



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL
ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

WWW.WHITEBLACKLEGAL.CO.IN

DISCLAIMER

No part of this publication may be reproduced or copied in any form by any means without prior written permission of Editor-in-chief of White Black Legal – The Law Journal. The Editorial Team of White Black Legal holds the copyright to all articles contributed to this publication. The views expressed in this publication are purely personal opinions of the authors and do not reflect the views of the Editorial Team of White Black Legal. Though all efforts are made to ensure the accuracy and correctness of the information published, White Black Legal shall not be responsible for any errors caused due to oversight or otherwise.

WHITE BLACK
LEGAL

EDITORIAL TEAM

Raju Narayana Swamy (IAS) Indian Administrative Service officer



Dr. Raju Narayana Swamy popularly known as Kerala's Anti-Corruption Crusader is the All India Topper of the 1991 batch of the IAS and is currently posted as Principal Secretary to the Government of Kerala. He has earned many accolades as he hit against the political-bureaucrat corruption nexus in India. Dr Swamy holds a B.Tech in Computer Science and Engineering from the IIT Madras and a Ph. D. in Cyber Law from Gujarat National Law University. He also has an LLM (Pro) (with specialization in IPR) as well as three PG Diplomas from the National Law University, Delhi- one in Urban Environmental Management and Law, another in Environmental Law and Policy and a third one in Tourism and Environmental Law. He also holds a post-graduate diploma in IPR from the National Law School, Bengaluru and

a professional diploma in Public Procurement from the World Bank.

Dr. R. K. Upadhyay

Dr. R. K. Upadhyay is Registrar, University of Kota (Raj.), Dr Upadhyay obtained LLB, LLM degrees from Banaras Hindu University & PHD from university of Kota. He has successfully completed UGC sponsored M.R.P for the work in the Ares of the various prisoners reforms in the state of the Rajasthan.



Senior Editor

Dr. Neha Mishra



Dr. Neha Mishra is Associate Professor & Associate Dean (Scholarships) in Jindal Global Law School, OP Jindal Global University. She was awarded both her PhD degree and Associate Professor & Associate Dean M.A.; LL.B. (University of Delhi); LL.M.; PH.D. (NLSIU, Bangalore) LLM from National Law School of India University, Bengaluru; she did her LL.B. from Faculty of Law, Delhi University as well as M.A. and B.A. from Hindu College and DCAC from DU respectively. Neha has been a Visiting Fellow, School of Social Work, Michigan State University, 2016 and invited speaker Panelist at Global Conference, Whitney R. Harris World Law Institute, Washington University in St. Louis, 2015.

Ms. Sumiti Ahuja

Ms. Sumiti Ahuja, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi,

Ms. Sumiti Ahuja completed her LL.M. from the Indian Law Institute with specialization in Criminal Law and Corporate Law, and has over nine years of teaching experience. She has done her LL.B. from the Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. She is currently pursuing PH.D. in the area of Forensics and Law. Prior to joining the teaching profession, she has worked as Research Assistant for projects funded by different agencies of Govt. of India. She has developed various audio-video teaching modules under UGC e-PG Pathshala programme in the area of Criminology, under the aegis of an MHRD Project. Her areas of interest are Criminal Law, Law of Evidence, Interpretation of Statutes, and Clinical Legal Education.



Dr. Navtika Singh Nautiyal

Dr. Navtika Singh Nautiyal presently working as an Assistant Professor in School of law, Forensic Justice and Policy studies at National Forensic Sciences University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat. She has 9 years of Teaching and Research Experience. She has completed her Philosophy of Doctorate in 'Inter-country adoption laws from Uttarakhand University, Dehradun' and LLM from Indian Law Institute, New Delhi.

Dr. Rinu Saraswat



Associate Professor at School of Law, Apex University, Jaipur, M.A, LL.M, PH.D,

Dr. Rinu have 5 yrs of teaching experience in renowned institutions like Jagannath University and Apex University. Participated in more than 20 national and international seminars and conferences and 5 workshops and training programmes.

Dr. Nitesh Saraswat

E.MBA, LL.M, PH.D, PGDSAPM

Currently working as Assistant Professor at Law Centre II, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Dr. Nitesh have 14 years of Teaching, Administrative and research experience in Renowned Institutions like Amity University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Jai Narain Vyas University Jodhpur, Jagannath University and Nirma University. More than 25 Publications in renowned National and International Journals and has authored a Text book on CR.P.C and Juvenile Delinquency law.



Subhrajit Chanda



BBA. LL.B. (Hons.) (Amity University, Rajasthan); LL. M. (UPES, Dehradun) (Nottingham Trent University, UK); PH.D. Candidate (G.D. Goenka University)

Subhrajit did his LL.M. in Sports Law, from Nottingham Trent University of United Kingdoms, with international scholarship provided by university; he has also completed another LL.M. in Energy Law from University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, India. He did his B.B.A.LL.B. (Hons.) focussing on International Trade Law.

ABOUT US

WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal provide dedicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

THE DIGITAL SHADOW: ANALYZING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE U.S. AND THE EFFICACY OF SURVIVOR SUPPORT SYSTEMS

AUTHORED BY - VAISHALI VERMA¹ & UTKARSHA SINGH²

I. ABSTRACT

The Human Impact of Online Child Sexual Abuse

Online Child Sexual Abuse (OCSA) is a growing threat with profound effects on children. The internet has become a space where this abuse can escalate, amplifying the trauma experienced by young survivors. This article explores the different forms of OCSA, its alarming prevalence, and the deep psychological scars it leaves behind. It also takes a critical look at the systems designed to help survivors, examining how well support, rehabilitation, and legal interventions actually work. The research shows that the online nature of the abuse often leads to heightened feelings of guilt, isolation, and re-traumatization for survivors. Despite various efforts from both government and non-profit organizations, there are still significant gaps in support specifically in terms of accessibility, funding, and measuring long-term recovery. The legal system also faces unique challenges with digital evidence and often falls short of providing survivors with the justice and healing they need. Ultimately, this research points to a critical need for a new approach, one that is nimble and specifically designed to meet the complex needs of survivors in our rapidly changing digital world. We must work together to prevent OCSA, support those who have been harmed, and ensure that justice is served in the digital age.

KEYWORD: OCSA, psychological, rehabilitation, re-traumatization, digital

¹ Research Scholar, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University, Lucknow

² Research Scholar, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University, Lucknow

II. Introduction: Defining the Landscape of Online Child Sexual Abuse (OCSA)

Online Child Sexual Abuse (OCSA), often referred to as Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA), constitutes a grave crime where perpetrators leverage the internet to sexually exploit and abuse children. This exploitation can manifest through physical force, threats, or more intricate power imbalances between the victim and the perpetrator. The digital realm has broadened the avenues for such abuse, giving rise to various forms and sophisticated tactics.

Definition of Online Child Sexual Abuse (OCSA)

OCSA encompasses a spectrum of illicit activities, each designed to exploit children through digital means:

- **Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM):** This category includes any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving an individual under 18 years of age. The creation and dissemination of CSAM are central to online exploitation.
- **Online Enticement and Coercion (Grooming):** This is a broad and insidious form of online exploitation where an individual communicates with someone believed to be a child via the internet with the intent to commit a sexual offense or abduction. The grooming process is often gradual, involving the identification of a minor, establishing a connection through support and attention, befriending them, gaining their trust, gathering personal information, exploiting vulnerabilities, and gradually lowering their inhibitions. Common tactics include engaging in sexual conversation or role-playing, soliciting or sharing explicit images, building rapport through compliments or shared interests, sending explicit images of themselves, pretending to be younger, or offering incentives such as gift cards, alcohol, drugs, lodging, or food.
- **Sextortion:** This occurs when offenders employ threats or coercive tactics to compel victims to produce and transmit sexually explicit imagery of themselves. A particularly distressing variant is financial sextortion, where minors are coerced into sending explicit images online and subsequently extorted for money.
- **Livestreaming Child Sexual Exploitation:** In this form, an offender forces a child victim to engage in sexually explicit conduct during a live broadcast, in real-time, to one or more viewers.
- **Self-Generated Sexual Content ("Sexting"):** An increasingly prevalent issue involves child exploitation material being shared via social media and, disturbingly,

produced by children themselves. This often occurs under pressure, force, or coercion from peers or friends, highlighting a complex dynamic within peer networks.

Global Prevalence and Escalating Trends in the Digital Age

The scale of OCSA is staggering and continues to grow at an alarming rate. Globally, an estimated 300 million children become victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation annually, representing approximately one in eight children worldwide. More specifically, around 302 million children (12.6%) have experienced non-consensual taking, sharing, and exposure to sexual images and videos in the past year, while 300 million (12.5%) have been subjected to online solicitation, including unwanted sexual talk or requests for sexual acts.³

Data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTipline underscores this escalating crisis, reporting a dramatic increase of over 300% in online enticement reports between 2021 and 2023. In 2024 alone, NCMEC received nearly 100 reports of financial sextortion every day. The United States is identified as a particularly high-risk area, with a significant proportion of CSAM hosted within its borders. Approximately 23% of U.S. children reported victimization from non-consensual image sharing in the past year. Furthermore, a disturbing statistic reveals that one in nine men in the U.S., equating to almost 14 million individuals, have admitted to online sexual offending against children at some point in their lives.⁴

The problem has demonstrably worsened since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading experts to characterize OCSA as a "global public health crisis that is steadily worsening" and advocating for it to be treated as an "epidemic" due to its pervasive scale and devastating lifelong impacts. This escalating trend highlights a critical challenge: the nature of the crime is not merely increasing in volume but is rapidly diversifying its forms, particularly with the advent of artificial intelligence (AI). The alarming 1,325% surge in CyberTipline reports involving Generative AI Technology (GAI) in 2024 is a stark indicator of this shift. These AI-generated images and increasingly realistic deepfake videos of child sexual abuse are

³ Over 300 million children a year are victims of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse - Childlight. (n.d.). Childlight. <https://www.childlight.org/newsroom/over-300-million-children-a-year-are-victims-of-online-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse>

⁴Salter, P. M. (n.d.). More than 300 million child victims of online sexual abuse globally: report. UNSW Sites. <https://www.unsw.edu.au/newsroom/news/2024/05/more-than-300-million-child-victims-of-online-sexual-abuse-globally-report>.

circulating, often indistinguishable from authentic CSAM, and can be created offline, posing a significant risk of overwhelming existing detection efforts. This dynamic and evolving threat landscape implies that traditional, reactive law enforcement and prevention strategies are increasingly insufficient, demanding innovative, proactive, and technologically informed countermeasures.⁵

Despite the documented increase in these crimes, overall CyberTipline reports paradoxically decreased in 2024. This reduction is partly attributed to a new "bundling" feature implemented by large online platforms to streamline the reporting of widespread incidents, such as viral content. However, this decrease is also concerningly linked to some platforms failing to report as they should and the growing use of end-to-end encryption, which limits platforms' ability to detect and report abuse, thereby obscuring the true scope of the problem.

The Unique Characteristics of Online Abuse

The internet's worldwide reach, easy access, and the fact that digital content lasts forever are not just things that make OCSA worse; they really make it worse. This digital footprint means that images and videos can persist indefinitely online, creating a continuous source of fear, anxiety, and embarrassment for victims. This enduring presence implies that there is often "no definable end to the abuse," leading to perpetual re-traumatization for survivors.⁶

The anonymity and identity protection provided by internet platforms enable offenders to behave without the typical social restraints or the fear of being judged or punished right away. This makes it far more difficult to hold them responsible and creates enormous obstacles for victims who want to report or seek justice. The fear that an anonymous perpetrator can simply create a new account to continue targeting a victim further compounds the harm. The digital environment also facilitates the instantaneous production and limitless distribution of child exploitation material, accelerating its spread and making containment exceptionally challenging. This inherent characteristic of the online medium creates a unique and continuous psychological burden that profoundly distinguishes OCSA from offline abuse.⁷

⁵ Ali, Sana & Pasha, Saadia. (2022). A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE TECHNOLOGY ENABLED CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE (OCSA) & ITS IMPACTS. 25. 1-18.,

⁶ Schmidt, Felipa & Varese, Filippo & Bucci, Sandra. (2023). Understanding the Prolonged Impact of Online Sexual Abuse Occurring in Childhood. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 14. 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1281996.,

⁷<https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/Anonymity%20and%20identity%20shielding%20online%20statement.pdf?v=1754495796157>. (n.d.).

Concerns in the professional and legal arenas include the notion that OCSA is less severe or violating than offline abuse. This underestimate might leave victims feeling as if their experiences have been dismissed. Such minimization can delay or impede disclosure, limiting access to appropriate support, isolating the survivor and exacerbating their suffering. The enormous scale of victimization, with hundreds of millions of children victimized each year, combined with the serious and long-term health implications, raises OCSA from a purely criminal justice issue to an urgent global public health problem. This viewpoint needs a fundamental shift from punitive tactics to a broader public health strategy that includes prevention, early intervention, comprehensive assistance, and long-term rehabilitation.

One issue in the legal and professional domains is the belief that OCSA may not be as serious or illegal as offline abuse. Because of this undervaluation, victims may feel that their experiences are not given enough weight. Such minimization can exacerbate the survivor's distress and further isolate them by delaying or preventing disclosure and preventing access to the right kind of support. OCSA is elevated from a criminal justice issue to a pressing worldwide public health disaster due to the magnitude of the victimization hundreds of millions of children are impacted each year and the severe and lasting health effects. A radical change from just punitive tactics to a more comprehensive public health approach that includes prevention, early intervention, all-encompassing assistance, and long-term rehabilitation is required under this viewpoint.

III. Psychological Impact on Victims: A Deep Dive into Trauma

Online Child Sexual Abuse inflicts profound and enduring psychological wounds on its victims, often exacerbated by the unique characteristics of the digital environment. The trauma experienced by survivors manifests across a wide spectrum of mental health challenges, both immediate and long-term.

Immediate Psychological Consequences

Victim-survivors commonly express intense psychological suffering in the days following OCSA. This includes the beginnings of anxiety disorders, depressed symptoms, and widespread sleep disturbance and insomnia. A particularly persistent and destructive consequence is the profound sense of shame and self-blame that many survivors feel, which frequently contributes directly to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

This self-blame is typically based on a perceived role in the abuse, particularly in cases involving coercion or the creation of self-generated content. Children may dissociate from abuse as a psychological defense mechanism, both while and after it has occurred. This detachment might make it extremely difficult for individuals to describe their experiences later on, limiting disclosure and intervention. In severe situations, the unbearable agony and embarrassment might drive youngsters to self-harm or consider suicide.

Long-Term Psychological Consequences

The psychological effects of OCSA are not transient; they can be severe and long-lasting, dramatically changing a survivor's developmental trajectory and adult functioning. Long-term clinical mental diagnoses commonly connected with child sexual abuse include Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and several personality disorders, most notably Borderline Personality Disorder.

The abuse can profoundly affect psychosexual and psychosocial development, leading to difficulties with sexual functioning, including issues with desire, arousal, and satisfaction, as well as the inappropriate development of sexuality, often termed "traumatic sexualization". Survivors frequently grapple with deep-seated identity issues, including confusion about their self-worth or purpose, and may develop a poor body image that persists for years.⁸

Difficulties creating and sustaining strong, trusting relationships are a common and debilitating long-term outcome. These difficulties are distinguished by difficulty with boundaries, a proclivity for intertwined or avoidant relationships, and a mistaken perspective of what makes a "normal" or healthy interpersonal connection. To cope with overwhelming and unpleasant feelings, survivors frequently utilize maladaptive behaviors such as alcohol or drug misuse, self-mutilation, or disordered eating patterns including bingeing and purging. A particularly concerning long-term consequence is an increased vulnerability to repeated revictimization, with survivors two to four times more likely to be subjected to further abuse than those who have not experienced child sexual abuse before.

⁸ IFDC - Psychological toll of online child sexual abuse: Call for rights-based approaches «. (n.d.). <https://ifdchild.org/psychological-toll-of-online-child-sexual-abuse-call-for-rights-based-approaches/>

The Digital Context as an Exacerbating Factor

The digital characteristic of OCSA creates significant aspects of psychological trauma.

- **The Invisible Wound of Digital Permanence:** One of the most disturbing aspects of OCSA is the digital permanence of images and videos. This means the abuse can be re-experienced repeatedly every time the material is viewed, sent, or received, leading to continuous re-traumatization. Survivors live with the constant, pervasive fear of their images resurfacing online or being recognized by others who have viewed the material. The psychological healing process is thus complicated by an ever-present digital shadow that can reactivate the trauma at any given moment.⁹
- **Digital Context Amplifies Shame and Self-Blame:** The public nature of online shaming registers in the brain in a manner strikingly similar to physical pain, leading to intense sadness and a profound feeling of deep isolation. This public humiliation, often witnessed by peers, significantly intensifies feelings of guilt and shame, particularly when victims are coerced into taking and sending sexual material, making them feel complicit in their own abuse. The anonymity afforded to perpetrators online can embolden them to use more severe and cruel forms of harassment, compounding the victim's distress and making it harder to identify the source of harm.¹⁰ This amplification of internal blame is a direct consequence of the digital environment's public and often anonymous nature, which can make victims feel that their actions are permanently exposed and judged, contributing to a cycle of self-condemnation.
- **Identity Erosion in a Digitally Curated Reality:** Online grooming strategies are highly manipulative, altering a child's perception of self-worth and purpose, leaving them vulnerable to long-term psychological trauma and significant identity uncertainty. The progressive introduction of sexualized content, together with the perpetrator's intentional efforts to isolate the child from supportive networks, reinforces this warped reality. Continuous exposure to a "personalized" and "eerily familiar" digital world, often curated by algorithms, can stunt personal growth and make it difficult for survivors to distinguish genuine connections from manipulative ones in real life,

⁹ Joleby, Malin et al. "“All of Me Is Completely Different”: Experiences and Consequences Among Victims of Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse." *Frontiers in psychology* vol. 11 606218. 7 Dec. 2020, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.606218

¹⁰Joleby, M., Landström, S., Lunde, C., & Jonsson, L. S. (2020). Experiences and psychological health among children exposed to online child sexual abuse – a mixed methods study of court verdicts. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 27(2), 159–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2020.1781120>

resulting in long-term difficulties forming healthy relationships and a persistent sense of being "sexualized."

- **Accessibility and Inescapability:** Due to their continuous smartphone access, children are constantly at risk for OCSA, which makes it challenging for them to leave the setting where the abuse took place. Because the digital realm, which is supposed to be a place of connection, turns into a continual reminder of vulnerability and the possibility of re-victimization, this round-the-clock exposure can lead to a state of chronic stress.¹¹
- **Perceived Minimization of OCSA:** One key difficulty stems from the notion among some experts and legal contexts that OCSA is intrinsically less severe than offline abuse. This view can lead to victims believing that their experiences are being discounted or rejected, which can delay or impede disclosure and prevent access to appropriate and effective treatment, further isolating the survivor and exacerbating their trauma.

IV. Support Mechanisms and Rehabilitation Programs: Availability and Effectiveness

A diverse array of support services is available for OCSA survivors, aiming to address their immediate and long-term needs:

- **Hotlines and Helplines:** These serve as primary points of contact for reporting suspected exploitation and abuse. Key examples include the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTipline, and the Know2Protect Tipline. Other critical resources include the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) National Sexual Assault Hotline and the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline.
- **Counseling and Therapy Services:** These are provided by various organizations, encompassing individual, group, and family therapy modalities. NCMEC's Family Advocacy Outreach Network (FAON) plays a crucial role in connecting survivors with specially trained mental health professionals globally. Organizations such as the Sex Abuse Treatment Center (SATC) and HAWC offer clinical therapy specifically tailored for children, adolescents, and non-offending family members, often integrating creative

¹¹ Quayle, Ethel et al. "The experiences of practitioners working with young people exposed to online sexual abuse." *Frontiers in psychiatry* vol. 14 1089888. 13 Mar. 2023, doi:10.3389/fpsy.2023.1089888

techniques like play and art for younger children. Local Mental Health Authorities also contribute to the provision of these vital services.¹²

- **Content Removal Services:** A critical service in the digital age is NCMEC's "Take It Down," a free resource designed to assist victims and survivors in removing or stopping the online sharing of non-consensual explicit images or videos taken before they were 18 years old.
- **Government and NGO Initiatives:** Governmental bodies such as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) through its Know2Protect campaign, and the Department of Justice (DOJ) with Project Safe Childhood, lead significant efforts in prevention, public awareness, and direct victim support. UNICEF adopts a holistic approach, providing technical support to governments for policy and law development and strengthening service delivery capabilities. Numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Childhelp, Phoenix 11, Thorn, the National Children's Alliance, and Wings (specifically for adult survivors) provide a wide range of advocacy, intervention, treatment, and prevention resources.

Therapeutic Interventions for OCSA Trauma

Effective therapeutic interventions are crucial for addressing the complex trauma associated with OCSA.

- **Evidence-Based Therapies:** Several evidence-based interventions are widely utilized. Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) is highly recognized for its effectiveness in treating PTSD and related emotional difficulties. It integrates cognitive-behavioral techniques with trauma-sensitive interventions and often involves a supportive caregiver, which is critical for child victims. Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) are also employed to help survivors process trauma and develop healthier coping mechanisms.¹³
- **Holistic and Multimodal Care:** Comprehensive treatment often incorporates holistic elements to support overall healing. This can include art therapy, animal-assisted therapy, play techniques, recovery-centered nutrition, energy medicine, and physical

¹² Beutler, Larry & Williams, Rebecca & Heidi, Zetzer. (1995). Efficacy of Treatment for Victims of Child Sexual Abuse. *The Future of Children / Center for the Future of Children, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation*. 4. 156-75. 10.2307/1602529.

¹³ Reeson, Matthew et al. "A Novel 2-week Intensive Multimodal Treatment Program for Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Survivors is Associated with Mental Health Benefits for Females aged 13-16." *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry = Journal de l'Academie canadienne de psychiatrie de l'enfant et de l'adolescent* vol. 29,3 (2020): 165-176.

activity, recognizing the interconnectedness of mental and physical well-being in trauma recovery.

- **Trauma-Informed Care (TIC):** This is a foundational and overarching approach across all services for OCSA survivors. TIC acknowledges the widespread impact of trauma and aims to prevent re-traumatization by emphasizing principles of safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, choice, and empowerment. Trauma-informed agencies have demonstrated improved child welfare outcomes, including a reduction in the need for crisis services or residential treatment, decreased prescriptions for psychotropic medications, fewer foster home placements, and enhanced overall child functioning and well-being.¹⁴

Barriers to Accessing Support and Rehabilitation

Numerous barriers impede OCSA survivors from accessing the critical support and rehabilitation services they need:

- **Stigma, Shame, and Fear of Disclosure:** A primary and pervasive barrier is the profound shame and guilt experienced by victims, coupled with the intense fear of negative reactions, judgment, or blame from family, friends, or professionals. This leads many children to delay disclosing abuse for years, or to never disclose it at all.¹⁵
- **Lack of Awareness and Knowledge:** Children and their families may lack awareness or understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse, leading them to misinterpret abusive behaviors or to be unfamiliar with appropriate reporting protocols. Furthermore, many professionals themselves may lack a comprehensive understanding of OCSA or specialized training in addressing its unique dynamics, which can lead to inadequate responses.¹⁶
- **Geographical, Financial, and Cultural Barriers:** Practical barriers include geographical distance to services, the costs associated with transportation, childcare, and medication, and direct service fees. Cultural norms, language barriers, and experiences of discrimination can also create significant obstacles, particularly when culturally specific services are lacking.

¹⁴ A1. Principles of Care, <https://www.safeta.org/page/kidssectional/>.

¹⁵ Assini-Meytin, L. C., Thorne, E. J., Sanikommu, M., Green, K. M., and Letourneau, E. J. (2022). Impact of child sexual abuse on socioeconomic attainment in adulthood. *J. Adolesc. Health* 71, 594–600. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2022.05.013

¹⁶ Gmeara, Netanel & Katz, Carmit. (2022). "It was Really Hard for Me to Tell": The Gap between the Child's Difficulty in Disclosing Sexual Abuse, and their Perception of the Disclosure Recipient's Response. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 38. 2068-2091. 10.1177/08862605221099949.

- **Privacy Concerns:** Survivors often fear that their personal information will be shared or misused, leading to a reluctance to seek help. This concern is amplified by a lack of control over personal data and the complexities of privacy regulations and the privacy concerns are the result of lack of digital literacy in the marginalized and older population.

Reintegration Initiatives and Long-Term Outcomes

Reintegration is a critical process that aims to equip survivors psychologically, socially, and financially to return to their families and local communities, or to an alternative safe environment. Key components of successful reintegration include a safe and stable environment, a reasonable standard of living, physical and mental well-being, personal, social, and economic development, and robust social and emotional support.

- **Residential Treatment:** For children with complex needs, residential treatment programs offer comprehensive services within structured, safe environments, including individual, group, and family therapy, psychiatric services, and case management. Specialized programs exist for individuals with co-occurring disorders and for victims of sex trafficking, such as the SAGE Residential Program, which provides long-term, trauma-informed treatment for youth aged 11-17, utilizing models like Attachment, Regulation, and Competency (ARC) and Sanctuary Model principles.
- **Outcomes:** These therapies are thought to provide benefits such as improved insight, a stronger feeling of self-worth, higher goals, healthier relationships, educational successes, improved health and well-being, and better communication skills. Trauma-informed agencies have shown improved child welfare results, including fewer children seeking crisis assistance or residential treatment, fewer prescriptions for psychiatric drugs, fewer foster home placements, and improved general child functioning. According to certain research, the majority of adolescent females can maintain the changes they made after long-term residential therapy for at least a year after release.
- **Challenges in Evaluation:** Despite the perceived benefits, there is a significant lack of robust evidence and systematic data collection on the long-term outcomes of OCSA interventions. It remains challenging to definitively prove that recovery is solely due to treatment rather than the passage of time or other external factors. Specific effectiveness

data for OCSA interventions, particularly those in the online context, is limited, highlighting a critical research gap.¹⁷

- **Funding and Capacity Challenges:** OCSA survivors' support and rehabilitation programs confront long-term funding issues. Many agencies rely primarily on non-statutory funding, which creates instability and limits their ability to deliver comprehensive long-term care. There is a noticeable dearth of specialized training for professionals in this field, and services are sometimes overburdened by the large number of perpetrators and complex demands of victims.

VI. Legal Aid and Justice System: Pathways and Pitfalls

The pursuit of justice for survivors of Online Child Sexual Abuse is a complex and often arduous journey, fraught with challenges related to legal aid accessibility, the intricacies of digital evidence, and systemic shortcomings within the justice system itself.

Availability of Legal Aid Services

A growing network of legal aid services aims to support OCSA survivors in navigating the legal landscape:

- **National Organizations:** The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) assists survivors in locating attorneys for monetary restitution, recognizing the complex nature of such claims. The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline, which can provide initial legal assistance and referrals. Take Back The Night (TBTN) offers a legal hotline for free information about legal options, with a focus on US-based cases.
- **Local and State-Specific Services:** Organizations like The SAFE Alliance provide comprehensive legal support for survivors of domestic abuse, child abuse, sexual assault, and sex trafficking. Their services include assistance with family law (e.g., divorce, child custody), immigration law (e.g., U visas, VAWA petitions), protective orders, and limited criminal law advocacy, often working closely with district attorneys and family courts.
- **Funding:** Funding for these vital legal aid services often originates from specific legislative allocations, federal grants (e.g., Violence Against Women Act - VAWA

¹⁷ McPherson, Lynne et al. "Approaches to Assessment and Intervention with Children and Young People who have Experienced Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of Reviews." *Journal of child & adolescent trauma* vol. 18,2 279-291. 29 Mar. 2025, doi:10.1007/s40653-025-00702-4

funds), or state-level initiatives, sometimes derived from taxes on sexually oriented businesses.

Reporting OCSA Cases and the Legal Process

Reporting OCSA is a crucial first step for intervention and potential prosecution, though it requires immense vulnerability from the victim.

- **Reporting Channels:** Victims or concerned individuals can report suspected OCSA through various channels: the NCMEC CyberTipline, the Know2Protect Tipline, by calling 911 in emergencies, or by directly contacting local, state, or tribal law enforcement officials.
- **Mandatory Reporting:** Professionals, such as teachers, social workers, and healthcare providers, are often mandated reporters, legally required to report suspected child sexual abuse to both child protective services and law enforcement.
- **Evidence Preservation:** It is critically important for victims and their families to save all available evidence, including images, videos, and texts, and to report the crime as soon as possible, as this material is vital for criminal investigations.
- **Information Flow:** NCMEC staff review incoming tips and make them available to the appropriate law enforcement agencies for potential investigation. Law enforcement then collects digital evidence using proper protocols to ensure its integrity and preservation, while also protecting victim privacy.

Challenges in Investigation and Prosecution

Despite the availability of legal aid and reporting mechanisms, the investigation and prosecution of OCSA cases face significant hurdles, often amplified by the digital context.

- **Digital Evidence Complexity:** While digital evidence is a cornerstone of modern criminal investigations, its use is complicated by several factors. The rapid evolution of technology and the sheer volume of data pose significant management challenges. Other hurdles include the common use of encryption, perpetrators' attempts to delete data, and the difficulty of managing crimes that cross jurisdictional borders. A major concern is preserving a secure chain of custody for this type of evidence, which is often volatile. The legal system also faces internal issues: prosecutors may struggle to understand how to present digital evidence, while defense attorneys might lack the expertise or funds to effectively challenge it

- **AI-Generated Content:** The alarming rise of AI-generated CSAM presents a new frontier of challenges. This material can be visually indistinguishable from real CSAM and can be created offline at scale, posing a significant risk of overwhelming law enforcement resources and diverting attention from cases involving actual child victims.
- **Lagging Legal Frameworks:** Legislation frequently lags behind rapid technological advancements. Many countries lack explicit laws that adequately criminalize online sexually abusive acts, leaving victims less protected legally than those who experience offline abuse.
- **Victim Blaming and Minimization:** A persistent issue is the perception among some professionals and within legal contexts that OCSA is less severe or that children are somehow "participating" in the abuse. This can lead to victim blaming, hindering the pursuit of justice and causing further harm to survivors.
- **Barriers to Non-Disclosure:** Concerns about being judged, blamed, or even facing self-incrimination dramatically reduce the number of reports made by survivors. This is especially true if a child was groomed into producing self-generated content or if their sexual orientation is criminalized in their region. The problem is made worse by a general lack of public awareness about the proper channels for reporting such abuse.
- **Systemic Failures:** For survivors of online child sexual abuse, the justice system is often a source of frustration and disappointment. Reporting rates are very low—between 5% and 20%—and a large number of these reported cases are left unresolved. There is also a notable absence of mandatory investigative protocols for cases of youth-initiated abuse. Confidentiality laws can also become a barrier, hindering the necessary flow of information between agencies and potentially causing victims to lose access to vital services. Survivors commonly report feeling disempowered, confused, and uninformed during police investigations and legal proceedings. Overall, the criminal justice system is largely seen as failing survivors, as it places a greater emphasis on punishing offenders than on supporting a path to rehabilitation and recovery.

Effectiveness of Justice System from Survivor Perspective

From the survivor's perspective, the effectiveness of the justice system is often mixed, with many experiencing re-traumatization and dissatisfaction.

- **Secondary Victimization:** Many survivors who interact with the police and legal system report experiencing secondary victimization, indicating that the process itself can inflict additional trauma.¹⁸
- **Lack of Trust and Reporting:** The low reporting rates reflect a fundamental lack of trust in the system and a perception that it is ineffective or will cause further harm. Survivors often prefer not to subject themselves to a system that they believe will fail them.
- **Preference for Rehabilitation and Prevention:** Survivors overwhelmingly express a preference for safety approaches that prioritize rehabilitation and prevention over solely punitive measures for offenders. They often seek outcomes beyond perpetrator prosecution, such as financial assistance, child custody, or simply a sense of safety and stability.
- **Civil Legal Remedies:** Civil legal services are increasingly recognized as a promising, though overlooked, strategy. They can offer support specific to survivors' immediate needs, focusing on increasing agency, safety, and stability in their lives. While not primarily designed for mental health, receiving civil legal assistance can lead to positive changes in psychological well-being. However, barriers to access, including issues of race and gender inequality, persist within the civil justice system.¹⁹
- **Alternative Justice Models:** Restorative and transformative justice approaches are gaining recognition as more survivor-centered alternatives. These models aim to provide healing, restitution, and a more active role for survivors, offering safer spaces to explore what happened and potentially leading to greater satisfaction than traditional trials. However, these approaches face challenges related to funding and broader implementation within a system traditionally focused on carceral responses.
- **Need for Trauma-Informed Justice:** There is an urgent need for justice systems to adopt trauma-informed practices to prevent re-traumatization and support individuals in their recovery. Without this, the system risks perpetuating cycles of trauma rather than aiding rehabilitation and reintegration into society.²⁰

¹⁸ Cogan, Nicola et al. "A journey towards a trauma informed and responsive Justice system: the perspectives and experiences of senior Justice workers." *European journal of psychotraumatology* vol. 16, 1 (2025): 2441075. doi:10.1080/20008066.2024.2441075

¹⁹ Palmer, Jane & Lee, Jacqueline & Michels, Emily. (2024). *Civil Legal Services and Survivor-Defined Justice: A Qualitative Study with US Civil Legal Attorneys for Sexual Assault Survivors*. *Social & Legal Studies*. 34. 10.1177/09646639241253094.

²⁰ Cogan, Nicola et al. "A journey towards a trauma informed and responsive Justice system: the perspectives and experiences of senior Justice workers." *European journal of psychotraumatology* vol. 16,1 (2025): 2441075.

VII. Conclusions and Recommendations

The global issue of online child sexual abuse is growing at an alarming rate, causing significant and lasting psychological and social harm to victims. The digital world isn't just a passive platform; it intensifies this harm through the permanent nature of online content, the anonymity of offenders, and the specific methods used for online grooming and shaming. This complex situation results in an "invisible wound" for survivors, who experience repeated trauma and a deep loss of trust, which severely impacts their ability to form healthy relationships and rejoin society.

Although various support systems, rehabilitation programs, and legal services are available, their impact is often limited by major systemic problems. Widespread stigma, deep shame, and the fear of negative reactions or further victimization frequently prevent survivors from speaking out, leaving many feeling isolated and without support. Access to help is also restricted by geographic, financial, and cultural challenges, as well as a significant lack of digital knowledge among at-risk groups. The legal system, in particular, has difficulty handling the complexities of digital evidence, including AI-generated content, and often fails to offer a supportive, survivor-focused path to justice and recovery. The current situation highlights an urgent need for new solutions, more resources, and a fundamental change in strategy across all areas.