [92]. This suggests that either there is a gap in the literature or the variability of mechanisms is too wide to identify trends.

- Technology may also be used to reach and support children who are currently being exploited. Lessons can be learned from how technology is used by domestic violence, rape and sexual assault support groups [92].

The rise of online subcultures promoting violence

The FBI, the NCA and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) have identified a rise in online subcultures and groups promoting violence. These groups overlap online, and as a whole, they are often referred as "the Com" (short for community) [93].

What is the Com [94]?

- The Com is a decentralised, loosely connected online harm ecosystem spanning multiple platforms and jurisdictions in ways that can evade traditional detection, moderation and enforcement. It is **not one group**, but a set of overlapping subcultures, behaviours, networks and communities associated with multiple forms of harm.
- Authorities describe elements of this ecosystem using different terms, including **"nihilistic violent extremism"** or **"sadistic online exploitation"**, reflecting its hybrid nature. Activity operates across gaming platforms, livestreams, messaging apps and social networks.
- It is mostly composed of children and young adults (11-25 years old).
- Children involved may be both victims and perpetrators.

Pathways to harm

- **Emotional vulnerabilities become entry points for exploitation** and manipulate children into harmful acts, including self-harm, violence or sexual exploitation. Thus, those with adverse life experiences (ACEs), neurodiversity, mental health needs, and social isolation, face higher levels of vulnerability into recruitment and victimisation.
- There are many gateways of adjacent online subcultures identified that can gravitate towards Com subgroups. For example, manosphere, cybercrime, ultra-graphic violence, streaming subcultures, and many more (see Resolver's graphic on page 25 for further detail).
- The Resolver report uses the term "weaponised loneliness" to underscore the importance of children's need for belonging and how this is exploited by these networks to recruit, groom and coerce them into violent and/or harmful behaviours [94].
- Radicalisation can take place very quickly (sometimes in weeks).

Ideologies

- The groups that are part of the Com are ever evolving, but all tend to share a nihilistic point of view of the world and encourage violence as an outlet for their personal struggles [94].

- Some groups within it may also promote child sexual abuse, the creation and sharing of child sexual abuse material, and misogynistic and misanthropic ideologies [94, 95].
- **Theres is lack of consistent ideology**. Despite many groups within Com borrowing the aesthetics of far-right ideologies, neo-Nazi symbology and accelerationists, and some subgroups even interacting with more established ideology-based groups, Com engagement does not necessarily share the same level of conviction. They may be more opportunistic in targeting vulnerable groups (e.g., LGBTQ+, homeless people, migrants, etc.) and depicting sadistic neo-Nazi symbols for shock value. At the same time, subgroups have also distributed jihadist handbooks [94, 95]. This is important to consider, as prevention mechanisms based on group or ideological affiliation may be insufficient.
- **There is a fascination with violence.** This may be manifested in a myriad of ways, including satirical memes, replication of mass murders in online games (e.g., Roblox) where children often engage in, and a glorification of mass attackers and school shooters [96]. The digital aspect of these subcultures translates into a globalisation of this phenomenon in which recent school shooters and mass attackers could be linked to the Com.
- There is a financial aspect of Com behaviour and survival. The use of cryptocurrency can be used as a form of payment for violent acts; and some subgroups may engage in cyberattacks and ransomware to large organisations and governments in order to obtain access to systems and sensitive data [94]. Overall, there is a **gamification of the groups' activities** in order to obtain clout and respect within the group in which the most violent acts are assigned higher value [93, 94].

Exploitation: the law and safeguarding

- The Government introduced a standalone offence of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in the Crime and Policing Bill, jointly with Child Criminal Exploitation Orders. This piece of legislation adds to the complex legal framework of exploitation offences which may be addressed in the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the Sexual Offences Act 2003, and the Online Safety Act 2023.
- The new CCE offence targets adults who groom and exploit children, but participants have highlighted that it may be insufficient to safeguard children who take part in exploitation of other children themselves, while also being victims [97].
- The Online Safety Act 2023 does not create new criminal offences specific to grooming or exploitation, but it places duties on regulated online services in relation to illegal content and introduces new offences relating to intimate images of children.
- Grooming may be criminalised through specific offences in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (e.g., sexual communication with a child).
- A child may be charged for sexual offences against another child, but even then, the law recognises that children who display harmful sexual behaviour may themselves be victims of abuse or exploitation.

5. Safeguarding needs and response gaps

There are consistent reports in the literature of limited adult oversight, outdated safety training, uncertainty among practitioners about how to monitor or intervene lawfully, and inconsistent platform enforcement when harmful content is reported.

Online spaces are difficult to guard, and exposure is driven more by how the child behaves online than by traditional measures of protection (e.g., strong family ties) [13]. However, measures such as **teen-by-default** or **safety-by-design** strategies where technology platforms embed a safeguarding approach could be a preventative factor in supporting families, communities, and institutions in keeping children safe online. Additionally, emerging risks require ongoing adaptation. Research emphasises the importance of early intervention, as extremist content often remains at low-level, normalised forms where automated detection alone is insufficient and human moderation remains essential [98].

Evidence gap: Further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of alternative types of guardianship and other preventative factors, and how that looks like in the online world.

Despite these gaps, changes in policy are being introduced to address them and further research is currently being undertaken which will shed light on our own knowledge gaps:

- An amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill has been announced, which will order tech firms to take down non-consensual intimate images within 48 hours or face fines[27].
- A recent UK Government consultation on children's digital access gathered evidence and opinions from children, parents, experts and the wider public. The government's response will be published in summer 2026.
- The Prevention and Diversion Tool (PDAT) used by youth justice services across England and Wales could facilitate detection of online harms as it's the only mandatory risk assessment which includes questions about children's digital lives going through diversion and out-of-court interventions. These questions will also be incorporated into AssetPlus, an assessment and planning interventions framework used for children who have received a court outcome, in summer 2026. Future evaluations of these tools could focus on their impact on the effectiveness of detecting online harms affecting children.
- The Children's Commissioner is currently undertaking a research project on the experiences of children who have been referred to PREVENT and the type of support they receive, as well as the experiences of the practitioners making the referrals and providing the support. Findings will be published later this year.
- The YJB is commissioning a research project to examine youth justice responses to online sexual offences carried out by children in England and Wales. Findings are expected be published in 2027.

[27] Press release available: Tech firms will have to take down abusive images within 48 hours under new law to protect women and girls - GOV.UK

- The UK government has recently announced plans to ban social media access for children under 16 from spring 2027[28]. In addition, in June 2026, the government instructed technology companies to introduce device-level controls[29] to prevent children seeing, sending, and receiving explicit content.

The findings of this report are particularly relevant in the context of the Government's decision to ban social media for under-16s. Whilst the YJB welcomes the plans, we are aware no single measure can keep children safe. Creating safer futures for children will continue to depend on trusted adults, strong relationships, effective partnership working, and co-ordinated support to protect children both online and offline.

[28] Guidance available: Fact sheet: New rules to protect children online - GOV.UK.

[29] News story available: New plans to stop children taking, sharing or viewing nude images - GOV.UK. The UK government has warned that if tech companies fail to act within three months, it will introduce legislation to make these measures mandatory.

6. Youth Justice Service interventions: what works?

Relationship violence prevention lessons and activities

The YEF Toolkit identifies activities aimed at reducing relationship violence between children as having a moderate impact. There is a great variety of programmes with this aim, but they are usually delivered in a school setting and conducted by teachers as part of the Relationship and Sexual Health Education curriculum. There is high-quality research indicating that these activities can reduce all types of dating and relationship violence, including emotional, physical and sexual violence, and violence that takes place online[30].

Case study: Don't steal my future, Wales

"Don't steal my future" is a training workshop delivered to children by the Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre in schools, colleges and sports clubs across North Wales. The workshop aims to educate children on what is sexual violence and its impacts to victims, children who have carried out such offences, and their families. It includes conversations about consent, healthy relationships, gender roles and concludes with attendees taking a pledge to not steal anyone's future, so "everyone can live a live free of sexual violence".

Although the programme has not yet undergone a formal evaluation, the organisation reported positive participant feedback. Findings from a post-participation survey also suggest promise, with 85% of children indicating that they found the training helpful.

Mentoring programmes for boys

A systematic review found that mentoring interventions for boys and young men show strong promise in improving soft skills and in reducing violence perpetration. While these benefits underscore mentoring as a valuable approach for supporting boys' wellbeing and prosocial development, the evidence for its effects on gender norm transformation, reproductive health knowledge and behaviours, substance use, and financial vulnerability is mixed [99].

Case study: Mankind, South Gloucestershire Youth Justice Service

Mankind is a programme designed to support young boys to develop a pro-social identity by discussing and challenging typical male stereotypes. The programme aims to explore with boys what being a man for them means and which influences shape theirs and society's perceptions of how a man should be and behave. This includes how social media can influence these ideas.

[30] Refer to recent YJB's evidence pack on harmful sexual behaviour, misogyny and violence carried out by children for further examples of practice in this space.

Gender-sensitive online programmes

A systematic review suggests that framing, content and delivery of programmes that speak directly to boys' identities and peer dynamics are central to shifting attitudes and behaviours linked to aggression and risk-taking, while also building strengths and belonging [100]. The review identified interventions with online components that used cognitive-behavioural therapy principles, but were also gender-sensitive, were most successful in supporting boys in improving their self-efficacy, self-esteem, emotional regulation, help-seeking behaviour, and overall increases in psychological wellbeing. This presents an opportunity to utilise technology to support effective responses.

It has also been suggested that lessons can be learned from how technology is used by domestic violence, rape and sexual assault support groups in order to identify children who are at risk of exploitation [92].

Awareness campaigns and resources

There are a few recent resources launched by government bodies to increase awareness of online harms. For example, the Children's Commissioner launched in December 2025 a suite of resources with activities for children and parents to help them navigate their digital engagement. The FBI also launched a Public Service Announcement in March 2025 to increase awareness of the growing number of children being targeted by violent online networks. However, the evidence of these campaigns in preventing harm is limited.

Case study: Be Share Aware Prevention Programme, Rotherham Youth Justice Service

Be Share Aware Prevention Programme is an educational intervention for children that have been referred to the police into the youth justice service because they have sent, distributed or received indecent images. Originally piloted in 2022, its strong engagement led to wider rollout, including delivery in schools across Rotherham. The programme aims to help children understand the law relating to sharing inappropriate or indecent images and to improve their ability to stay safe online.

The intervention adopts an accessible, multi-modal approach using role-play, presentations, videos, and games to meet different learning needs. It also incorporates up-to-date information on risky websites and emerging social media features, informed through regular liaison with the local community safety team. Overall, the programme provides an early-intervention, harm-reduction response that supports online safety awareness among vulnerable children.

Parent-child relationship

A US study looking at the parenting dimensions that favoured positive parent-child relationships found that children whose parents exhibited warmth, structure, and autonomy support were less likely to have engaged in bullying or cyberbullying. Children whose parental relations were marked by rejection, chaos, and coercion were more likely to have participated in both forms of peer aggression. The same study also identified a stronger parental influence on cyberbullying behaviour than offline bullying [34].

Evidence gap: There is little evidence on programmes that may be able to increase these dimensions. The YEF Toolkit estimates that parenting programmes have a low impact in reducing violence. However, there is strong evidence suggesting that they can reduce behavioural difficulties, which are associated with later involvement in harmful behaviours.

A recent systematic review highlighted the media literacy gap between parents and their children as a main challenge in preventing online sexual victimisation. Other challenges identified were barriers to parent-child communication, challenges in mediation strategies, sociocultural responses in parental responses, and inadequate support systems [101]. These are important to consider in order to equip parents with the support they need as the "first line of defence" against online harms.

Psychological inoculation against misinformation

Inoculation works under the premise that preparing audiences before they encounter online content, makes them less susceptible to misinformation. Instead of working on dismantling and verifying each piece of information shared online, inoculation equips children with the skills necessary to identify trustworthy and untrustworthy content online. Whilst this is still an emerging technique, research has shown promising results in reducing the impact of misinformation [102].

Case study: HateLess - Together against Hatred, Germany

HateLess is a school-based program funded by the EU and the German Government which aims to "dismantle hate speech, disinformation, and entrenched racist narratives by amplifying and making visible diverse counter-narratives".

The program aims to equip both children and youth workers with the skills required to counter misinformation and racist narratives online. It is based on the basis that media literacy is fundamental to empower children and helps them become informed citizens. It takes a participatory approach to also foster creativity and engagement among participating children.

An evaluation of the project has suggested that children who participated in HateLess showed greater empathy, self-efficacy, and counter-speech compared to the control group who did not go through the program [103].

Guidelines for the participatory actions that form the program can be found here.

Evidence gap: diversionary approaches (pre & post arrest) to prevent radicalisation

A recent systematic review identified that there is insufficient evidence to determine whether interventions delivered outside the criminal justice system effectively counter the radicalisation of children [104]. To address this gap, further robust evaluations of current diversionary initiatives are needed to understand their impact, identify best practice, and inform future policy and programme design.

7. Implications for policy and practice

Embedding children's digital lives into assessment and intervention

Understanding children's online experiences is essential to identifying risk and need and should therefore become a routine step in all assessments and ongoing conversations with children. Assessment tools (e.g., AssetPlus, PDAT) and guidance documents for YJSs are currently being updated to reflect this new reality. Additionally, children's online lives need to be considered when managing safety concerns (including offline), both for the child and others. Interventions offered may also need to consider children's online activity, including peer dynamics, exposure to harmful content, and the influence of platform design. Growing Child First research shows that interventions and resources are more effective when co-designed and produced with children, recognising children as active agents in decisions relating to their safety and support.

Strengthening multi-agency working and shared responsibility

Effective safeguarding requires joined-up local systems with clear pathways for sharing concerns, responding early, and escalating support where needed. Youth justice policy should continue to promote collaboration with schools, families and specialist services, such as health, ensuring that roles and responsibilities are clearly understood and that children do not fall between systems.

Investing in workforce capability and confidence

Practitioners often report uncertainty about how to identify, interpret and respond to online harms. Workforce development, including digital literacy and understanding emerging online risks, is paramount to build practitioner confidence and ensure consistent support and appropriate responses.

Promoting protective factors and children's strengths

The evidence points to the importance of belonging, positive relationships, emotional regulation and critical thinking as protective factors. Youth justice interventions should build on children's strengths by supporting digital and gaming literacy, healthy relationships and opportunities for positive identity-building. Whilst further research is needed in this area, gender-sensitive and developmentally appropriate approaches show promise in recognising different experiences and pressures faced by boys and girls online.

Influencing wider systems to keep children safe

The evidence gathered in this review reinforces that safeguarding children online cannot rest solely with families or services. Youth justice policy and practice have a role in contributing to cross-government and regulatory approaches that promote safety-by-design, effective platform accountability, and age-appropriate online environments. This broader system is essential to reduce harm at source and create safer digital spaces for children.

Annex 1: About this evidence pack

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Scope of the Evidence Pack

The evidence briefing aimed to:

- Synthesise the evidence on the association between online harms and youth justice outcomes.
- Identify factors that may influence variance in offending and victimisation of online offences.
- Identify interventions aimed at mitigating online harms, reducing involvement with the youth justice system, and promoting pro-social identities.

Acknowledgments

The YJB's Academic Liaison Network (ALN) was consulted, and a drop-in session was held on 18th November 2025 prior to defining the scope and designing the methodology to better understand the landscape and current issues. We are thankful for their meaningful contributions.

Search methodology

The PICOS framework was used to narrow the scope:

- Population (P): children (under 18 years old) exposed or at risk of being exposed to online harms.
- Intervention (I): Online harms (including cyberbullying, sexual abuse, grooming and exploitation, radicalisation). Programmes and interventions designed to mitigate online harms in children. Exposure to pornography has been excluded in this review.
- Comparator (C): Children not exposed to online harm OR different levels/types of exposure. Children who have not received intervention aimed at mitigating online harm exposure.
- Outcomes (O): youth justice-related outcomes (offending, arrest, court involvement, custodial sentences, diversion programmes) AND problem or harmful behaviour as proxy behaviours which could lead to criminalisation but are not considered offences. We also included positive outcomes (e.g. education attainment, healthy relationships, etc.).
- Study design or type of publication (S): evidence reviews, grey literature and peer-review papers accessed via MOJ libraries.
- **Exclusion criteria:** population and policy wide interventions (e.g., evaluation of policy), adult only population studies, studies on impact on communities, essay or opinion pieces, articles behind a pay wall.
- **Inclusion criteria:** studies in English, published in the last 10 years unless level of relevance showed otherwise, studies conducted based within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) list. Individual studies and grey literature were included but systematic reviews and meta-analysis were prioritised. Studies or articles highlighted by key stakeholders and peer reviewers have also been included in the review – this was particularly pertinent in the identification of case study interventions.

- **Databases searched:** EBSCO, PubMed, Google Scholar
- **Other websites:** GOV.UK, ONS, YEF Toolkit, Resource Hub.

Papers identified by topic experts have also been included and reference lists of relevant papers have been screened. This included examples of practice via YJB Operational Colleagues.

Limitations

Due to time constraints, no critical appraisal has been carried out. This means that whilst we can provide a synthesis of the evidence, we cannot provide an estimate on how strong or robust it is. However, to mitigate this, systematic reviews that have conducted a critical appraisal process have been prioritised in our search and reporting. Thus, this briefing is based on a **narrative review of available evidence** and includes a wide variety of evidence to provide an overall summary. This narrative review was designed to be an informative (rather than all-encompassing) review of recent data and evidence about online harms affecting children.

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