

Suojellaan Lapsia
Protect Children

# CSAM USERS IN THE DARK WEB

## PROTECTING CHILDREN THROUGH PREVENTION

## REDIRECTION SURVEY REPORT

**Tegan Insoll, Anna Ovaska & Nina Vaaranen-Valkonen**
Suojellaan Lapsia ry. / Protect Children

SEPTEMBER 2021

This report has been written by Suojellaan Lapsia ry. (Protect Children) Project Researcher Tegan Insoll, LL.M.; Legal Specialist, Anna Ovaska, LL.M.; and Executive Director, Senior Specialist, Psychotherapist, Nina Vaaranen-Valkonen, M. Soc. Sc. All data analysis has been conducted by the authors. This report has been edited by Katariina Leivo, MSc. and Matilda Sandvik, LL.M. candidate (Suojellaan Lapsia ry. / Protect Children). Graphic design and layout by Havas Helsinki & Tegan Insoll. This report has been originally published in English.

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*CSAM Users in the Dark Web: Protecting Children Through Prevention*

Tegan Insoll, LL.M., Anna Ovaska, LL.M. & Nina Vaaranen-Valkonen, M. Soc. Sc.

Suojellaan Lapsia ry. / Protect Children

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**Supported by:**






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# Foreword



## Nina Vaaranen-Valkonen

**Protect Children Executive Director, Innovator of the ReDirection project**

I have worked in the field of child protection for over 15 years. My work as the Executive Director of Protect Children is my dream come true - I get to further children's rights and take concrete measures to protect children from all forms of sexual violence on a daily basis.

The idea for the innovative ReDirection project came from the experience I have gained as a cognitive psychotherapist and in my nine years of analysing CSAM through Project Arachnid. I wanted to approach the topic from an empathetic point of view to encourage and support behavioural change, therefore I titled the ReDirection survey *Help us to help you*. We want to believe in individuals' ability to change their behaviour, and we must encourage and support them in doing so too. It is crucial that we take a multi-pronged approach in the protection of children to ultimately provide children with the level of protection and safety they need and are entitled to.

I work with individuals who have been subjected to sexual violence in their childhood, as well as parents of child victims of sexual violence. The wisdom and knowledge I have gained from these brave survivors is what drives me to do my absolute most to protect children.

I want to thank my husband and four children without whom this organization could not exist. Thank you for your endless support and encouragement and thank you also to my dearest friends for always believing in my passion. To my incredible team, thank you for your endless hard work and unwavering enthusiasm.

I have dedicated my life to this cause and will continue to do so, because every child has the right to a non-violent childhood.



*Nina Vaaranen-Valkonen*



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# Protect Children

**At Protect Children, we do our utmost to ensure that no child is subjected to sexual harassment, grooming or any kind of sexual violence, whether online or offline.**[1]

We believe that to fully protect children from sexual violence, it is crucial to tackle the issue from all angles. Protect Children educates children on vital online safety skills through the **Online Road Safety** project,[2] conducts research on pressing issues and establishes innovative intervention strategies to prevent online sexual offences through an offender-focused approach in the **ReDirection** project. Protect Children specialists analyse child sexual abuse material (CSAM) to support law enforcement agencies in their efforts to identify and save children and remove the material from the internet, as a part of the global Project Arachnid alliance.[3] Protect Children also leads peer support groups for parents of children who have been victims of sexual violence. We also support professionals in all fields by offering training and specialist consulting services.

All children have the right to non-violent childhoods and Protect Children, with the support of likeminded organisations around the world, fights tirelessly to uphold this right.[4]

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **5 million +** | **569 000 +** | **Peer-support groups** | **3 000 +** | **3 million +** |
| people reached with our **Online Road Safety** project to strengthen children's digital safety skills | images of child sexual abuse analysed by Protect Children specialists through Project Arachnid | for families whose children have been the victim of a crime of sexual violence | professionals trained, including law enforcement | people reached with our **ReDirection project** |

[1] Suojellaan Lapsia ry. / Protect Children is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization based in Helsinki, Finland. Learn more about Protect Children on our website: www.protectchildren.fi/.

[2] Read more about our Google.org-funded **Online Road Safety** project on our website: www.protectchildren.fi/online-road-safety/.

[3] Read more about Project Arachnid: www.projectarachnid.ca/en/.

[4] Article 19, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx.



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# Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

Child Sexual Abuse Material, or CSAM, (often misleadingly referred to as 'child pornography') includes images, videos, live-streaming, and any other material that depicts sexual violence against a child. CSAM can include material that shows a child in a sexually suggestive or explicit manner partially clothed, or nude, and can include material that does or does not illustrate sexual activity or violence at all.[5]

Behind CSAM are real children being subjected to sexual abuse and violence. When CSAM is distributed online, the children are re-victimised each time the material is viewed. The images are not just images – there is real harm to real children in viewing, using, and distributing the images.[6] Any images or footage recorded of sexual crimes against children that are shared and distributed over the internet further violates the rights and well-being of the child victim.

In a **Canadian Centre for Child Protection** survey, nearly 70% of CSAM survivors said that the distribution of their images impacts them differently than the hands-on abuse they suffered as the distribution never ends and the images are permanent.[7]

Offences of sexual violence against children of which there is recorded footage are particularly traumatic for the child. For the victims of CSAM, the mere awareness that there is a video recording or photograph of their sexual abuse, coupled with the fear of its possible spread and eternal circulation online can have a life-long devastating impact. Each time the CSAM is viewed again, the child is re-victimised. Images and videos depicting child sexual abuse are viewed and distributed on virtually all platforms, on both the surface web and the dark web.

At Protect Children, we believe that it is of fundamental importance to remove images of CSAM from the internet and adopt all possible measures to prevent the use and spread of CSAM.

---

[5] National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), 'Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)' www.missingkids.org/theissues/csam. The COPINE scale provides a typology of CSAM images, see: Ethel Quayle 'The COPINE Project', 5 Irish Probation Journal 65, 68 https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/12893845/The_COPINE_Project.pdf.

[6] Read more in our blog post: Protect Children, 'Behind CSAM, Real Children are Being Abused' www.protectchildren.fi/2021/08/19/behind-csam-real-children-are-being-abused/.

[7] Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc, 'Survivors' Survey: Executive Summary 2017', 28 www.protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsSurveyExecutiveSummary2017_en.pdf.



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# The ReDirection Project

**Protect Children recognises an urgent need to gather information about CSAM users and adopt an offender-focused approach to preventing sexual violence against children online.**

Protect Children started the **ReDirection project** in September 2020, with the aim of conducting new innovative research on CSAM users and developing the anonymous, rehabilitative **ReDirection Self-Help Program** for individuals who search for, view, and distribute CSAM. The development of the project is in line with the targets set out in the Non-Violent Childhoods Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025.[8]

Traditional research on CSAM users contains an inherent bias as it is often based on research on known or convicted offenders. However, it is widely known that CSAM offences are hidden crimes, and the majority of offenders are never reported or convicted. Our research aims to circumvent this bias by directly researching the offenders who may never be convicted.

Sexual violence against children is a public health problem, and thus to prevent it, it is vital to adopt a public health approach. Due to the massive scale of the problem, and its devastating nature, it is not effective, nor is it in accordance with the rights of the child to focus solely on tertiary prevention. Efforts must be better concentrated on primary and secondary means of prevention focusing both on potential victims and potential offenders. Instead of "attempting to make the best of a bad situation" and reacting once the harm has already taken place, we must prevent sexual violence against children before it occurs.[9]

Protect Children's **ReDirection project** is funded by the End Violence Fund, a global partnership focused on the UN Sustainable Development Goal 16.2: ending all forms of violence against children by 2030.[10]

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[8] Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Non-Violent Childhoods Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020–2025 (Helsinki, 2020), 378 www.julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162554/STM_2020_34_J.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

[9] Elizabeth Letourneau et al., 'The Need for a Comprehensive Public Health Approach to Preventing Child Sexual Abuse' (2014) 129 Public Health Reports 222, 226.

[10] Read more: https://www.end-violence.org/safe-online.



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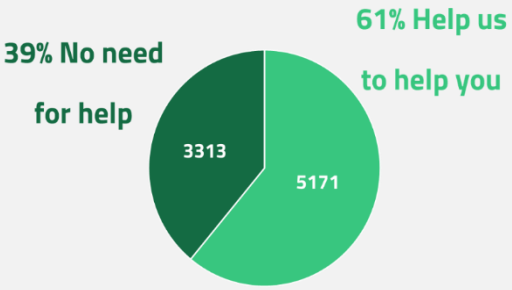
# ReDirection Surveys

**Protect Children created and launched two innovative surveys in the dark web to gather unprecedented data about the habits, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of individuals who use CSAM.** When individuals search for CSAM on the dark web by using certain key words, they are presented with the possibility to answer the surveys: **Help us to help you** and **No need for help**.




Respondents to the two surveys

In total, this report examines the responses from **8,484** respondents to the two surveys. The **Help us to help you** survey asks the respondents questions about their habits, thoughts, emotions, and behaviours related to their use of CSAM. If the users do not want to answer such questions, they have the choice to instead answer the **No need for help** survey, which asks why they believe that they do not need any help.

The surveys do not ask the respondents to disclose any identifiable personal characteristics, such as age, gender, nationality etc. to ensure full anonymity and privacy.[11]

This report presents the preliminary analysis conducted by Protect Children on the results of the surveys. Further research will be conducted in collaboration with researchers to analyse the results in more depth. The original surveys were provided originally in English and Spanish. Due to the high number of respondents, we subsequently launched 10 additional languages (see Methodology for information) in order to gather data from a more diverse group of CSAM users.[12] We plan to conduct further comparative analysis of potential differences between the responses in the various language versions.

"To better protect children, we must begin to understand the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of the offenders."

**Nina Vaaranen-Valkonen,** Protect Children Executive Director, Senior Specialist, Psychotherapist.

[11] Read more in the Methodology.

[12] The additional 10 language versions are not part of the ReDirection project as funded by the End Violence Fund but will be analysed in this report together with the original ReDirection data.





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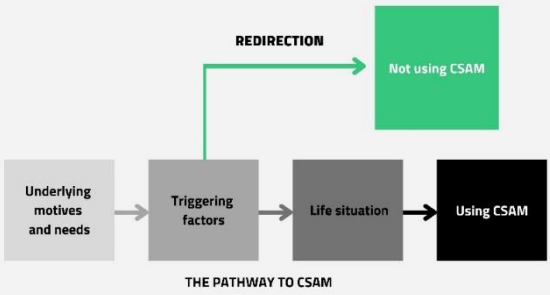
# ReDirection Self-Help Program

**It is crucial to prevent sexual violence against children at the source by addressing risks before they materialise.** To do this, we have developed practical measures to guide individuals to stop their use of CSAM, and ultimately protect children from sexual violence online.




Protect Children, in collaboration with psychologists Nina Nurminen[13] and Mikko Ylipekka,[14] has developed the **ReDirection Self-Help Program**; an anonymous rehabilitative program for individuals who view and distribute CSAM. The program is based on cognitive-behavioural therapy and guides users through a number of tasks asking them to consider their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours regarding their use of CSAM. The end goal of the program is for the users to achieve and maintain behavioural change and stop viewing CSAM. We developed the program with the knowledge gained from the unprecedented findings of the **ReDirection surveys** presented in this report.

The program has been translated into Spanish and culturally adapted by RedPaPaz[15] and Milena Vásquez-Amézquita PhD.[16] Individuals can access the **ReDirection Self-Help Program** anonymously in English and Spanish on the Helsinki University Hospital (HUS) website and through the Tor browser. The program will be translated into several other languages in the future.

The **ReDirection Self-Help Program** is based on the manualised NEW DIRECTION Personal Rehabilitation Programme®.[17]

---

[13] Nina Nurminen, Principal Lecturer and Psychologist at the Training Institute for Prison and Probation Services (Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency).

[14] Mikko Ylipekka, Prison Psychologist at the Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency.

[15] Red PaPaz www.redpapaz.org/.

[16] Milena Vásquez-Amézquita PhD. Associate Professor at Universidad El Bosque.

[17] Nina Nurminen, NEW DIRECTION – Personal Rehabilitation Programme ® (Criminal Sanctions Agency 2014).



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# THE KEY FINDINGS

1. Innovation leads to intervention
2. Users have been exposed to CSAM at a young age
3. CSAM is a gendered issue
4. Many CSAM users are not just viewers
5. CSAM is increasingly livestreamed
6. More research is needed

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# 1 Innovation Leads to Intervention

**Creating and implementing innovative strategies can lead to effective intervention**

There is an urgent need for strong intervention strategies to stop the use of CSAM. Our results indicate that many CSAM users would like to and have tried to stop using CSAM but have been unsuccessful.[18] The innovative **ReDirection Self-Help Program** aims to guide these users who have some motivation to change their behaviour and help them to successfully maintain behavioural change.

We found that the **Help us to help you** survey may have acted as an intervention in itself. CSAM users were asked to reflect, often for the first time, on their own thoughts and feelings about their use of harmful materials. Many respondents expressed relief that they could share their feelings and said that they felt hopeful for the possibility of getting help to change their behaviour.

The approach we have adopted differs from traditional approaches towards preventing the use of CSAM, and is inspired by compassion-focused therapy, which suggests that approaching individuals with compassion can be effective in changing harmful behaviour. The high number of respondents to the surveys indicates the potential of this approach.

In light of exponential technological advancement and developing means of CSAM, we must keep innovating and find new ways to better protect children.

'This was the first time I have typed about a constant problem in my head'

'I feel optimistic about the evolution of online help'

Survey extracts (modified for clarity and anonymity).

[18] See Help us to help you Question 7 and Question 8.



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# 2 Users Have Been Exposed to CSAM at a Young Age

**Many CSAM users were children themselves when they were first exposed to CSAM**

The survey results show that 70% of respondents say that they first saw CSAM when they were under the age of 18.[19] Nearly 40% say that they were under 13.[20] Additionally, over half of the respondents say that they first saw CSAM accidentally, meaning that they were exposed to CSAM without actively searching for it.[21]

The survey results indicate that individuals may have been exposed to CSAM at a young age due to a number of reasons Some may have searched for the material voluntarily out of curiosity or interest. Others may have been shown CSAM as part of their sexual abuse or exploitation. Such individuals may search for and view CSAM later in life to better understand their abuse and/or find material depicting their own abuse, should it exist. Other individuals may have started viewing legal, adult pornography at a young age and begun to consume increasingly more extreme material as they became desensitised to the material.

Exposure to CSAM at an early age can be defined as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), with potentially far-reaching negative and harmful impact on wellbeing and development.[22]

We need stronger transboundary collaboration to protect children from accessing material that is unsuitable for their age and development. To fully tackle the problem, we need stronger input from all sectors, from government and legislative bodies to NGOs and corporations.

---

[19] See Help us to help you Question 1.

[20] See Help us to help you Question 1.

[21] See Help us to help you Question 2.

[22] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 'Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)' www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html.



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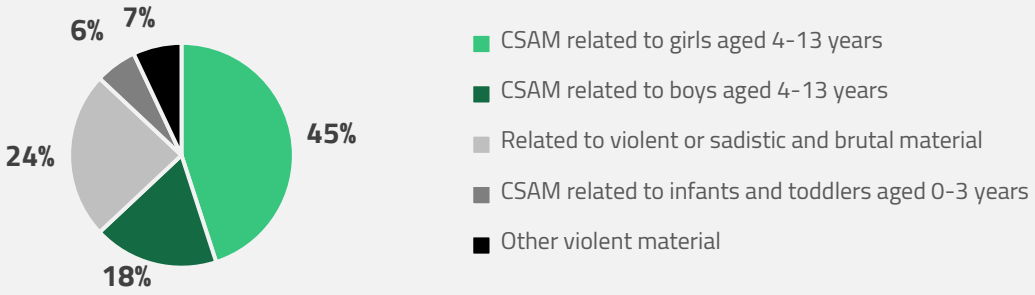
3

# CSAM is a Gendered Issue

**Our results suggest that CSAM users on the dark web predominantly view CSAM depicting girls**

Through the **Help us to help you** survey, we examined the demand side of CSAM to understand the type of material that CSAM users on the dark web are searching for.[23] The results are alarming. 45% of respondents said that they view CSAM related to girls aged 4-13, while 18% said that they view CSAM related to boys in the same age bracket. The remaining respondents said that they view violent or sadistic and brutal material, CSAM related to infants and toddlers aged 0-3 years, and other violent material.[24]




Child sexual abuse, both offline and online, is an issue that is affected by gender in a number of ways. Studies analysing existing CSAM have found that while girls are more likely to be depicted than boys, the content depicting boys is often more egregious.[25]

Nonetheless, CSAM is a heinous and widespread form of criminality that affects all children everywhere in the world. All children, regardless of gender are at risk of being subjected to sexual violence, and we must ensure that our efforts to protect children are protecting **all children**.

---

[23] Based on preliminary analysis, there are some clearly identifiable differences in the type of CSAM used by respondents to the separate language versions of the survey. Protect Children plans to pursue further qualitative data analysis on the results to identify global differences in CSAM users' behaviours.

[24] See Help us to help you Question 5.

[25] Ethel Quayle & Terry Jones, 'Sexualized images of children on the Internet', 1 Sexual Abuse 7 (2011) www.pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21349829/; ECPAT International, 'Trends in online child sexual abuse material' (April 2018, Bangkok) 12-13; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), 'Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)' www.missingkids.org/theissues/csam.



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# 4 Many CSAM Users are Not Just Viewers

**Many respondents are at high risk of directly contacting children**

There is a misconception that individuals who view CSAM pose less danger than hands-on offenders as they do not attempt to directly contact children. Our results indicate that this is not the case. While a direct causal connection between CSAM use and direct offending, or attempts thereto, cannot be drawn, the results indicate a significant correlation between the two. This is especially the case if certain predisposing factors exist.[29]

52%

of respondents have felt afraid that viewing CSAM might lead to sexual acts against a child.[26]

44%

of respondents said that viewing CSAM made them think about seeking direct contact with children.[27]

37%

of respondents have sought direct contact with children after viewing CSAM.[28]

Our research shows that the existence of CSAM online leads to further sexual abuse and to thoughts and worries about committing crimes of sexual violence against children. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to remove detected CSAM from the web. This requires coordinated effort from all relevant parties, including internet service providers, social media platforms, law enforcement agencies, NGOs and researchers. Due to the vast volumes of CSAM already in existence online, advanced technological solutions are urgently required to identify, report and remove such content.

---

[26] See Help us to help you Question 17.

[27] See Help us to help you Question 18.

[28] See Help us to help you Question 19.

[29] Michael Seto, *Internet Sex Offenders* (American Psychological Association 2017) 179.





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5

# CSAM is Increasingly Livestreamed

**There is a worrying increase in the prevalence of livestreamed CSAM**

Livestreamed CSAM comprises of material depicting child sexual abuse and exploitation, which is being captured and shared in real-time by the offender or obtained from the child victim through online solicitation.

**45%**

**of respondents watch livestreamed CSAM.**

Almost half of the respondents to the **Help us to help you** survey said that they watch livestreamed CSAM.[30] Even on the dark web, where livestreaming does not usually occur, users report also watching livestreamed CSAM.[31]

Livestreamed CSAM is becoming increasingly prevalent due to a number of factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic.[32] Contact offending has been reduced by global travel restrictions; however, this has shifted the offending to another form. Offenders whose opportunities to physically abuse children are limited instead seek to fulfil their desires by paying for made-to-order CSAM through livestreaming. An additional explanation for the increasing prevalence of livestreamed CSAM is "the demand for new 'fresh' material and a customized experience".[33] The results indicate that CSAM users often experience desensitisation to sexually explicit material, and constantly seek more extreme material.

The increasing prevalence of livestreamed CSAM makes the creation, distribution, and use of CSAM more accessible than ever. This poses new challenges for law enforcement and organisations trying to remove CSAM from the internet. To tackle this, we need more effective prevention tools, enforced platform age verification, and child focused prevention to educate children on how to stay safe online.[34]

---

[30] See Help us to help you Question 11.

[31] Livestreaming is not prevalent on the dark web due to technical limitations of the platforms.

[32] EUROPOL, 'Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA) 2020' (5 October 2020) www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/internet-organised-crime-threat-assessment-iocta-2020.

[33] Roderic Broadhurst, 'Child Sex Abuse Images and Exploitation Materials', in Roger Leukfeldt & Thomas Holt (eds) *Handbook of Cybercrime* (Routledge, October 2019), 322.

[34] Protect Children's **Online Road Safety** project aims to educate children on the risks of the online environment and teach digital safety skills at an early age, in order to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation online.



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# 6 More Research is Needed

**Further research is required to strengthen global child protection efforts**

Traditional research on individuals who use CSAM is often inherently biased as it has focused primarily on convicted and known offenders. CSAM criminality, as well as other forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation, is often well-hidden. Our survey attempts to overcome this bias by inviting responses from all CSAM users, not only those who have been convicted. We believe that this has given a more accurate representation of CSAM users, as we know that the majority will never be convicted for their crimes. However, we need further research and more in-depth analysis to gain deeper insight into the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of CSAM users to combat the issue and protect children from heinous crimes.

The survey results have revealed several issues which may be invaluable in prevention work. For example, responses indicate that not all CSAM users are paedophiles or hebephiles, and thus do not necessarily experience sexual attraction towards children. Whilst sexual attraction to children and the associated cognitive distortions are certainly prominent reasons for CSAM use, qualitative analysis of the open-ended answers indicates various additional motivators. Some clear patterns include pornography escalation, sexual abuse in own childhood, and other trauma.

Comprehensive, multi-pronged prevention strategies are needed to better protect children from all forms of sexual violence. Effective prevention means cannot be limited to a single group but must focus on all children and all potential offenders.

Finally, as demonstrated by the **Help us to help you** & **No need for help** surveys, innovation works. More innovative research must be conducted to strengthen prevention from all angles.


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Survey Results

# HELP US TO HELP YOU

This section presents the results from each question of the

Help us to help you survey

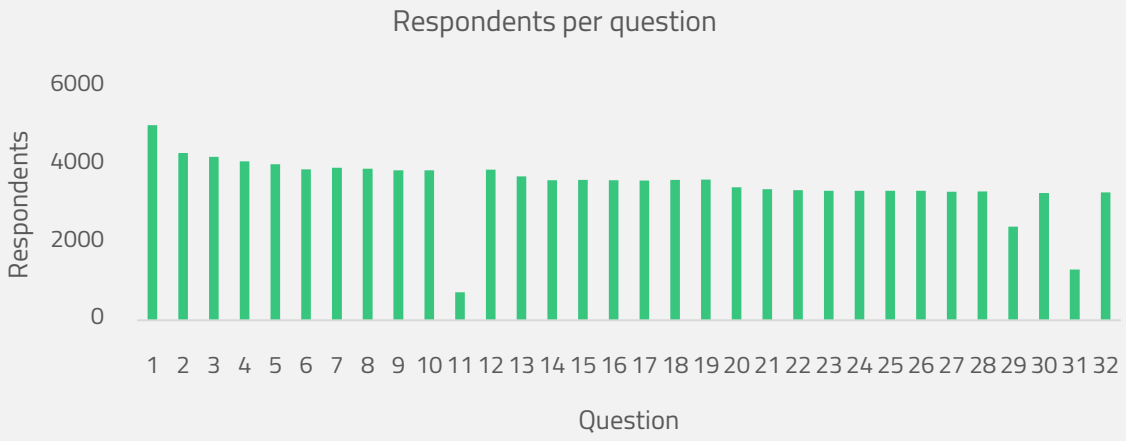
Total number of respondents:

5,171

### Survey results in detail

The **Help us to help you** survey consists of 32 questions related to the habits, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of CSAM users.

This section presents the results of each multiple-choice question. The percentages have been rounded to the nearest percent, and as such may not always add up to 100%.




### High retention rate

In total, the **Help us to help you** survey was answered by 5,171 respondents. As the questions were not mandatory, each question has a varying number of respondents. The retention rate throughout the survey remained high, with a slight steady decline.

### Anomalies were limited

We have identified three clear anomalies in the number of respondents to each question. Question 11 was added to the survey at a later date, and as such has a shorter data gathering period than the other questions.[35] As such, this question has a significantly smaller number of respondents. Questions 29 and 31 are the only open-ended questions with no multiple-choice options. The general reluctance of respondents to answer open-ended questions is shown in the drop in respondents to these questions. Question 31 asked the respondents to give very detailed answers, which we expect lowered the willingness of the respondents to spend time answering this question.

[35] Question 11 data gathering period: 22.6.2021-11.8.2021 (51 days). Question 11 was added in English on 22.6.2021 and the other language versions were added subsequently.



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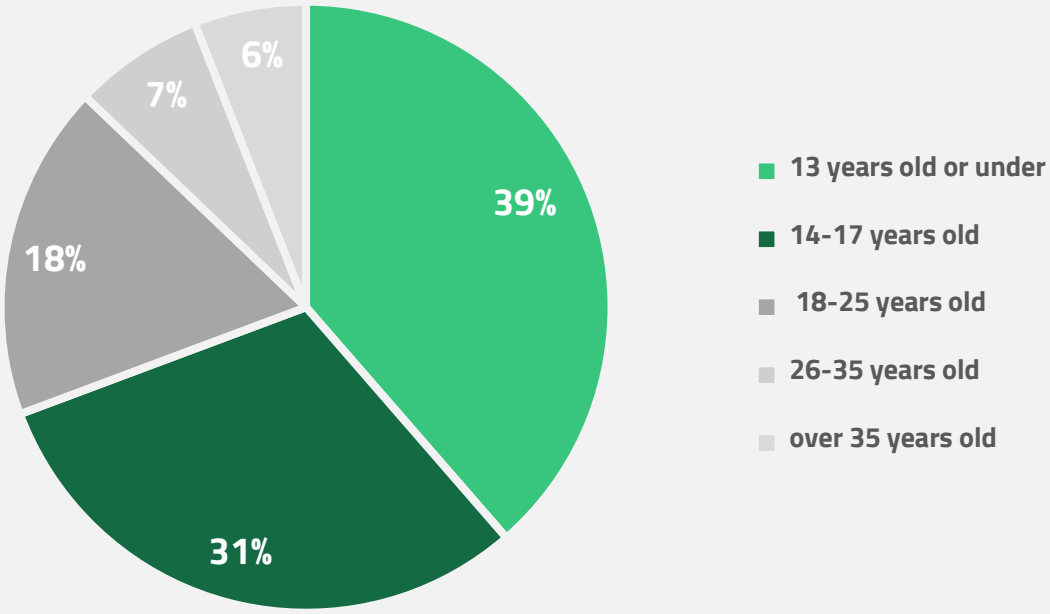
# Q1: Age of First Exposure to CSAM

**1. When I first saw CSAM/illegal violent material I was**

- ☐ 13 years old or under
- ☐ 14-17 years old
- ☐ 18-25 years old
- ☐ 26-35 years old
- ☐ over 35 years old

5,030 respondents




70% of respondents say that they first saw CSAM when they were under the age of 18.

Nearly 40% were 13 or under.



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# Q2: How Users First Saw CSAM

**2. When I first saw CSAM/illegal violent material, it was**

- ☐ **Accidentally**
- ☐ **Through my social connections**
- ☐ **After searching actively for other hard-core material**
- ☐ **After searching actively for sexual CSAM / illegal material**
- ☐ **Other occasion, what?**

4,313 respondents




Over half of the respondents say that they first saw the material accidentally, rather than by deliberately accessing it.


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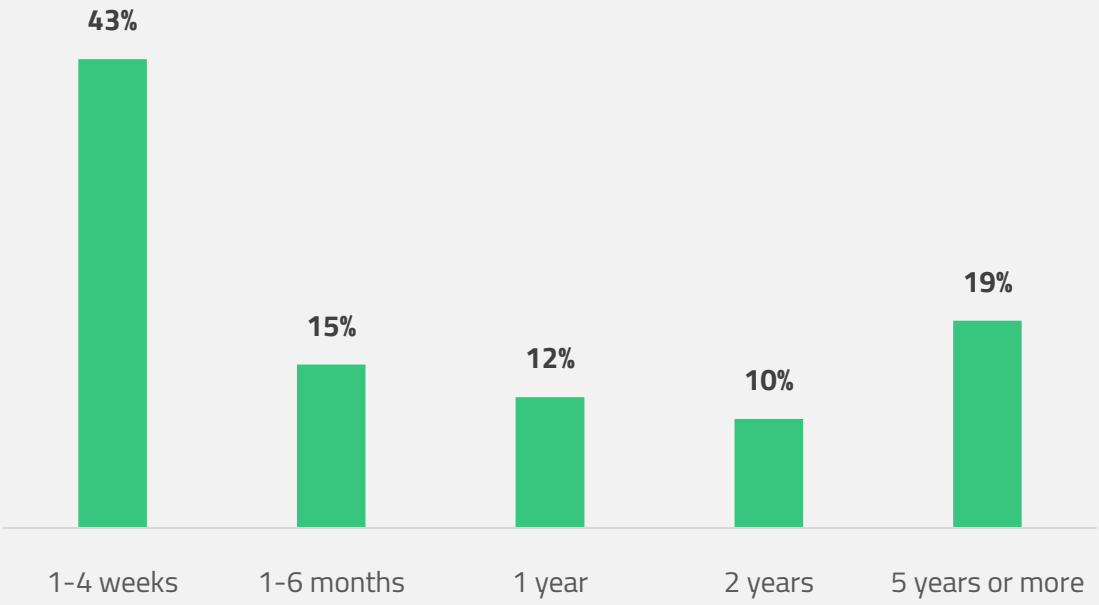
# Q3: Length of Use of CSAM

**3. I have actively searched and viewed CSAM/illegal violent material for**

- ☐ 1-4 weeks
- ☐ 1-6 months
- ☐ 1 year
- ☐ 2 years
- ☐ 5 years or more

4,215 respondents




The majority of the respondents say that they have been searching for and viewing CSAM for under 6 months.

This suggests that the sample group represents CSAM users who have not been viewing the material for a long period of time.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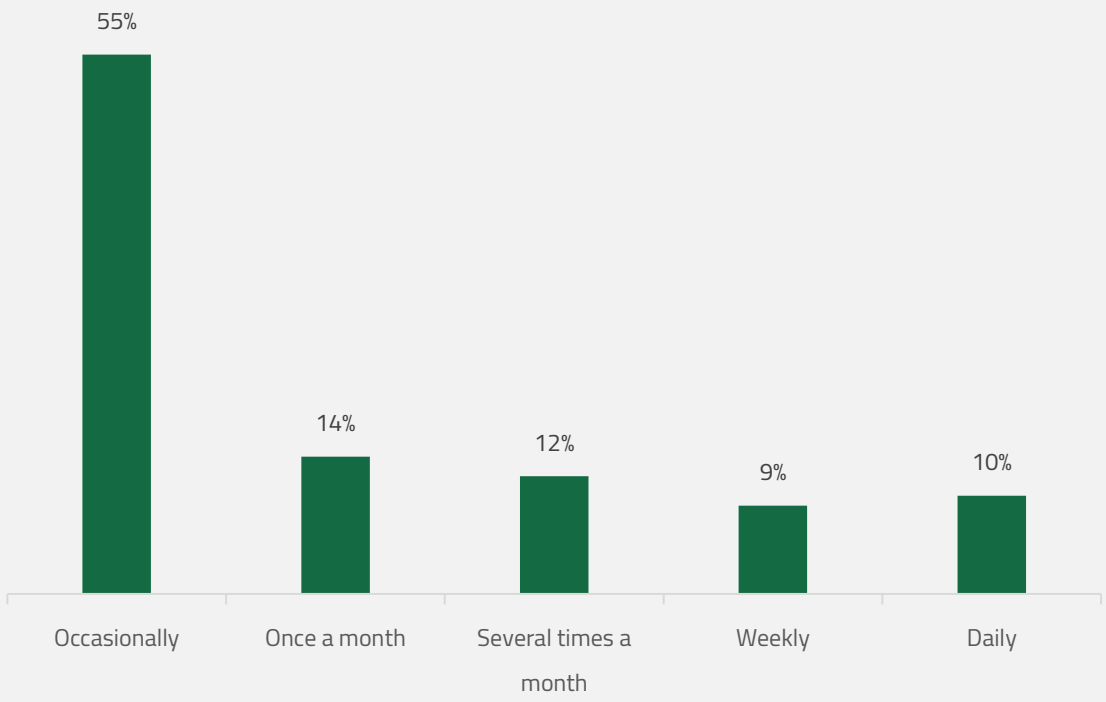
# Q4: Intensity of Use of CSAM

**4. I search and view illegal violent material**

- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ Several times a month
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Daily

4,099 respondents





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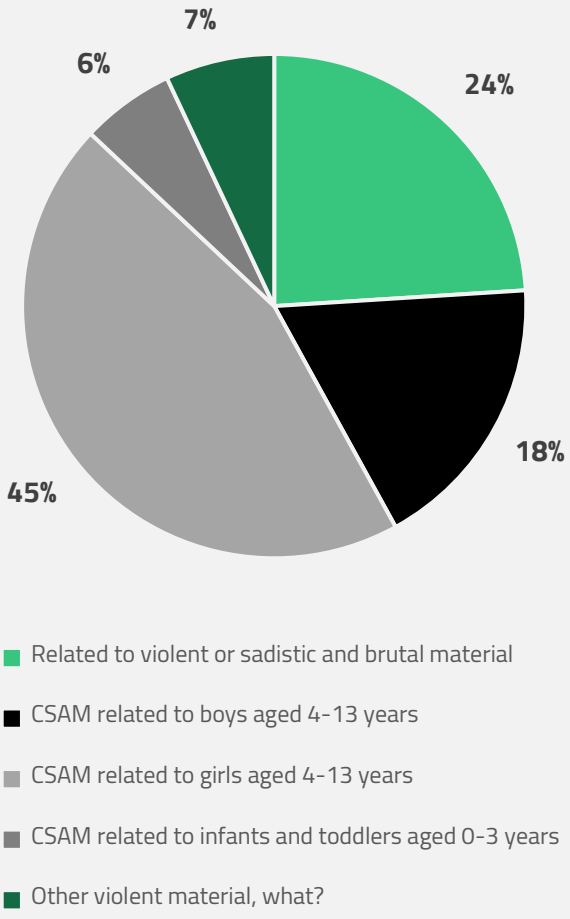
# Q5: Type of Material

**5. I use images and videos**

- ☐ **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?**

4,024 respondents




Almost half of the respondents use CSAM depicting girls ages 4-13 years.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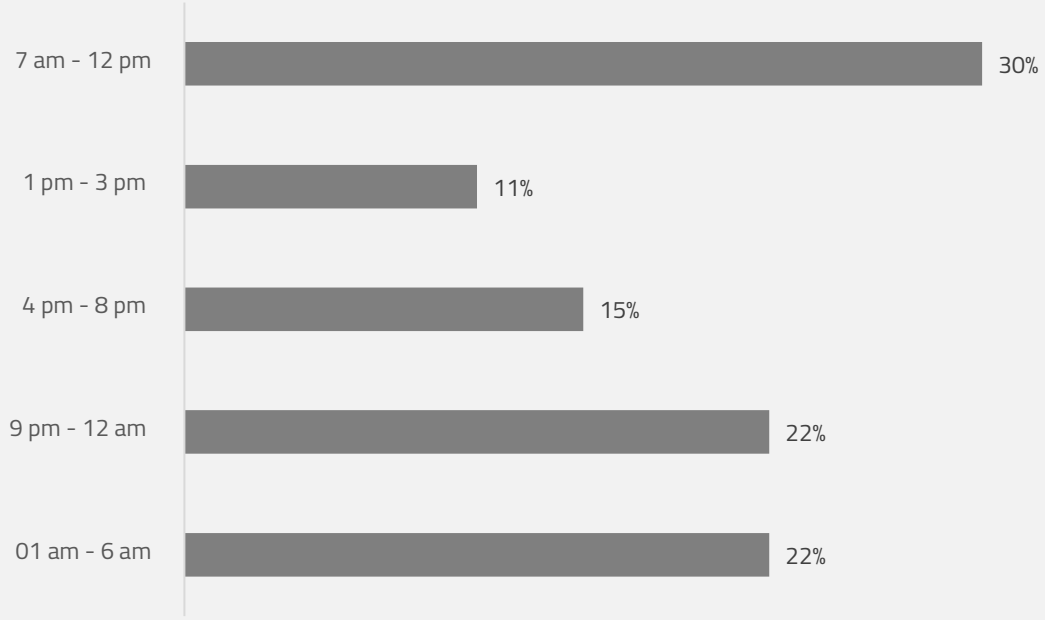
# Q6: Time of Use

**6. The time I usually search and view illegal violent material**

- ☐ **7 am - 12 pm**
- ☐ **1 pm - 3 pm**
- ☐ **4 pm - 8 pm**
- ☐ **9 pm - 12 am**
- ☐ **01 am - 6 am**

3,896 respondents





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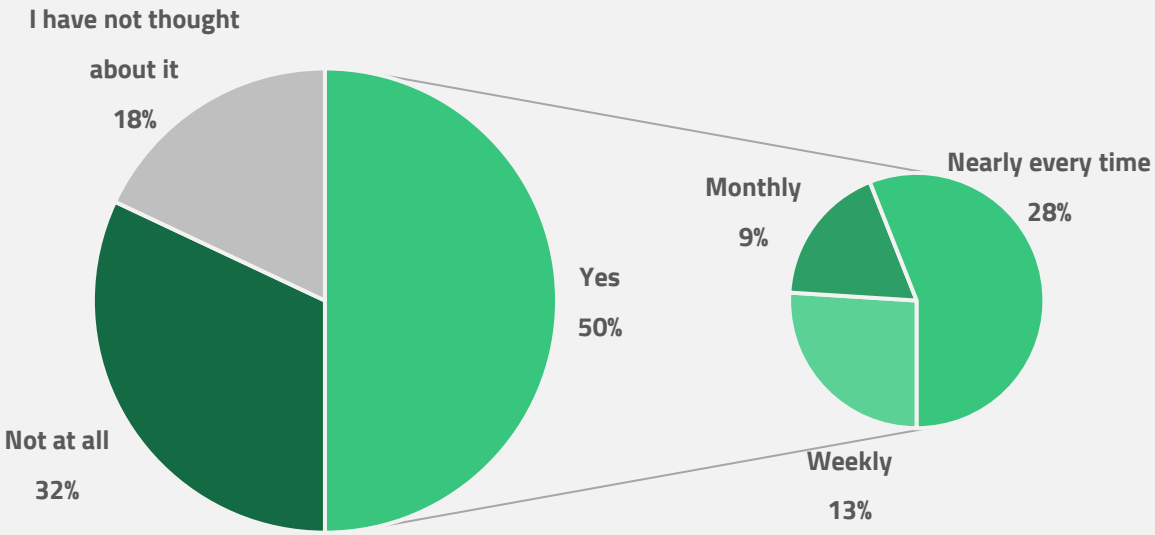
# Q7: Willingness to Stop Using CSAM

**7. I would like to stop searching and viewing CSAM/illegal violent material**

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ I have not thought about it
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Nearly every time

3,935 respondents




Half of the respondents claim that they would like to stop searching for and viewing CSAM.

With the help of the **ReDirection Self-Help Program**, these respondents who are motivated to change may be able to change their behaviour.



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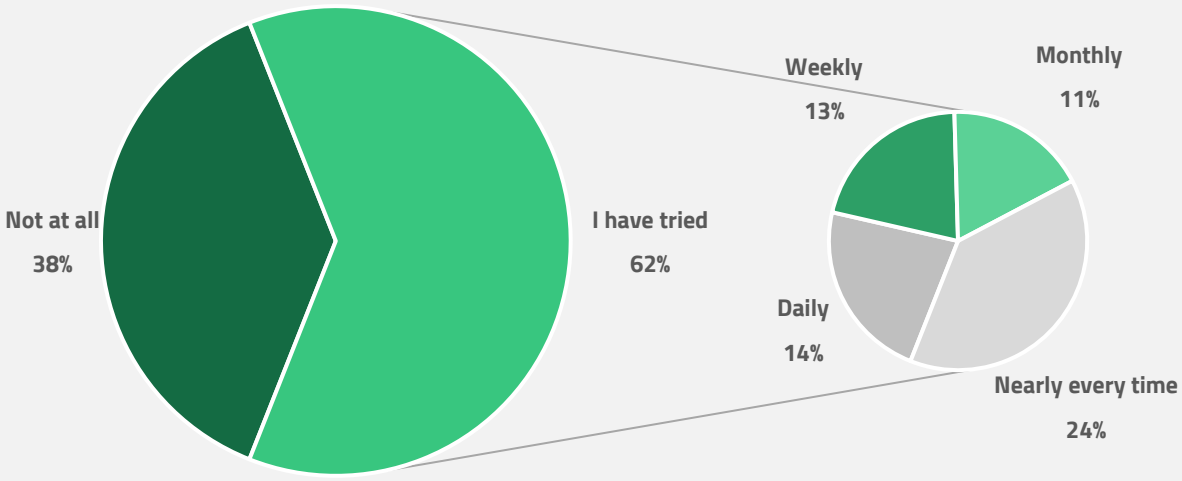
# Q8: Have the Users Tried to Stop Using CSAM?

**8. I have tried to stop searching and viewing CSAM/illegal violent material**

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Nearly every time

3,908 respondents




The majority of CSAM users say that they have at some point tried to stop using CSAM but have failed to do so.

The use of CSAM can be addictive, requiring effective rehabilitative programs to support behavioural change.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# Q9: What has Stopped Users Searching for CSAM?

**9. When thinking of searching for CSAM/illegal violent material, is there something that stopped you from doing it?**

- ☐ **Negative feelings (guilt and shame)**
- ☐ **Negative thoughts**
- ☐ **Self-control**
- ☐ **Unfavourable situation**
- ☐ **Other, what?**

3,866 respondents




Many of those respondents who have stopped themselves searching for CSAM report having done so in response to negative feelings and self-control.


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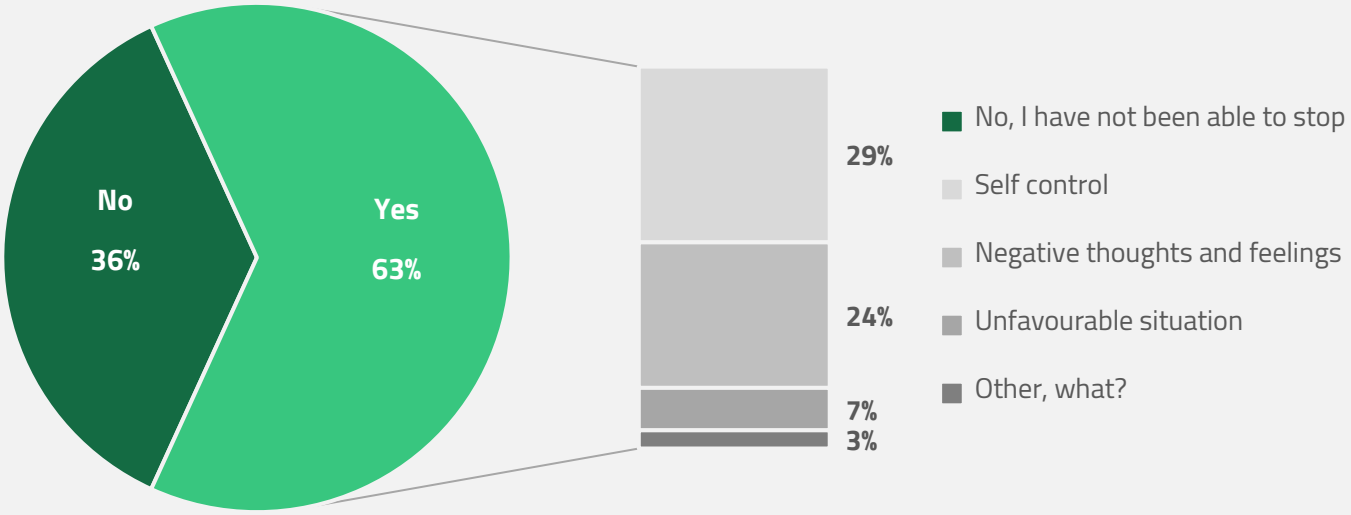
# Q10: What has Stopped Users Viewing CSAM?

**10. When actively viewing CSAM/illegal violent material, is there something that has made you stop?**

- ☐ No, I have not been able to stop
- ☐ Negative thoughts and feelings
- ☐ Self-control
- ☐ Unfavourable situation
- ☐ Other, what?

3,868 respondents




Most respondents say that they have been able to stop actively viewing CSAM, mostly through self-control or negative thoughts and feelings.

Responses indicate that it is possible for CSAM users to stop using CSAM, but they often struggle to maintain their behavioural change.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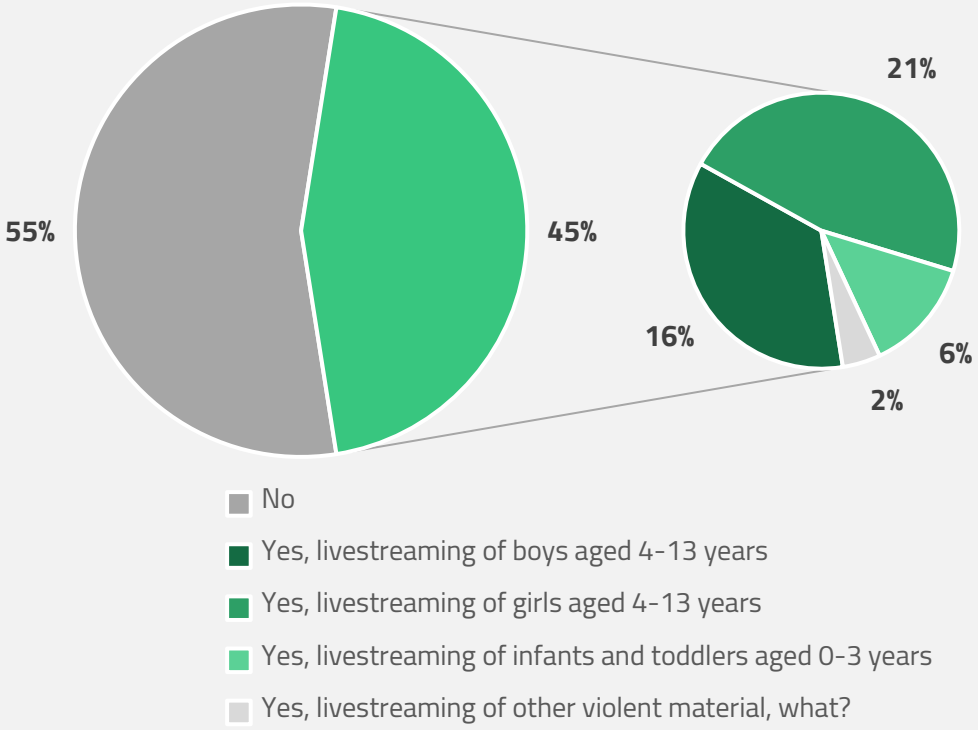
# Q11: Livestreamed CSAM

**11. I watch livestreamed CSAM**

- ☐ 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?

802 respondents




A large proportion of respondents say that they watch livestreamed CSAM. Of those who do, the majority watch livestreaming of girls aged 4-13 years.

The increasing prevalence of livestreamed CSAM is deeply concerning. Livestreaming platforms are easily accessible to both children and offenders, and this poses new challenges for prevention of sexual violence against children online.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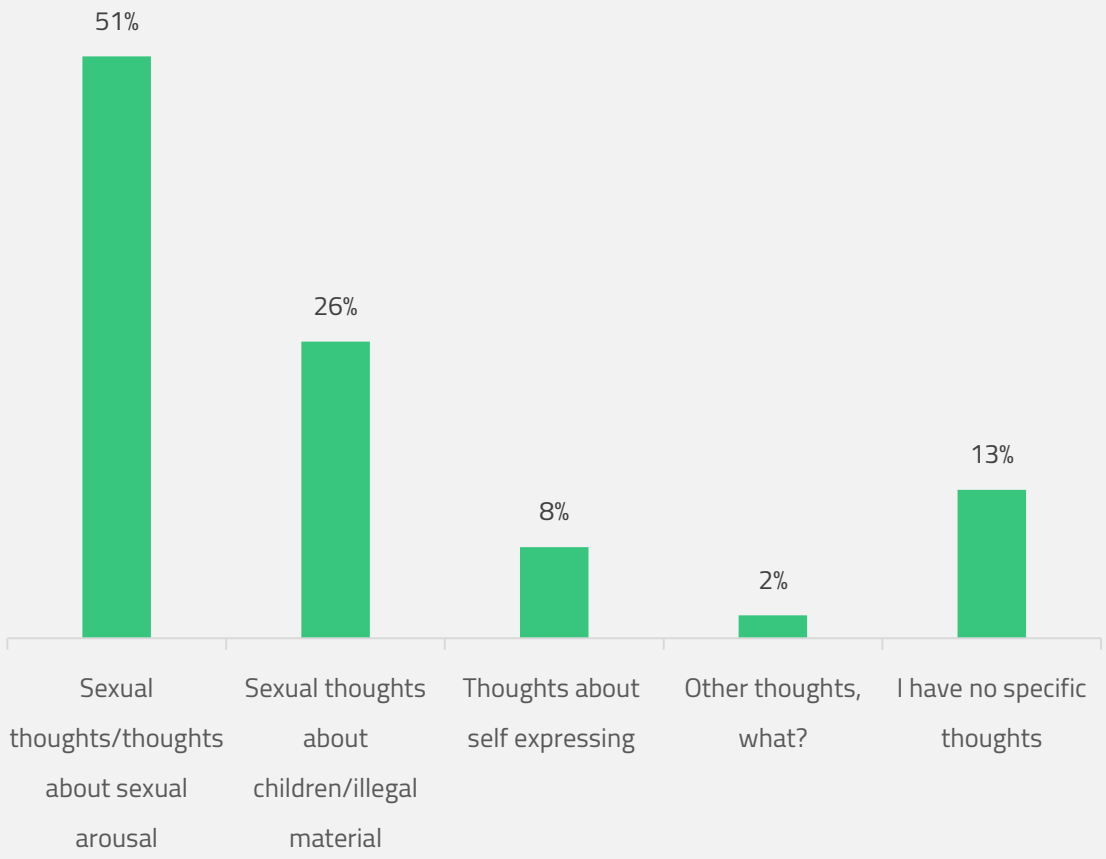
# Q12: Users' Thoughts Before Using CSAM

**12. What are your thoughts before you search or view CSAM/illegal violent material?**

- ☐ Sexual thoughts/thoughts about sexual arousal
- ☐ Sexual thoughts about children/illegal material
- ☐ Thoughts about self-expressing
- ☐ Other thoughts, what?
- ☐ I have no specific thoughts

3,886 respondents



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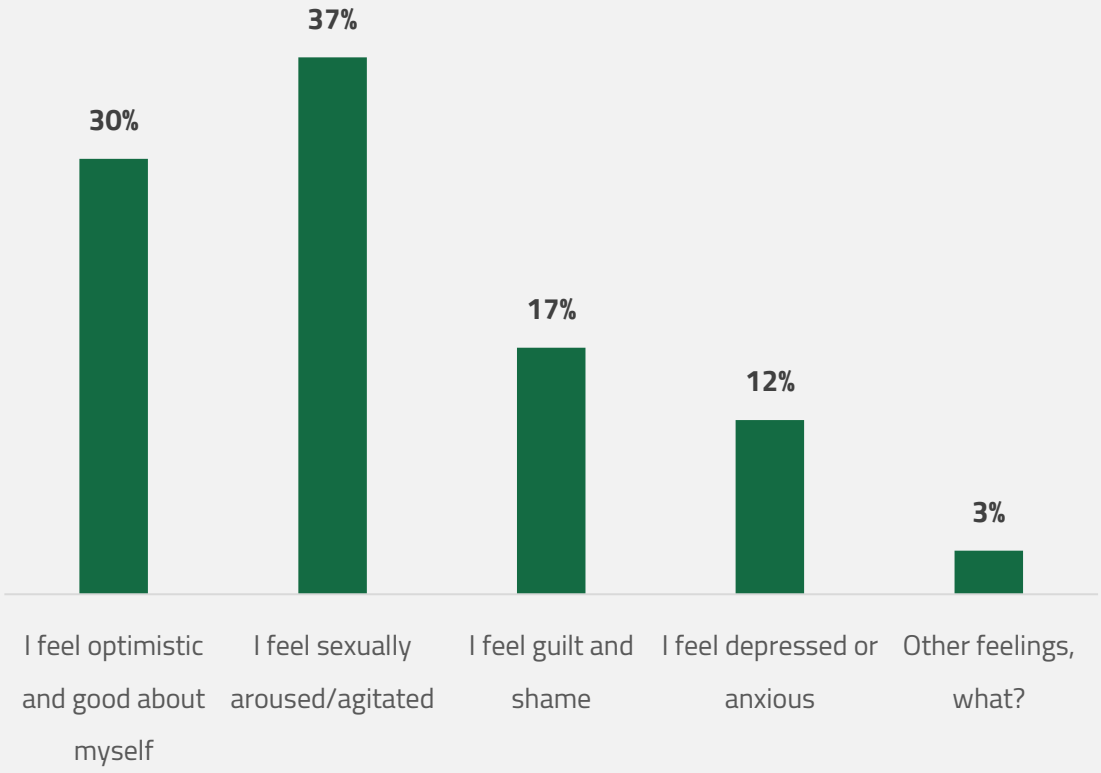
# Q13: Users' Feelings Before Using CSAM

**13. How are you feeling before you think, search or view CSAM/illegal violent material?**

- ☐ I feel optimistic and good about myself
- ☐ I feel sexually aroused/agitated
- ☐ I feel guilt and shame
- ☐ I feel depressed or anxious
- ☐ Other feelings, what?

3,708 respondents




Many respondents report feeling sexually aroused or agitated before viewing CSAM.

Worryingly, a significant proportion of respondents report feeling optimistic and good about themselves before viewing CSAM. This highlights the existing cognitive distortions that many CSAM users have regarding their behaviour.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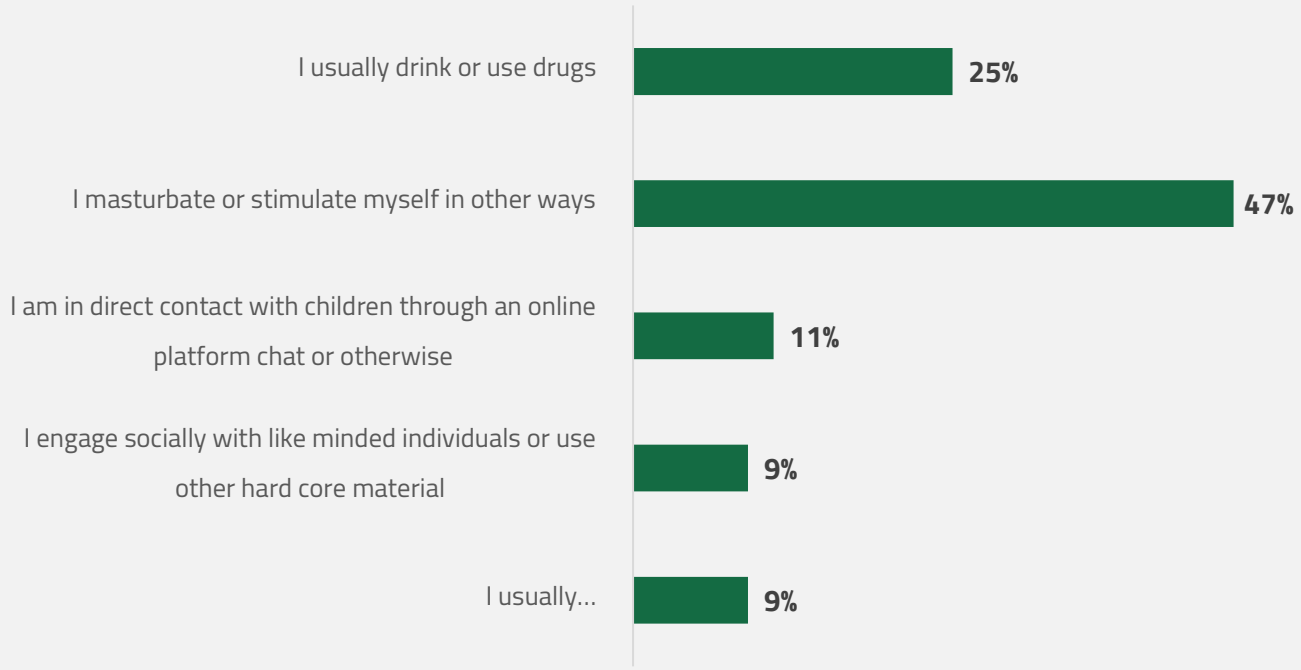
# Q14: Users' Behaviour Before Using CSAM

**14. What are you usually doing before you think, search or view CSAM/illegal violent material?**

- ☐ **I usually drink or use drugs**
- ☐ **I masturbate or stimulate myself in other ways**
- ☐ **I am in direct contact with children through an online platform chat or otherwise**
- ☐ **I engage socially with like-minded individuals or use other hard-core material**
- ☐ **I usually...**

3,614 respondents




In addition to having sexual thoughts before watching CSAM, many respondents say that they masturbate or stimulate themselves before using CSAM.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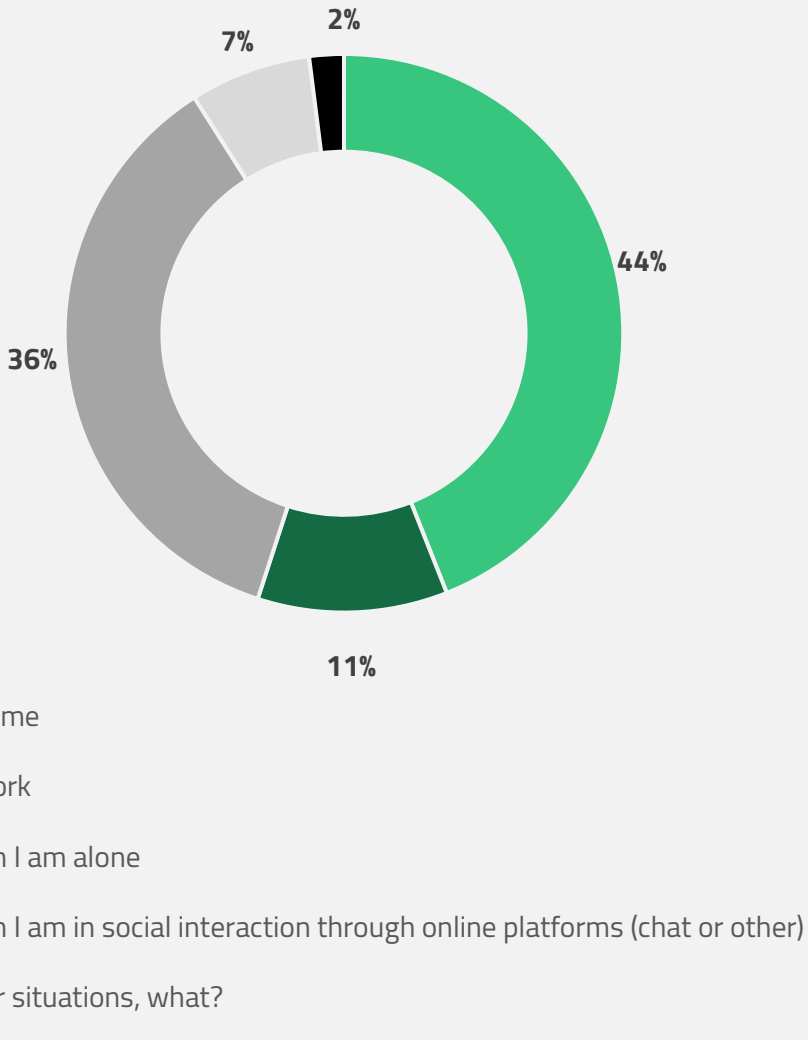
# Q15: Situations in Which Users View CSAM

**15. In what situations do you usually think, search for or view CSAM/illegal violent material?**

- ☐ **At home**
- ☐ **At work**
- ☐ **When I am alone**
- ☐ **When I am in social interaction through online platforms (chat or other)?**
- ☐ **Other situations, what?**

3,620 respondents





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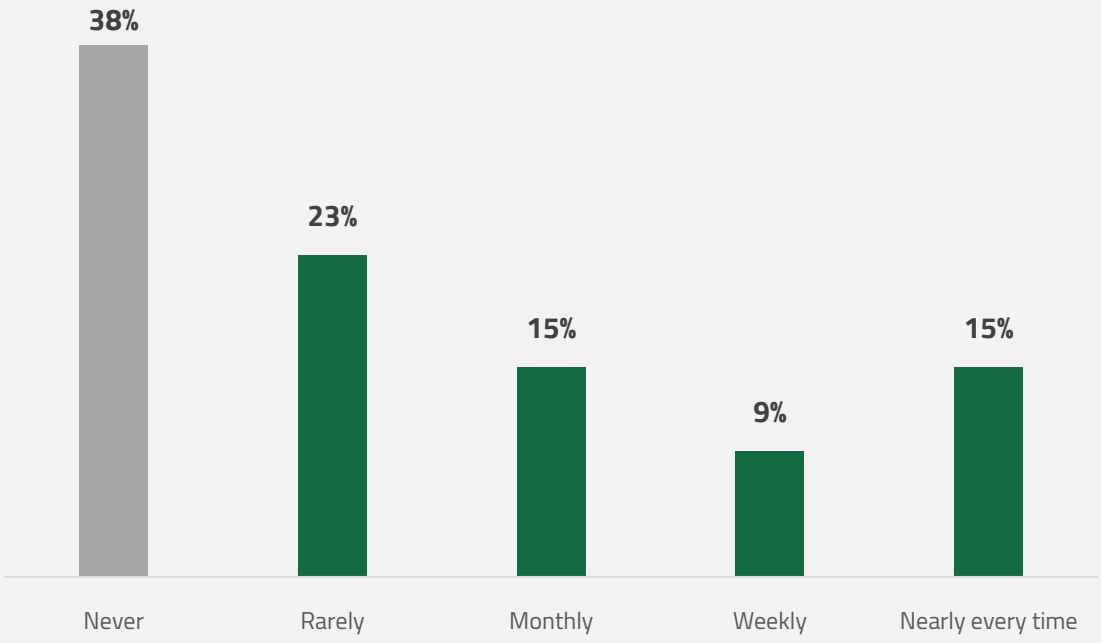
# Q16: Ability to Control Behaviour

**16. I feel that I am not able to stop or control my behaviour in searching/viewing CSAM/illegal violent material**

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Nearly every time

3,612 respondents




A majority of respondents (62%) at some point feel that they are unable to control their use of CSAM.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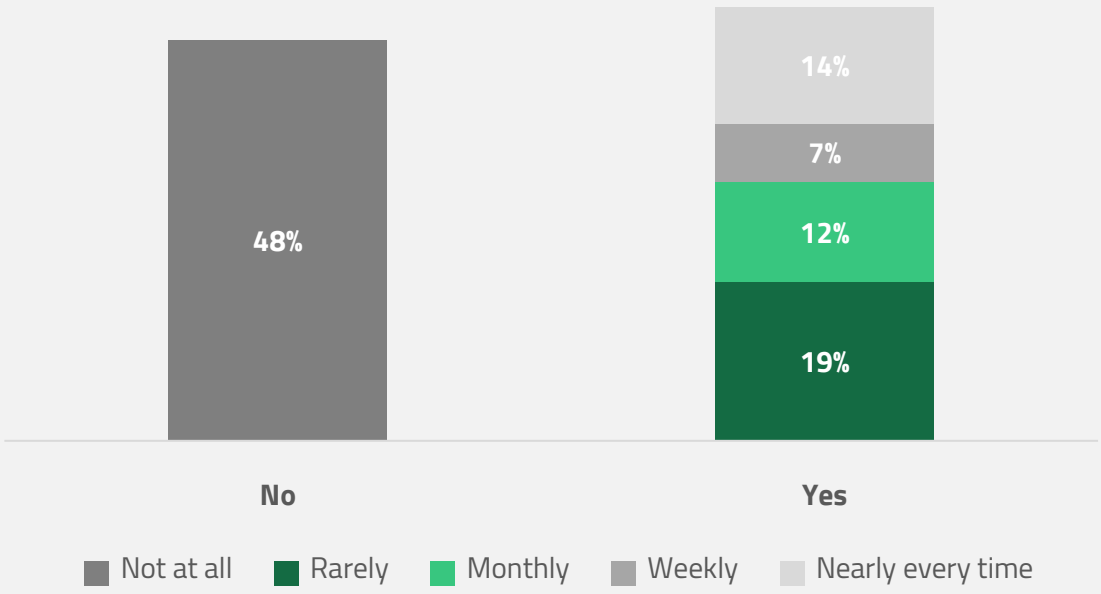
# Q17: Fear of CSAM Leading to Direct Sexual Acts

**17. I feel afraid that viewing CSAM/illegal violent material might lead to sexual acts against a child or another human**

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Nearly every time

3,602 respondents




Over half of the respondents fear, at least sometimes, that their CSAM use could lead to direct offending against children.

This finding highlights that CSAM users are not just viewers. Individuals who use CSAM are at a high risk of directly contacting children, bringing an additional level of urgency.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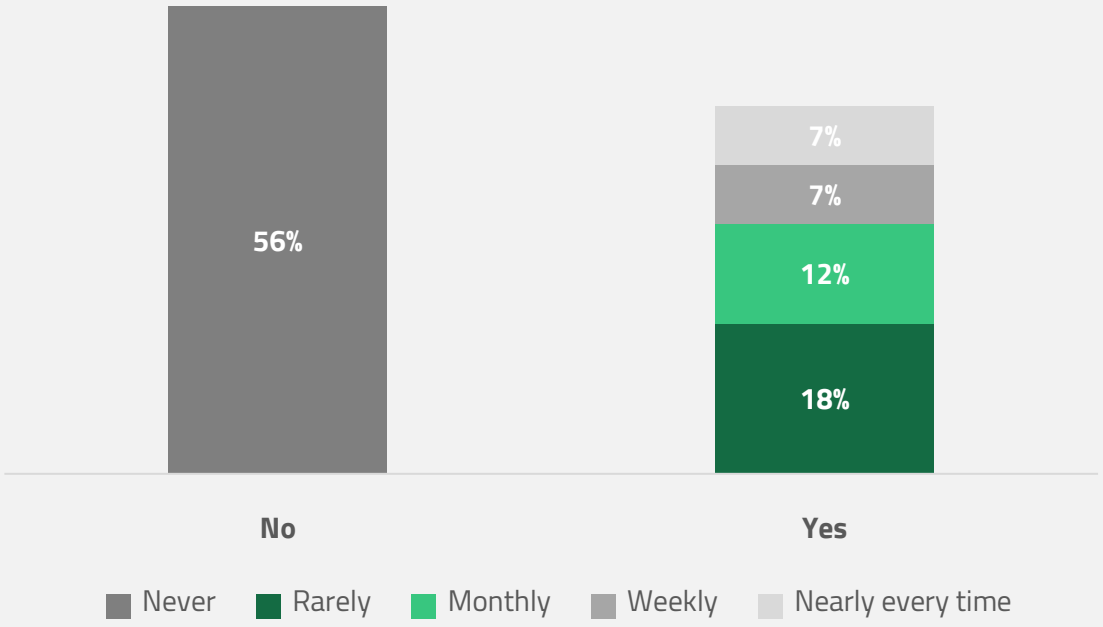
# Q18: Thoughts About Seeking Direct Contact with Children

**18. How often has viewing CSAM/illegal violent material made you think about seeking direct contact with children through online platforms (chat or other)?**

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Nearly every time

3,623 respondents




44% of respondents say that they have, at least once, thought about seeking direct contact with children through online platforms.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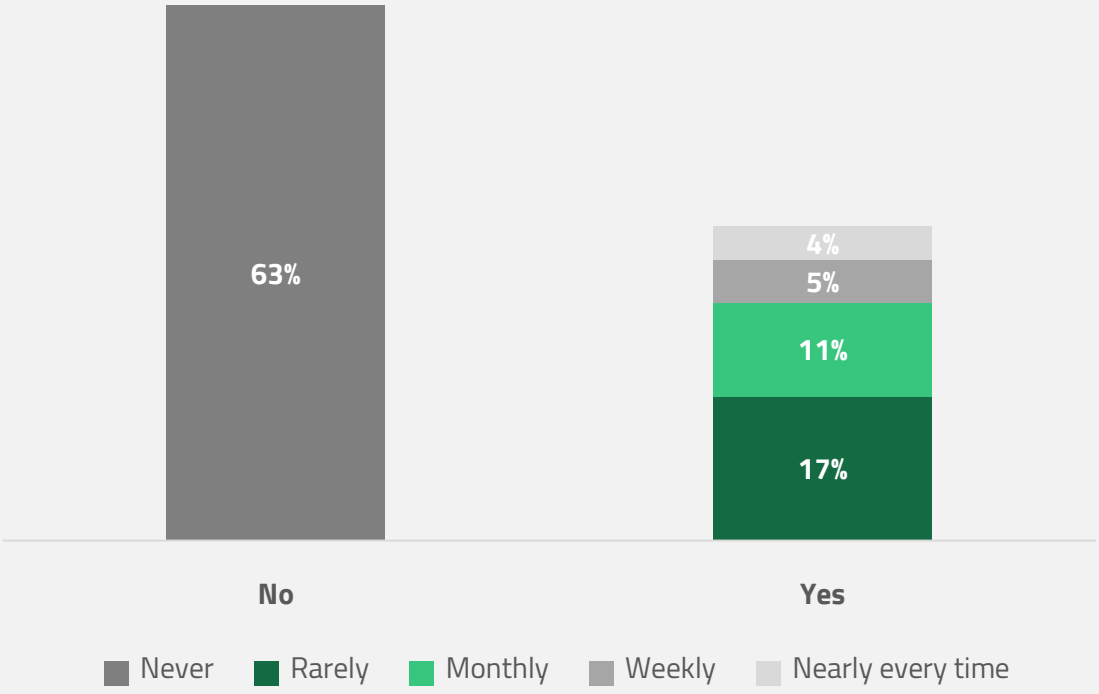
# Q19: Seeking Direct Contact with Children

**19. How often after viewing CSAM/illegal violent material have you sought direct contact with children through online platforms (chat or other)?**

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Nearly every time

3,628 respondents




Many respondents say that they have, at least once, sought direct contact with children through online platforms after having viewed CSAM.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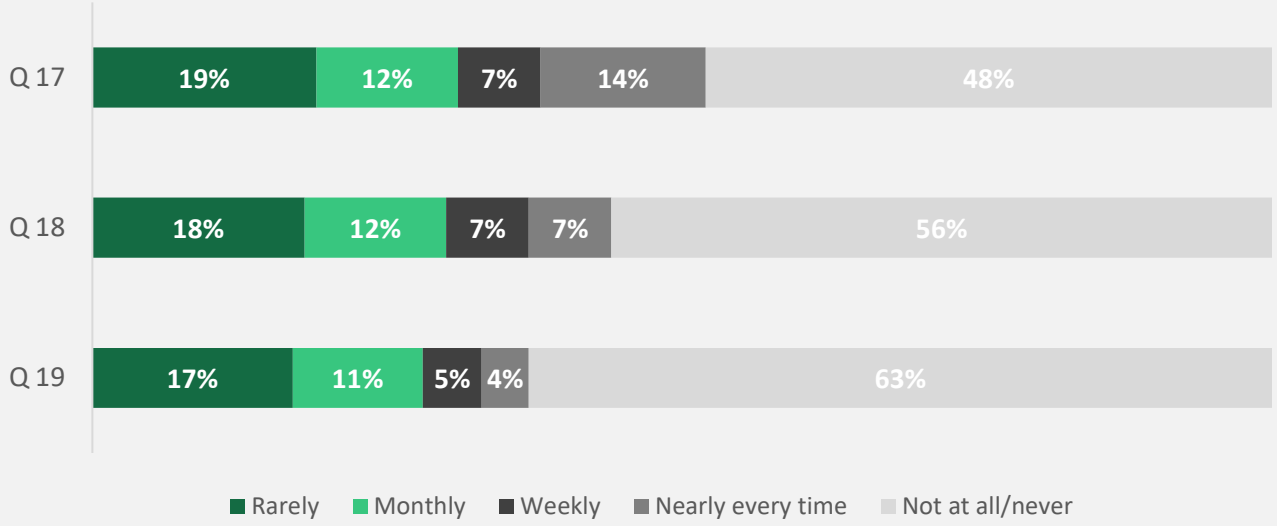
## Many CSAM users are not just viewers

High numbers of respondents report having at some point felt afraid they may, thought about, or directly contacted children after using CSAM.[36] These results show that the users of CSAM are not only viewing the harmful material, but also are at a high risk of directly contacting children.

CSAM users directly contacting children though online platforms poses further risks to the safety and wellbeing of children. Directly contacting children for sexual purposes can be classified as sexual harassment, grooming, or, in the worst case, hands-on child sexual exploitation and abuse.




**52%**

of respondents have felt afraid that viewing CSAM might lead to sexual acts against a child.[37]

**44%**

of respondents said that viewing CSAM made them think about seeking direct contact with children.[38]

**37%**

of respondents have sought direct contact with children after viewing CSAM.[39]

[36] See Key finding: Many CSAM Users are Not Just Viewers.

[37] See Help us to help you Question 17.

[38] See Help us to help you Question 18.

[39] See Help us to help you Question 19.



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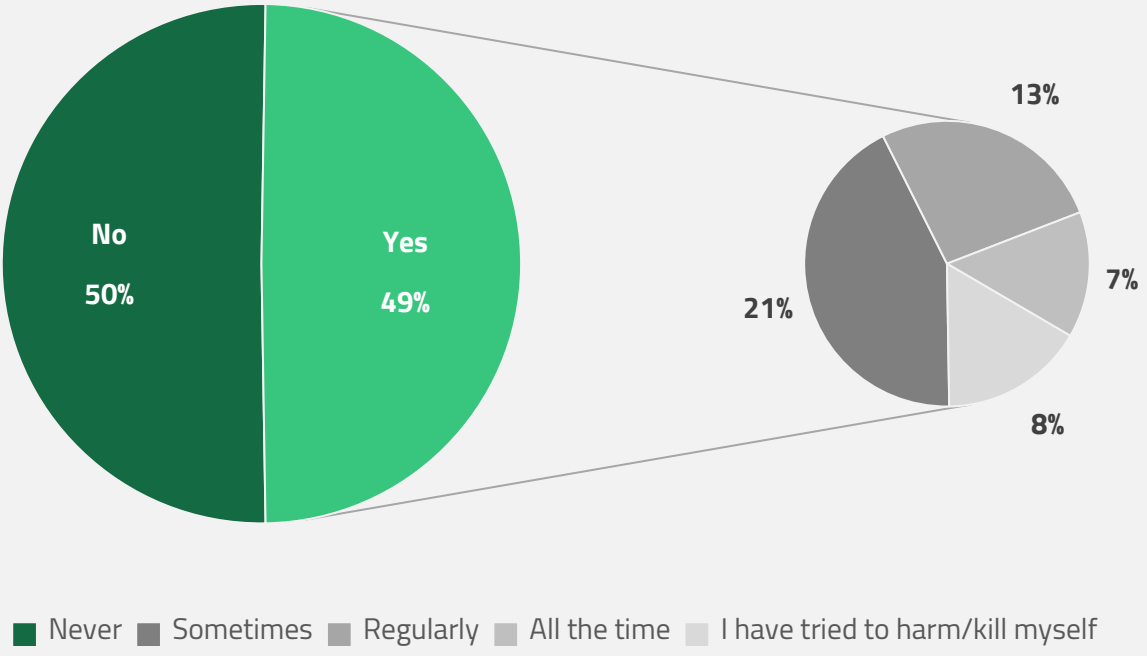
# Q20: Self-Harm and Suicide

**20. Have you had any self-harming thoughts or suicide attempts?**

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Regularly
- ☐ All the time
- ☐ I have tried to harm/kill myself

3,428 respondents




Approximately half of the respondents have at some point experienced thoughts about self-harm or have attempted suicide.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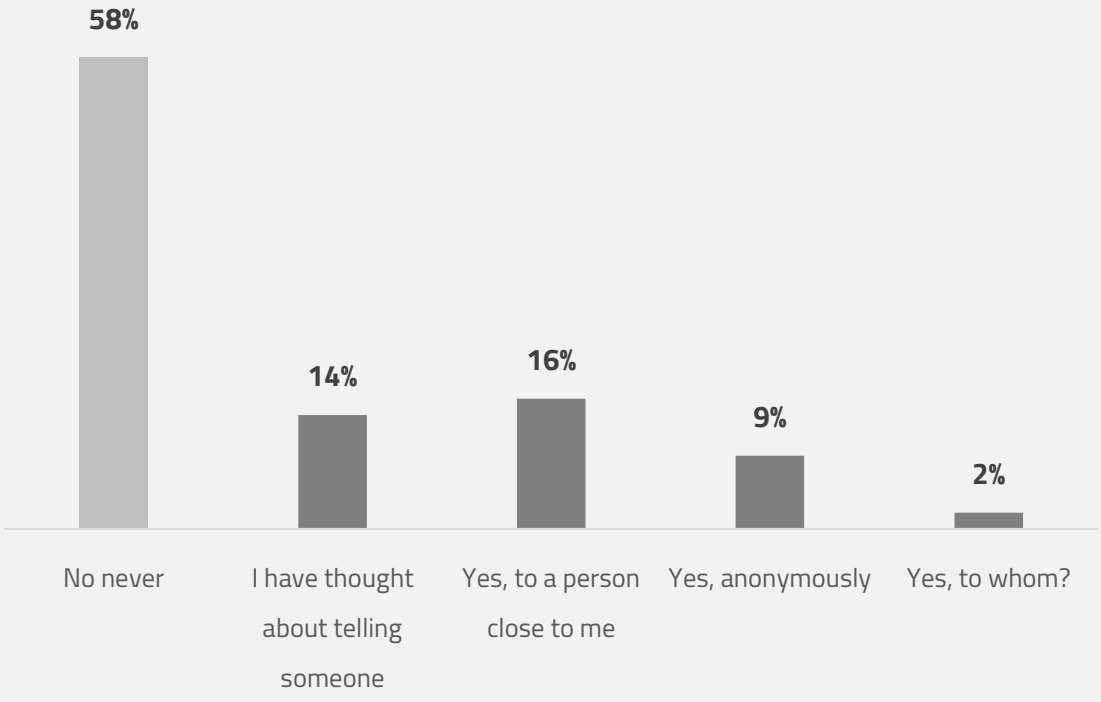
# Q21: Disclosing CSAM Use

**21. Have you told anyone about your use of CSAM/illegal violent material?**

- ☐ **No, never**
- ☐ **I have thought about telling someone**
- ☐ **Yes, to a person close to me**
- ☐ **Yes, anonymously**
- ☐ **Yes, to whom?**

3,384 respondents




A strong majority of the respondents say that they have never told anyone of their CSAM use.

This demonstrates the difficulty of seeking help, and the need for anonymous intervention programs, such as the **ReDirection Self-Help Program**.



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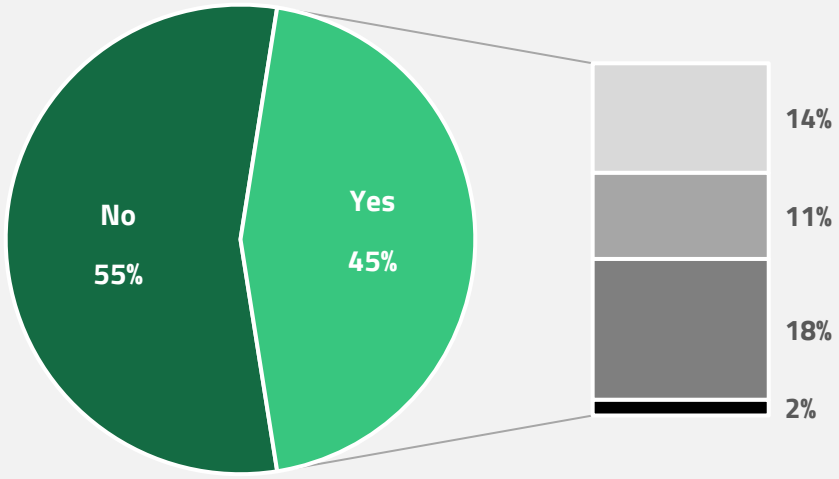
# Q22: Difficulties Related to CSAM Use

**22. Have you experienced any difficulties related to your use of CSAM/illegal violent material?**

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Yes, difficulties in close relationships
- ☐ Yes, difficulties with substance abuse
- ☐ Yes, difficulties with my mental health
- ☐ Yes, other difficulties, what?

3,357 respondents




Nearly half of the respondents state that their use of CSAM influences their life negatively in some way, in particular with regard to their mental health and close relationships.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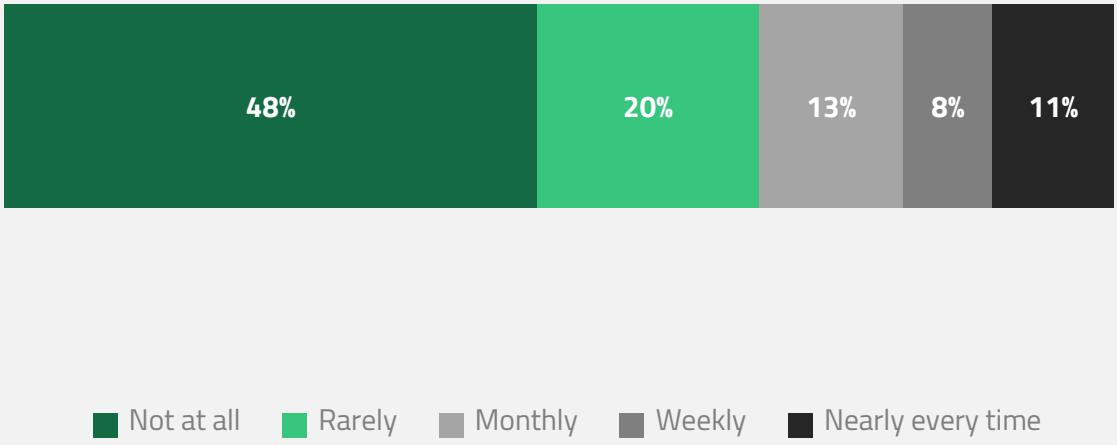
# Q23: Stress and Emotional Difficulties

**23. Have you experienced difficulties in coping with your stress and emotions after viewing the CSAM/illegal violent material?**

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Nearly every time

3,336 respondents





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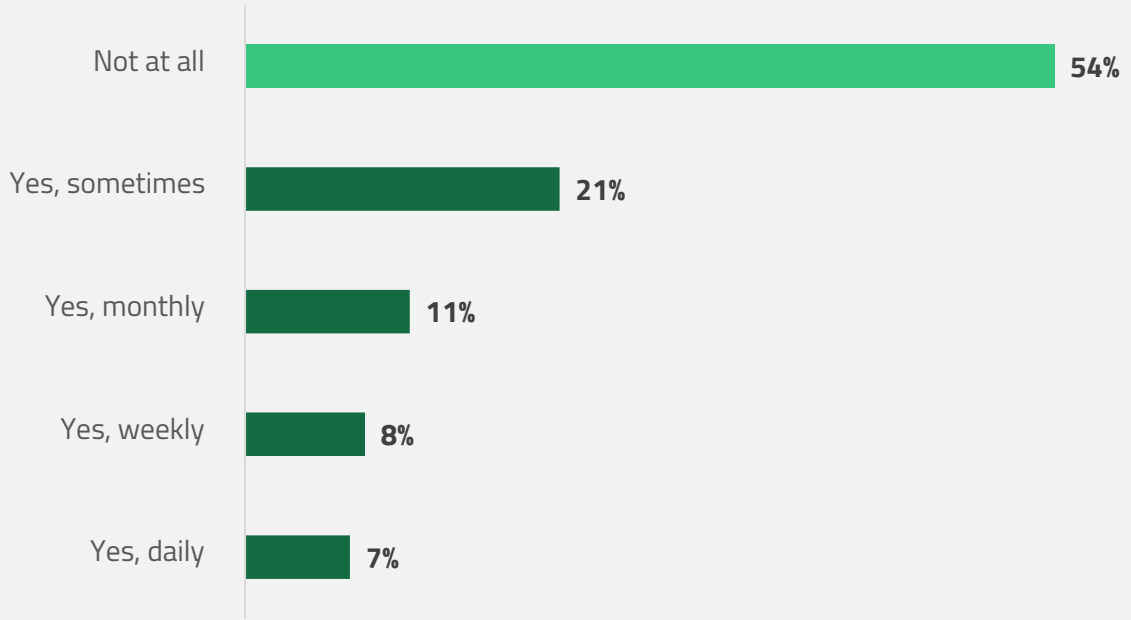
# Q24: Difficulties in Daily Activities

**24. Have you experienced difficulties in carrying out your ordinary daily routine and activities?**

- ☐ **Not at all**
- ☐ **Yes, sometimes**
- ☐ **Yes, monthly**
- ☐ **Yes, weekly**
- ☐ **Yes, daily**

3,335 respondents





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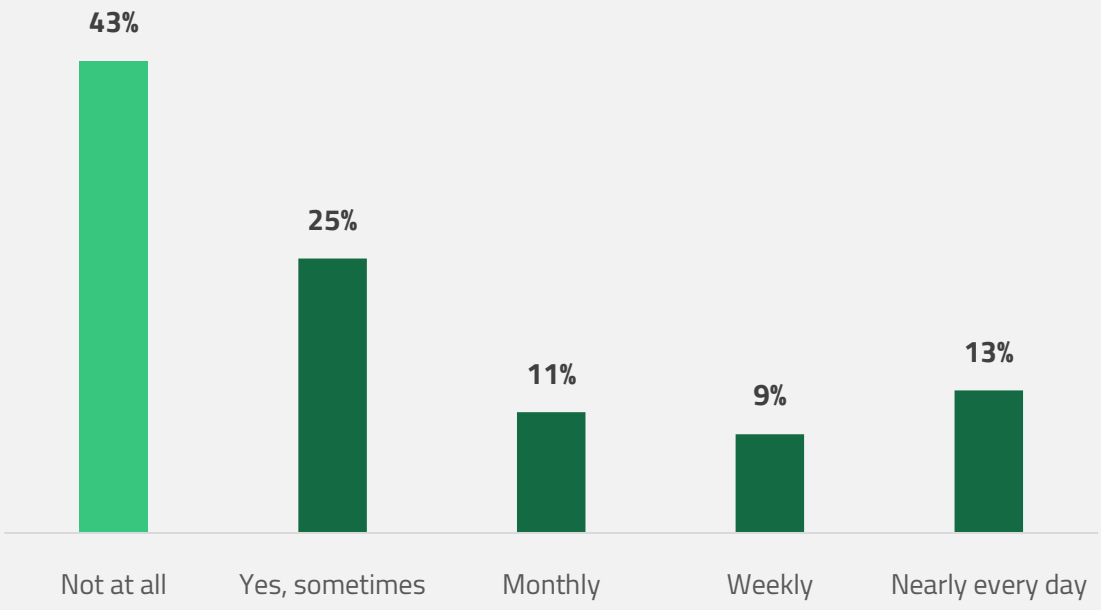
# Q25: Desire to Withdraw Socially

**25. Have you experienced desires to withdraw socially, for example through avoidance of social situations, feeling better in solitude?**

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Yes, sometimes
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Nearly every day

3,335 respondents




A majority of respondents (57%) say that they have felt a desire to withdraw socially.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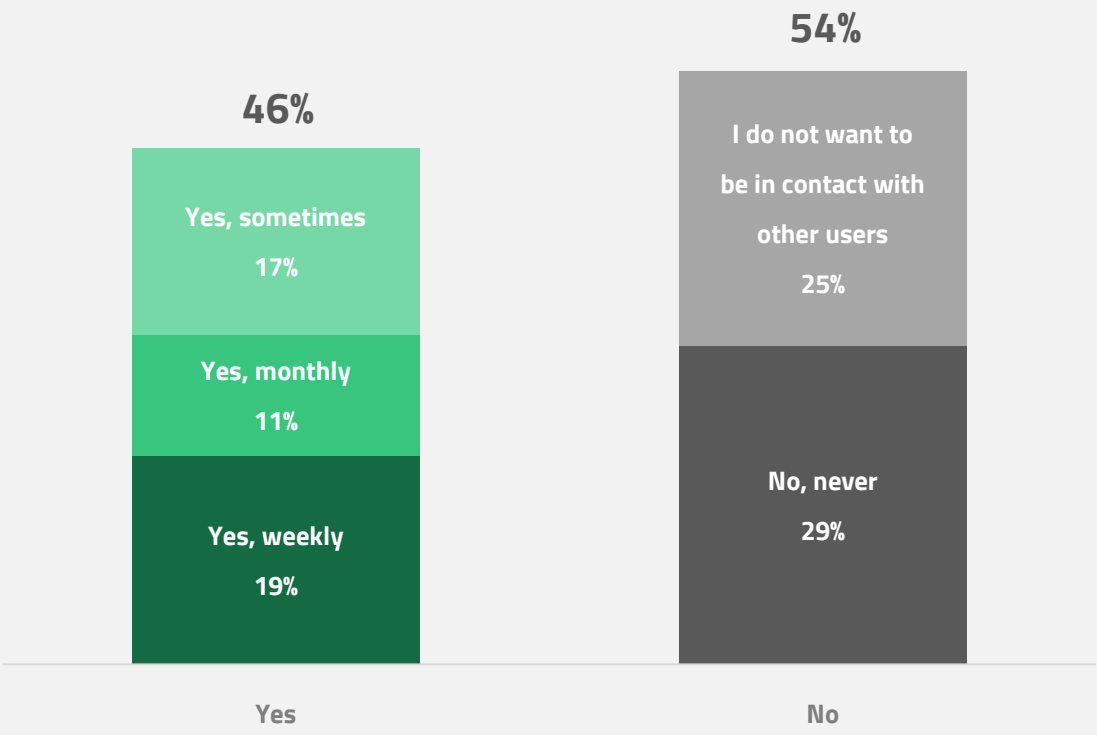
# Q26: Contact with Other CSAM Users

**26. Have you been in contact with other CSAM/illegal violent material users?**

- ☐ Yes, weekly
- ☐ Yes, monthly
- ☐ Yes, sometimes
- ☐ No, never
- ☐ I do not want to be in contact with other users

3,340 respondents




Many CSAM users say that they are in contact with other users.

Being in contact with other users can exacerbate the problem. Users might justify each other's behaviour, thus perpetuating the cognitive distortion that CSAM use is acceptable.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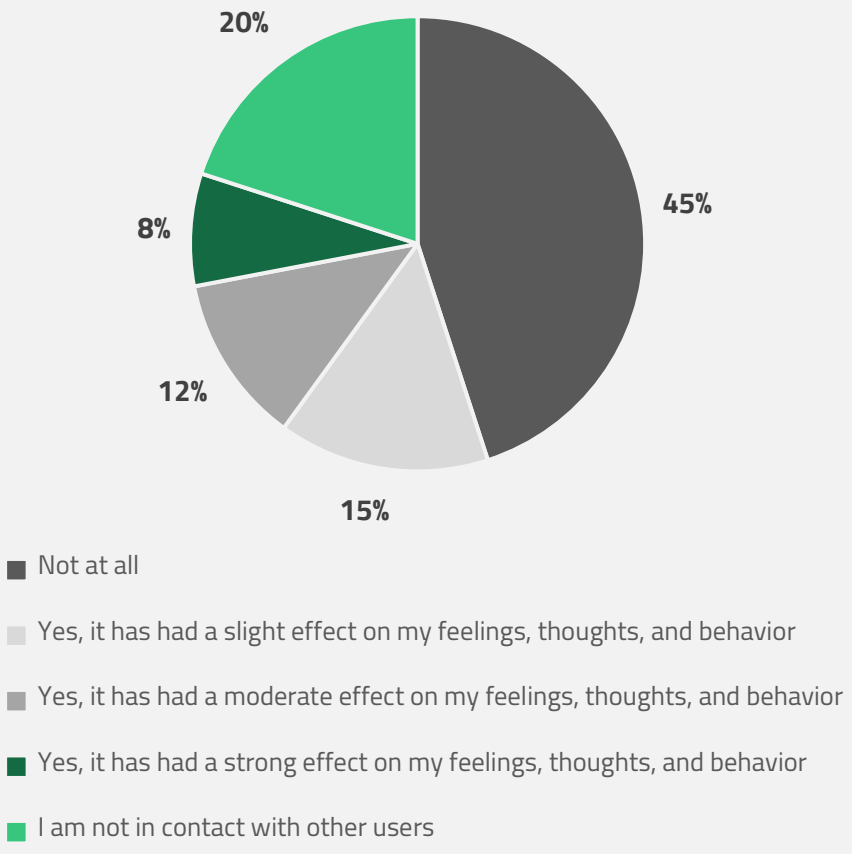
# Q27: Influence of Other CSAM Users

**27. Have you been affected by the feelings, thoughts, or behaviours of other CSAM/illegal violent material users?**

- ☐ **Not at all**
- ☐ **Yes, it has had a slight effect on my feelings, thoughts, and behaviour**
- ☐ **Yes, it has had a moderate effect on my feelings, thoughts, and behaviour**
- ☐ **Yes, it has had a strong effect on my feelings, thoughts, and behaviour**
- ☐ **I am not in contact with other users**

3,315 respondents




35% of respondents say that they have been affected by other CSAM users to some extent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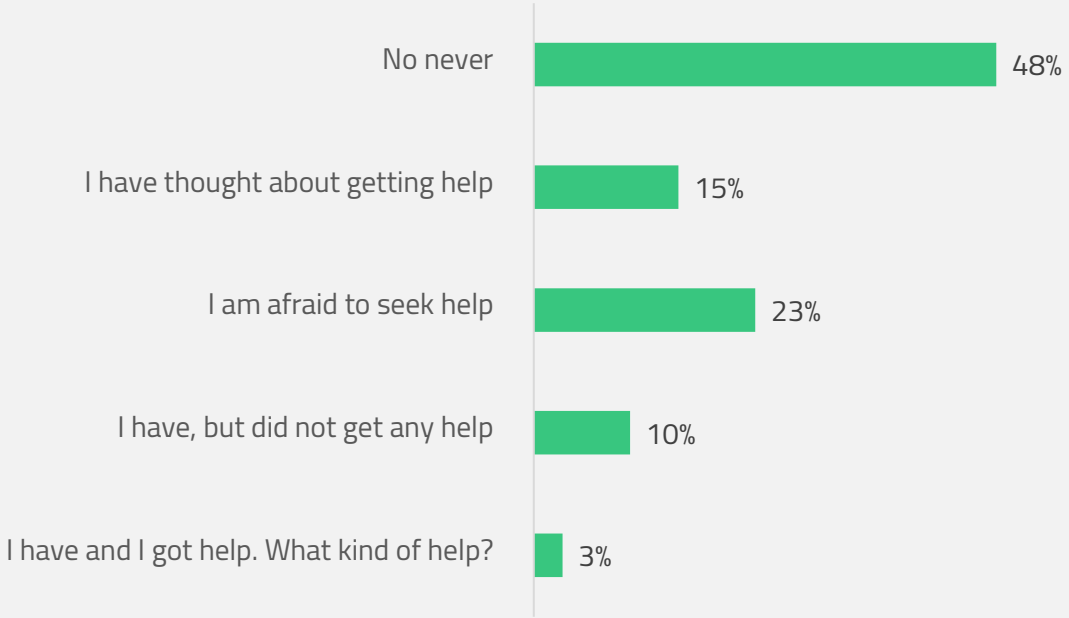
# Q28: Seeking Help for CSAM use

**28. Have you sought help to stop searching, using, or sharing CSAM/illegal violent material?**

- ☐ **No never**
- ☐ **I have thought about getting help**
- ☐ **I am afraid to seek help**
- ☐ **I have, but did not get any help**
- ☐ **I have and I got help. What kind of help?**

3,322 respondents




A majority of the respondents have never sought help to stop viewing CSAM, have never thought about getting help, or are afraid to seek help.

Only 13% of respondents say that they have received help.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# Q29: Self-Image of CSAM Users

**29. How would you describe yourself?**

☐ **I am...**

2,414 respondents

This open-ended question received 2,414 written responses. Our preliminary qualitative analysis reveals several common categories of responses. These include respondents expressing a negative self-image, with guilt or shame about their behaviour, as well as responses from individuals expressing positive self-image. A number of respondents mention loneliness and mental health problems such as depression. Many refer to their sexual interests, and many mention their age.

| **Preliminary classification of responses** |
| --- |
| Negative self-image (guilt/shame) |
| Positive self-image |
| Loneliness and mental health problems |
| Sexual interests |
| Age (often young age, e.g. 14 years old) |

Question 29 gave the respondents an opportunity to reflect on their perception of and express how they feel about themselves, after having been asked to consider their thoughts, emotions and behaviours relating to their use of CSAM. We believe that placing this question near the end of the survey meant that the responses were more likely to reflect the respondents' view of themselves with regard to their use of CSAM.

We plan to conduct further qualitative analysis on these responses.


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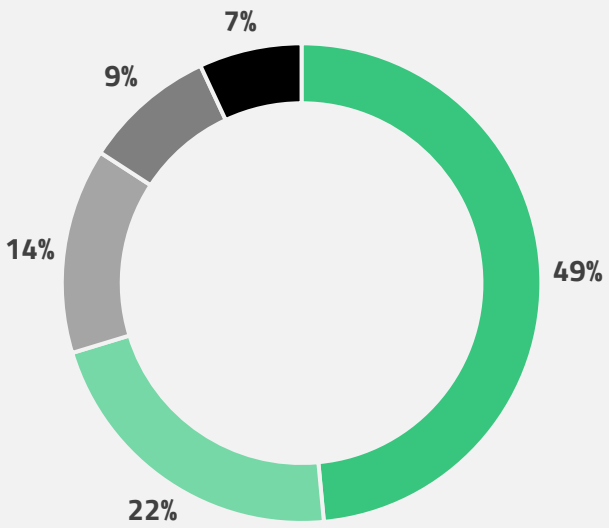
# Q30: CSAM Users' Views of Their Futures

**30. How do you see your future?**

- ☐ I am full of hope about my future
- ☐ I am not particularly pessimistic or discouraged about the future
- ☐ I feel discouraged about the future
- ☐ I feel that I have nothing to look forward to
- ☐ I feel that the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve

3,285 respondents




- I am full of hope about my future
- I am not particularly pessimistic or discouraged about the future
- I feel discouraged about the future
- I feel that I have nothing to look forward to
- I feel that the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve



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# Q31: What Would Help CSAM Users Stop Using CSAM?

**31. Help us to help you?**

**If you have tried to stop using and sharing CSAM/illegal violent material and got back to using it, could you tell us 3 reasons why you have not succeeded?**

☐ **What would help you to stop using and sharing CSAM/illegal violent material?**

1,305 respondents

The 1,305 written responses each provide invaluable insight into the reasons why CSAM users struggle to stop using CSAM, and what they believe could help them to change their behaviour. This information is essential in preventing CSAM offences.

From the English language responses, we have conducted preliminary qualitative analysis to determine some of the most common categories of responses. Many respondents said that there was nothing that could help them to stop, however many others cited a number of potentially effective methods that may help users change their behaviour, including restricting access to CSAM and therapy or counselling.

| **Reasons why the respondents have not succeeded in stopping their use of CSAM:** | **What would help the respondents to stop using CSAM?** |
|---|---|
| Lack of self-control | Medication to lower sex drive |
| Escalation of pornography use | Relationship with a partner |
| Masturbation & sex addiction | An alternative way to feel release |
| Depression | Therapy/counselling |
| Problems in relationships | Less access to CSAM |
| Substance use | Keeping this survey as a pop up |
| Stress, anxiety | Being caught/arrested |
| Sexual abuse in childhood | Safe space to confess |
| Loneliness | Nothing would help |
| Accessibility of CSAM | |
| Unwillingness to stop | |


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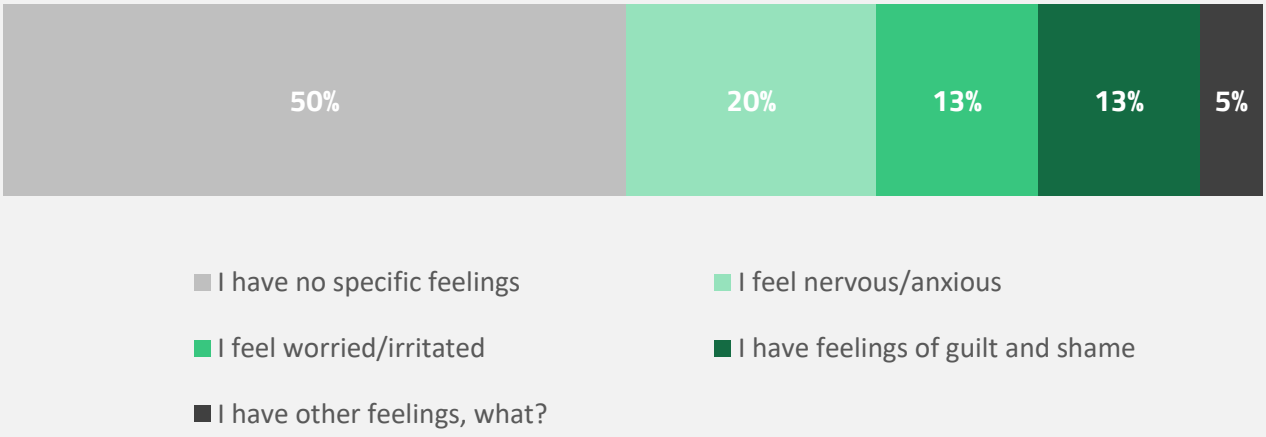
# Q32: Emotions After Answering the Survey

**32. How are you feeling after answering this survey?**

- ☐ I have no specific feelings
- ☐ I feel nervous/anxious
- ☐ I feel worried/irritated
- ☐ I have feelings of guilt and shame
- ☐ I have other feelings, what?

**3,301 respondents**





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Survey Results

# NO NEED FOR HELP

This section presents the results of the

No need for help survey

Total number of respondents:

3,313

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## I don't need any help.

## Would you like to tell us the reason for this?

3,313 respondents

The **No need for help** open-ended survey has been answered by 3,313 respondents, compared to 5171 respondents to the **Help us to help you** survey.

We have conducted preliminary qualitative analysis of the English written answers,[40] however we plan to conduct further in-depth analysis in all languages, with the help of our partners to translate the responses, as we have massive data in 12 languages.

Many responses fall within one of the four following categories:

**Cognitive distortions: 'I am using CSAM, but I don't need help because it is not wrong'**

- I'm underage myself so it is okay
- I am just watching CSAM, I am not contacting any children
- There is nothing wrong with using CSAM or being sexually interested in children
- Children can consent

**Introspective: 'I know that using CSAM is wrong, but I can't stop'**

- No one can help me
- I will never change

**Justifications/excuses: 'I am not using CSAM, so I don't need help'**

- I am conducting research; I am not interested in watching CSAM
- I am a law enforcement officer investigating online crimes
- I am just curious about what I can find on the dark web
- I want to see how accessible CSAM is

**Irrelevant/incomprehensible**

- Spam
- Not relevant to the question

[40] There are 2,887 English responses to the **No need for help** survey.



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# What have we learnt and where do we go from here?

This report provides an overview of the results of Protect Children's research conducted as a part of the **ReDirection** project. Qualitative analysis of the data and further analysis of the quantitative data will be conducted by Protect Children. Together with project partners, we will publish research articles elaborating on the findings of the research.

Due to the significant impact that the **Help us to help you** survey has had on respondents, Protect Children has decided to not remove the survey from the dark web yet. Originally, the intended time for data gathering was to be three months. However, after realising the importance of the surveys as an intervention for many CSAM users, and due to the massive amounts of individuals accessing the surveys daily, the surveys will remain accessible on the dark web for the foreseeable future.

At the time of writing, over 10,000 individuals have taken the time to respond to questions on their CSAM use. Many CSAM users have indicated willingness and even a need to talk to someone. When the goal is to prevent sexual violence against children, the means of prevention cannot be limited, and thus it is necessary to target offenders and offer guidance to those who are motivated to change their behaviour. The **ReDirection Self-Help Program** provides anonymous guidance to support the behavioural change of individuals to stop their use of CSAM.

Through the unprecedented information gathered from this research, we are able to better understand the thoughts, behaviours, and emotions of individuals who search for CSAM. This in turn helps us to strengthen our efforts to protect children against all forms of sexual violence everywhere.

Together, we will continue the fight to **protect children**.


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# Methodology

The data presented in this report has been gathered through the two anonymous surveys in the dark web conducted by Protect Children: **Help us to help you** and **No need for help**. The primary focus of this report is the presentation of the quantitative data results gathered from the multiple-choice questions in the **Help us to help you** survey. Qualitative data gathered from open ended questions in both **Help us to help you** and **No need for help** will be comprehensively analysed by Protect Children.

The surveys are available in 12 languages. The language versions of the surveys have been made available at different times, all within the period between 10 December 2020 and 11 August 2021. As such, each survey has a different data gathering period.

| Language | Data gathering period | Duration (days) | Respondents |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Dutch** | 9.6.2021-11.8.2021 | 64 | 5 |
| **English** | 10.12.2020-11.8.2021 | 245 | 6,037 |
| **Estonian** | 6.5.2021-11.8.2021 | 98 | 66 |
| **Finnish** | 6.5.2021-11.8.2021 | 98 | 60 |
| **French** | 2.6.2021-11.8.2021 | 71 | 37 |
| **German** | 5.5.2021-11.8.2021 | 97 | 310 |
| **Italian** | 6.5.2021-11.8.2021 | 98 | 115 |
| **Japanese** | 24.7.2021-11.8.2021 | 19 | 8 |
| **Norwegian** | 5.7.2021-11.8.2021 | 38 | 2 |
| **Russian** | 5.5.2021-11.8.2021 | 97 | 542 |
| **Spanish** | 10.12.2020-11.8.2021 | 245 | 1,296 |
| **Swedish** | 22.6.2021-11.8.2021 | 51 | 6 |
| | | | **8,484** |


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## Formulating the Questions

The questions of the **Help us to help you** and **No need for help** surveys were carefully curated by experts working in the field, including psychologists, psychotherapists, researchers, law enforcement, legal specialists, and specialists working with offenders and potential offenders. The questions were drafted on the basis of Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT), with the primary focus of gathering information on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of the respondents in order to create the **ReDirection Self-Help Program**.

The surveys do not include any questions relating to identifiable personal characteristics, so as to fully preserve the respondents' anonymity and to garner a level of trust. It is presumed that this guaranteed anonymity increases the willingness of respondents to answer honestly and accurately. Furthermore, we did not implement mandatory questions into our surveys, and respondents had complete authority over the questions they wanted to respond to.

**We did not inquire about the age, gender, nationality, or any other identifiable personal characteristics of the respondents.**

## Sample group

As we did not ask the respondents to disclose any identifiable personal characteristics, the knowledge we have on the sample group is limited. The respondents are dark web users who are searching for CSAM or other violent illegal material on certain dark web platforms using well-known codes for CSAM. We also found from the results that many of the respondents said that they had been using CSAM for less than 6 months.

## Limitations

Since launching the surveys, we have recognized various limitations. When analysing the results, we must factor in the fact that many respondents may fear that their responses may incriminate them. This, in turn, may hamper the accuracy and truthfulness of some responses.


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## Quantitative Data

The quantitative data presented in this report was gathered from the multiple-choice questions in the **Help us to help you** survey.

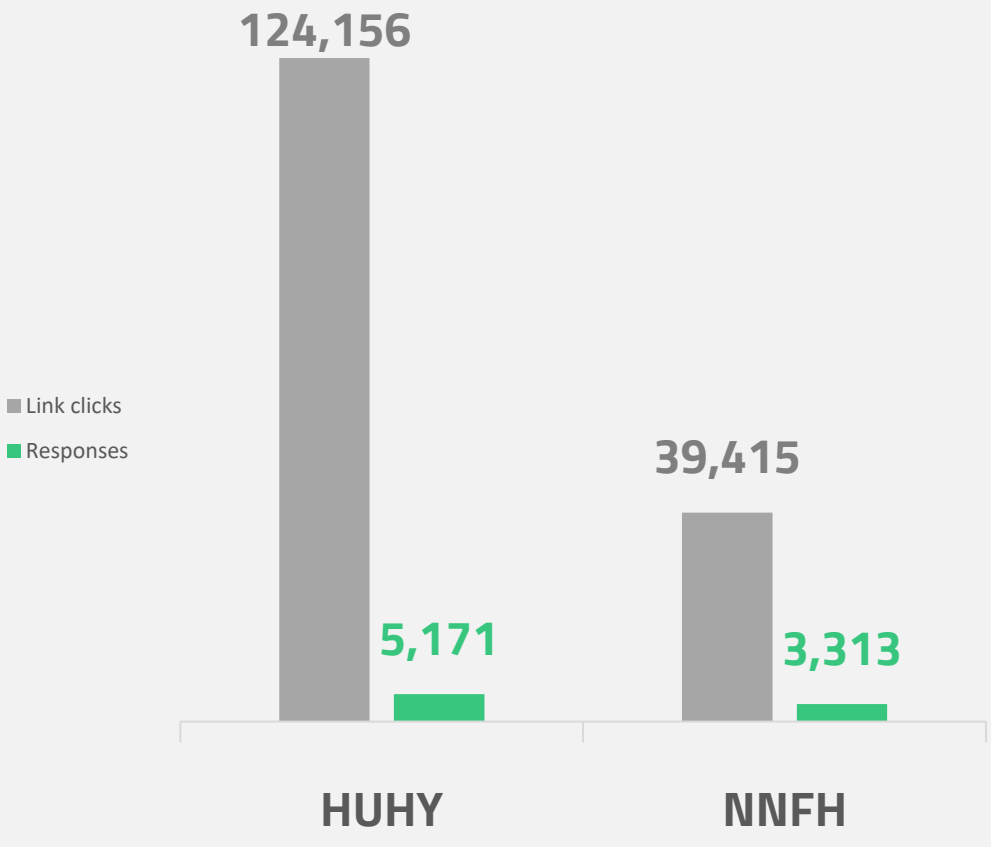
## Qualitative Data

The qualitative data presented in this report was gathered from the English language open-ended questions in the two voluntary, anonymous surveys conducted by Protect Children in the dark web: **Help us to help you** and **No need for help**.

For this report, Protect Children conducted preliminary qualitative analysis on the English open-ended responses from the surveys. We are planning to conduct further research and analysis; however, we require resources to translate the results in the other languages.

## Clicks & Responses to Surveys

During the data gathering period, there were nearly 165,000 clicks and a total of 8,484 responses to the two surveys. Subsequent to the data gathering period, the number of responses has continued to rise, with over 10,000 responses at the time of publishing.



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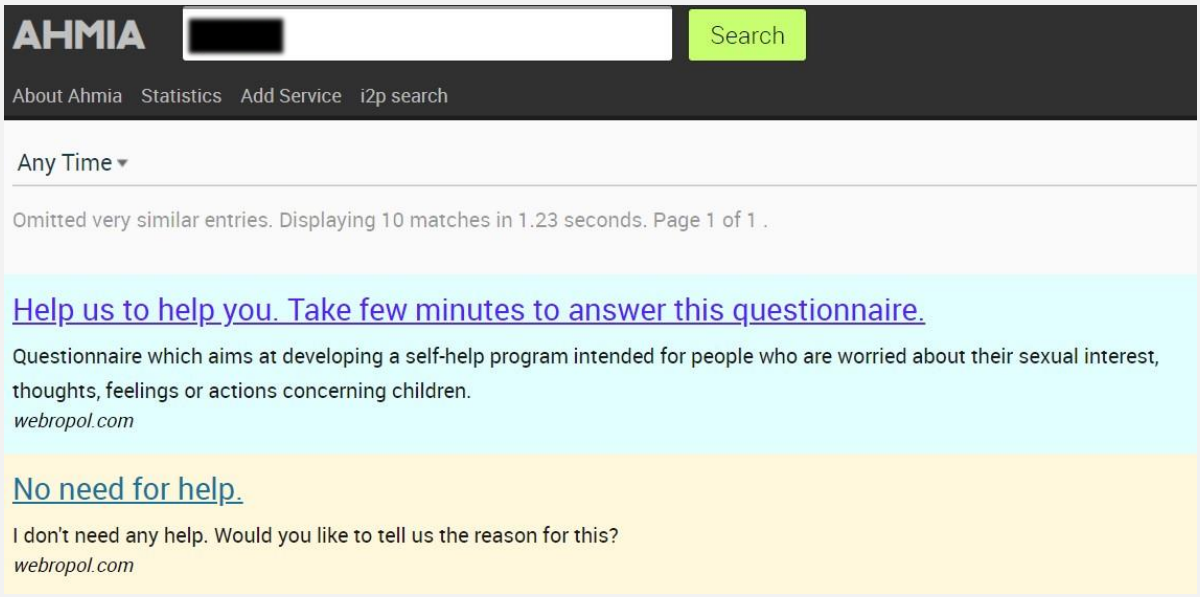
## How the respondents access the survey

The surveys are available on three dark web search engines and pop up to users when they use specific search terms that indicate that they may be searching for CSAM.




The above image illustrates how the surveys appear in the dark web search engine "Ahmia" after searching for material with search terms, or codes, often associated with CSAM. The figure shows an example of a common code (blurred for reader discretion) through which users search for CSAM. Certain words often associated with CSAM have been programmed to lead the individual to the landing page which holds the **Help us to help you** & **No need for help** surveys. It is important to note that the individual has the option to either click onto a survey or decide not to open either. Thus, no respondent was automatically directed into either questionnaire, but rather had to make the conscious decision to open the questionnaire if they wanted to participate in the survey. Once the individual opens either survey, they select their preferred language before starting the survey.

## CSAM Search Codes

The search terms, or codes, with which users search for CSAM have been gathered from INTERPOL and international law enforcement agencies. Although different languages have their own search codes, most of the codes acquired were in English. From this it could be derived that many individuals searching for CSAM on the dark web do so using English codes.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