



73% of adults believe children cannot safely use the internet without being approached by adults looking to harm them

New survey shows people do not think the internet is safe for children

AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS, 17 November 2021 – Today, ECPAT, the world’s biggest influencing network solely focused on ending the sexual exploitation of children, released findings from research in eight countries across the European Union in which they explored public attitudes towards online child protection.

Key findings of the research included:

- 76 per cent of respondents said that allowing online service providers to be able to detect and flag any signs of child online sexual exploitation or abuse is more or as important as their privacy online.
- Nearly 7 out of 10 people feel that there is not much, if any, privacy online. Those who believe online privacy does *not* exist (68%) outnumber those who believe it does (25%) by more than two to one.
- An average of 73% of adults believe children cannot go online without being approached by adults looking to harm them. 77% of female respondents held this view, as did 69% of male respondents.
- 68 per cent of respondents in the eight countries support plans by the European Union to introduce new legislation on the detection of child sexual abuse material by private companies (Italy (75%); Spain (75%); Netherlands (72%)).
- The research findings were broadly consistent across all eight countries.

Commissioned by ECPAT International in partnership with their member Defence for Children – ECPAT Netherlands, the qualitative and quantitative research delivered by YouGov was based on representative adult populations (18+) in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Sweden.

The research shows widespread public support (68%) for the use of technical tools to identify child sexual abuse material and for the European Union to introduce legislative change to help improve child safety (1).

Most respondents in the qualitative research groups did not know that hash detection or anti-grooming tools existed (2). Once participants learnt about these tools, they were angry that they weren’t being used and turned on at all times. Participants in these groups held to this view even when they were told that their data could be scanned to achieve this.

Coming from some of the largest countries in the European Union, the message is clear: the public wants action taken to protect children online. They want to see automated tools that can help to keep children safe online to always be used, with online platforms having a legal duty to do so.

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Notes to editors

Research Methodology – 8 country datasets are available. A merged EU dataset is available. All figures from the quantitative data, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 9,410 adults participated in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and Spain. Fieldwork was undertaken between 2nd – 11th September 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been given an even weighting for each country to produce an ‘average’ value. The qualitative data was gathered in 7 countries (all the countries above minus Sweden) through online Remesh sessions with 210 people. This was done in the first part of 2021 within 4 months’ time by Outrageous Impact.

(1) **Legislation** – These findings follow changes in late 2020 when new [regulation](#) in the European Union placed technology companies deploying specialised tools to voluntarily detect child sexual abuse material into legal limbo with the [e-Privacy Directive](#). As a result, some technology companies stopped scanning for images of child sexual abuse and exploitation leading to enormous consequences. A [temporary agreement](#) was enacted to allow technology companies to resume scanning, but some are yet to do so.

The European Union is currently exploring whether to create new legislation that will mandate online service providers (e.g., social media platforms) to use automated technology tools to detect and flag signs of online sexual exploitation and abuse. These tools will continuously check the personal activity of all users on the platform, looking for signs of online sexual exploitation and abuse. However, this automated technology means users give away some of their personal privacy, because the tools scan images and messages to protect children.

(2) **Definitions**

- Hash Detection – Hash-based child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) detection tools compare a user image to known CSAM to see if there is a match. The images are not compared directly but with hash values that are generated for both the user image and individual CSAM. A hash function is an umbrella term for any function that converts input (e.g., text, an image) to a fixed-size output, which is known as the hash value. The hash value is a sequence of alphanumeric characters considered a ‘fingerprint’ of the image. Two hash values that are identical to one another indicate two identical images.
- Grooming detection technologies (GDT) help determine if a child is being groomed for sexual abuse. Typically, these technologies are discussed in relation to text-based conversations as explained grooming often takes place on messaging platforms. GDTs usually take the form of keyword detectors or more advanced ML-based techniques. However, certain metadata analysis can also be used to supplement the grooming detection process.

About ECPAT International

ECPAT is an international organization with 122 members in 104 countries who coordinate research, advocacy, and action to end the sexual exploitation of children.

ECPAT engages in multi-country and multi-sector collaborations, working with law enforcement, private sector organisations, and governments around the world to prevent future sexual crimes against children. They look at this issue in all its settings, including child sexual exploitation through prostitution; trafficking; child early and forced marriage and child sexual exploitation online.

Since 2020, ECPAT has been implementing [Project Beacon](#), a campaign of information and advocacy focused on technology and children’s rights in the EU.