



# RESEARCH BRIEF: Complexities of Online Sexual Exploitation: Challenges in Defining, Regulating, Exiting, and Preventing It.

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**NOTE:** This is the first part of a two-part series. Part 1 focuses on online social media platforms as a way to recruit, groom and exploit children and other vulnerable populations. In April 2025, Part 2 will focus on the uses of online content to prevent, exit and policies that keep social media platforms accountable to monitor and remove the facilitation of online sexual exploitation.

Online Sexual Exploitation (OSE) is described as the use of the Internet<sup>1</sup>, digital social media platforms, and electronic devices to recruit, solicit, promote, coerce, and purchase individuals to perform sexual acts (Bouché, 2015; Mitchell, et al., 2010; NCMEC, 2016; Ray & Henry, 2025; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017; Walsh et al., 2024). Unfortunately, minors; especially females, in the United States (U.S.) and abroad are at higher risk to experience such exploitation. Vulnerabilities that place young children and others at risk to become victims vary. Literature has established the complex and multi-level vulnerabilities that push populations to human trafficking victimization from intrapersonal to structural. Polyvictimization, poverty, single-parent household, minority-status, homelessness, being part of the justice and foster care systems can exacerbate someone's risk to become a victim of trafficking. Yet, an important vulnerability that needs to be considered in the context of OSE<sup>2</sup> is being a child who regularly uses social media platforms<sup>3</sup>, messaging applications<sup>4</sup>, and chat rooms<sup>5</sup>, and willingness to share content explicit or not. These practices and exposure at an early age increase online sexual exploitation (Ray & Henry, 2025; Thorn, 2019; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017).

Unfortunately, to this day, there are many gaps within the literature to better comprehend OSE within the U.S.

<sup>1-5</sup> Please see Glossary for the definitions of terms used throughout this analysis.

OSE has become more of a pressing issue since COVID-19. Because of the ever-evolving nature of social media platforms, there are multiple challenges to best define, prevent, regulate, and address OSE. These challenges include: the lack of protection features to users, threats to online security, children and teens developmental stages limitations, increased hours spent online, and perpetrators' understanding on strategies of control and manipulation (Mitchell, et al., 2010; Bouché, 2015; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Lane, et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Addressing the lack of OSE research is essential. Thus, this two-part analysis seeks to bring to the front current highlights from the OSE literature to provide readers with a deeper understanding of what is emerging in terms of entrapment, exiting, and possible solutions for prevention and protection (some of these content is coming up in part 2). Recognizing what is already known and identifying gaps in the context of OSE are essential first steps. Collaborative efforts to conduct studies and evaluations can help build evidence-based practices, evaluated policies, and educational

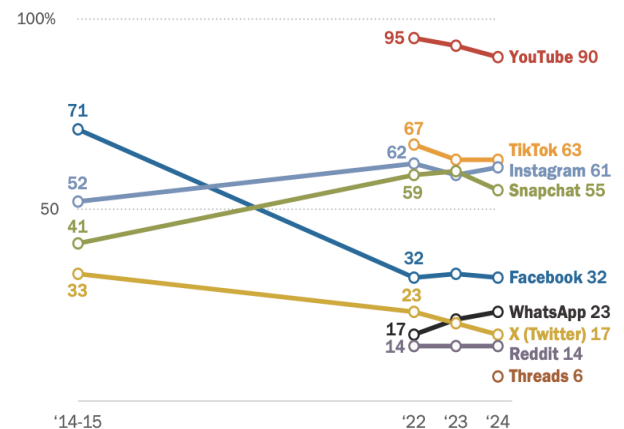
programs to better protect vulnerable individuals. This analysis is based on 12 academic articles, and 8 government and non-governmental reports.

## BACKGROUND

The increase in online activity among youth brings growing concerns about their safety in the digital world. Statistics show how feasible and common it is for teens to have access to digital devices--mobile phones, computers/laptops, gaming consoles, or tablets (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024). Youth usage and engagement on online platforms has increased alongside the rise of digital device

### YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat top the list for teens

% of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 who say they ever use the following apps or sites



Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. teens conducted Sept. 18-Oct. 10, 2024.

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accessibility. A national data analysis demonstrates that around 90% of American youth (any individual under the age of 18) are online daily, with 45% reporting constant use of various platforms throughout the day (Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2022; O'Brien and Li, 2020). A 2024 report from Pew Research Center shares that nearly 96% of the surveyed teens go online every day; this is a nearly 25% increase since 2014 and shows the steep rise in youth online activity. Some of the most commonly used platforms include YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. While WhatsApp is only used by 23% of surveyed teens, its usage has increased since 2022 (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024). Other platforms are still being used by teens, but have declined over the past decade—including Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024). The ever changing nature of social media platforms demonstrate the fluctuation of the rates of social media usage. These data trends also show how online social media platforms' popularity varies

**90%**

of American youth are online daily.

**45%**

of American youth *constantly* use various platforms throughout the day.

U.S. teens spend an average of

**5 hours a day**

on social media platforms.

Source: DeAngelis, T. (2024) and Faverio, M. & Sidoti, O. (2024).

throughout. Thus, the responses to protect their users must adapt quickly to the constant changes of both user' engagement and selection of platforms.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), teens in the U.S. spend an average of five hours per day on social media activities and interactions (DeAngelis, 2024). The increase in online use in the last several years places teens and young users at a higher risk of being exposed to a variety of Internet-based criminality

(U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Some of the threats identified within the literature consist of cyberbullying<sup>6</sup>, harassment, sexting<sup>7</sup>, and unwanted exposure to sexual content (O'Brien & Li, 2020). Studies have also noted that social media platforms could play a role in facilitating connections and communication with traffickers (Bouché, 2015; Cole & Sprang, 2015; Moore et al., 2017; Tidball et al., 2016). Thus, the ubiquitous nature of social media platforms and channels present multifaceted ways through which traffickers can recruit, groom, facilitate, and solicit victims (Mitchell et al., 2010; O'Brien & Li, 2020). Before suggesting better online safety tools, it is important to discuss the vulnerabilities and risk factors among youth that could lead them to encounter traffickers and OSE.

### Defining Vulnerabilities

U.S. research has identified several risk factors that increase youth vulnerability to OSE. These vulnerabilities increase the threats for youth's recruitment, grooming and sexual exploitation. Children lacking basic human connection and needs are at the highest predisposition for trafficking victimization—including OSE. Other vulnerabilities are having a history of abuse or neglect, early exposure to poverty, homelessness, and/or substance abuse (Bouché, 2015; Lane et al., 2022; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Ray & Henry, 2025; Rosenblatt, 2014). Additionally, youth with low self-esteem, who engage in other risky behaviors—like running away—or who misuse substances are at higher risk of exploitation in trafficking (Lane et al., 2022; O'Brien & Li, 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014). Lack of connection, having unmet needs, participating in risky behaviors, and wrestling with personal challenges place youth at a higher chance of seeking connection and love. In fact, according to the APA, 60% of the highest social-media-using youth reported to have "weak parental relationships" (DeAngelis, 2024). These vulnerable youth tend to spend more time online and engage on social

media platforms; and such platforms are taken advantage of by traffickers, as they know how to target and engage with the vulnerable.

### Risky Behaviors Online

Recent literature highlights the connections between vulnerabilities and various online risky behaviors that create greater susceptibility to OSE. Examples of these risk behaviors include posting personal content online or engaging in live-streaming video activities. Notably, the content does not need to be explicit, but minors face higher risk when they share details on family strife, physical location, denote a desire to leave home, inquiry about sexual topics, and age of young users (O'Brien & Li, 2020; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Additionally, risk factors associated with recruitment are overrepresented among sexual and gender minority youth (Ray & Henry, 2025; Walsh, et al., 2024).

### Intersectionalities of Online Sexual Exploitations

Complexities of victimization risks have been identified when interconnections between sociodemographic and intrapersonal psychological characteristics are represented. For example, minors who take part in sexting are more likely to have suffered from lower self-esteem, substance abuse, and cyberbullying; therefore they are more likely to experience OSE (Gottfried et al., 2020; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Other intersectionalities have been noticed throughout literature in the context of online sexual solicitation<sup>8</sup> behavior among teens abroad. These include: a) strong association between sexting and sexual coercion<sup>9</sup> of adolescent females; b) early unintentional or intentional exposure to pornography; and c) low academic performance among students who are exposed to pornography. Moreover, Chang et al. (2014) and Gottfried et al. (2020) identified

**6-9** Please see Glossary for the definitions of terms used throughout this analysis.



negative mental health outcomes when youth engage in pornography, media exposure and risky internet behaviors. Depression, substance use, cyberbullying, and offline sexual harassment were the negative health outcomes identified (Chang et al., 2014; Gottfried et al. 2020). With a deeper understanding of the risk factors and vulnerabilities amongst youth who engage online, stakeholders (i.e., leaders in the community, parents/ caregivers, educators, governmental and non-governmental organizations) can examine the process in which traffickers use online platforms to create more effective strategies for their protection.

### **Intersections of Online Activity, Grooming, and Sextortion**

#### *Online Recruitment, Grooming and Threats*

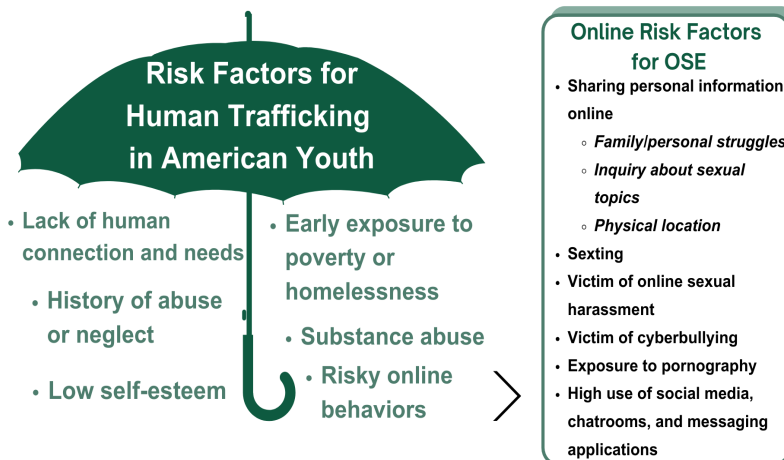
Online activity, as mentioned, plays a role in the recruitment, exploitation, identification, exiting and prosecution of trafficking. Although the link

media platforms such as Snapchat, messaging applications<sup>10</sup>, chat rooms, to multiplayer video games (O'Brien & Li, 2020; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). As social media platforms online and other applications are constantly evolving, scholarship has not been able to trace the full extent of platforms that traffickers are using for recruitment (O'Brien & Li, 2020). Sextortion<sup>11</sup> is one of the most common strategies used by offenders to force and coerce their victims into OSE. These platforms can serve as a pathway for traffickers to recruit victims and can lead to further victimization either in-person or facilitated online.

#### *Online Exploitation*

Sextortion is a form of cybercrime, or online-based crime activity. Offenders obtain or produce explicit images, videos, or messages, or they produce the explicit content of their victims to then post the content online. The explicit content of a child is known as child sexual abuse material

and threaten them to share such information with friends and family if they do not comply with their demands to create more sexual content. This practice has been reported in the majority of minor victims of OSE (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Typically offenders do not employ sophisticated hacking techniques since the current unsafe practices of users discussed earlier facilitate easy access to shared content. Some traffickers use crowdsourcing<sup>13</sup>. Crowdsourcing has been used by traffickers as an effective strategy to recruit and collect larger amounts of explicit content at once (Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2023; Ray & Henry, 2025; Tidball, et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). However, this is not to say that online communities that exploit children online at times are not highly sophisticated and well-organized. Traffickers are very aware of law enforcement's efforts and strategies to hide their cyber criminality (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Moreover, smartphone devices are an ideal tool for traffickers as they can use it to create, store, access and distribute CSAM as well as to connect with victims and other offenders. Encryption and the secrecy of the identity of offenders assist their criminality, which become great challenges for prosecution and identification. More creative, effective efforts need to be made to deter online-crime activity and to better protect children and other potential victims. Additionally, it is important to recognize that online content can also assist in the prosecution of cyber crime, support victims to find resources, and increase awareness to prevent OSE (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017).



Adapted from Bouché, 2015; Lane et al., 2022 O'Brien & Li, 2020; Ray & Henry, 2025; Rosenblatt, 2014; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017; and Walsh, et al., 2024

between online activity and recruitment of victims of trafficking has been identified for a couple of decades, an increase of such dynamics has been observed especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Kotrla & Wommack, 2011; Lane et al., 2022; Polaris, 2020; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Recruitment occurs on a variety of platforms, ranging from social

(CSAM)<sup>12</sup>, which is prohibited by the U.S. federal law (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). This content includes any abuse, rape, molestation, and/or exploitation of a minor. Sex traffickers typically hack social media platform accounts or pose as peers or trusted friends to obtain explicit content. Once content is obtained, typically offenders extort their victims

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Areas that have been identified throughout this first part analysis include intrapersonal and interpersonal risk factors for OSE. Some other important associations can include

**10-13** Please see Glossary for the definitions of terms used throughout this analysis.





cybercrime prevalence, online explicit content sharing, the strategies traffickers utilize to sexually exploit their victims through online platforms. More studies need to be conducted especially in the context of the United States to understand new trends and the constantly changing trafficking victimization of youth and other vulnerable groups within cyberspace. At the intrapersonal level, more understanding is needed in the areas of psychological motivations and nuances of connecting with potential perpetrators, exchanging sexual content online, risks and tactics of coercion associated with personality or certain risk behaviors of minors prior to online sexual exploitation, and the pipeline from exchanging sexual content to meet a financial need to trafficking entrapment (Choi, H., et al, 2016). At the interpersonal level, studies could focus on best partnership practices with parents, educators, law enforcement agents, and any social

service provider. These proposed practices could best equip those who are caring and interacting with minors in the areas of emerging trends, online and social platforms literacy, cyberbullying and online safety (Choi, H., et al, 2016; Gezinski, & Gonzalez-Pons, 2022; O'Brien, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The increase in online presence of children and their unsafe practices are of great concern. The diverse social media platforms, messaging applications, video games, and mobile devices have facilitated and increased online sexual exploitation. Traffickers possess easy access to minors and other vulnerable populations. Offenders can connect, groom and exploit their victims, especially children, through these channels without much sophistication or technological skills. Unsafe practices of sharing detailed content including explicit material

further increases the risk of online sexual exploitation. This first part of the analysis highlights the emerging trends of this criminality and its challenges. It also underscores recommendations that can support vulnerable populations and better online safe practices when it relates to children and other at-risk groups engaging with social media platforms and other interactive applications and games.

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## GLOSSARY

TERM	DEFINITION
Chat room	An area on the internet, or other computer network, where users can communicate—typically limiting communication to a particular topic.
Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)	Explicit images, videos, or messages of a child that are produced and posted online.
Crowdsourcing	The practice of obtaining information or input by enlisting the services of a large number of people, either paid or unpaid, typically via the internet.
Cyberbullying	The use of digital technology (such as social media, text messages, websites, or online games) to intentionally harass, threaten, or harm others.
Internet	A global computer network providing a variety of information and communication facilities, consisting of interconnected networks.
Messaging applications	A software program that allows users to send and receive messages (including text, images, audio, and video) in real-time through an internet connection.
Online Sexual Exploitation (OSE)	The use of technology or the Internet, to facilitate the sexual abuse of a child—including the production and sharing of child sexual abuse material online.
Sexting	The action or practice of sending sexually explicit photographs or messages via mobile phone.
Sextortion	A form of cybercrime, or online-based crime activity, that extorts money or sexual favors from someone by threatening to reveal evidence of their sexual activity.
Sexual coercion	The act of pressuring, manipulating, or forcing someone into sexual activity against their will.
Sexual solicitation	The act of requesting, inviting, or attempting to persuade someone to engage in sexual activity, often in a direct or inappropriate manner.
Social media platform	Any internet-based system for the creation, exchange, or sharing of user-generated content—whether it be for information, advertising, or any other purpose.
Sugar baby	A term used for a person who receives financial support or gifts from an older, wealthier person in exchange for companionship or sexual intimacy.

