

Online crimes of sexual violence against children in Finland

Experiences of Finnish survivors and results from
perpetrator research

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JULY 2023

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All data analysis has been conducted by the authors. This report was originally published in Finnish.

Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry. is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation based in Helsinki, Finland. The purpose of the work of Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry. is to end all forms of sexual violence against children. For more information about our work and inquiries, please visit our website: www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en

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Parts of the research presented in this report has been conducted within Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry.’s ReDirection project, which is funded by the Safe Online Initiative at End Violence. The report also presented findings from the Our Voice- survey for survivors of sexual violence in childhood, which is supported by the European Justice Initiative.

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Introduction

Crimes of sexual violence against children are increasingly committed online, also in Finland. The aim of this report is to provide an overview of the phenomenon of online crimes of sexual violence against children, providing findings on both the offenders of these crimes and the consequences for victims. The report concludes with a set of recommendations to better prevent and combat sexual violence against children on the research findings.

The report also includes information from the unique ReDirection research conducted by Protect Children and the responses of people who actively search for and use child sexual abuse material. More than 24,000 people have already responded to the dark web survey, in 21 languages. For this report, we have analysed responses provided in Finnish (N= 165), from presumably Finnish CSAM users, who we refer to in the report as Finnish. Information has also been gathered from the preliminary results of Protect Children's survey for adults who have experienced sexual violence in their childhood.

The data and research findings presented in the report demonstrate that we need stronger and more comprehensive work and preventive measures to combat online crimes of sexual violence against children. As technology advances, online sexual violence is becoming more prevalent and effective crime prevention is increasingly challenging without regulating online environments. As academic research demonstrates that the use of child sexual abuse material increases the risk of committing other crimes of sexual violence against children, (Insoll & al.) stronger efforts need to be focused on detecting and removing such material from the internet. This way we can help prevent sexual violence against children and endless re-victimisation, as well as support the healing of victims of whom recordings and images of the sexual violence they were subjected to have been shared online.

Background information on online sexual violence against children



One in five children in Europe become victim to sexual violence

It is estimated that one in five children in Europe are victims of sexual violence.¹ As technology continues to develop, more and more crimes of sexual violence against children are committed online, and the amount of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) circulating online has explosively increased worldwide. The Internet Watch Foundation's (IWF) data from 2022 shows that more Category A material, the most heinous type of CSAM, was found online than ever before.² According to the same data, more than a third of CSAM involves children under the age of 10.³ This material is unfortunately still often incorrectly referred to as child pornography, when in reality, it is evidence of serious crimes against children. We refer to this footage as child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

With the development of technology, a child can become a victim of sexual violence without the perpetrator being physically present in the same space as the child. The perpetrator may use online means to for example groom, trick, manipulate, coerce, intimidate, blackmail, threaten or otherwise induce a child to commit sexual acts either against themselves or against another child. The perpetrator may film and record the real-time acts or manipulate and pressure the child to send images and video footage of themselves to the perpetrator. In both cases, the perpetrator may record the footage they receive and share and distribute the footage online. As offenders make use of the internet, hundreds of children can become victims to the same perpetrator in a short period of time. In recent years, several large-scale chains of crime of online sexual violence against children have been reported in Finland - for example, in a case reported in Central Finland in 2021, there were 134 children involved, the youngest of whom was 5 years old.

It is widely known, and as Protect Children's research on offenders shows, crimes of sexual violence against children, especially the searching, viewing and distribution of CSAM, are often carried out under the cover of anonymity, on the dark web. However, it is important to note that these crimes are definitely not limited to the dark web, but also take place widely on the open web, where children spend their time. The US National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received a total of 31,802,525 individual reports of suspected online child sexual abuse from online service providers globally in 2022 alone.⁴ These reports included nearly 88 million files, images, videos, and other evidence of sexual violence against children. These nearly 32 million reports originated from open web platforms, demonstrating that CSAM widely found also on the open web.

¹ European Commission (2020) EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse [20200724_com-2020-607-commission-communication_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/justice/child-justice-2020-2024)

² Internet Watch Foundation, Annual Report (2023) [IWF 2022 CSAM Annual Report | Internet Watch Foundation](https://www.iwf.org.uk/annual-report-2023)

³ Internet Watch Foundation, Annual Report (2023) [Analysing The Data By Age](https://www.iwf.org.uk/annual-report-2023)

⁴ NCMEC CyberTipline 2022 Report (2023) [CyberTipline Data \(missingkids.org\)](https://www.missingkids.org/cyber-tipline)

Sexual violence against children is a form of hidden criminality

"I believed that I was guilty for what happened. The perpetrator said that it was our secret and that no one else should know. "**

Crimes of sexual violence against children, like crimes of sexual violence in general, are very much a form of hidden criminality. Only a fraction of cases are reported to the authorities - in Finland, it is estimated that only about 12% of these crimes are brought to the attention of authorities.⁵ There are several reasons for non-disclosure and not reporting. According to the preliminary results of Protect Children's survey for survivors, the most common reasons for non-disclosure are strong feelings of shame and guilt, misperceived by the victim, and the belief that disclosing would not have helped the victim.

"I did not understand what it was. I remember the distressing feeling and being told not to tell anyone."

"I did not understand that I had become a victim of a crime."

"I did not understand what happened"***

**** Responses to Protect Children's survey for survivors of sexual violence in childhood to the question "How would you describe the barriers for disclosure while the sexual violence was still ongoing?"*

Research indicates that a notable reason for non-disclosure is the belief by victims that the sexual harassment, grooming or sexual violence they experienced is not so serious.⁶ Also Protect Children's survey's preliminary results suggest that one central reason for non-disclosure is that the victim has not understood the seriousness of the crime or even that what they experienced could be defined as a crime. The survey findings are preliminary and require further analysis.

⁵ Lahtinen, H.-M., Laitila, A., Korkman, J., & Ellonen, N. (2018). Children's disclosures of sexual abuse in a population-based sample. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 76, 84-94.

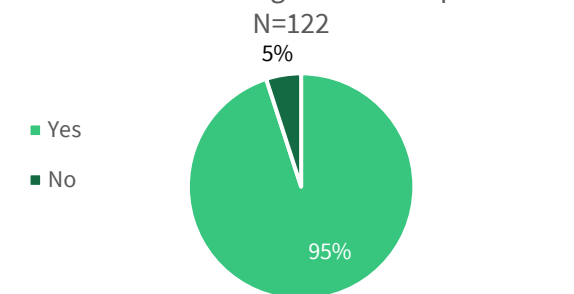
⁶ Lahtinen, Hanna (2022) *Child Abuse Disclosure: From the Perspectives of Children to Influencing Attitudes and Beliefs Held by Interviewers* <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-61-4459-7> 65-66

Long-term consequences experienced by victims of sexual violence in childhood

It is widely recognised that sexual violence against children is a traumatic event that causes significant suffering for the victim and their close ones. Becoming a victim of sexual violence as a child, if left untreated, significantly reduces quality of life and increases the risk of subsequent somatic and psychological issues.⁷ Crimes of sexual violence against children that are recorded and distributed online (CSAM) are particularly traumatic for the child.⁸ The victim is traumatised by the mere knowledge that there is a recording of the sexual violence they were subjected to,⁹ often fearing the possible dissemination of images or videos online and their eternal circulation on the internet.¹⁰ The situation is incredibly difficult and traumatic. The uncontrolled dissemination of the material online can, in the worst case, lead to years of revictimisation.

The consequences of sexual violence in childhood can be significant and long-lasting in the life of

the victim. According to preliminary findings from Protect Children's survey for adults who have experienced sexual violence in childhood, 95% report that the sexual violence they were subjected to as a child has led to long-term adverse consequences.



The most common consequences include various mental health issues (PTSD, depression, anxiety disorders), somatic symptoms (including chronic pain and aches) and challenges in personal relationships. Around half of the respondents say that the

sexual violence has later negatively affected their ability to work and study.¹¹ These findings suggest that crimes of sexual violence against children, in addition to the significant impact on victims of crime, also have a negative impact on a wider societal level, including a national economic impact. Sexual violence in childhood, like other Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs),

⁷ Deblinger, Esther & Behl, Leah & Glickman, Alissa (2012) Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral therapy for children who have experienced sexual abuse. Teoksessa Philip Kendall (toim.) Child and adolescent therapy. New York: The Guilford Press, 345–375.

⁸ Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., Hanson, E., Helen, W., & Beech, A. R. (2017). Impact of online and offline child sexual abuse: "Everyone deserves to be happy and safe": How young people are affected by sexual abuse and how professionals respond to it. NSPCC. <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2017/impact-online-offline-child-sexual-abuse/>

⁹ Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc., "Survivors' Survey - Full Report" (2017) 147-148. https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf

¹⁰ Joleby M, Lunde C, Landström S and Jonsson LS (2020) "All of Me Is Completely Different": Experiences and Consequences Among Victims of Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse. Front. Psychol. 11:606218. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.606218

¹¹ 111 Finnish speaking respondents have answered the question about the nature of the long-term consequences. The results are preliminary and require further analysis.

often leads to a significantly increased risk of re-victimisation.¹² Half of the respondents (N=116) report having become victim to sexual violence again after the first instance of abuse. The results are preliminary and require further examination.



Nine out of ten victims have experienced long-term adverse consequences

Online sexual violence against a child without physical contact with the offender can be just as traumatic for the child and cause the same long-term adverse consequences as sexual violence committed in close contact.¹³ In fact, a growing body of new research suggests that the location where sexual violence against a child occurs, whether it be online or offline, is not significantly related to the harmfulness of the acts.

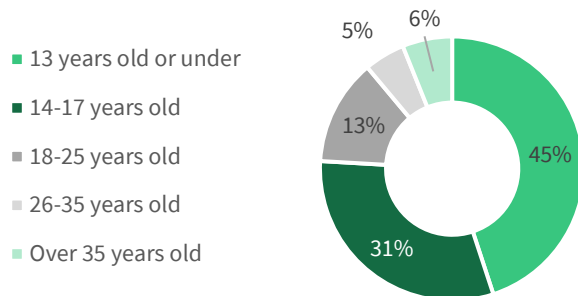
¹² Ports KA, Ford DC, Merrick MT (2016) Adverse Childhood Experiences and Sexual Victimization in Adulthood. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2016 Jan;51: 313-22. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.08.017.

¹³ Hanson, Elly (2017) *The Impact of Online Sexual Abuse on Children and Young People: Impact, Protection and Prevention.* 10.1002/9781118977545.ch6.

Information on Finnish speaking CSAM users

An alarming number of respondents were first exposed to CSAM as children

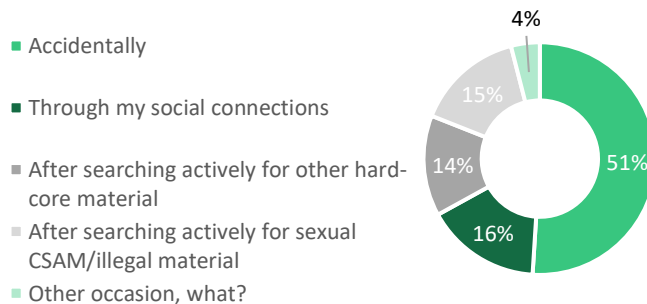
Q1 When I first saw CSAM/illegal violent material I was
N=165



Finnish CSAM users report that they first saw CSAM at a very young age. Of the respondents, 76% were under the age of 18, of which 45% were under the age of 13. The results of Finnish respondents differ from the average of other language respondents of 66% and 37% respectively. Exposure to CSAM as a child can be classified as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), which can have long-lasting negative consequences for a child's well-being and development.

Half of respondents first saw CSAM by accident

Q2 When I first saw CSAM/illegal violent material, it was
N=139



An alarming number of Finnish respondents who are now actively seeking CSAM say they first encountered the material by accident. This result, combined with the knowledge that the majority of respondents first saw the material as children, strongly suggests that CSAM is widely accessible on the open web. The results demonstrate an immediate need to regulate online environments, as every child has the right to a safe environment, including in

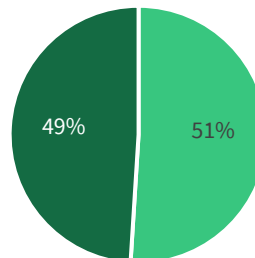
digital media, and no child should be exposed to CSAM or other illegal and age-inappropriate violent material.

Finnish CSAM users more likely to contact children

Q19 How often after viewing CSAM/illegal violent material have you sought direct contact with children through online platforms (chat or other)?
N=120

■ Never

■ At least sometimes (rarely, monthly, weekly & nearly every time)



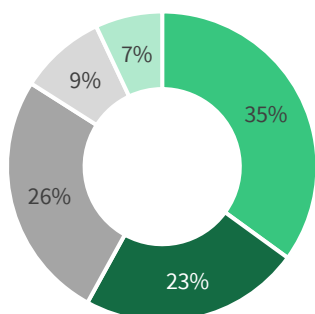
Academic research by Protect Children shows that CSAM use leads to an increased risk of committing other crimes of sexual violence against children.¹⁴ Almost half (49%) of Finnish respondents say they have sought direct contact with a child

after viewing CSAM. This is more than 10% higher than the average across language respondents. This result gives an indication of high-risk offenders in Finland. The clear correlation between CSAM use and seeking contact with a child indicates an urgent need to reduce the availability of CSAM online as an important part of preventing sexual violence against children. The results also show the need to develop and use more effective measures to detect grooming on online platforms.

¹⁴ Insoll, T., Ovaska, A. K., Nurmi, J., Aaltonen, M., & Vaaranen-Valkonen, N. (2022). Risk Factors for Child Sexual Abuse Material Users Contacting Children Online: Results of an Anonymous Multilingual Survey on the Dark Web. *Journal of Online Trust and Safety*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.54501/jots.v1i2.29>

Finnish CSAM users view more violent and sadistic material

Q5 I use images and videos
N=128

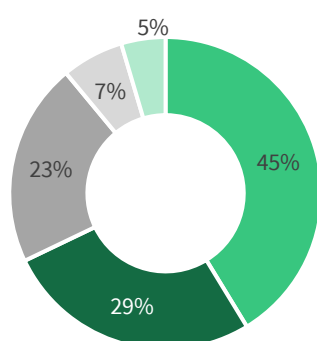


- Related to violent or sadistic and brutal material
- CSAM related to boys aged 4-13 years
- CSAM related to girls aged 4-13 years
- CSAM related to infants and toddlers aged 0-3 years
- Other violent material, what?

Finnish respondents report viewing more violent and sadistic material than the average across language respondents (35% of Finnish respondents, compared to 25% in other languages). Finnish respondents also use more material of sexual violence against infants and toddlers compared to the average of responses in other languages (9% of Finnish respondents, 6% of respondents in other languages).

Child sexual abuse is being viewed through live stream

Q11 I watch livestreamed CSAM
(N=100)

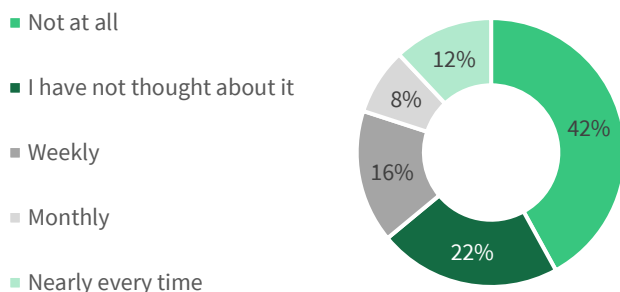


- No
- Yes, livestreaming of boys aged 4-13 years
- Yes, livestreaming of girls aged 4-13 years
- Yes, livestreaming of infants and toddlers aged 0-3 years
- Yes, livestreaming of other violent material, what?

As technology advances, the ways in which crimes are committed are also changing. More than half of the Finnish respondents say that they have watched footage of child sexual abuse in real time, via livestream. Livestreamed CSAM can depict a child committing sexual violence against themselves or another child with the guidance of the perpetrator who is located elsewhere, or sexual violence committed against a child by a perpetrator who is in the same physical location as the child victim.

CSAM users' motivation to stop using CSAM

Q7 I would like to stop searching and viewing CSAM/illegal violent material (N=120)



Around one third of Finnish respondents say they would like to stop using CSAM. This result is slightly lower than the average across other language versions¹⁵. However, it is of paramount importance that low-threshold support is also available for Finnish individuals who want to change their behavior and stop using CSAM. Both EU- and Council of Europe law requires Member States to provide intervention measures for people who fear they might commit

crimes of sexual violence against children. Support should be available, both to prevent crimes against children and to break the cycle of crime.

”Defective” ”A hopeless person” ”At a dead end” ”Hopeful”*

** Finnish CSAM users' answers to the question "How would you describe yourself?"*

¹⁵ 48 % of respondents in other language versions say they would like to stop using CSAM (N=9435)

Protect Children's recommendations

The availability and dissemination of CSAM online must be prevented

Research findings and statistics on the amount CSAM circulating online clearly show that in order to prevent sexual violence against children, it is of paramount importance to strongly combat the availability and dissemination of the material online. The current EU legislation, which allows service providers to continue to voluntarily detect and report sexual violence against children on their platforms and to remove CSAM, expires in August 2024.¹⁶ Without new legislation, technology companies will no longer be allowed to detect, report, or remove CSAM from their communication platforms. It is estimated that 80% of reports last year of online sexual violence against children originated from online communications.¹⁷

Protect Children's specialists have analyzed

1 411 160

CSAM images since 2020

Protect Children is part of the international Project Arachnid network, led by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, which uses efficient technology to reduce the availability of CSAM and speed up the process of taking it down globally. Our experts have analysed more than 1.4 million images since 2020 and our contribution has led to more than 800,000 removal notices being sent to electronic service providers.

Technology to detect CSAM has been developed and is already widely used. Strong safeguards are built into the technology to protect fundamental rights and ensure proportionality of their use. We have also seen the impact of banning the use of detection technology. In 2021, when for example Facebook was banned from detecting CSAM in the EU for 10 months, the ban led to a staggering 58% drop in reports of the material and therefore requests to remove it.¹⁸

The amount of CSAM circulating online has exponentially and explosively increased year after year and it is clear that current voluntary measures by online service providers are insufficient to protect children from sexual violence online. Online service providers should have a legal obligation to identify and report CSAM on their platforms. The European Commission has

¹⁶ Regulation (EU) 2021/1232 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 July 2021 on a temporary derogation from certain provisions of Directive 2002/58/EC as regards the use of technologies by providers of number-independent interpersonal communications services for the processing of personal and other data for the purpose of combating online child sexual abuse

¹⁷ WeProtect Global Alliance, Economist Impact (2021) [Estimates of childhood exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors - WeProtect Global Alliance](#)

¹⁸ National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (2021) "Weeks of Waiting: The ePrivacy Directive and the decline of CyberTipline reports in the EU" [We Are in Danger of Losing the Global Battle for Child Safety \(missingkids.org\)](#)

proposed a new regulation¹⁹, to promote the detection and reporting of online sexual violence against children in the EU, to prevent crimes and to better support victims and survivors. If adopted, proposal 2022/0155 would provide a proportionate long-term solution and legal framework to guarantee and enable the safe use of technology to detect and report online sexual violence against children and CSAM.

Crime prevention must be strengthened holistically

Despite the fact that catching, convicting and punishing offenders proportionally is of the utmost importance, it is also essential to intervene with potential offenders at an early stage, in a preventive way, already before the crime is committed. Of the Finnish CSAM users who responded to Protect Children's survey, around one third say they want to stop using the material. People who are concerned about their own behavior in relation to CSAM use should have access to low-threshold support and treatment.

Protect Children has produced the ReDirection self-help programme, in collaboration with the Criminal Sanctions Agency and HUS Menta Health Hub, for people who seek and use CSAM. The self-help programme is available anonymously on the Dark Web and on the HUS Mental Health Hub website on the open web.

Children's everyday lives are increasingly digital, and simply restricting or forbidding the use of devices or online services does not protect children in digital environments. Every child should have the right to safety skills education in all environments. Children must be provided with sex education and information about body boundaries in an age- and developmentally appropriate way. Children also have the right to digital safety education and information on how to act in different circumstances online, especially in confusing and frightening situations. This information and education should be made available before the child starts to use digital devices independently. Digital safety skills education should be organised at the national level and implemented in strong cooperation with early childhood education and schools. This way also children who do not have a safe adult at home to support them have the opportunity to learn important digital safety skills and receive answers to any questions and concerns that may arise in the digital world.

Protect Children's experts have developed and produced the Early is Best digital safety skills model and educational materials for children aged 5-9, their parents and professionals working with children.

The Finnish criminal law needs to be further developed

With the overall reform of the legislation regarding sexual offenses (2022), the minimum sentences for crimes of sexual violence against children were increased in Finland. However, the distribution, possession or real-time viewing of CSAM still does not necessarily lead to more than fines as a sentence.²⁰ Grooming offences also often result in fines. Protect Childrens experts find that fines

¹⁹ Proposal 2022/0155 for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Laying Down Rules to Prevent and Combat Child Sexual Abuse (2022)

²⁰ Only the aggravated form of disseminating CSAM can lead to a prison sentence. Criminal Code of Finland (1889) chapter 20 on sexual offenses, 9 § (8.7.2022/723)

should never be an option in crimes of sexual violence against children that cause significant and long-term suffering to the victim. The sentencing of the crimes must be made more proportionate to their harmfulness.

Many victims of childhood sexual violence are not ready to disclose their experiences until they are adults, often closer to the age of 30. The statute of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children in Finland is exceptionally short compared to other European countries, especially the other Nordic countries.²¹ In Finland, the statute of limitations expires generally when the victim turns 28 years or 20 years after the crime (whichever is the later date). Some offences, such as CSAM-related offences, expire within five or ten years.

The statute of limitations must be extended. The threshold to disclose is very high due to immense feelings of guilt and shame. The journey towards recovery is long, and the process needs to be respected. Our society needs to support healing without pressure.

— Survivor, Our Voice group

Every person who has become a victim of sexual violence in childhood should have the right and opportunity to report the crime when they feel ready to do so. Extending or removing the statute of limitations for prosecution can also help victims to access support and care at a later stage.

Victims of violence must be supported and heard

It is important to immediately refer child victims of sexual violence to low-threshold psychosocial care and research-based trauma-focused treatment and support (e.g., TF-CBT, CFTSI). Adequate resources need to be ensured to deliver high quality support and care nationwide. Referring victims to treatment and support as early as possible can, at best, prevent re-victimisation and reduce the long-term adverse consequences of sexual violence. However, support and treatment must also be available at a later stage, if necessary, to deal with any long-term adverse effects. Timely support for victims of sexual violence significantly reduces suffering and can also prove cost-effective for society.

Protect Children organises You are Enough™ peer support groups for parents and carers of children who have been victims of sexual violence. The information gathered from these groups shows that the support available to parents of victims of crime is insufficient in Finland. Parents are the primary and key actors in supporting the child victim both in the criminal justice process and in their recovery from sexual violence. Protect Children's experts emphasize that the whole family needs support when a child becomes victim to a crime of sexual violence.

²¹ Since 2014, there is no statute of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children in Norway (Almindelig Borgerlig Straffelov §91) nor in Denmark (Straffeloven §93b), regardless of whether the crime involved penetration or not. In Sweden (2020), there is generally no statute of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children which involve penetration (Brottsbalk 35 kap. §2).

Several studies show that peers and friends of children and young people are often the first to know about experiences of harassment, grooming and sexual violence.²² In Finland, there are several low-threshold services and reporting channels for children and young people to report their experiences. It is therefore not a question of a lack of support services, but rather of increasing children's and young people's awareness of the phenomenon and how to act when they or a friend is sexually harassed, groomed or subjected to any form of sexual violence.

”Other safe adults around. A culture where the victim is not blamed or suspected. Sex education as a child would have helped to understand what is ok and what isn't.”

”Knowing that I had been wronged. Knowing that it wasn't my fault.”

”Awareness of the importance of body boundaries and knowing how to act in such a situation. Also, if an adult had asked directly about what had happened.” *

** Responses to Protect Children's survey for survivors of sexual violence in childhood to the question "What would have helped you disclose the sexual violence you were subjected to as a child?"*

Open discussion and awareness of sexual violence and its prevalence reduces the shame and guilt experienced by victims, feelings which belong exclusively to the perpetrators. In the case of online crimes of sexual violence, a single report to the authorities has led to the discovery and investigation of dozens or even hundreds of crimes against children and adolescents by law enforcement agencies.

Based on research, Protect Children has developed the MyFriendToo website, which aims to provide young people with clear information and guidance for when they find out that a friend has been a victim of sexual violence. The MyFriendToo website increases children's and young people's knowledge and understanding of the importance of reporting the crimes, both to support the recovery of their friend and to prevent further cases of harassment, grooming and sexual violence against children and young people.

In order to prevent crimes of sexual violence against children, develop and improve the criminal law, and develop good practices to bring about change, it is vital to listen to those who witness and experience violence. Survivors' expertise is incredibly valuable and should be put at the heart of the debate and development.

Protect Children's Our Voice Survivors' Group aims to highlight the voices and wisdom of those who have experienced sexual violence in childhood. The group has about 50 members and the information gathered from them is used in Protect Children's holistic work to prevent sexual violence against children. The survivors also contribute significant expertise to the development of Protect Children's work and to lobbying for the development of the criminal law.

²² Lahtinen, Hanna (2022) Child Abuse Disclosure: From the Perspectives of Children to Influencing Attitudes and Beliefs Held by Interviewers <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-61-4459-7>