

# Online harms experienced by children and young people

## Report

Two young women looking at a mobile phone

## Key information

Publication type: General

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## The research

In light of the increased amount of time young people spent online during the pandemic to learn, socialise and for entertainment, London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) commissioned an in-depth exploration of online harms.

The research looks at 'acceptable' use and regulation and considers the experiences of marginalised young people, whose voices were missing from the body of existing research.?

## Research questions

The research aimed to better understand children's and young people's:?

- experiences of online platforms, social media platforms, apps and gaming?
- experiences of online harms and the impact on their lives?
- perceptions of what 'acceptable use' is in online spaces?
- views on law enforcement's role in addressing online harms
- views on what future regulatory frameworks and arrangements should be developed.

# Summary of methodology

As part of the [Social Switch Project](#), well respected charities, [Catch22](#) and [Redthread](#), carried out interviews with vulnerable children and young people that use its services, as well as frontline youth workers, police and tech platforms.

## Key findings

The research revealed that 97 per cent of Catch22's child sexual exploitation referrals have an online or social media element – with substantial increases related to online grooming and abuse.

Consultation with young people showed that more than 70 per cent of young people had seen content during lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 that was either violent or explicit. This includes videos of suicide, nudity and extreme violence.

Additionally, young people cited unwanted contact online from adults, companies and bots, while there were also complaints of cyberbullying, threats and sharing of explicit content. They also described social media as 'toxic' and found it led to a negative impact on a young person's mental health and wellbeing.

However, only 40 per cent of young people interviewed reported online harms because they didn't know how to, they had previously been ignored or previous negative experiences. Several people also cited receiving responses a long time after a complaint, which caused them to relive the event or incident.

As well as harms, young people highlighted significant benefits to their online world – in their education, their social lives and in their identity.

Further findings include:

- young people want to see better training for professionals and guardians in relation to online behaviour
- children and young people want to see improved monitoring, swift action and accountability from tech organisations, rather than the responsibility being placed on the user
- young people felt that police are 'one step behind' developments in technology and so need to develop stronger relationships with tech companies.

## Recommendations and next steps

The report sets out seven key recommendations. These are presented under the 7R's, with examples of young people's calls for action including:

- **Research:** resources need to be dedicated to independent research that is fully participatory and includes transparent input from tech companies.
- **Rights:** children's rights in the digital space, considering their right to learn, to play, and to be informed, are too often missing from online safety discussion.

- **Regulation:** legislation in relation to social media platforms is needed but it is one aspect in an array of required measures, including education, the need to address social inequalities, the need for transparency by companies and partnership work.
- **Responsibilities:** children and young people placed a lot of emphasis on the responsibilities of companies and felt that they should be held accountable for inaction.
- **Representation:** children and young people want to be part of panels that tech companies, platforms, and gaming designers consult with when designing, developing and updating new products.
- **Responses:** children and young people and their advocates want to see quick, appropriate, effective, and proportionate responses to online harms. They want swifter processing and better updates from law enforcement when phones are seized.
- **Resources:** more resources are needed for those working in education and safeguarding and reforms to school education are needed to better reflect the online environment.

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