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Online sexual exploitation and abuse in the United States:

An analysis of policy gaps, system response, and prevention mechanisms through survivor-lived experiences

January 2026



A just world for all women and girls





Contents

Content warning & resources	6
About Equality Now	7
About the Sexual Violence Prevention Association	7
About the project	8
Acknowledgements	8
Abbreviations and acronyms	9
Glossary	10
Executive summary	11
Overview	11
Key findings	12
Introduction: Context and rationale	14
Purpose and scope of the report	14
Conceptual framework	15
Types and forms of OSEA in the United States	15
Jenna - survivor of OSEA	16
Demographics most affected by OSEA	17
US-based technology companies	18
Current legal frameworks & support mechanisms	19
Federal-level	19
State-level	20
Support	20
Link to global discussions	21
Methodology	22
Sampling strategy	22
Data collection	22
Ethical considerations	22
Limitations	23
Data analysis	23
Results and key findings	24
Participant backgrounds & identities	24
Nature & impact	25
Common manifestations of OSEA	31
Table of OSEA classification among study participants	31
Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)	31
Nonconsensual explicit deepfakes	31
Child sexual abuse materials (CSAM)	32

Online grooming	33
Sextortion & coercion	33
Cyberstalking, threats, and doxxing	33
Online sex trafficking	34
Impacts on survivors of OSEA	35
Emotional, mental and physical impacts	35
Interrelational impacts	36
Financial impact	36
Lifestyle impact	38
Victim blaming and feelings of betrayal	38
Nikki- survivor of OSEA	40
Implications of OSEA	41
Variation in forms of OSEA	41
Dichotomy between adult and child survivors	41
OSEA harm is ongoing and compounding	42
Responses & access to legal remedies	43
Reporting & investigation	43
Multi-jurisdictional issues within the US	44
Burden on survivors	45
Legal process	46
Systemic knowledge gaps	46
Lack of specialised training	47
System effectiveness	47
Angelique - survivor of OSEA	48
Victim blaming in the legal process	49
Case resolution	49
Policy gaps	50
Coverage	50
Accountability	51
Access & cost	51
Timing	52
Lack of survivor voices	52
Lack of survivor voices in case decisions	52
Lack of survivor voices in policy reform	53
Support systems	54
Support services	54
Community response	55
Alan - survivor of OSEA	56

Recommendations	57
Recommendations for legal systems	57
Training & education	57
Legal language and processes	58
Recommendations for policy reform	59
Advocacy and international collaboration	59
Intersectionality and inclusion of survivor voices in developing law and policy	60
Recommendations for survivor support	61
OSEA-specific support services	61
Reduce stigma to build community support	61
Recommendations for prevention	62
Prevention framework	62
Education is prevention	63
Ending misogyny and rape culture	64
Technology regulation	65
Data collection and reporting	66
Understanding perpetrator motivations	66
Conclusion	68
OSEA is a growing problem	68
Future research	68
Call to action	69

Content warning & resources

This report contains descriptions of online sexual exploitation and abuse (OSEA), including discussions of rape, coercion, harassment and other forms of sexual violence. Resources for psychological and emotional safety are listed below:

Organisation	Website	Description
RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)	rainn.org	The nation's largest anti-sexual violence organisation, operating the National Sexual Assault Hotline.
National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)	nsvrc.org	Provides leadership in preventing and responding to sexual violence through collaboration, sharing resources, and promoting research.
Safety Net Project, National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)	techsafety.org	Focuses on the intersection of technology and intimate partner violence, offering resources on how to use technology safely and address misuse.
WomensLaw.org	womenslaw.org	Provides legal information and support to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.
Without My Consent	withoutmyconsent.org	Offers resources for individuals facing online harassment, including guidance on removing nonconsensual content.
Reputation Rhino	reputationrhino.com	Specialises in online reputation management, including the removal of nonconsensual explicit content.
Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI)	cybercivilrights.org	Provides support and advocacy for victims of nonconsensual pornography and other forms of online abuse.
Love Is Respect	loveisrespect.org	Offers information and support to young people about healthy relationships and dating abuse.
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) - Take It Down	takeitdown.ncmec.org	Assists minors in removing explicit content shared online.
Stop Non-Consensual Intimate Images (StopNCII)	stopncii.org	Provides a tool to help prevent the spread of nonconsensual intimate images online.
National Human Trafficking Hotline	humantraffickinghotline.org	Offers support and resources for victims of human trafficking.
Tahirih Justice Center	tahirih.org	Provides legal services, policy advocacy, and education to protect immigrant women and girls.
National Suicide Hotline	988 Lifeline	Provides confidential crisis counseling and support.



About Equality Now

Equality Now is a worldwide human rights organisation dedicated to securing the legal and systemic change needed to end discrimination against all women and girls, everywhere in the world. Since its inception in 1992, it has played a role in reforming 130 discriminatory laws globally, positively impacting the lives of hundreds of millions of women and girls, their communities and nations, both now and for generations to come. Working with partners at national, regional and global levels, Equality Now draws on deep legal expertise and a diverse range of social, political and cultural perspectives to continue to lead the way in steering, shaping and driving the change needed to achieve enduring gender equality, to the benefit of all.



About the Sexual Violence Prevention Association

The Sexual Violence Prevention Association (SVPA) is a national nonprofit in the US dedicated to preventing sexual violence systemically. We achieve this through four main pillars- legislative advocacy, groundbreaking research, public education, and engaging institutions such as colleges, companies, and K-12 schools. We use systemic change to prevent sexual violence by counteracting rape culture and preventing perpetration. We are founded and led by marginalised survivors with the core belief that sexual violence is both the result of existing power imbalances and a tool used to gain and maintain power, control, and oppression. Thus, ending sexual violence requires ending systemic inequity and vice versa.

About the project

Subsequent to the publication of its report, *Ending Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Women and Girls: A Call for International Standards*¹, Equality Now has been advocating for policy and legal reform to address online sexual exploitation and abuse (OSEA). Equality Now identified the United States (US), India, and Kenya as focus countries to collaborate with local advocacy organisations to engage with survivors and understand their lived experiences of OSEA. The goal of this project is to enhance knowledge and awareness among national, regional, and international policymakers on mechanisms for preventing and responding to OSEA. Over the years, Equality Now engaged several stakeholders in the US to better understand the gaps, challenges, opportunities, and priorities in addressing OSEA. This research study was commissioned by Equality Now for the Sexual Violence Prevention Association to gather evidence of survivors' lived experiences in the US.

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Finally, the team is deeply grateful to all the study participants for agreeing to participate in the study and share their time and experiences as survivors. We acknowledge how difficult it is to revisit these experiences and hope these stories will inform policy and legal reform to prevent OSEA.

Abbreviations and acronyms

ACLU:	American Civil Liberties Union
AI:	Artificial intelligence
ASMR:	Autonomous sensory meridian response
CCRI:	Cyber Civil Rights Initiative
CDA:	Communications Decency Act
COPPA:	Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act
CPS:	Child Protective Services
CRC:	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSAM:	Child sexual abuse material
DA:	District attorney
DDD:	Depersonalization-Derealization Disorder
DMCA:	Digital Millennium Copyright Act
DOJ:	Department of Justice
ERP:	Erotic role play
FBI:	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FTC:	Federal Trade Commission
GDC:	Global Digital Compact
GBV:	Gender-based violence
HD:	High definition
IBSA:	Image-based sexual abuse
ICCPR:	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IDI:	In-depth interview
IT:	Information technology
ITC:	Information and communications technologies
LGBTQ+:	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others
NCEM:	Nonconsensual explicit materials
NCII:	Nonconsensual intimate images
NCMEC:	National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
NDII:	Nonconsensual distribution of intimate images
NDII:	Nonconsensual disclosure of intimate images
NCDII:	Nonconsensual distribution of intimate images
NCOSE:	National Center on Sexual Exploitation
NGO:	Nongovernmental organisation
NNEDV:	National Network to End Domestic Violence
NSFW:	Not safe for work
NSVRC:	National Sexual Violence Resource Center
OSEA:	Online sexual exploitation and abuse
PTSD:	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RAINN:	Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network
SDG:	Sustainable Development Goals
STISA:	Survivors and Tech Solving Image-Based Sexual Abuse
SWAT:	Special weapons and tactics team
SVPA:	Sexual Violence Prevention Association
TAKE IT DOWN:	Tools to Address Known Exploitation by Immobilizing Technological Deepfakes on Websites and Networks
TFGBV:	Technology-facilitated gender-based violence
TFSEA:	Technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse
UN:	United Nations
UNDP:	United Nations Development Program
US:	United States
VAWA:	Violence Against Women Act

Glossary

- ◆ **Bots:** Automated applications or scripts designed to perform repetitive tasks without requiring human input.²
- ◆ **Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM):** Visual material that depicts acts of sexual abuse and exploitation of children.³
- ◆ **Continuance:** Delays in court proceedings until a later date, granted by a judge.⁴
- ◆ **Cyberbullying:** Constant and intentional online bullying to undermine the victim's self-esteem.⁵
- ◆ **Cyberstalking:** Persistent, unwanted and/or threatening surveillance, contact and/or pursuit by technological means.⁶
- ◆ **Dark web /Underground web:** An encrypted sector of the internet that is not indexed by traditional search engines. The dark web offers anonymity and privacy; however, it is also well known to be a centre of illegal activity.⁷
- ◆ **Deepfakes:** Artificially generated images depicting real people. Deepfakes use a form of artificial intelligence called deep learning to make images of fake events, hence the name deepfake.⁸
- ◆ **Digital literacy:** The confident and critical use of a full range of digital technologies for information, communication, and basic problem-solving in all aspects of life.⁹
- ◆ **Doxxing:** Online sharing of private information to publicly expose and shame the person targeted.¹⁰
- ◆ **Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA):** Sexually explicit images or videos recorded with consent but distributed or disseminated without consent.¹¹ Alternative terms include nonconsensual sharing of intimate images/nonconsensual distribution of intimate images (NCDII) and revenge pornography.
- ◆ **Nonconsensual sexual deepfake:** Uses artificial intelligence to generate fake sexually explicit videos or images of someone without their consent.¹²
- ◆ **Online grooming:** Establishing a relationship with someone to manipulate, exploit, or abuse them. Typically, the process includes selecting a victim, gaining access to them, and isolating them through online means and digital technology.¹³
- ◆ **Online harassment:** Repeated conduct that threatens, pesters, scares, or abuses someone by sending degrading, offensive, or insulting comments or images.¹⁴
- ◆ **Preliminary injunction:** An injunction that may be granted before or during trial, with the goal of preserving the status quo before final judgment.¹⁵
- ◆ **Rape culture:** A society or environment whose prevailing social attitudes have the effect of normalising or trivialising sexual assault and abuse. Starts with normalisation, such as “locker room talk,” escalates to victim-blaming and harassment, and culminates with sexual assault and rape.¹⁶
- ◆ **Sexual coercion and extortion:** Often referred to as “sextortion,” it involves online blackmail, where money, sex/sex acts, or additional explicit images are demanded to prevent the publication of intimate images or private information.¹⁷
- ◆ **Sexually explicit or explicit material:** an audio recording, a film or video recording, or a periodical with visual depictions, produced in any medium, the dominant theme of which depicts or describes nudity, including sexual or excretory activities or organs, in a lascivious way.¹⁸
- ◆ **Swatting:** Making malicious hoax calls to emergency services to falsely report an ongoing emergency at a certain location. The intent is to cause large-scale deployment of Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams, bomb squads, and other police resources.¹⁹

Executive summary

Overview

Technology is now an integral part of everyday life, and with its rapid growth has come a drastic increase in rates of online sexual violence, creating urgent challenges for individuals and society. This report examines the impact of online sexual exploitation and abuse (OSEA) on survivors in the US through the firsthand accounts of thirteen survivors. Using semi-structured, in-depth interviews (IDIs), the study analyses their stories for recurring themes, patterns and insights into the nature and impact of OSEA in the US.

The research participants for this report were located across the US, including in Texas, Colorado, Arkansas, Georgia, New York and Virginia, and represent diverse backgrounds in terms of race, age, gender and socioeconomic status. Recruiting participants proved challenging due to the complexities associated with OSEA, such as the permanence of the internet, the ongoing nature of abuse, and survivors' feelings of distrust and betrayal.

Results indicate that online sexual violence has unique impacts on survivors, including job loss, escalating and continuing harm, and limited legal remedies specific to technology. This study offers strong recommendations for prevention and redress from participant survivors, who are experts in their own experiences. The findings underscore the importance of centring first-person accounts when attempting to understand the nature of OSEA as well as future measures for prevention. Further research should explore the causal effects of existing and emerging policies on preventing and addressing OSEA.

In this study, the term OSEA refers to a number of sexually exploitative and harmful behaviours that occur online and can impact anyone. OSEA includes online grooming, livestreaming of sexual abuse, child sexual abuse material (CSAM), online sexual coercion and extortion, online sex trafficking and image-based sexual abuse (IBSA). This list is not exhaustive and, as technology evolves, new forms of abuse and exploitation emerge. See Equality Now's report *Ending Online Sexual Exploitation And Abuse Of Women And Girls: A Call For International Standards*.

Key findings

The participants in this study reported a wide range of abuses, but shared many of the same feelings, impacts and conclusions from their experiences. Many also shared similar ideas for policy reforms and prevention measures.

- ◆ All 13 participants expressed experiencing some form of **victim-blaming**. This feeling was either self-imposed or imposed by others.
- ◆ All 13 participants reported **continuing harm** due to the nature of this abuse. OSEA is rarely a one-time event; the existence and spread of nonconsensual images can lead to ongoing retraumatization.
- ◆ Four participants expressed having **suicidal ideation** at some point.
- ◆ 11 out of 13 participants **formally reported their abuse**, either to law enforcement or to the technology platforms. The two who did not were children at the time of the abuse.

Jenna, survivor of OSEA: *“Growing up in an experimental time with technology especially as a young woman... it is almost inherently a form of abuse, because people are constantly commenting on your body... I remember even being on Facebook a lot younger and getting random older men messaging me over Messenger. Different various instances of cyber stalking. I remember giving my phone number to the pharmacist once and getting back home only to realize that the man behind me had been eavesdropping and heard my number, got it, texted me, started bugging me... And even with an ex-boyfriend who could border on [being] abusive, checking my messages, monitoring my phone... So that one big story is the one I wanted to share. But I also just feel like it’s important to acknowledge that... those smaller abuses add up over time as well, where you kind of learn that in online spaces, your body is still not yours, you will still be sexualized.”*

- ◆ Every participant encountered **barriers to obtaining justice**. These included poor reporting experiences, failures at various levels of law enforcement, a lack of clear legal options, insufficient responses by technology companies and platforms, and a general lack of legislation to properly address the harms done.
- ◆ Most participants experienced some form of **financial loss** as a result of their situation. Of the 10 who were adults at the time of the abuse, three lost their jobs outright, and four lost career advancement opportunities. Many spent money on lawyers and other legal services, relocated, were extorted for money, or paid third parties to remove nonconsensual materials of them from platforms.
- ◆ Every participant who reported their abuse described the experience as overwhelmingly negative; **none of the survivors succeeded in the complete removal of the materials or in holding their perpetrator(s) meaningfully accountable**.

Based on these findings, the study recommends the following to address OSEA in the US effectively:

- ◆ **Centre survivor voices** in all legal, policy and community response reforms.
- ◆ **Implement stronger legal frameworks at the state and federal levels**, with clear laws surrounding consent and the distribution of materials online.
- ◆ Create and enact policies to **hold technology companies accountable** for the nonconsensual publication and distribution of sexually explicit materials, including sexual abuse and explicit deepfakes, on their platforms.
- ◆ Update law enforcement response, support services and other reporting systems to include **specific training and education on OSEA**.
- ◆ Incorporate **international collaboration** into advocacy, response and prevention mechanisms, as OSEA transcends borders.
- ◆ Ensure all survivors have **free and easy access** to legal counsel, mental health services and reporting mechanisms to seek recourse and get materials taken down.
- ◆ Improve **data collection and reporting** by addressing existing research gaps and ensuring ongoing updates to data infrastructure as technology advances.
- ◆ OSEA can be ended by **ending misogyny and rape culture** in the world more broadly.



Introduction: Context and rationale

Credit: FG Trade Latin/iStock

Purpose and scope of the report

This project documents survivors' lived experiences of OSEA, particularly image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), technology-facilitated sex trafficking, and sexual coercion and extortion. The research provides details of the experiences of multiple survivors affected by OSEA and analyses barriers they face in seeking justice and opportunities for systemic change. The study utilises IDIs to examine how OSEA manifests in the US, including how existing laws are implemented by law enforcement and the judiciary. It also reviews the challenges and gaps survivors encounter in accessing legal remedies, offering recommendations for reform and prevention.

Conceptual framework

Types and forms of OSEA in the United States

As technology evolves, researchers have increasingly examined how artificial intelligence (AI), social media, dating apps and online communications facilitate sexual exploitation and abuse. Early studies focused on online grooming, which became common in internet chat rooms in the 1990s. Grooming involves building trust with a potential victim, often a child, through flattery or manipulation to prepare them for abuse.²⁰

Over time, OSEA expanded through email and file-sharing networks, often used by perpetrators to distribute child sexual abuse materials (CSAM).²¹ The rise of webcam and livestreaming technology in the early 2000s enabled abusers to videochat with and coerce victims in real time, record sexual activity and distribute content across platforms nonconsensually.²² With the spread of texting, sextortion²³ rates surged.²⁴ In these cases, perpetrators use explicit sexual material to blackmail victims, threatening to release the materials to the victim's community, workplace or online platforms unless they provide something in return, such as money or additional images.²⁵ In 2023, reports of financial sextortion more than doubled in a year, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), which is the nation's largest organisation focusing on missing and exploited children. NCMEC received 26,718 reports of sextortion, an increase from 10,731 reports in 2022.²⁶

Other technologies further fuel abuse. The dark web facilitates the global trade of abusive content, while innovations such as cryptocurrency, encrypted messaging apps and online payment systems make it easier to profit from exploitation.²⁷ The expansion of online dating apps, rideshare technology and social media platforms has also created new avenues for harm.²⁸ Most recently, AI-generated content has become a major concern: in 2023, over 98% of deepfakes or artificially-generated images online that depict real people were pornographic.²⁹

Due to these advancements, many features of OSEA continue today. An estimated one in eight adults in the US has experienced nonconsensual distribution of sexually explicit materials.³⁰ Perpetrators exploit the anonymity and reach of online platforms, gaining access to vast numbers of victims across geographic boundaries while avoiding accountability. Meanwhile, legislation struggles to keep pace, leaving platforms largely unregulated or with limited oversight.³¹

Survivors of OSEA experience many of the same consequences as survivors of in-person sexual violence. These include harms to psychological wellbeing, increased substance use and engagement in risky behaviours, social withdrawal, fatigue, reductions in sleep and appetite, headaches, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal ideation, and struggles in their profession or education.³² On top of this, survivors of OSEA often experience ongoing harm because exploitative or abusive photos, videos or other content remain online or are repeatedly posted or circulated, leading to repetitive retraumatisation.³³ Survivors of OSEA also face an increased risk of physical harm, including stalking, domestic abuse, sexual violence and human trafficking. Due to the anonymity of the internet, the speed of technological advancement, and the lack of political will surrounding this issue, survivors are left with very little recourse to stop the abuse.

Research suggests that one in six US children experience some form of online sexual abuse, including grooming, before age 18.

The anonymity and complex nature of technology also create major research gaps, and available statistics fail to capture the scale of the problem and the speed at which it is evolving. In 2024 alone, the NCMEC noted a 1,325% increase in reports of AI-generated child abuse images.³⁴ Research suggests that one in six US children experience some form of online sexual abuse, including grooming, before age 18.³⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated prevalence, particularly that perpetrated against children.³⁶ Importantly, these numbers are still inadequate in representing the true nature of OSEA, as incidents can only be reported by those who become aware that their content has been distributed.³⁷

Current reporting and research overwhelmingly focus on children and CSAM, leaving adult survivors largely invisible. This lack of data contributes directly to inadequate policies and legislation. Without comprehensive data, lawmakers underestimate the scope of OSEA and fail to enact appropriate remedies. This report seeks to fill these gaps by centring survivor voices.

Jenna

Jenna's story starts in the early stages of social media, and her experience demonstrates that sexual violence has been facilitated by technology since its inception. She explains that there was no language to describe what happened to her at the time, and it was not until more people were victimised and technology advanced that she came to understand this as abuse.

Jenna grew into adulthood alongside the evolution of social media in the early 2000s. She was in middle school when she remembers technology starting to intersect with her first experiences of sexual harassment as a girl. She received unwanted messages over Facebook from older men. People commented anonymously on pictures of her on social media, discussing her body. She recalls someone she didn't know getting her number and soliciting her over text. When she was 12 or 13, she and a friend jokingly took a picture of themselves topless and posted it on Flickr. The image was supposed to be deleted after thirty seconds, but someone took a picture of their screen.

This picture was spread through her school, and she remembers the shame and disappointment directed at her. There was little, if any, discussion about the person who took the picture of the Flickr post, those who continued to spread it, or of the simple fact that this image was that of a child. Her experience happened so early in the evolution of the internet that she really did not have words to describe it as sexual abuse. She also notes that technology itself is too often treated merely as a tool for facilitating violence, rather than a unique root of a new, evolving problem.

“I think that's a great myth that we're still undoing about the role of technology and how it's supposed to make us more autonomous and empowered and almost be above the toxicity of what the world can bring. And you know, I think we're coming to a collective conclusion that that's not the case. But I think we're still reckoning with what that actually looks like on a granular level, especially for people who have been subjected to discomfort, and then, even abuse and violence at the hands of technology.”

Stories like Jenna's highlight the importance of including survivor voices as well as those who grew up as technology was evolving. She offers unique insight into OSEA, having understood its origins through her own lived experiences of abuse.

Demographics most affected by OSEA

OSEA is an extension of sexual violence, misogyny and other forms of hate, including anti-LGBTQ+ violence and racism, abetted by the mechanism of technology. This is significant because these underlying issues have remained a societal problem for centuries, but the tools for abuse continue to evolve. Due to entrenched social and structural disparities, OSEA disproportionately affects women and girls, people of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and other members of historically oppressed groups.³⁸ People who identify as members across several of these groups experience unique and compounding harms, a concept understood as intersectionality.³⁹

OSEA disproportionately affects women and girls, people of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and other members of historically oppressed groups.

The effects of nonconsensual distribution of intimate images (formerly known as “revenge porn”), for example, are disproportionately harmful to women. Women are more likely to be victimised by this form of abuse and are more likely to be judged, humiliated, harassed, doxxed or threatened when these materials are distributed.⁴⁰ Existing social dynamics and the legacy of sexually shaming women and girls create this disparity; men, particularly heterosexual, able-bodied, white men, are less likely to face similar ridicule or threats of violence for nudity or sexual content online.⁴¹

Members of the LGBTQ+ community are at a higher risk of OSEA victimisation than cisgender, heterosexual people.⁴² A majority of LGBTQ+ people report experiencing harassment, discrimination or shaming for their identity throughout their lifetime in ways that heterosexual people do not.⁴³ These experiences can lead to an outsized engagement in coping mechanisms such as substance use, sexual repression or compulsive sexual behaviour, which leaves people vulnerable to grooming and exploitation.⁴⁴ Members of the LGBTQ+ community are also disproportionately active online, as social media and other platforms have paved the way for connection and community.⁴⁵ Yet increasing their risk for OSEA victimisation. It is important to note that increased online presence and any offline or online consensual sexual

behaviour are not inherently problematic. The fact that members of the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to engage in online sexual behaviour may leave them more vulnerable to abuse, but the responsibility for that harm rests solely on the perpetrator.⁴⁶

Women and girls of colour are disproportionately affected by OSEA.⁴⁷ Studies of online harassment and violence have found that abuse directed toward women and girls of colour is racially stereotypical, focusing on their perceived promiscuity and reinforcing harmful, historical stereotypes.⁴⁸ Black girls in particular face disproportionate sexual harassment online at a young age.⁴⁹ Women and girls of colour also face greater barriers to justice due to structural racism and negative relationships with police, court systems and social services.⁵⁰ A Towson University study found young women of colour overwhelmingly reported that race and sexually explicit remarks appeared together in comments on their social media pages, while Asian women were among the most likely to experience online sexual harassment and abuse, but the least likely to report it, citing their desire to avoid personal embarrassment.⁵¹

Because OSEA is closely aligned with technology, social media and online presence, children and young people are among the most affected. The lives of young people are increasingly intertwined with social media and digital devices, making them more vulnerable to interactions with perpetrators.⁵² Adolescents are more susceptible than adults to psychological manipulation due to their incomplete cognitive development, issues with self-esteem, family difficulties and growing curiosities about sex and adulthood, which leave them particularly vulnerable to grooming.⁵³ Furthermore, children and adolescents with disabilities are at an increased risk of online sexual abuse.⁵⁴ Challenges associated with OSEA that affect young people are exacerbated by those which already affect the disabled population, including limited communication skills, understandings of consent and varying degrees of bodily autonomy.⁵⁵

US-based technology companies

Unlike physical forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, OSEA occurs through various online outlets, messaging channels and platforms. Harmful content can be copied and shared across borders in seconds, and online platforms often amplify its reach. This makes prevention and regulation especially urgent in the US, where a handful of corporations dominate the global technology industry.⁵⁶

Meta, Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Apple and Microsoft, known collectively as the “Big Five,” control the primary digital spaces where OSEA occurs.⁵⁷ Meta, which owns Instagram and WhatsApp, hosts 3.5 billion users and, together with Alphabet, accounts for more than 50% of global online advertising spending.⁵⁸ Google holds more than 60% of the search engine market share in the US.⁵⁹ Apple’s annual profit exceeds Starbucks’ revenue, Microsoft is a top-three vendor for 84% of businesses globally, and Amazon accounts for more than 40% of online spending in the US. In 2020 alone, the Big Five generated \$197 billion in profit on \$1 trillion in sales, with a combined market value of \$7.5 trillion.⁶⁰ The monopoly these US-based companies have over the digital market suggests they not only control the primary avenues through which OSEA occurs, but also have the power and ability to set global standards for digital safety.

The monopoly these US-based companies have over the digital market suggests they not only control the primary avenues through which OSEA occurs, but also have the power and ability to set global standards for digital safety.

When perpetrators exploit platforms to share nonconsensual distribution of intimate images (NDII) or CSAM, they can quickly share harmful content with billions of users worldwide. The blurred boundaries between online and offline life make these environments especially conducive to exploitation.⁶¹ The technology industry’s global reach and approach to safety, content moderation and prevention sets the stage for worldwide standards for survivor protection and perpetrator accountability. Furthermore, these corporations possess the necessary resources and capabilities, positioning them as key players in OSEA prevention.

There is no statute expressly requiring technology companies to maintain user safety and transparency. However, US law (requirements under the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, the moderation and safety framing in the Communications Decency Act, and Federal Trade Commission guidelines) reflects legal expectations that online service providers implement measures to protect users and provide transparency disclosures.⁶² Technology companies can regulate OSEA through company principles, such as through terms of service or community guidelines.⁶³ US-based companies also act as gatekeepers; they have the means to develop efficient reporting mechanisms and to prevent financial institutions from profiting from OSEA.⁶⁴ To date, however, US companies have had little incentive or obligation to act decisively in this area due in part to the current legal landscape, as detailed in the following section.

The list below includes the platforms and technology companies (both US-based and global) specifically mentioned by the study participants. It is not exhaustive, but instead illustrates the diversity of technologies implicated in OSEA. Many were mentioned more than once. Several participants also used collective terms such as “social media”, “tech companies”, and “dating apps” to describe the technology involved in the abuse:

- ◆ 4Chan
- ◆ AmaLeaked
- ◆ Backpage
- ◆ Cheatingwives.com
- ◆ Chaterbait
- ◆ Discord
- ◆ Facebook
- ◆ Flickr
- ◆ FormSpring
- ◆ Google
- ◆ Instagram
- ◆ LinkedIn
- ◆ MySpace
- ◆ Nudify
- ◆ Pornhub
- ◆ Reddit
- ◆ Recurbate
- ◆ Snapchat
- ◆ Telegram
- ◆ ThotBB
- ◆ Thor
- ◆ TikTok
- ◆ Tinder
- ◆ Twitter/X
- ◆ YouTube

Current legal frameworks & support mechanisms

The current legal frameworks and support mechanisms in the US to address OSEA are complex and fragmented. This is because the US has both federal laws, which apply nationwide and state laws, which differ from one state to another. As a result, legal protections and responses vary depending on where a survivor lives. Efforts to address OSEA include federal-level reforms and enforcement actions, as well as state laws, policy initiatives and regulatory proposals, but significant gaps in coverage and consistency remain.

Federal-level

Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA) was originally enacted to incentivise platforms to remove content harmful to children, by providing immunity to platforms that screened or removed indecent materials posted on their sites by third parties.⁶⁵ However, over time, courts expanded their interpretation to shield online platforms from lawsuits, granting broad immunity against civil liability⁶⁶ and, in effect, making it incredibly difficult for survivors to hold platforms accountable for harmful content posted on their platforms.

A 2020 Department of Justice (DOJ) review of Section 230 recommended reforms to 1) incentivise online platforms to address illicit content; 2) clarify federal government civil enforcement capabilities; 3) promote competition; and 4) promote open discourse and greater transparency.⁶⁷ However, Congress has hesitated to amend the statute for reasons concerning speech and protections for innovation, leaving survivors without access to legal remedies or options for removal requests.⁶⁸

In 1998, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) established a notice-and-takedown system for copyright holders to request the removal of infringing content.⁶⁹ While not explicitly designed to address OSEA, survivors often turn to DMCA takedown requests to remove content, but the mechanism is deeply inadequate.⁷⁰ The DMCA is primarily concerned with copyright, and OSEA survivors do not always hold copyright ownership of images of themselves, such as in the case of AI-generated deepfakes.⁷¹ Even if a survivor does hold copyright, filing is slow and burdensome, requiring them to disclose personal information and increasing the risk of retaliation, such as online harassment, from the notice recipient.⁷² Even when successful, takedown requests do not prevent perpetrators from re-uploading content or engaging in future harm.

Congressional efforts to address OSEA specifically in the US have been intermittent and narrowly focused. While CSAM has been criminalised since the early 2000s, protections for other populations have been incremental.⁷³ The Violence Against Women's Reauthorization Act of 2022 created a civil cause of action for survivors whose intimate images are distributed without their consent.⁷⁴ Plaintiffs may seek monetary compensation and preliminary injunctions to order a defendant to stop distributing content. The statute also permits the use of pseudonyms, allowing plaintiffs to remain anonymous. While these statutes have expanded protections, they are limited in scope and difficult to enforce. Additionally, policymakers and criminal justice actors often refer to this type of legislation as "revenge porn," a label that misrepresents the nature of the abuse and reinforces stigma. The term implies a motive of personal retaliation and frames survivors as participants in pornography rather than as survivors of a violation, thereby diminishing the perpetrator's responsibility.

Most recently, Congress passed the Tools to Address Known Exploitation by Immobilising Technological Deepfakes on Websites and Networks (TAKE IT DOWN) Act of 2025⁷⁵, which criminalises distribution and threats to distribute nonconsensual explicit materials (NCEM), including AI-generated images and deepfakes.⁷⁶ As of May 2026, the law will also require online platforms to implement standardised report-and-remove procedures and remove violating content within 48 hours.⁷⁷ Failure to comply will subject platforms to enforcement by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). While the TAKE IT DOWN Act is an important step forward, its effectiveness will depend on enforcement and survivor access to reporting tools.

State-level

State laws are sporadic in their coverage and consistency for OSEA. While CSAM has been covered federally since the early 2000s, only 45 out of 50 states have updated their laws to cover AI-generated CSAM.⁷⁸ Protections for adults have expanded much more gradually. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Reauthorization Act of 2022⁷⁹ was the first to provide federal protections for survivors of IBSA, but advocates have still struggled to get consistent state-level coverage. South Carolina became the final state to enact some form of legislation addressing IBSA in 2025.⁸⁰

More than half of states now prohibit nonconsensual AI-generated or computer-edited sexually explicit materials, commonly referred to as deepfakes. California⁸¹, Indiana⁸², Utah⁸³, Virginia⁸⁴, Washington⁸⁵, and New York⁸⁶ have expanded their privacy or IBSA statutes to include computer-generated or digitised explicit images with the intent to harm or cause distress.⁸⁷ Penalties vary widely, including felonies and prison sentence lengths. For example, Florida, Louisiana, and Minnesota make the nonconsensual distribution of sexual depictions a felony, while it is considered a misdemeanour in Texas. Penalties under the Louisiana statute range from 10 to 30 years' imprisonment, fines up to \$50,000, or both.⁸⁸

Although these legislative actions are successes, the varying language used to define this type of abuse can complicate societal and political response. States use different legal definitions, including “fabricated intimate images,”⁸⁹ “counterfeit intimate image,”⁹⁰ “altered sexual depiction,”⁹¹ “unlawful deepfakes,”⁹² “falsely created videographic or still image,”⁹³ and “fictitious, composite images.”⁹⁴ This patchwork complicates cross-state comparison, creates gaps in protections, and can minimise the gravity of certain forms of abuse.

Support

There are some support resources available for survivors of OSEA in the US; however, their scope is limited. NCMEC takes reports of crimes related to child exploitation, CSAM and missing children.⁹⁵ Although limited to cases involving children, this organisation provides resources, support, information and a connection to law enforcement. NCMEC also offers a Take It Down tool to help remove CSAM from social media platforms, websites and search engines by creating a digital footprint of images or videos submitted through their service.⁹⁶ The Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI) helps combat IBSA by providing information, support, and referrals to adult and child victims.⁹⁷ They host the CCRI Safety Center, which helps people collect evidence and report to law enforcement, social media platforms, search engines and other websites or applications.⁹⁸

Several sexual violence resource centres have experienced funding cuts due to Executive Orders 14151 and 14173, passed in January 2025⁹⁹, which seek to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion. Organisations such as the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) have removed more than two dozen resources for LGBTQ+ people and immigrants in compliance with the order.¹⁰⁰ Many other organisations have downsized completely in response, cutting staff, resources or closing offices. At the same time, demand for resources is increasing, particularly for speciality and niche experiences such as those associated with OSEA and for marginalised populations.¹⁰¹

While this introduction outlines the current federal and state legal frameworks, as well as support mechanisms, significant gaps remain in implementation, enforcement and accessibility. Later in this report, survivor experiences will be presented to illustrate how these systemic knowledge gaps, institutional inefficiencies and limitations in support mechanisms affect real-world outcomes for those navigating the OSEA legal landscape.

Link to global discussions

OSEA is not confined to specific countries. While physical forms of trafficking and extortion may cross borders, they are more easily regulated through security apparatuses and distinct legal infrastructure within political jurisdictions. Online abuses do not fit within these bounds. A sexually explicit image of someone can be shared without consent across political borders and legal jurisdictions, across multiple platforms, and by multiple people in seconds. This is a form of exponential harm exclusive to the online world.

Internationally, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls has emphasised that criminalisation is necessary to protect victims' rights to privacy and dignity.¹⁰² The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Seoul Policy Centre's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Partnership Programme have further advanced global policy to strengthen protections and prevention initiatives against technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).¹⁰³ Although not legally binding, these advancements foster a global commitment to implementing treaty obligations that States are expected to uphold.

Many international frameworks related to OSEA are relatively new, evolving, or being adapted to apply to emerging forms of abuse. Additionally, several current global mechanisms to combat OSEA rely on international human rights law frameworks that were not originally designed to address digital harms, making their application complex and challenging.¹⁰⁴

The US is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees a right to privacy and protection against "unlawful attacks on honour and reputation."¹⁰⁵ This has been interpreted to apply in online contexts by addressing surveillance, data collection, and harms that arise through online distribution of explicit materials,¹⁰⁶ and provides a legal foundation for the prevention and mitigation of IBSA. However, the US remains the only UN Member State that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),¹⁰⁷ although it has ratified two of its Optional Protocols, including the Protocol on Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.¹⁰⁸ This obligates the US to combat CSAM, but leaves broader gaps in digital privacy safeguards for children and rehabilitation support.¹⁰⁹

The Global Digital Compact (GDC), an annexe to the Pact of the Future, is a political commitment that offers States a framework entailing privacy, safety, and human rights-centric approaches to combating various online abuses.¹¹⁰ Global commitments such as this help set norms, shape multi-stakeholder implementation and create a foundation for Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs) and governments to justify new laws and policies.¹¹¹ Additionally, through human-rights-focused approaches, international cybercrime treaties provide legal mechanisms for cross-border investigations, data collection and enforcement bodies to mitigate OSEA. The Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention) is an international treaty that addresses cybercrime.¹¹² and parties like the US have used its infrastructure for evidence sharing and mutual assistance in cases of CSAM and other digital harms.¹¹³ Beyond the Budapest Convention, the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, also known as the UN Convention against Cybercrime, was adopted in December 2024 and is moving toward ratification.¹¹⁴ This convention creates a comprehensive global treaty-based framework for preventing and combating cybercrime,¹¹⁵ including CSAM, IBSA and related offences.¹¹⁶

Equality Now has put forward a report, *Ending Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Women and Girls: A Call for International Standards*, to describe the global impact of this problem. This includes discussions of the similarities and differences between countries and cultures, the scope of the problem, and the barriers to legal recourse for victims, particularly due to jurisdictional complications and to lagging legislation.

Methodology

Sampling strategy

This project employs a qualitative, cross-sectional design to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of survivors of OSEA. Qualitative research can uncover the meaning behind the reasoning, choices, behaviours and emotions of survivors.¹¹⁷ Eligibility for participation included survivors of OSEA in the US. The researchers employed a variety of sampling strategies, including purposive, convenience, and snowball. Purposive sampling was utilised to recruit and select eligible individuals with experiences of OSEA in the US. Convenience sampling was employed, as respondents were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate, via email, social media posts and flyers. Snowball sampling was employed when existing participants or organisations referred other potential participants, following the distribution of a recruitment email.

Data collection

Participants were recruited via email to individuals and partner organisations of the SVPA. Partner organisations were also provided with a copy of the recruitment email to send to potential participants. Additionally, the SVPA posted a notice on LinkedIn and designed a flyer with a QR code that linked to an interest form. Once participants filled out the interest form, the research team sent an email outlining the steps for participation. Steps included filling out a consent form (see Appendix B) and signing up for an interview time slot via a YouCanBookMe link. The research team then confirmed appointment times and scheduled meetings via Zoom, sending a reminder with the meeting information to participants 24 hours prior to the interview. The research team provided potential respondents with approximately one week before following up with further correspondence.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom and audio recorded to the cloud. The interview protocol was a semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix A) with six sections: 1) Background Information; 2) Personal Experience with OSEA; 3) Access to Legal Remedies; 4) Support Systems; 5) Recommendations for Policy and Legal Reform; and 6) Prevention Mechanisms. Interviews were approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. Once the research team completed an interview, they sent a thank you email with resources designed to support survivors of sexual violence, including those specific to OSEA (see [Content Warning & Resources on page 6](#)). Materials pertaining to these sequences available upon request.

Ethical considerations

The research team took precautions to address various ethical considerations. Interviews were one-on-one, and participants could decline to answer any question, correct or remove their responses, and terminate the interview at any time without repercussions. Participants specified how they would like to be identified for the interview and report, with options including full name, first name only, pseudonym, initials, or “Anonymous”.

Researchers requested permission to audio record interviews for transcripts and reference purposes, to validate and clarify notes, and consent was obtained to use direct quotes. Recordings were only shared with the researchers on an as-needed basis within the SVPA and Equality Now. Participants could decline the recording, request to pause at any time, and they had the choice to have their camera on or off throughout the interview. Data, including recordings and transcripts, were stored in private accounts and on password-protected devices, and will be destroyed one year following collection.

Risks associated with participation in this research project were minimal. Confidentiality was safeguarded and respondents had the option to specify their identification preferences. Participants were compensated \$30 for completing the interview, with payment sent via Venmo or PayPal by the SVPA using the handle or email provided on the consent form within five business days.

Limitations

This study has several important limitations. Interviews were conducted with 13 participants who had direct experience with OSEA. While this small sample allowed for a rich and detailed exploration into survivors' experiences, the results are not generalisable to all survivors of OSEA in the US. Instead, the aim of this study was to capture personal narratives and amplify the voices of survivors in the policy development process.

Several other limitations are present in the study:

- ◆ Participation required reliable internet access, a device with audio and video capabilities, and proficiency in the English language.
- ◆ A majority of participants were adult women, as is often the case in sexual violence research.¹¹⁸ Therefore, the subsequent recommendations for legal and policy reform reflect the primary experiences of this particular subset of survivors.
- ◆ The selection criteria included a wide range of OSEA, which limits the ability of researchers to adequately draw conclusions about one specific form of abuse.
- ◆ The research employed a semi-structured interview format to cover key topics while allowing for flexibility and a conversational exchange. While this approach can be advantageous when exploring personal experiences, researcher bias may present itself in the form of probes or follow-up commentary.¹¹⁹

Data analysis

To fully and accurately capture survivors' experiences, this research employed a multistep thematic analysis, used for analysing qualitative data that involves searching across a dataset to identify, analyse and report recurring patterns.¹²⁰ All interviews were conducted via Zoom, audio-recorded and transcribed with the participant's consent. Transcripts were uploaded to an encrypted and password-protected internal drive, where team members carefully cleaned them for accuracy and clarity. Cleaned transcripts were then transferred to Atlas.ti, a software program designed to facilitate the organisation and analysis of qualitative datasets, enabling a structured and consistent coding process. Researchers then generated a codebook for primary and secondary coding cycles based on the emerging themes.

Once the dataset was coded and organised, the team sought to identify underlying themes and connections across the transcripts.¹²¹ Further memoing allowed for an audit trail of theme development and for credibility.¹²² To verify the validity and reliability of the survivor stories, the research team sent drafts to participants for review and made edits accordingly.

This report features excerpts that provide insight into the researchers' overall understanding of OSEA in the US through synthesised findings and discussion.¹²³ In keeping with the goals of this report, explaining OSEA through "lived experience," participant quotes are featured directly throughout. Filler words from survivor quotes, such as "like" and "um", were removed for clarity, but no other alterations were made.

Results and key findings

Participant backgrounds & identities

The following analysis pulls from experiences shared by 13 survivors. These accounts are varied, revealing the wide range of contexts, impacts, and harms associated with OSEA. To begin the interviews, participants first discussed their background and identities. Of the 13 participants, ten identify as women. One identifies as a man, one is transmasculine, and one is nonbinary. Seven identify as heterosexual/ straight. Two identify as bisexual, one is pansexual, one is asexual and aromantic, and one identifies as queer. One preferred not to answer any questions about their sexuality. Eight of the participants are white, two are Black, one identifies as Latinx, one is multiracial, and one preferred not to disclose their race. Two identify as disabled. Participant ages range from 19 to 46, and their levels of education range from having completed high school to holding a doctorate degree.

Table 1. Participant Demographics		(Sample Size = 13)
Category	#	
Gender Identity		
Woman	10	
Man	1	
Transmasculine	1	
Nonbinary	1	
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual/Straight	7	
Bisexual	2	
Pansexual	1	
Asexual and aromantic	1	
Queer	1	
Prefer not to disclose	1	
Race/Ethnicity		
White	8	
Black	2	
Latinx	1	
Multiracial	1	
Prefer not to disclose	1	
Disability Status		
Identify as disabled	2	
Age Range	19-46	
Education Range	Some high school - doctorate	

Nature & impact

Participants for this study

The following is a brief overview of the participants included in this project. This is intended to present the broad nature in which technology has been weaponised to abuse people, as well as give a voice to those who are survivors in the ways in which it impacted them and their own ideas for prevention.

Name	Nature of OSEA	Impact Statement	Recourse & Support	Prevention
Susanna Gibson (she/her)	<p>Susanna's ex-husband livestreamed them having sex. A bot and multiple people captured and posted them on pornography sites without consent. When she ran for office, The Washington Post published a story that she had used these videos to pay for her campaign.</p> <p>Nonconsensual distribution of explicit material, sexual coercion, and doxxing.</p>	<p>"It had significant impact on my sense of safety, felt like I couldn't go anywhere, didn't feel safe going to the grocery store, didn't feel safe in my gym... anxiety, depression, insomnia... it had an impact on every single part of me, and my life, so, fundamentally changed who I am as a person."</p>	<p>Susanna was told she could not sue for defamation because she wasn't a public figure. She could not name all of her perpetrators, as those who captured the videos were anonymous. She had some luck reporting to pornography platforms, but not all of them. She found support, and most people believed her, but there was very little to be done.</p>	<p>"At the end of the day, people are harmed because someone chooses to harm them... So I think, just to hammer it home, like public education, that this is sexual violence."</p>
Samantha (she/her)	<p>After being raped, Samantha learned the assault was video recorded. The perpetrator, a police officer, said they had been role-playing.</p> <p>Rape, nonconsensual distribution of sexual abuse material</p>	<p>"It's one thing that the attack happened, but then, when it was shared to be rewatched over and over again, and I had no control over how far it was reaching, or how many people that it was actually, you know, viewing it, or who had access to it... It emotionally was just horrifying."</p>	<p>Samantha reported to the police in the next town to avoid her perpetrator's precinct. She obtained a protective order and reported to Title IX through her university, which offered some validation and small recourse (the perpetrator lost his job). No one could help her take down the video.</p>	<p>"If you're a bystander and you are receiving something that is questionable as to whether it was consensually shared, having some level of education around what's appropriate?... if you facilitate that, you're just as guilty."</p>

<p>Jenna (she/her)</p>	<p>When Jenna was in middle school, it was the beginning of the internet boom. She and her friend were being silly and having fun, and they took a picture of their breasts and uploaded it to Flickr for 30 seconds. Someone took a picture of their picture, and it spread throughout her school.</p> <p>CSAM</p>	<p>“In the wake of the trauma from that tech-facilitated abuse, I ended up being assaulted in... in-person situations, and I feel very certain that they’re connected. Because I didn’t feel like my body was mine anymore, and it felt really normalised to me that other people could just use my body in whatever way they wanted, especially boys.”</p>	<p>Jenna was not aware she could report the incident at the time. Even today, she questions where accountability lies. Flickr? The cell carrier? Her school? The police? And what does recourse look like? Does it extend to everyone who has seen the image?</p>	<p>“I think the ways in which all of us are socialised and taught to view our bodies and others’ bodies is the first intervention point.”</p> <p>“I also wish there had been more resources for my mom. She was a single parent at the time, and I think she also just didn’t know what to do.”</p>
<p>Katherine M. (she/her)</p>	<p>Katherine’s partner assumed her identity online and posted explicit images of her online without her consent.</p> <p>Nonconsensual distribution of explicit material, IBSA, identity theft.</p>	<p>“It’s almost laughable because... I look at myself, and I think I am one of the most normal people out there. And I just—I started having nightmares... I started having panic attacks, which I never had before. It affected everything.”</p>	<p>Katherine did not report, fearing the system would blame her, she would lose her children, or her partner would lose his job. She has found the most support in hearing the stories of other survivors.</p>	<p>“If we could go way back we would allow boys to feel and to feel their worth. Ultimately [this] came down to a child not being seen, not being able to express how he felt, and so he had to be silent.”</p>
<p>M.C. (she/her)</p>	<p>M.C. started a relationship with someone she met on Tinder. They exchanged consensual sexual images and videos. When she ended the relationship, he threatened her, posted the images, sent them to her job, and continuously harassed her for months.</p> <p>Nonconsensual distribution of explicit material, doxxing, sextortion</p>	<p>“I remember the safety part was the most important part for me. Like I need to feel safe, because at the time I felt like he was just going to show up at my house and hurt me.”</p>	<p>M.C. was terrified of the images being online. In a panic, she deleted everything she could from her emails and files. Once she reported, she was told she had deleted evidence needed for the case. She then spent weeks trying to reach out to every platform individually, which takes time, and prove that the images are nonconsensual.</p>	<p>“In my ideal world, [there would be] some sort of organisation where we can give a heads up like, ‘hey, I think this is going to happen. This is my info. Is there any way I can get any type of protection?’ That would be amazing. Just giving a heads up about something potentially harming me, and they will cover that online world for me and protect me.”</p>

<p>Alan (he/him)</p>	<p>When Alan was 14, he joined a group on Discord. Adults on the server started asking him to do erotic role play (ERP) and send nude photos; if not, they would slander him across the platform. He fell into a continuous cycle of harassment from an adult on the platform.</p> <p>CSAM, sextortion, nonconsensual distribution of explicit material</p>	<p>“I was basically scared 24/7. I stopped sleeping... I would just be on Discord 24/7 talking to these people. I was constantly scared that people were going to DM me, scared that people were going to share my images or messages.”</p>	<p>Alan reported the abuse to Discord. The platform reached out to the owner of the server, who deleted the account. But no one from the platform reached out to Alan and he has no way to track any images that might still be in circulation. Others on the server blamed him for reporting the abuse, and law enforcement was never seriously involved.</p>	<p>“The main work that can be done, prevention-wise, is education and teaching kids, and adults, on the internet how to protect themselves and how to spot dangerous things and creating better resources to report.”</p> <p>“I also think Discord could put a little more effort into moderating those servers, if they just looked a little closer into things, if they took their jobs a little more seriously, people would not use it for that.”</p>
<p>Anonymous #1 (she/her)</p>	<p>Anonymous #1 has a public platform, creating Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) videos for her audience. People have been making sexually explicit deepfake images and videos of her without her consent since early on in her career. She has had to uproot her life and live off the grid to protect herself from stalkers and harassment.</p> <p>Nonconsensual deepfakes, AI-generated sexual abuse, cyberbullying</p>	<p>“It changed how I look at the general population... Definitely makes me mistrust men a lot more than I used to. And unfortunately, I kind of have to live my life on the baseline of assuming that bad people are going to interact with me, even though 99.9% of them are good. Those bad people ruin it for me, safety-wise, mentally, literally, physically.”</p> <p>“My male counterparts do not have to deal with this.”</p>	<p>Anonymous #1 never reported to the authorities because it would be “useless.” Her experience with law enforcement is that they don’t know anything about the internet and what is happening online. Through a lawyer, she found one of the men who had made a deepfake of her, but there was nothing to be done because he had not done anything illegal.</p>	<p>“I want to get the word out that it happens to so many people... and you have nothing to be ashamed of, and the people who are [creating the deepfakes] are committing a crime. And right now, it’s not a crime! So I just think that that’s something that prevention-wise, just the knowledge that this happens.”</p>

<p>Taylor (she/her)</p>	<p>When Taylor was 20 years old, she started an online relationship with a man she met on Facebook. After sending images and videos to each other, he suddenly started threatening to share the materials over social media if she didn't send him more.</p> <p>Sextortion, grooming, nonconsensual distribution of explicit materials</p>	<p>"I got this immediate sense that I just lost my go-to person. So that was my frustrating breakdown because I didn't have who to run to. I didn't have who I could share this particular problem with because who I would normally share with turned out to be the person inflicting this on me. I broke down emotionally."</p>	<p>Taylor tried to report what was happening to some of the platforms the man said he would post to, but she was unable to speak through her tears. She just kept crying and lost focus of the screen in front of her. Instead, she opted to submit a written report and was never responded to.</p>	<p>"Back then I just thought that giving into their demands would actually stop this from spreading. But I noticed that the more I gave into the demand, the more the demands kept increasing... I think, basically, most times when people do this they don't feel like they could get caught."</p>
<p>Nikki (she/her)</p>	<p>Nikki was trafficked for a year after she was advertised to sell sex on Backpage. The man who trafficked her locked her in a hotel room and forced her to make sexually explicit videos, which he then threatened to share with her children's fathers if she did not provide more.</p> <p>Trafficking, sextortion, coercion, grooming, nonconsensual distribution of explicit materials</p>	<p>"I was in different situations, everything away from my kids... I was told my children were being killed or going to get hurt. It was just horrible."</p>	<p>Nikki did not report her trafficker, but interacted with the legal system to fight charges that she had been arrested for, including solicitation, narcotics violation, and jaywalking. She has worked with nonprofits to seek help in getting her record expunged. The courts still do not view her as a victim, but rather as a perpetrator.</p>	<p>"His life was spiraling out of control so he needed to control something. Some people are just like that- narcissistic, controlling. Sometimes it's the way they've grown up, too. They were just lacking, you know, support or love when they were younger."</p>

<p>Angelique (she/her)</p>	<p>Angelique had a permanent restraining order on her husband through their divorce, which he violated eleven times. She discovered that his abuse also included posting sexually explicit materials of her on various platforms online without her consent.</p> <p>Nonconsensual distribution of explicit materials, stalking</p>	<p>“I equate it to throwing a pebble in a pond. It starts right there where the impact is, but then it has these ripple effects and that just continues to go out. I just don’t trust anyone... It impacts my ability to feel safe even when I do feel like I’m able to try to start to trust someone.”</p>	<p>When Angelique reported to law enforcement, they asked her why this was a big deal. She had to explain the circumstances and the restraining order violations to be taken seriously. He was charged with stalking and agreed to a plea agreement. Angelique was told she should not pursue a trial because she would be a “horrible witness,” “too emotional” and that the defence would “bring up her past.”</p>	<p>“Education, education. Education is prevention. The two are kind of interchangeable in this space, and I just think that as long as we’re engaging in the dialogue we’ll get there. Rome wasn’t built in a day.”</p>
<p>Anonymous #2 (she/her)</p>	<p>Anonymous #2 met someone and dated them briefly, only to find out that he had been stalking her for months on social media. He created dating app profiles under different names and engaged with her prior to ever meeting her. He was abusive and continued to stalk her and hack her social media throughout their time together.</p> <p>Cyberstalking, stalking, coercion</p>	<p>“Over time, it just felt like I couldn’t do things that I was previously looking forward to doing like just going out and interacting with people.”</p>	<p>Anonymous #2 reported to the police and was referred to some legal avenues. She found navigating the process complicated and was told “we only do class action situations” or “we only handle criminal cases.” The burden was on her to figure out her own legal options, and has yet to hear back from several that she reached out to. She stopped trying in 2022.</p>	<p>“I think prevention starts earlier than we think. I think a big part of really effectively realising a society or social space that really leads to prevention and just normalising being against sexual violence has to do with socialisation of men honestly, and starting from boyhood... Once they reach adulthood, they’re not having to unlearn a bunch of things.”</p>

<p>Avatar (he/him)</p>	<p>When Avatar was a teenager, he met someone in a Discord gaming community who convinced him to send nude photos. He then blackmailed Avatar, threatening to send them to his family if he didn't pay him.</p> <p>CSAM, grooming, sextortion</p>	<p>“That’s what brought my gaming passion to an end. I couldn’t game because I was so afraid.”</p> <p>“I couldn’t pay attention in school... I wasn’t able to focus on school so obviously I failed awfully.”</p>	<p>Avatar was afraid of reporting in part because he didn’t want his parents to know he was gay. He found support in a friend, who advised him to tell the man to go ahead and share the photos. This ended things. The photos weren’t shared and the man blocked Avatar from further communication.</p>	<p>“First off I’ll start from the very basic. If I had had a good relationship with my parents... [if] they accepted me for who I truly am I would have shared every basic detail of my day with them... They would have been well aware of my actions with him.”</p>
<p>Izzy (she/her)</p>	<p>Izzy was in a long distance relationship, and she and her partner shared images and videos through Snapchat. Her account was hacked, and the hacker posted the sexual content on her Snapchat story. The hacker also sold all of the content to various pornography sites along with her name and address.</p> <p>Nonconsensual distribution of explicit materials, doxxing</p>	<p>“Eating has been really hard, just feeling comfortable in my body... and then a lot of resentment towards my boyfriend as well, which has impacted our relationship a lot.”</p>	<p>Izzy reported to her local police and to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who told her she shouldn’t have used Snapchat. She felt like she was being made fun of. Several viewers of the content shared images with her family and threatened to post them elsewhere if they didn’t pay. Her friends, family, and therapist have been very supportive.</p>	<p>“Snapchat, for sure, could have prevented this. I’m really pissed off at them... I think Google needs to be held accountable. It doesn’t really make sense to me that you, as an organisation, can host these websites and allow [revenge porn sites] to be running platforms.”</p>

Common manifestations of OSEA

OSEA is a broad term, encompassing multiple forms of online sexual abuse. The following demonstrates the wide range of experiences the participants of this study reported.

Table of OSEA classification among study participants

OSEA Classification	Frequency
Online grooming	4
Live streaming of sexual abuse	1
Online sexual coercion/extortion	6
Online sex trafficking	1
Child sexual abuse materials	3
Image-based sexual abuse	10
AI-generated sexual abuse (also known as “deepfake porn”)	1
Cyberstalking/ doxxing	4

***These classifications are not intended to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive. Many forms of OSEA are still not accurately described by the current language. These classifications are based on participants’ self-identification and researchers’ expertise.

Katherine M.: *[I prefer] image based sexual abuse. Or I like ‘online sexual exploitation and abuse.’ And I don’t like the term ‘intimate’ like when they throw that in there, because I don’t know. Intimacy is safe, and nothing about this is safe.*

Samantha: *So I was physically attacked and raped and the perpetrator had recorded the attack and then disseminated it afterwards to kind of further cause embarrassment and yeah, so it wasn’t like, I don’t know. I just don’t like the revenge porn term.*

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)

Ten of the 13 participants experienced the nonconsensual sharing of explicit images, sometimes referred to as IBSA. Explicit images were shared or re-shared without the survivor’s consent by ex-partners, bots, and other perpetrators. Survivors reported their content being shared without their consent through social media and online platforms, including dating sites, messaging apps, and pornography sites. This form of OSEA can proliferate rapidly, as described in the survivor account below:

M.C.: *In January of 2023, he [my ex] somehow contacted my husband and sent him a bunch of that information, screenshots, images, etc. But not only that, he also reached out to the place that I was working at, which is still my current employer. And he sent emails to all my colleagues sharing my information, sharing my images as well... I volunteer for a national nonprofit here in the US. He reached out to them. They sent me a copy of what he sent to them as well, accusing me about so many things, and also sharing my image.*

When this form of abuse is discovered, survivors often have to take immediate steps to preserve their security, safety and reputation. Participants noted the need to maintain flash drives of evidence, file reports with designated organisations, and access advocacy or legal services.

Nonconsensual explicit deepfakes

AI-generated sexual images or videos are another form of OSEA. One participant of this study, Anonymous #1, described her experience of nonconsensual explicit deepfake abuse in which her likeness was stolen from social media. She characterised AI-generated OSEA as a weaponised tool used for both harassment and attacks on her reputation. Her story illustrates how a perpetrator created a nonconsensual explicit deepfake without her consent:

So it was a deepfaked video of me, my face on a porn star’s body like a professional porn video. And it looked really bad. It looked really fake.

Being a public-facing figure also put Anonymous #1 at an increased risk of being targeted:

People who make ASMR have tons of public, HD, straight-on face, video, online. So it’s perfect to feed to AI and to the computers that were making all this content. So we were definitely one of the first to be targeted, and I think that’s why a lot of celebrities were targeted, too.

She reached out to law enforcement, who contacted her later with a disappointing result: *They got a hold of the guy that we know did the deepfakes on me, and they got excited that he essentially admitted it, but then were like, “Well, there’s nothing we can really do with that.”* The person who created the materials of her and disseminated them across platforms had not broken the law.

The nonconsensual explicit deepfakes were further weaponised by a company looking to take advantage of and extort Anonymous #1 for money to remove the illegal content. She explained:

I remember one time I got an email from a company who... said that they would help me take down the videos for like \$400 a video. And I’m like, No, I don’t care... So that was offensive and annoying.

Child sexual abuse materials (CSAM)

Three participants in this study experienced the distribution of CSAM, which falls under the umbrella of OSEA. Survivors shared experiences of online CSAM, qualifying them for participation, as well as memories of

offline CSAM or child sexual abuse from earlier in life that resurfaced during interviews. This type of abuse is often associated with acts of coercion and can be facilitated through online platforms themselves when they have inadequate user age verifications or encourage explicit interactions.¹²⁴ Alan’s story features incidents of CSAM that were initiated over a Discord server. An adult interacted with him over the platform, eventually convincing Alan to share explicit images:

Alan, who was 14 when the abuse on Discord began: *I didn’t realise at the time that I could have probably reported it to the FBI but I did end up, when I was 16, I did end up realising, oh, my gosh, this is child endangerment. This is basically trafficking images of children.*

Alan’s reflection highlights how youth and adolescent online users are often targeted due to a common lack of knowledge about what inappropriate behaviour entails. Legal protections exist to stop the spread of CSAM online, but much of the burden is placed on the victim to identify and report the abuse. This puts children in an undue role of responsibility for ending their own abuse.



Online grooming

The adults in the role-playing Discord server that Alan described groomed the children who joined the platform. Adult users took advantage of and exploited the server to target victims, gain their trust, isolate them on private messaging apps or calls, normalise CSAM, and maintain control through denial and retaliation. Alan describes the ways in which multiple adults on the platform used erotic role playing (ERP) as an excuse to engage in abuse with him and other minors:

It leans very quickly into going from, oh, well, it's just our characters having sexual conversations to an adult and a child having a sexual conversation online...I definitely was groomed over the course of a year into sending these images and messages to adults because it started with things like, oh, let's just do like an erotic role play of our characters. It starts like that, and then it usually, from what I've witnessed, it usually delves into making it you as a real person. It's extremely common and it's one of the biggest ways, I think, of grooming minors on the internet.

This narrative illustrates how perpetrators gain access to and groom young people through online servers. These spaces are designed for users to escape from reality and immerse themselves in the lives and worlds of characters and storylines. Perpetrators exploit the innocence of young players and their mental connection to characters, framing acts of OSEA as part of the role play against the character instead of against the individual themselves.

Online grooming behaviours can be directed at all age groups and are not restricted to children. The online environment expands the access of perpetrators to individuals who are typically seeking companionship with others. Taylor was 20 when she first started interacting with a man through a social networking site, describes how her abuser provided her with attention, flattery, and love as a means to gain trust, then slowly began pushing boundaries, gaining power and control:

I think at first, it doesn't actually start up as an abuse..., it felt more like attention, flattery, and I could say, even love. He groomed me, and he knew exactly what to say. He knew how to make me trust him. He would compliment me, share deep conversations with me. He would pretend, you know – then it didn't feel like pretense. But now, or after the abuse, I just felt it was just pretense all along. He would pretend to relate to my struggles and over time this slowly began to push boundaries, ask for personal details, photos. And because we had a lot of deep conversations, I was free to give them, you know, some secrets. And then again to make me feel like I owe them something... And they just manipulated me into believing this

was actually normal, that they cared for me, they cared about me, and then I just, I gave more. And the more I gave the more control they took, the more control they had over me.

Sextortion & coercion

Six participants reported experiences of extortion, where either they, a friend or a family member was blackmailed into providing sexual content, engaging in sexual acts, or giving money under the threat of having their explicit images or videos publicly released. Perpetrators may obtain sexually explicit materials from victims initially consensually, and then later weaponise those same materials. In other instances, perpetrators nonconsensually obtain content by hacking a victim's online accounts, secretly recording them, recording abusive encounters, coercing victims into sending materials, or creating deepfakes.

Accountability in these types of OSEA cases reaches beyond the perpetrator to platforms and institutions, such as the financial corporations that facilitate abuse through mobile banking applications. Izzy, who was 21 when her Snapchat was hacked, explains receiving threats of exploitation for financial gain via CashApp and Zelle:

I think to an extent, just because I had people using those images, and they were sending it to my dad on his Facebook page and my brother. So it was just kind of like, not that they were trying to extort me personally, but they were using the images to get money from my dad and my brother of saying; "Hey, if you know you don't want to see your daughter, if you don't want to see your sister all over the Internet, you can CashApp or Zelle me this sum of money."

Izzy's narrative illustrates how the experiences and harms of OSEA extend beyond the individual level to encompass interpersonal relationships and organisations. Given their role in Izzy's story and in many other survivor experiences, financial institutions are important parties to include in prevention initiatives

Cyberstalking, threats, and doxxing

Four of the survivors in this study experienced online stalking, reported receiving threats, and breaches of private information. Participants recounted receiving unsolicited contacts from perpetrators, and that intimate partners, employers and work colleagues also received unwanted messages. Survivors received threats that perpetrators would approach them in person, expose online relationships, publish intimate materials on social media or pornography sites, engage in self-harm or suicide, or harm the survivor, their family or friends. MC

was 33 when she reconnected with someone she had dated in the past. They began a short relationship, and when it ended, he cyberstalked, threatened and doxxed her.

M.C.: The threats were also made on my social media. So pretty much, I was receiving emails from him, probably 5 emails or no more from 5 up to 10 emails daily for all January and February. At the beginning the first emails were adding the links to my LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, etc. I had all that private. However, I think somehow he could see the list of my friends and stuff like that...So in those emails, with the threats he included I'm gonna show up at your house, and I'm just gonna hurt you and hurt your husband, etc.

As seen in M.C.'s description, a perpetrator's access to a survivor's private information, such as their friend lists and home addresses, may lead to further abuse. Several participants in this study experienced doxxing, in which their personal information and home addresses were publicly posted online. Izzy recalls being doxxed:

Yeah, that was the freakiest part. I'm really comfortable in my sexuality, it wasn't like, I'm not ashamed of sex and talking about it. So it wasn't that what was concerning to me. But my address got leaked into a comment section on one of these sites, so that definitely contributed to feeling secure in my own home. yeah.

Anonymous #1, who has had multiple people make nonconsensual AI sexual deepfakes of her, had to relocate and live completely off the grid due to doxxing and threats to her physical safety.

Online sex trafficking

One participant in this study is a survivor of online and offline sex trafficking. Sex trafficking encompasses a range of perpetrator abuses induced by force, fraud, or coercion to engage in commercial sexual activity.¹²⁵ The use of technology to facilitate sex trafficking has increased its reach, making it easier for traffickers to find and exploit new victims and connect with buyers.¹²⁶ Traffickers use platforms to advertise sex services or to manipulate dating sites to create a false appearance of consent while holding victims against their will, often coercing them into further abuse.

Misconceptions surrounding sex trafficking can make it challenging to identify, particularly when it occurs online. As with all forms of sexual violence, this abuse can occur even if the victim initially consented,¹²⁷ and sex trafficking does not require movement; it includes confinement and coercion.¹²⁸ Online sex trafficking in particular makes coercion more accessible for perpetrators because they can exploit online materials for control without physically moving the victim.

Nikki was a "streetwalker," or a person who sold sex in public spaces. However, she felt that she was offered safety and protection by advertising online, only to be locked in a hotel room and trafficked by someone for a year. The perpetrator forced her to make sexually explicit videos and then threatened to send them to the fathers of her children so that she would lose access to them. The perpetrator profited by selling the videos and advertising her to sell sex on Backpage.com.

Nikki spoke about the coercion she experienced: Just a vulnerability of people that is preyed upon, basically. And then the promising of things to get you there and then go, you know, or issue from there. And I was told my children were being killed or gonna get hurt, and all that. So it was just horrible.

Impacts on survivors of OSEA

The following section details the vast range of impacts on survivors of OSEA. These include emotional, mental and physical impacts of the abuse as well as the ways in which their experiences affected their lives offline. Throughout the study, participants shared the ways in which OSEA changed the way they lived, how they interacted with others, and their relationship with technology.

Emotional, mental and physical impacts

Participants were impacted in life-altering ways by the abuse they experienced. Several key themes emerged throughout the interview process, including emotional, mental and physical harms, as well as ongoing or growing impacts as the abuse and exploitation continued. Participants expressed the ways this impacted their daily lives emotionally:

Izzy: [I'm] terrified of where I live right now, just because I know my address is hacked. So in terms of security, I begged my parents, and they did get all new windows and locks for my house. So everything in our house changed. I have a really hard time sleeping at night.

Samantha: It emotionally was just horrifying..., it's one thing that the attack happened, but then, when it was shared to be rewatched over and over and over again, and I had no control

“It emotionally was just horrifying..., it's one thing that the attack happened, but then, when it was shared to be rewatched over and over and over again, and I had no control over how far it was reaching, or how many people that it was actually, you know viewing it, or who had access to it.”

over how far it was reaching, or how many people that it was actually, you know viewing it, or who had access to it. I think it was just kind of a very dark place that I don't think I could have even predicted being in so, I mean, in every way it impacted [me].

Anonymous #1: Stalking and people trying to dox and get information about where I live, where I went to school, and all those things. So very anxiety inducing. It definitely changed the way I live, for sure. All of this changed the way I live. Just like what I choose to put online, my paranoia is very high. And it's taken up a lot of my time. A lot of my time.

Many participants expressed feeling depressed, suicidal and in a constant state of fear. Although the experiences of the participants were diverse, the emotional impacts were largely similar. This speaks to the underlying harm caused by OSEA. While technology is the mechanism, the experiences of fear, depression, shame and anger are consistent with survivors of sexual violence more broadly.¹²⁹

Many participants isolated themselves from their communities due to fear, embarrassment, or feeling like they would not have support. Alan, who was groomed by an adult on Discord starting when he was 14, was terrified to tell his parents; *I was worried that if other people outside of Discord found out it wouldn't be the adults getting in trouble, it would be me.* Isolation, either self-imposed or due to ostracisation, is a common response to OSEA trauma.¹³⁰ Many participants who experienced isolation also expressed having suicidal thoughts.

OSEA not only isolates survivors from their social networks but can also simultaneously suppress their ability to speak out, seek justice or gain support from their communities. Perpetrators often use this form of sexual violence as a means of asserting control or instilling fear, while existing societal factors such as victim-blaming, shame and disbelief reinforce this silence.¹³¹ Because OSEA disproportionately affects women and other oppressed groups, its silencing effect further limits their voices in public discourse and perpetuates existing systemic inequities.

Some participants also described physical impacts of the trauma they experienced with OSEA, beyond the initial assaults or threats to their physical safety. Katherine said she started over-eating, putting on weight to “make [herself] disgusting.” She perpetually covered up in public to hide her body. Izzy also expressed engaging in disordered eating. She struggled to find her appetite, constantly aware of her body and the comments from strangers online. Nikki struggled with drug addiction.

Alan deprived himself of sleep, constantly checking Discord out of fear that the content of him had spread. Jenna, who had sexually explicit materials of her distributed throughout her middle school, said she started putting herself in high-risk situations later in life. She was assaulted multiple times later on.

Jenna: Because I didn't feel like my body was mine anymore, and it felt really normalised to me that other people could just use my body in whatever way they wanted, especially boys... The experience taught me that my body is like a bargaining chip. [It] can be used transactionally, but not in a way that is actually empowering, or for my own benefit.. I'm always on the losing end of a big power dynamic.

Interrelational impacts

Participants described the impact of OSEA as reflecting broader gender dynamics, explaining how survivors who identify as women tend to have extreme consequences resulting from OSEA, while their male-identifying partners do not. For instance, despite both being in the livestream video, Susanna Gibson lost her job while her husband did not. Izzy, a survivor with previous experience of sexual violence, explained how her boyfriend was also a victim, yet did not understand:

I think he just disassociated from it entirely. His face wasn't in anything, and that's kind of what he kept saying. He more so felt for me... It was just kind of an uncomfortable feeling that he, I think, just didn't connect with it. Wasn't that big of a deal to him... I told my boyfriend about it, and that support was again kind of just he didn't get it, and I kind of was hopeful that he would, because now he was also a part of that. And again, I don't think it was clicking for him that like, Hey, you're a victim of this just as much as I am, even though my face is in these. So are you. He didn't quite understand.

OSEA affected participants' loved ones in unique ways as well. Both Nikki and Anonymous #1 expressed fears that their children would be harmed through the threats they experienced. Nikki was trafficked, and her perpetrator threatened to release videos of her to her children's fathers so she would lose custody. People made nonconsensual sexual AI deepfakes of Anonymous #1, and she was cyberstalked and doxxed by people who saw the videos. She feared that someone would find her address and harm her children. These two survivors had different experiences with OSEA but shared a similar impact.

Survivors of OSEA experience varying responses from their communities. These impacts are further exacerbated by existing social dynamics, including racism, classism, homophobia and misogyny. Sexually explicit videos of two

participants and their male partners were leaked online; notably, the men in the videos did not experience nearly the same level of harassment or threats to their safety as a result. This variance in response demonstrates how sexual violence is often used as a tool to silence victims and how negative social reactions are often connected to deeply ingrained power dynamics perpetuating gender stereotypes.¹³² Survivors are often silenced by compounding pressures, including the weaponisation of sexual violence as a tool to gain control and instil fear, as well as societal factors of victim-blaming and shame.¹³³

Susanna: And, you know, my husband, for example, owns his own law firm in the country... And he actually lost no clients. [He] experienced less than a handful of phone calls or emails. And basically getting high fives, like his old fraternity brothers are like, yeah, we watched them. They're pretty hot. Meanwhile, I'm getting death threats, rape threats, doxxed, swatted like you. Just look at – What's the difference between us? We're both in those videos, right?

Avatar: I was actually afraid of judgment. And you know people seeing me making me feel less of myself for being gay... And our society today has positioned the society in such a way that they see the LGBTQ community folks as threats to the wellbeing of the society... they are seen as threats of which we are just humans.

Nikki: Well, with police you're not really heard as a woman. And then you're looked at. You're judged by your behaviours and whatnot, and that people aren't understanding the trauma part of it. Yeah, I felt unheard, unseen. Judged.

Financial impact

Every participant experienced a financial impact; some lost their jobs, others developed depression and stepped away from work, and some had concerns that potential employers might find sexually explicit materials of them online if they ever chose to shift careers. Four participants noted dips in their performance at their current jobs due to depression or distraction, potentially affecting their chances of promotion. Izzy started receiving messages on LinkedIn from people who had seen her on various pornographic websites and began harassing her. Because LinkedIn is such a vital tool for job searching, she fears she will not be able to find a job in the future.

M.C. was threatened, stalked, and doxxed by someone she had ended a relationship with. He had sexually explicit images of her and sent them to her workplace: *But I think [what] he really wanted [was] for me to lose my job, to be kicked out of the foundation as well, because in all the emails it was like, "it is a shame that you have someone like this in your*

company. It is a shame that you have someone like that part of your team.”

The participants’ fears around these coercive tactics are not unfounded. Research shows that one in three employers says that a sexually provocative image of a person online would be a main reason to not hire them.¹³⁴ One participant was fired from her job as a nurse when sexually explicit material of her was distributed online without her consent. She was told she was fired out of “concern for her reputation.”

Job loss and general unemployment are only one of the financial impacts of OSEA. Some participants were extorted for money. Avatar was groomed by an adult online when he was a young teenager. The adult gained his trust,

One in three employers says that a sexually provocative image of a person online would be a main reason to not hire them.

eventually manipulating him into sending nude images, and then quickly started extorting Avatar for money. He demanded payment, threatening to send the picture to his family and his school. Avatar used his allowance to pay him.

Beyond the direct impacts of OSEA on employment and extortion, many participants spent money on legal fees or third parties to get sexually explicit materials taken down. Anonymous #1 estimates that she paid \$10,000 to a law firm to locate the person who created an AI deepfake of her and to have it taken down. The firm found the individual, but there was nothing to be done since he hadn’t broken any laws, and they could not get the video taken down as it had spread across several platforms.

Izzy still pays \$1,000 a month to a third party to continuously do reverse image searches of her and pull sexually explicit materials from various dark websites. Some participants, including Taylor, did not seek legal counsel because the financial barrier to obtaining an attorney was too great. The financial burden of seeking justice rests almost solely on the survivors. Criminal prosecutions focus on punishment, where survivors have little control as witnesses rather than parties to



the case.¹³⁵ Alternatively, pursuing compensation and content removal often requires costly private legal representation, especially for civil suits for OSEA.¹³⁶ These barriers contribute to the problem of low reporting and inadequacies in the legal process.

Participants faced various other financial burdens due to their experiences with OSEA. Some were forced to move to a new housing situation. Many participants pay for mental health counselling, which, if attended weekly, can range from \$6,000 to \$13,000 per year without insurance.¹³⁷ One participant is still financially reliant on her perpetrator, so she does not want to seek any recourse that could affect his career.

Lifestyle impact

Survivors may make changes to their physical environment and daily habits in response to experiencing OSEA. Participants reported an increase in security measures; for example, M.C. changed all her passwords, deleted her social media accounts, installed home security cameras, and changed her phone number. She also began recording evidence of OSEA by taking screenshots of all communications with the perpetrator and storing them on a flash drive. Other survivors reported similar experiences. Angelique revealed that she needed to relocate from her small town. Susanna described the effect on her sense of safety and security:

I mean, it had a significant impact on my sense of safety. I felt like I couldn't go anywhere, didn't feel safe going to the grocery store, didn't feel safe in my gym. The gym was probably the one place I felt the safest - didn't feel safe in my home. I mean, anxiety, depression, insomnia. I mean, the impact that it had. I mean, it had an impact on every single part of me, and my life, so, fundamentally changed who I am as a person.

In attempts to regain control over their security, survivors often took steps to delete their social media accounts. These platforms were often used to spread nonconsensual materials or were the site where the OSEA was initiated. Deletion of social media accounts led to some unintended consequences as described in M.C.'s case:

I deleted completely my Facebook, which now I regret because I didn't do any type of backup, and I lost a bunch of pictures and stuff. And I lost contact with some friends that I don't think I can reconnect otherwise.

Anonymous #1 moved to a new location entirely due to the fears brought on by doxxing. Izzy updated security at her house, and Anonymous #2 changed her route to work because she was being cyberstalked.

Victim blaming and feelings of betrayal

Many participants expressed feelings of responsibility and blame for their own victimisation. This was particularly common for those who had originally taken their own pictures or consented to being photographed or recorded, but had not consented to those materials being distributed online. Jenna was 12 when she and a friend jokingly posted a picture of themselves topless on a Flickr site that was supposed to delete it after thirty seconds. Someone took a picture of the picture and spread it through her school. She speaks about the solitude of feeling like she was to blame:

Jenna: Nobody was interested in helping me process that recourse either or explore options. And it very much just felt like, you know, this is my blame to carry, my burden to carry. There's nothing that can be done about it. This picture is never gonna go away.

Almost every participant experienced feeling blamed for their situation by the people around them, including by law enforcement, lawyers, and, in some cases, by their own friends and family.

Samantha, who was raped, and the perpetrator video recorded the assault to post online, recalls her interaction with law enforcement when she reported: *It was questions like, well, if you were unconscious, then how do you know you didn't consent? And that kind of almost mocking and making fun of? And then when they were presented with, you know, evidence of the video, and it was well, you know, we can't prove it. He says you're role playing, and just everything you could possibly think of as to why, there's no way, even just a video that proves the crime happened.*

M.C.: Also the language they used, it felt again, it felt like they were judging all the time, like, okay. So you're saying that you were the one sending the pictures. Of course it was me sending the pictures, and I wanted to send the pictures, but I didn't want the pictures to be shared.

Izzy: They made some jokes about it like, "Oh, well, you know, this is why you shouldn't use Snapchat. This is why we tell people not to document these things." And again, I'm a 21, 22 year old consenting adult. So.

Angelique: The response I got initially was kind of like, "Well, you guys were married. Is it really that big of a deal?" kind of thing.

The weaponisation of sexually explicit materials against a person violates their autonomy, privacy, and consent.¹³⁸ Further, survivors of OSEA can face substantive threats to their reputation, intimate privacy, freedom of expression,

employment or education, and can experience risks of identity theft and computer fraud.¹³⁹ It is further traumatising to experience blame for these violations or to not be believed, particularly by those who are supposed to protect survivors and offer services. This can be viewed as a form of betrayal.¹⁴⁰ Victim blaming is a harmful and prevalent factor in rape culture, with roots in misogyny, sexual shaming, and purity culture.¹⁴¹ The tendency to victim-blame is facilitated through societal structures, including the language in which sexual violence is described (the problematic term “revenge porn” is still used in legal language, for example), biased media coverage, harmful stereotypes about promiscuity (particularly aimed at LGBTQ+ people and people of colour), and the general political power imbalance under patriarchy.¹⁴²

Participants expressed feeling betrayed and ensuing trust issues with their partners or with people in general following their experiences of OSEA. Just as with in-person cases of sexual violence, the majority of people affected by OSEA know their perpetrator.¹⁴³ About 60% of OSEA survivors know their perpetrator in person, and an additional 15% never met them in person but began a relationship online; this generally leads to grooming and/or sextortion cases.¹⁴⁴

In this study, five of the 13 participants were in committed, in-person relationships with the person who victimised them. Three met people online, who victimised them after gaining their trust, and two were victimised exclusively by strangers. Others had their materials spread and posted by people they did not know, but knew one or more of their perpetrators.

Anonymous #2 matched with someone on a dating app and met up with him. She found out months later that he had been cyberstalking her, hacking her messages, and interacting with her, posing as different people on the app. She spoke about the shock and betrayal she felt when she found out:

I just felt unsafe even in places that I used to just engage in... I think the biggest trouble, though, is healing and kind of feeling safe in certain environments and interactions just because of how encroaching a situation like that can be. But it's an everyday walk, I guess, to recovery.

Nikki

Nikki's experience demonstrates the ways in which technology can be used against people who turn to it to keep them safe. She is also a survivor of offline sexual violence, and her story underscores the ways in which OSEA and in-person abuse are often simultaneous and connected.

Nikki experienced sexual abuse starting when she was twelve years old, and it left her confused and alone. She was dealing with a complicated home life, and she felt that she had very little guidance and support. She says that growing up, she had been taught how to use her body through abuse. As she got older, she struggled with addiction and other coping mechanisms. She also had children, and she struggled financially.

When she was in her twenties, she began selling sex to make ends meet, and during this time, she was sexually assaulted. This scared her, and she met someone who put her on Backpage, a site used for prostitution, so she could more safely make enough money to get out of her current situation. Backpage was supposed to keep her safer than selling sex on the street. Instead, someone used this platform to track her down. He locked her in a hotel room and trafficked her for the following year.

The man who trafficked her forced her to make sexually explicit videos and told her he would send them to various people in her life. This included her children's fathers, which placed her in fear of losing access to her kids. If she pushed back, he would threaten to kill her children. Nikki says even today, if anyone Googles her name, stories appear that she was missing for a year. Her story highlights that moving from streetwalking to advertising online, while generally understood to be safer, can actually be as dangerous for people involved in the sex trade.

Nikki's experience with systemic betrayals continued when she received judgment from people who were supposed to help her. On several occasions during this period, Nikki was hospitalised and had interactions with hospital staff, social workers, and police. She says for the most part the police "didn't believe me, told me I was lying, and were very aggressive in a way. [They were] demeaning, unhelping, and some police over here are involved in the bullshit... Detroit cops are crooked."

This, paired with charges against her for prostitution and narcotics possession, left Nikki with very few people who treated her with kindness and understanding. She notes that one of the largest gaps in getting people out of trafficking situations is education. Even now, while there is more training being implemented for police and hospital workers, "they [still] do not have the next training for judges, prosecutors, lawyers, things like that to understand the behaviours and whatnot of someone who's been through trauma." She also comments that every resource she found, she had to seek out herself. This demonstrates how the burden often falls on the survivor to extricate themselves from the situation they are in.

Implications of OSEA

While the previous section focused on the personal and psychological impacts experienced by survivors, this section examines the broader implications of OSEA, specifically how these harms are understood and addressed by society, institutions, and movements working to address online harms.

OSEA is unique in that the use and weaponisation of technology for abuse is multifaceted and has the ability to create ongoing harm. The wide range of abuses considered OSEA has created rifts in the movement to combat it, and ongoing harms add compounding trauma to survivors' lives.

Variation in forms of OSEA

One major theme to emerge from the participants of this study was the need to eliminate rifts within the movement to end OSEA. The concept of online sexual violence is broad in scope and encompasses multiple forms of abuse. This can lead people to feel that their own experience is not fully captured or is put in competition with others' experiences.

For example, multiple participants who are survivors of nonconsensual distribution of explicit materials expressed feeling like they experienced more victim-blaming than those who are survivors of nonconsensual AI deepfakes. This reflects society's attitudes toward different types of abuse rather than the severity of survivors' experiences.¹⁴⁵

Susanna: [The tension between AI deepfakes and authentic materials] is creating this good victim, bad victim dichotomy! That is well, anybody can be the victim of deepfake. You can just be innocent as possible sitting in your room and be a victim of this. But so you're good victims, we want to prioritize you, we want to protect you, we want to hear your stories. But if you are someone who sent a video or image to a partner, you actually kind of deserve what you got... you're the bad victim. You're not sympathetic.

Samantha, who was raped, and the perpetrator recorded the assault on video, explains:

I acknowledge, and I appreciate, that there's an emphasis on deepfakes and AI... [but] those who have had actual images shared, or who have been, in my case, attacked and it was videoed there, it's almost looked at as it's somehow our fault, and we are to blame because we've participated in it in some way, regardless of whether we consented to it or not. And I don't think those who have experienced deepfakes are necessarily facing those same questions of whether they consented to it. I

hope that the dialogue that I've seen in the legislative landscape recently starts to shift towards consent as the focus, not whether it's deepfakes or not.

Samantha explains well that the key underlying factor in any of these experiences is consent. Survivors of deepfakes as well as survivors of nonconsensual distribution of authentic sexual materials are victims of consent violations. Social perceptions of OSEA are often influenced by constructs of harm, victimhood, and blame, which shape conceptualisations and responses to digital sexual violence.¹⁴⁶ Narratives of the "ideal" victim often assume someone who deserves help to be very young or elderly, weak, vulnerable, and that they are attacked by a stranger.¹⁴⁷ Similar to offline incidents of sexual violence, the hierarchies of blame in online contexts ascribe culpability and responsibility to those who do not align with the "ideal" construct.¹⁴⁸ Participants echo these constructs of victimhood as targets of nonconsensual sexual deepfakes are often viewed as "ideal victims" because they did not actually participate in the sexual acts. With authentic materials, survivors are blamed and treated as somehow responsible for their own victimisation because they themselves are in the images or videos.¹⁴⁹

Dichotomy between adult and child survivors

Another major theme described by participants is the differing experiences and attention paid to adult survivors versus those who were victimised as children. Indeed, the literature review for this research proved challenging to find studies on adult survivors of grooming, trafficking, and other forms of online sexual abuse. This gap in research has resulted in not only a lack of policies to protect adults online, but also a lack of understanding of adult survivors. While both children and adults experience victim-blaming, some participants expressed frustrations that the law and their communities did not treat the violations of their consent as such because they were over the age of 18.

It is generally accepted socially (likely due in part to legal definitions) that children are incapable of giving consent to engage in sexual activity with an adult.¹⁵⁰ Adult victims, however, often face the assumption that once they turn 18, they are always capable of providing informed and voluntary consent. This binary view of consent ignores the many ways in which adults can be groomed, coerced or manipulated into sexual acts or IBSA. Social and legal frameworks often fail to recognise that socio-economic conditions, disabilities, prior trauma, dependence on a partner, and many other factors can constrain an adult's capacity to give consent.¹⁵¹ Moreover, adult survivors often face suggestive blame or sentiments from society that their

victimisation is the result of personal choices rather than coercion.¹⁵²

This can be amplified in cases involving IBSA, where survivors often face the blame for having taken sexually explicit pictures or videos at all, rather than accountability lying solely with the perpetrators for violating their consent.¹⁵³ Such attitudes and corresponding legal gaps not only reinforce stigma and silence but also limit the legal and social recognition of adult IBSA as a form of abuse.

Izzy's Snapchat was hacked when she was 21, and the perpetrator posted sexually explicit pictures and videos of her and her boyfriend. Others quickly spread the videos and dug into old pictures from her social media accounts, which included a photo of her when she was 16 in a bikini. The prosecutor told her that this image was their best chance at seeking justice because they could claim CSAM. Izzy explains:

I think, at least during this specific experience, trying to find a loophole where we could use me as a child, as a way to get me justice as an adult in and of itself kind of invalidated the fact that as an adult, this is what I experienced. I don't know why we're using what happened to me as a kid to try and play that, but yeah, that whole concept. Yeah, I really don't like it.

The spread of CSAM online is a pervasive problem, as well as the online grooming of children. Three participants of this study were victimised when they were children, and there are not enough options for recourse or prevention mechanisms to stop this from happening. It does not take away from this mission to also support adult survivors and to recognise that consent violations are just as valid for those over the age of 18.

OSEA harm is ongoing and compounding

The exponential and ongoing harm associated with OSEA is somewhat unique to this form of abuse. Survivors often experience retraumatisation and a state of constant fear as materials of them continue to exist and spread online. Most of the participants of this study still have materials existing online, which is continuously traumatising. Izzy said, "I go and search anything that could tie back to me pretty much every day. I do that the second I wake up in the morning." She was first victimised one year ago.

The key underlying factor in any of these experiences is consent. OSEA is unique in that there are often multiple stages of possible consent violations because the abuse is ongoing and continues to spread. Consent is required for the initial sexual encounter, for that encounter to be photographed or videoed, for those materials to be saved,

stored, and/or shared, with whom they can be shared, and on which platforms. Many survivors experience multiple violations throughout because of this.

For those who are being extorted, many experience an escalation of threats after they give in to the perpetrator's demands.¹⁵⁴ Survivors of cyberstalking can feel like the abuse never ends, because the perpetrator seemingly has access to them from anywhere geographically. And those who have had nonconsensual deepfakes made of them are retraumatised as those images are shared and as more are created.

Taylor, who is a survivor of sextortion: *I just thought that giving into their demands would actually stop this, maybe images from spreading. But I noticed that the more I gave into the demand, the more the demands kept increasing.*

Several of the participants also had their experience with OSEA weaponised against their children, which demonstrates how the harms create ripple effects that impact families and communities. An anonymous viewer of the sexually explicit content of Susanna obtained her address and called the police. He created a false story that a crime was occurring in her home, which prompted armed SWAT members to storm her house while her two children were home. This is commonly known as "swatting."

Katherine, who is married with young children, was too afraid to report that there was nonconsensual content of her online to authorities because some anonymous users had made suggestive comments that she should not have children in the home with her. She was terrified that they would file a report to Child Protective Services (CPS) stating that she had sexually explicit content online, and that the authorities would take her kids away.

Nikki, who is a trafficking survivor, recently went to court to petition for custody of her children:

And I started to say, I'm a human trafficking survivor, and [the judge] shut me down completely... I'm so fucking sick of it, and she still brings up my past from 4 years ago, no matter how many certifications I got, no matter what I do, my bad, my past was brought up... So it was ridiculous.

"I go and search anything that could tie back to me pretty much every day. I do that the second I wake up in the morning."

The ongoing and effectually permanent nature of OSEA leaves survivors with feelings of hopelessness and can put them in a state of constant vigilance.

The ongoing and effectually permanent nature of OSEA leaves survivors with feelings of hopelessness and can put them in a state of constant vigilance. It affects their daily lives and the long-term decisions they make, such as where to live, how much online presence to have, and how to navigate their careers. The constant nature of this abuse also diminishes survivors' autonomy over their own bodies and sense of belonging in their communities. Many are perpetually afraid that whoever they are speaking to, even a complete stranger, might have seen a video of them online. Or that more materials will emerge, or their lives, livelihoods, or the lives of their loved ones will be threatened in perpetuity.

Responses & access to legal remedies

Participants described their experiences interacting with the legal system and other mechanisms for recourse, including reporting to technology platforms, as negative overall. Participants cited confusing multijurisdictional issues due to the online nature of their abuse and a disproportionate burden placed on them to find solutions. They also reported a lack of system effectiveness, a lack of knowledge and training for law enforcement and legal experts on OSEA, and victim blaming. None of the participants had their cases resolved, which would include the removal of all materials from platforms, recourse against their perpetrators, and efforts to remedy their own reputations and emotional wellbeing.

Reporting & investigation

Similar to other crimes of sexual violence, survivors often choose not to report their experiences of OSEA or have negative experiences if they do report.¹⁵⁵ Participants discussed difficulties with or a lack of knowledge about how to report. Many did not understand which laws would pertain to their experience. This uncertainty is described by Alan:

I was 16 and was scared and didn't want my parents to get involved and so I never did [report]. I do believe that's what kept the majority of the people from never doing anything,

because we were extremely young and none of us really understood the legal system and what it can do to help survivors and everything. So, none of us really did anything.

In the US, approximately 99% of people ages 18-29 and 96% of adults overall use the internet regularly.¹⁵⁶ Given the expansion of technology and the increase in people's dependence on it, children in the US will almost certainly come into contact with the internet. This underscores the importance of digital literacy and safety education for children, including how to report OSEA.

The participants who did report the OSEA they experienced were asked what motivated them to do so. Survivors cited the desire to protect themselves and others. Samantha expressed her reasons for reporting:

Genuinely, the fact that he had power and this position of authority in a college town, and you know it genuinely, was more of this pull to, you know, if I couldn't stop it from happening to me but I couldn't live with myself if I just sat on it and didn't say something, and someone else was harmed because of it.

Alan stated a similar motivation: *And hopefully, my experience can help protect other people in the future.*

Survivors also shared their experiences of reporting directly to online platforms. Izzy's experience illustrates the multiple steps survivors take to request that platforms take down the materials:

A lot of the websites did take me down. Once they found out that I wasn't the one who sent it to them, like Pornhub did that basically immediately. And I had to submit proof of my identity, date of birth, driver's license, to a lot of other websites.

Multiple platforms required proof of identity, date of birth, and a driver's license to agree to remove the videos of Izzy. These requirements impose additional barriers for survivors of OSEA. Under these provisions, survivors who do not provide a driver's license will not be able to report OSEA.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, submitting proof of identity and a license requires providing personal information, such as a home address. Individuals who have experienced a breach of security and safety through OSEA may not trust sending their personal information to the same company that hosted the nonconsensual video of them. Many have experienced doxxing, and might be hesitant to provide any other information that could be leaked. The requirements of these report procedures also makes it inaccessible for underage or undocumented survivors. Susanna commented that it is not in the interest of platforms to stop the spread of these materials; they seem more concerned

with shielding themselves from liability than with protecting survivors.

Izzy went to NetReputation, a company specialising in removal:

So I spent \$3,000 on a NetReputation place to kind of go through and use reverse image searching to do the best they can to remove all of that from the Internet. And that's been something I've been paying monthly for since this happened back in August.

While removal companies are a useful response tool, they can be a double-edged sword. Private investment raises ethical concerns about whether organisations should profit from OSEA, particularly considering its enduring nature creates space for continuing economic gain. The motives of these companies may be disingenuous given the financial incentive, which can lead to a further breach of trust with survivors.

Under the for-profit business model, removal companies rely on OSEA and takedown requests as their source of revenue.¹⁵⁸ Companies such as Reputation Stars, Remove My Name, and Online Defamation Defenders have all emerged in the growing industry of “online reputation control” services.¹⁵⁹ They charge fees ranging from a few hundred dollars per request to a few thousand. Due to this for-profit model, there is very little incentive for primary prevention of OSEA in the private sector, as companies make money as long as nonconsensual explicit materials continue to spread.

Every survivor of nonconsensual distribution of explicit images in this study described how they endured repeated incidents of content being posted and spread across different platforms. Each developed their own routines of monitoring online spaces and filing requests for materials to be taken down. Survivors may need to file so-called “takedown requests” repeatedly, sometimes daily, and these requests may persist for months or even years before being accepted or even acknowledged.

Some online platforms proactively account for potential incidents of OSEA within their terms of service and guidelines. Izzy explains what happened when she reported to Snapchat:

I did report to Snapchat, who basically, within their community guidelines, they say you're not supposed to take any sexually explicit pictures of yourself, so if anything does happen to you, that's your fault. So Snapchat was actually the least helpful platform. It genuinely made me sick to my stomach how dismissive they were!

Snapchat did not investigate the images that Izzy reported, dismissing her claims and blaming her instead. When online platforms actively engage in victim-blaming, they facilitate OSEA and bar survivors from removal and recovery.

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Multi-jurisdictional issues within the US

When survivors did report, they sometimes faced jurisdictional issues. In the US, laws are divided between state and federal systems, each with their own courts and authority to handle certain cases. Jurisdiction refers to the legal authority or power of a court or government body to make decisions or enforce laws within a specific area or over certain matters.¹⁶⁰ Due to the nature of the internet, OSEA does not know state or national borders and is rarely confined to one jurisdiction. This makes it difficult to determine which laws apply or which agency has authority to act, creating further issues for survivors to access recourse.

Survivors may report to their nearest local police station, but be subject to wider jurisdictions at the state or national level. Navigating this can add further confusion for those who report. Samantha recounted her experience reporting to law enforcement. She was raped by a police officer, so she did not want to report to the office within his jurisdiction.

Samantha: Because he worked for the city's office, I wasn't trying to walk up there and act like I was going to report to his friends. So I went to the next town over to report, and then they had to involve, you know, state police and higher ups because they didn't have jurisdiction in the next town over.

Samantha described that the jurisdictional issues continued because her perpetrator posted the video online:

They had multiple officers come in, and I had to continuously repeat over and over again what happened... They were basically like, well, what do you expect us to do about it? It's the internet, like, we don't have control over that... There were no resources given and it kind of left me feeling even more hopeless, because, you know, they're like, well, once it's on the Internet, it's out there so.

M.C. encountered jurisdictional issues with her perpetrator living in a different state: *So at the end of the day, the police called me back, and they were like, "Well, actually, there's nothing that we can do, because this person is not living here in Georgia. So there's nothing we can do. Only if you know that this person is going to be in Georgia. Maybe we can proceed with a temporary protective order, but then you will have to come back again. We need an address. We need this. We need that." It was just so honestly it was, it was very disappointing for me.*

These reflections also demonstrate that the survivors are often unaware of the complexity of jurisdictional issues when they report abuse. With both Samantha and M.C.'s accounts, this lack of knowledge about jurisdiction was weaponized by the responding officers to shift the burden back to the survivor. They asked Samantha, "what do you expect us to do about it? It's the internet" and informed M.C. that *she* would need to find out if the perpetrator would be back in Georgia, when, and then decide if she wanted to return to get a protective order.

Burden on survivors

A common theme to emerge from participant interviews was the incredible burden placed on survivors to navigate the legal system on their own behalves. Most did not know where to start or if what happened to them was illegal at all.

Anonymous #2 matched with someone on a dating app only to find out he had been cyberstalking her prior to their meeting. He also posed as other people on the app and interacted with her. When she realised this, she recognised moments from their time together as strange; he would say something to imply that he had knowledge of a text conversation she had with a friend. She remembers asking herself, "Is he trying to threaten me?" She could not prove he had hacked her social media or posed as other people and was unsure if what he had done was illegal. He had certainly violated her consent; she knew she felt unsafe, but wasn't sure anyone else would understand it that way.

Anonymous #2: *I did definitely try to do what I could by just gathering my own kind of evidence, doing my research, thinking about ways to keep information that would be helpful in the case that I need to share to use anything and then make reports where I know at least someone would be aware. But you'll be required to do things that are a little bit impossible for reporting to the police... they'll tell you, "unless there's this particular criteria, we can't necessarily do much for you" or "if you're not able to show up in person we wouldn't be able to do anything."*

Anonymous #1 was able to track down one of the people who made a sexually explicit AI deepfake of her. However, her lawyer told her that there was nothing to be done; he had not committed any crime. The content violated her consent, was spread across platforms, affected her work, and made her fear for her safety. It was, however, not illegal.

The content violated her consent, was spread across platforms, affected her work, and made her fear for her safety. It was, however, not illegal.

Other participants who reported OSEA were asked to provide evidence, which can be retraumatizing. Two were asked to gather evidence on a drive and physically bring it to their local police station. Asking a survivor to bring in nonconsensual, sexually explicit materials to be viewed by strangers is a process that should be handled with care. Izzy provided the FBI with a folder containing as much evidence she could find, including screenshots. Today, she does not know where it is. No one from the FBI has communicated with her, and it is unclear if the folder with her sensitive information is still present in their offices. This is an example of a seemingly small administrative issue that can be retraumatizing for a survivor of OSEA who is constantly concerned about the nonconsensual distribution of explicit materials of her.

M.C.'s ex threatened her by sending emails of her material to her directly, saying he would send them to her workplace and family. She was terrified and started deleting all of the emails and content she could find.

M.C.: *I remember deleting, deleting, deleting, deleting everything. I was in panic mode. So one in one of the phone calls in a hotline...the person that was on with me on the phone was like, "Well, please, and the first instance is to have all the*

proof, so do a screenshot about absolutely everything.” I was panicking like, well, I already erased a bunch of evidence!

Additionally, the financial barrier to acquiring a personal lawyer leaves many survivors to do their own legal research. The overarching theme from participants was that the burden was on them to learn about their options, pay for representation, ensure coordination between platforms and agencies, and provide evidence, all while dealing with the trauma of OSEA, and often while the materials were still circulating online.

Legal process

The legal process for OSEA survivors is complex and challenging to navigate. Survivors spoke to basic knowledge gaps of OSEA in the justice system, calling for increased training and specialisation. Participants experienced victim-blaming throughout the legal process and were often not taken seriously or had their experiences minimised. They struggled to get legal actors to view AI-generated OSEA as sexual violence.

Systemic knowledge gaps

Survivors described a pattern amongst court actors, including prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges and even victim advocates, where there was an obvious lack of knowledge about OSEA. These actors were often unsure about OSEA harms and the need to provide trauma-informed care. M.C. describes the scene when she reported her experience to law enforcement:

I didn’t feel like there is a protocol for these types of situations, and... the language they used felt again, it felt like they were judging all the time, like, okay, “So you’re saying that you were the one sending the pictures.” Of course it was me sending the pictures, and I wanted to send the pictures, but I didn’t want the pictures to be shared.

In other cases, the police didn’t believe survivors at all. Nikki shared:

The bad was like [they] didn’t believe me, told me I was lying, very aggressive in a way. Demeaning, unhelping, and some police over here are involved in the bullshit. So...Yeah, they know what’s going on. And don’t do nothing about it.

Even if law enforcement did believe survivors, they were uncertain about the procedures around evidence collection, including obtaining warrants, issuing subpoenas, and admissibility. This was illustrated in Angelique’s interview:

Our local police department had no idea...they were confused by whether or not they should even petition the judge for a warrant to get his phone because they weren’t sure whether or not they had jurisdiction to see something of that variety. And I’m going, “Well, yeah, you guys, yeah, you do.”

There was also confusion about platform procedures regarding takedown requests, including what to request, when, and where. Criminal justice professionals typically didn’t know the relevant statutes, if any, that would cover these acts. This often results in survivors needing to navigate the system on their own, forced to locate remedies and initiate actions between the criminal and civil systems. Samantha explains how she hired a civil attorney to get a protective order and went through the Title IX process at her university. Title IX is a federal law that prohibits discrimination in education based on sex, and provides services for survivors of sexual violence on school campuses.¹⁶¹ Samantha said of her experience:

I felt indifferent about the protective order, I don’t know that it made me feel any better. The Title IX process, I think, was probably the most validating, because, again sticking with the tech lens of it, you know, [the victim advocate] really did drill down and genuinely ask him, “Okay, so you took this video?”... Actually getting him to admit details about the video that he disseminated and the fact that there was no way I could have consented and the fact that he had distributed it to embarrass me and further harm me. So I think that process made me feel a lot more validated. And unfortunately, [the victim advocate] also just didn’t know what to do about the videos and, or the video and how to get it down.

Participants expressed a desire for someone they could communicate with to give them information about their case’s status and legal options going forward. Unfortunately, survivor interviews revealed a myriad of notification and consultation deficits. Major case decisions, especially plea deals, are sometimes processed late without giving survivors time to provide input.¹⁶² Other times, plea bargains are agreed to without any survivor consultation or notice.¹⁶³ In these instances, survivors may discover case outcomes indirectly, for example, by checking the court website, rather than through the appropriate notification channels.¹⁶⁴ This lack of communication can reinforce survivors’ perceptions that the system disproportionately benefits defendants. This is supplemented by the common practice of granting delays and continuances for defendants, as seen in Angelique’s case.¹⁶⁵

Classic “the defendant has more rights,” classic “anytime he needed a continuance,” or “he didn’t like that public defender and wanted a new one,” or anytime he needed anything, the courts had to accommodate.

Repeated delays and continuances shift the burden to survivors, who must push systems to keep cases moving.

Lack of specialised training

Participants voiced that they wanted the criminal justice system to provide specialised teams or employees to address OSEA. Specialisation on OSEA includes understanding online harms and navigating the legal process without burdening survivors. Anonymous #1, who had nonconsensual deepfakes made of her, describes the shortcomings she experienced with a legal firm:

She's supposed to specialise in handling... On her website, "We fight assholes, pervs, trolls and big tech." And I'm like great, perfect. But even working with her felt a lot like nobody at her firm really knew what was going on. The tech definitely seemed to evolve quickly. I was doing a lot of explaining and teaching... I had to do a lot of clarification on, like, you know they would send me this really long email or like have a really long talk and I'd be like, none of this is relevant, I don't know where we're not matching up here.... Basically, I don't remember them being very helpful at all... They got a hold of the guy that we know did the deepfakes on me, and they like got excited that he essentially admitted it, but then were like, "Well, there's nothing we can really do with that." And I was like, "Okay..."

Samantha also discussed issues with courts' OSEA knowledge:

I think not only judges need more training on this issue to understand the actual severity, but I think there needs to be some level of education provided to attorneys so more legal aid can take these kinds of cases and feel comfortable, but also just like private firm attorneys that want to take pro-bono cases... it seems so scary to attorneys, because it's like, okay, you've got the mental health piece but then you've got this fluctuating legal landscape but then you've also got tech.

Training can equip court actors with the skills to engage in survivor-centric language, navigate across platforms for evidence collection and preservation, and understand privacy elements. Given the complexity of OSEA, specialisation would positively influence system efficiency.

System effectiveness

Survivor experiences portrayed an inefficient legal process from reporting and intake to case closure. Law enforcement was unclear about how to address OSEA, and there were inconsistencies in how they handled digital evidence. According to participants, there was generally no protocol for OSEA cases and, at times, survivor-centered practices, such as providing a victim advocate or

trauma-informed interviews, were nonexistent. Instead of initiating an investigation, the police handed back M.C.'s evidence within two hours:

They called me within the next not even two hours, not even two hours. I was there, and I went home, and I remember I was doing whatever, and I received a phone call and they were like, Can you come and pick up your flash drive? I was like, I just handed it to you. So yeah, it wasn't even two hours.

Survivors also pointed to the inefficiency of reporting pathways for technology platforms, describing them as hard to locate, with sporadic responses, and counterproductive actions, such as platform moderation or deletion actions that erase evidence, which hinder legal investigations.

Alan, who was groomed by an adult on Discord when he was a young teenager, described the impact of server deletions:

And so I think that's why the owner of the server freaked out so much because [Discord] did reach out to her about the situation being like, "Hey, we are going to be investigating this, based on what we found," and then she deleted it, and they were not able to keep any of that evidence due to it.

By the time server users realised they could pursue alternative reporting options, such as federal authorities, the server and evidence were deleted, hindering the pursuit of legal actions and leaving survivors with an inefficient means to address OSEA. Requirements that online platforms ensure data retention and establish clear procedures for legal requests to maintain user safety and security would be beneficial for combatting OSEA. Early missteps shape expectations with the criminal justice system. Survivors learn quickly they may need to be their own advocate.

Angelique

Angelique's experience sheds light on the various pathways of system failure possible for survivors within the US criminal justice system. Her story illustrates numerous obstacles and barriers survivors face in their efforts to navigate the complexities of the reporting, investigation, prosecution, community supervision, and treatment systems.

It was a Saturday morning in late 2022 when Angelique received a call from her grandmother asking why “her naked rear end was showing up on her newsfeed”. Angelique was in the midst of a divorce, having left a long-term relationship. Despite the permanent restraining order she had against her partner, he violated it 11 times, and this was his last-ditch effort to embarrass her.

Over the next few days, Angelique discovered a plethora of sexually explicit images and videos of her shared on Facebook and other websites targeted at dating, cheating wives, and pornography. A friend referred the case to the police, who contacted Angelique, initiating an investigation.

Angelique had to explain the history of stalking and protection order violations for law enforcement to take her case seriously. The incident was triggering for Angelique, bringing up memories from a previous experience. Law enforcement lacked understanding of jurisdiction, and there was confusion about how to obtain a warrant to search the perpetrator's phone. Once a judge signed the warrant, investigators also discovered CSAM violations.

Under Colorado law, Angelique's case fell under the “Revenge Porn” statutes.¹⁶⁶ The District Attorney (DA) combined the 11 restraining order violations and stalking charges with the OSEA abuse and, without consulting Angelique, offered the perpetrator a plea deal for the lesser charge of domestic violence harassment. They told Angelique she would be a horrible witness, and the victim advocate chastised her. The judge sentenced the defendant to time served and, under his plea agreement, he did not have to register as a sex offender. His terms of probation were extended for three years, meaning his case will not be fully adjudicated until 2028.

Given conflict of interest laws, Angelique was referred to treatment 65 miles away, illustrating a common challenge among survivors with accessibility. Impacts on Angelique's life included relocation, issues with job performance, safety concerns, trust issues, and isolation. It wasn't until criminal justice professionals understood the totality of her circumstances and, with countless reminders, that they treated her with the dignity, fairness, and respect afforded her under the Victims' Rights Act.¹⁶⁷

Reflecting on the effectiveness of the legal process, Angelique asserted that she should not have to be responsible for notifying probation supervision officers of perpetrator violations. She stressed that she couldn't get a response until she copied a state senator she knew on her communications. She commented on how the perpetrator felt so comfortable while on probation, that he victimised another woman. When reporting this behaviour, court staff again told her this was a civil matter. Angelique described feelings of frustration in needing to remind civil servants of certain aspects of their job duties, especially as a Colorado taxpayer. In exasperation, she commented, “Don't wait until I'm on a poster at a candlelit vigil”.

Angelique's story demonstrates how the criminal justice system grants more rights to defendants than to survivors. It also highlights multiple pathways of system failure.

Victim blaming in the legal process

Throughout survivors' lived experiences, it became clear that a pattern of victim-blaming is present and common for OSEA cases. Participants who did report to authorities were interrogated about their credibility and questioned about consent. Responders often downplayed harm and shifted responsibility back onto survivors. Participants were perceived as being too emotional or unreliable in their accounts, leading to their exclusion from key decisions regarding their case.

Nikki, who was trafficked for a year, was repeatedly dismissed:

The hospitals and law enforcement treated me like shit, and they'd even say, "Oh, she's crazy."

Susanna, whose husband recorded them having sex and someone posted the video without her consent, said: *Yes, the FBI called my attorney and basically laughed at him. My attorney was pissed, so angry! They said, it's something akin to "Wait, so let us get this right, your client... she uploaded videos of herself and now she's angry?" and he's like, "Well, that's not exactly what happened," but fuck you, FBI, I appreciate it.*

The dismissal of survivors illustrates explicit victim-blaming, where law enforcement questions their credibility, scrutinises their right to consent, and inquires about their moral judgment. It also demonstrates implicit victim-blaming, where procedural missteps shift the blame to survivors. These dynamics influence subsequent case decisions, including charge decisions and plea bargains. Survivors often lose trust in the legal system as they are forced to navigate it alone, manage their own evidence, educate themselves about OSEA, stay up-to-date with court calendars, and advocate on their own behalf.

Case resolution

In the US, a case is generally considered "closed" once a final disposition is entered, such as a judgment in a civil case or a sentence in a criminal case. However, the nature of OSEA can result in ongoing harm, so many participants described unresolved or only partially resolved outcomes. Many survivors still have nonconsensual materials of them spreading across platforms, or their perpetrators are only held accountable for the initial posting, which does not feel adequate to address the whole harm.

Plea deals and probation supervision are perceived by the courts generally as efficient resolutions, often due to resource availability and prosecutorial discretion, making them common in the criminal justice system.¹⁶⁸ Angelique

explained how this process manifested in her case against her ex-husband:

To make things easier, and to avoid having to go to trials which are costly and time consuming, they just always give the option of a lesser charge, and "Here's a deal, and you could do probation."

While court actors may consider this type of case as resolved, it is not the same for survivors who still have concerns. Angelique explains:

The case is not fully adjudicated, and will not be until June of 2028; that is the length of his probation. He was originally supposed to be off of probation in 2025, but I noticed that he had another permanent restraining order hearing with someone else on the docket, and I had to call his probation officer and tell them why that was problematic... They elected to add an additional 3 years until 2028, but I was also informed that in November of 2024, ...he was given the opportunity to plead out to child abuse, and then I had the question of "How is another, how is a child abuse conviction not a violation of the probation in our case?" and their probation office responded to me that they are focused on teaching him empathy.

When the criminal justice system pushes cases to resolution without accountability, survivors are depreciated. Of the participants in this study who interacted with the court system, four out of five reported that their cases were not treated fairly or impartially.

When the criminal justice system pushes cases to resolution without accountability, survivors are depreciated.

The criminal justice system fails to recognise the nuances of OSEA and sexual violence. Survivor experiences are often reduced to lesser legal charges, their accounts are scrutinised, and they are unlikely to receive trauma-informed care. Jenna explains how the system of recourse in the US does not prioritise survivors:

Our system of recourse in the US is a legal one, and legal systems do not care that much about apologies and holding, you know, holding the pain of survivors. And that's partially harmful, because, perpetrators then won't apologise because that can be used against them in court, or, survivors have to go up and recount every detail of their experience, and I'd have

to go on a stand, I imagine, if I was being questioned about this, and talk about exactly why I took the picture and where I uploaded it, and you know how many times I'd sent nudes before and be totally scrutinised. I think the system as a whole isn't set up to really give survivors justice in the ways that they need and deserve, and should be able to decide what that looks like for them.

Across these accounts, participants were rarely satisfied with how cases ended. Once a case was initiated, it often resulted in additional obligations for survivors, including monitoring case dockets and maintaining contact with justice agencies. Despite court documents suggesting closure, the experience continued for survivors.

Policy gaps

Survivor experiences revealed policy gaps in the US around OSEA. Existing laws are piecemeal, platforms have limited duties in prevention and protection, and legal procedures move too slowly, failing to address the harms endured adequately. The following section details these gaps in policies, accountability for technology companies, access and cost, timing, and the overall lack of survivor voices in policy reform.

Coverage

The US has federal, state, and municipal legislation, and there are gaps and inconsistencies in coverage for OSEA at the various levels. Federal legislation is not comprehensive, state legislation is often unclear, and coordination between these levels of government can lack communication.¹⁶⁹ While state coverage provides extra protections to citizens, this incremental application of the law can impede resource allocation, create loopholes, and complicate cases that cross borders. There are also virtually no laws that span international borders for adult survivors of nonconsensual distribution of explicit materials.¹⁷⁰

M.C. pointed to gaps in federal statutes:

I think the lack of federal coverage, because when I was doing my research it was pretty much covered state by state...Kind of a surprise like why, why, why, in the state of Georgia is it so different than [another] state? So that was very frustrating. I would love to know that there's just like one general rule.

Similarly, Katherine also petitioned for stronger federal coverage:

I think that there needs to be more at the federal level because it supports the states, and the state supports the federal, and it definitely kind of speaks to some of those basic human rights. I usually go back to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and what that falls under.

Coverage issues also pertain to the type of abuse. OSEA statutes are inconsistent in both names and definitions. Legislation covering “revenge porn” and “nonconsensual disclosure of intimate images” (NDII) illustrates this discrepancy. 49 states have some form of legislation surrounding NDII, but they are inconsistent and often do not cover images distributed across state lines.¹⁷¹ Additionally, AI-generated content is often added on as an amendment, if at all; currently, only 21 states have laws regarding sexually explicit deepfakes.¹⁷²

One area that the US does focus on addressing is CSAM. However, the statute of limitations for child sexual abuse is a consistent barrier for adults. Alan explains:

People will go through sexual trauma, especially online and then they'll realise as adults this happened to me, and then by that time, legally, there's nothing they can do, because apparently there's been too much time in between the situation happening. It doesn't matter how much evidence you can present. It doesn't matter what happens... You're an adult now, you're not a kid anymore, nothing we can do to help you. I think there needs to be something fixed in the policy to help that. Because you, just because it's been 5 or 10 years since something's happened to someone. It does not mean that it has affected them any less. It does not mean that the situation has changed, and it doesn't mean that that situation is invalid.

When OSEA statutes are divided between state and federal legislatures and subject to various limitation statutes, gaps in oversight are inevitable, creating more harm. The broad nature of OSEA, including its multiple forms, complex geographical nature, and ongoing presence, requires policies that expand coverage to ensure survivors are supported and to establish clear lines of accountability.

“People will go through sexual trauma, especially online and then they'll realise as adults this happened to me, and then by that time, legally, there's nothing they can do.”

Accountability

12 out of the 13 participants, when asked what they would like to see change from a policy perspective, said they want to see more accountability for technology companies. Samantha discussed holding these institutions responsible:

The infamous tech companies and online platforms, having them held liable in a way that actually is substantial, not just a slap on the wrist that they'll just keep doing, whether that's monetary or some other action. But there needs to be some level of accountability expanded from what already exists.

Survivors also note the larger network that plays a role in facilitating abuse. App stores, search engines, and public forums are just a few examples of prevention points. As Jenna explains, responsibility does not fall solely to an individual perpetrator:

12 out of the 13 participants, when asked what they would like to see change from a policy perspective, said they want to see more accountability for technology companies.

Google should not be allowed to platform Nudify apps. I think that servers should not be able to service websites that are dedicated to circulating nonconsensual nude images and nonconsensual sexual deepfakes. Meta and other social media platforms should just do a better fucking job at being able to distinguish between consensual and nonconsensual circulated images, and that it should be easier to remove any content of yourself or your likeness that you don't want up... I mean, there's like really big networks of this type of abuse happening that are being fully enabled by tech platforms, and I care way more about those platforms paying fines and being held accountable than I do about individual perpetrators.

Participants' specific experiences with technology platforms ranged. Some voiced frustration with the reporting options on platforms when they attempted to have materials removed. It is far easier, they noted, to post materials than to get them taken down. Others suggested that there should be verification processes to identify what content is AI-generated. Some participants wanted to see technology companies held legally responsible for nonconsensual content that they allow to remain on their platforms.

Izzy: Pornhub could maybe be held a little more accountable for where they accept, maybe in the way that I had to show my identification to get them removed, you should have to show identification to get them uploaded.

Anonymous #2, who was cyberstalked, said that too often experiences like hers are not treated like stalking at all. The nature of her abuse, which started online, created a situation where the current legal definition of stalking did not encompass what happened to her. Furthermore, she said she felt like the solution too often from technology companies, if they respond at all, is to compensate the survivor rather than solve the problem:

A lot of these situations are kind of always treated like something to throw money at the victim, with no actual resolution that helps them implement their safety in the way that other kind of situations are treated, and we, as a government or as a nation, would benefit more from approaching this issue by figuring out ways we're better able to keep up with and investigate things that happen in cyberspace that are illegal.

The anger the participants directed at the technology companies was significant. While participants did discuss prevention and their desire to seek recourse against their perpetrators, they largely held the mechanisms (technology companies and platforms) responsible for the amount of harm they experienced. Technology-facilitated sexual violence enables some perpetrators to remain anonymous, allowing them to avoid accountability and even normalising their online abuse of others. It is unclear how many perpetrators would still be abusive without the anonymity and ease of technology.

Access & cost

One barrier survivors discussed was the limited coverage of services and funding. The costs of these cases are high, with content searches, takedown requests, legal fees, and mental health services. Jenna explained how certain services are only available to those who report:

A lot of times to get services you do have to report, so I think we should make it easier for people to get services without having to go through the legal route. For example, you shouldn't have to report to the cops to get your sexual assault examination covered by insurance. You shouldn't have to report your case to the police in order to get certain financial recourse, especially from companies, etc, who are enabling this abuse.

Given survivor experiences and perspectives on reporting, services and resources are unlikely to be adequately utilised. Even when the law does cover OSEA, access and

funding support are limited. Jenna commented on the financial strain and lack of health insurance coverage: *What about having to pay someone to dig through a million websites to find your content? And what about psychological harms? And what about paying websites to take down your content and paying legal fees like all of that, but especially from the health insurance side, I think, is a big gap when it comes to tech-facilitated gender based violence. I think there's not a lot of ways for people to get paid back for all of the money they have to put forward to take care of their physical and mental health following this type of abuse.*

While survivors can pay for removal requests, materials are often re-uploaded. This cycle highlights the persistent nature of OSEA and the mounting financial burden it creates.

Timing

A critical element unique to OSEA that several participants addressed is the time it takes to remove materials from platforms. While the reporting, investigating, and evidence-building processes are unfolding, survivors are being actively harmed while their materials of them are still being viewed and spread online. The longer this process takes, the more this trauma and impact grow exponentially. Most participants who reported to law enforcement or technology platforms stated that it was months before they received a response, and several responses indicated that there was nothing to be done. In that time, their materials continued to spread, as Izzy explains.

Izzy: So police was over the span of two months from when I reported to when they basically said, there's not much else we can do... And then the FBI was in one day. It was maybe 3 hours from when I got there to when I finally convinced someone to speak with me to the length that they spoke with me, and then I never heard back from them after that.

Samantha: I mean right now, I don't think there's anything federally mandating anything, but having a streamlined process for tech companies to be able to take down rapidly

While the reporting, investigating, and evidence-building processes are unfolding, survivors are being actively harmed while their materials of them are still being viewed and spread online.

not just, you know, we're going to process this like, if there's even a question or someone's questioning whether that was consensually shared, regardless of what site, whether it's social media or any online site there should, it should immediately be taken down and reviewed, as opposed to leaving it up and then trying to do the investigative process while it's still out there, to minimise the harm.

While timing is imperative to removal procedures, policies must shift to support prevention. To stop the harms of OSEA, it needs to be understood as sexual violence, as Katherine explains:

There needs to be support groups. There needs to be education of people to understand that this is sexual abuse, so that gap between policy and the victim. You know, there's this huge gap between. How do we react to this? How do you interact with people? So for legal, for law for and even victims' advocates. I've had, people say, well, they're just images.

Current policy gaps reflect a refusal to classify OSEA as sexual violence and to understand the urgency required in response. If the lived experiences of survivors are dismissed and they are harmed throughout the process of seeking recourse, they will further distrust the system put in place to help them.

Lack of survivor voices

Participants were asked if they felt that survivor voices were adequately considered when shaping policies and legal reform. They overwhelmingly reported feeling underrepresented. This lack of consideration is underscored in their experiences with legal cases and existing policies.

Lack of survivor voices in case decisions

The extent of survivor voices in decision-making for their own cases is limited for OSEA. Survivors reported that their trauma and harm were often minimised when they initially attempted to press charges. This decision point is important because it sets the trajectory of the case going forward. Angelique reflected on her case intake:

The response I got initially was kind of like, "Well, you guys were married. Is it really that big of a deal?" But once I kind of explained the history as to why, absolutely, this is a very big deal to me. Then they kind of took a whole different path and started treating me like they had half of a trauma-informed sense of communication ability. Because, again, because I feel like to make it easier for them, because [my ex-husband] was just doing so much. They kind of combined everything and offered him the opportunity to plead out. It's a lesser, lesser charge.

Most participants in this study reported that they did not feel their voices were accurately represented or considered by lawmakers when drafting policy.

When sexual offence charges are dropped, reduced, or reframed, the role of the survivor is diminished. The charge does not capture their experience, their account matters less, and court records do not reflect the reality of OSEA.

Another stage where Angelique's voice was silenced was the plea negotiation. She was invited to meetings to discuss the terms of the plea, but she felt it was performative. Angelique may have been heard in these meetings, but her input did not influence the resulting deal, and court officials went over her head to offer a plea:

They ended up just offering him a plea agreement under domestic violence, harassment...I was called into a meeting where I was not in agreement. I told them I did not want that. I was more than happy to trust a jury of my peers. I wanted my day in court. They basically, classic victim blame 101. You'll be a horrible witness. You're too emotional, they'll bring up your past. And so I, although they noted my objections to the deal, I really didn't have any say in whether or not – what they decided to do.

Angelique's experience is an example of gatekeeping, where prosecutors' expectations of "the perfect victim" filter out cases. In other instances, survivors are forced to monitor their own cases. Angelique commented that she "found out more information just Googling the docket" herself. The lack of transparency and timely notice may prevent survivors from participating in meetings or court hearings, further diminishing survivor voices in case decisions.

Some participants described hiring civil attorneys to obtain protective orders, which prohibit contact and trespassing. Although Samantha was granted a protective order, she left feeling indifferent. These orders are merely pieces of paper, and protections may not support a survivor's safety needs. Survivor safety also did not appear to be the priority for the probation department handling the perpetrator in Angelique's case:

I should not be having to notify the probation officers whose job it is to supervise him of what's going on with him. I couldn't

even get a response from their department until I copied a State Senator that I just so happen to know... Then, and only then, did they respond and choose to add the 3 years probation.

As reflected in Angelique's experience, survivor input is often an afterthought or not considered in decision-making surrounding cases.

Lack of survivor voices in policy reform

One of the goals of this report is to bridge the gap between existing policies and those that survivors themselves wish to see implemented. Most participants in this study reported that they did not feel their voices were accurately represented or considered by lawmakers when drafting policy. Ensuring survivors are included throughout the policymaking process is vital for reform, mitigation, and prevention policies to reduce the instances and impact of OSEA. Those with lived experience have the best understanding of this form of sexual violence and therefore can speak about what should change.

There is also continued harm in excluding survivor voices from policy decisions. A significant aspect that trauma survivors of sexual violence experience is a lack of autonomy and agency over themselves. Legislators and others who draft policies about and for OSEA survivors without any representation from them can perpetuate survivors' loss of self-determination.

Avatar said that, while he understands policymakers might think they are being fair, they often cannot speak from experience, which limits their understanding of the problem: *He or she does not actually know what it feels like to be there. He or she doesn't really know what it feels like to be at particular spots where you are left all alone by yourself.*

Other participants said that when they were included, it felt performative or disingenuous.

Samantha: *[Survivor voices are not included] nearly enough. I think, to some level, when it promotes somebody's agenda, it matters. But when it doesn't self-serve in some way, or make that person, politician, or whoever, a headline of how great they are, I don't know that it is prioritised.*

Jenna: *I mean, I think that depends on who's shaping the bill. Survivors are often used as kind of like chess pieces to, and puppets, to say what legislators want them to say. Often the truth is messier, and not as clean and perfect of a story as is portrayed in the media, and I don't think that that nuance is captured by lawmakers.*

Participants also noted an effort to find survivors that fit into a specific mould to fit their own agenda, ignoring other voices.

Anonymous #2: Well, what happens, especially with the gendered topics that have to do with violence, is that white women who are typically deemed as the standards and sometimes in cases can be the malicious party, are the ones with the most space, and really shaping the conversation in a way that actually breeds more inequality, more violence for other folks than it does actually breed any retribution or... resolution.

Samantha: I also think there is an emphasis to avoid adult survivors like the plague, because we are not the perfect victim or the sympathetic victim.

Support systems

The following section explores survivors' experiences with support systems, from formal services to informal community responses.

Support services

Although there are hotlines and formal survivor support services for sexual violence survivors, very few are specific to OSEA, even though the unique nature of online sexual violence requires specific response training and education to best support survivors. Survivors might be seeking information about getting materials taken down, handling the emotional toll of continued victimisation as materials spread, or looking for specific avenues for justice, considering the complex nature of the jurisdiction of technology-facilitated harm. There is an increasing demand for hotlines and resources to support people who have been affected by OSEA. At the same time, sexual violence support in general has seen a recent decline, which further exacerbates demand and stretches the existing resources.

Participants from this study faced several barriers to accessing support services. These include concerns about privacy, fears of LGBTQ+ identity disclosure, lack of knowledge about existing resources, and frustrations with inadequacies of support options.

Jenna, who was twelve when people spread a topless picture of her around her middle school, reported that seeking support never even occurred to her because she thought it was her fault:

No, I really understood it to just be something that I fucked up, and not that something fucked up was done to me...I wasn't even thinking about it as something like I could or should get support around because... I really just felt like it was my fault.

Another barrier to accessing resources is simply the online nature of services. Many survivors of OSEA are uncomfortable going online or do not want to have interactions with others via social media as a direct consequence of the OSEA they have endured. M.C. deleted all of her social accounts because she was being cyberstalked, which created challenges for her when seeking support. She was told there was a Facebook group she could join, but she did not feel comfortable using the app.

M.C.: I really wanted to reach out to a group and a specific group... And I think one of the challenges as well, it was that I hadn't had access to my social media. I think that was one of the main challenges, because pretty much I was doing research online. And if for some reason there was a group on Facebook, well, I wasn't gonna join because I wasn't using Facebook or something. All my social media was shut down. So I couldn't find anything specifically for this type of situation.

Avatar, who was groomed and extorted by someone through Discord, used Discord itself to search for resources. His Discord gaming group was his community, which speaks to the complexity some people experience from seeking safety from the same platforms that facilitate harm. He said he wished Discord had been able to help him find more concrete options, like connecting him to a therapist. Avatar was also afraid to seek support from other sources because he did not want to be outed in his community as gay.

Some participants did seek therapy, although many expressed that it was a major financial burden. To obtain free, long-term mental health services, most states require survivors to report their experiences to authorities, often within a short time frame of the event.¹⁷³ This creates additional barriers, as many forms of OSEA are not considered assault by law and therefore do not meet the requirements for free services. Many are also not a one-time event that can be reported within a specific time frame. Beyond this, reporting requirements may put an undue burden on survivors more broadly. They may feel that they should not be obligated to report to authorities regardless of circumstance, as they are often uncomfortable or unsafe doing so.

Participants also shared interactions with therapists who weren't familiar with OSEA and did not adequately treat their experiences as trauma. Katherine said the counsellors she spoke to had never heard of nonconsensual distribution of explicit images before. She shared, "it just felt really, really isolating."

Nikki, like many survivors, was in a state of constant fear and trauma throughout her experience. She was worried about her children, afraid for her physical safety, and literally trapped by the person who was trafficking her. She felt she lacked the capacity or energy to seek resources herself. In fact, any attempt to seek help could have resulted in putting herself or her children at risk. For the year she was trafficked, authority figures and hospital staff treated her as an addict and a criminal. She said she finally gained her freedom when someone—a young police officer—listened to her and treated her like a survivor in need of help. She has now found resources, but says it has taken years to compile them.

Participants reported having positive experiences most commonly with support groups created and run by other survivors, including both formal support groups and informal networks. Interactions with other survivors were generally described by participants as validating and healing.

Susanna: Having a network of other people who have gone through something similar, even though all of our experiences are so different. But - it really is huge. It makes you feel not alone because people, the general public like, even if people want to be supportive, we're like they just don't get it.

Angelique: There's just something about engaging in those conversations with someone else that isn't questioning you, isn't judging you, has been through what you've gone through on the bad days when you feel crazy or where self harm thoughts or even thoughts of suicide, to feel those big, heavy things normalised in a way that. It's still a great sense of community that really does set a lot of women on a great path towards their healing trajectory.

Community response

Ten of the 13 participants of this study shared what was happening to them with a close friend or family member while the abuse was occurring. However, all three who were children at the time of the abuse did not. These participants each expressed feelings of self-blame or fear about the reactions of the adults in their lives. Avatar, who was afraid his family would not support his LGBTQ+ identity, said, "I was... dying in silence."

Other participants expressed sharing their stories with friends who did not understand this as trauma. Katherine waited five years to tell anyone that her partner had stolen her identity and posted pictures of her online; when she finally confided in a friend, her friend "thought this was just a porn thing." Katherine said this type of dismissive response made it difficult to share with anyone else.

Susanna, who had sexually explicit videos of her posted on pornographic sites without her consent, experienced a magnified reaction from her community because her experience was so public. The videos spread quickly, and she was running for public office at the time, so most of her community found out. She explained that the reaction to her generally fell into extremes:

The community support is either horrific and cruel or could not love me more... The fact that people hate me so much [is] baffling to me... But members of your community feeling entitled to victim blame and shame you and further traumatise you. It's something, I just - But that's why victims don't speak up... because they will get blamed and shamed.

Susanna also noted that among the people who are the most critical and "horrible" to her are older women. She described them as "baby boomer feminists" and said several of these women have lectured her in person about how she has set back the feminist movement. This baffled Susanna, as she was hoping that other women would be the most supportive. This speaks to the misconceptions surrounding OSEA and the tendency to not view it as sexual violence.

Most of the participants who did share with someone close to them found support. Many expressed feeling validated, loved, and less alone. Anonymous #1, who had multiple nonconsensual sexually explicit deepfakes made of her and spread online, said she decided to share her story with her online community. They responded "really positively. It was nice. It was awesome. It was weird because I felt like I didn't deserve them being so nice to me about it, because I think I brushed it off for so long as not being a big deal."

Overall, the participants felt more safety and support from their friends and family than they did seeking formal resources. This may be due to the participants having a prior relationship with those they confided in, as opposed to reaching out to a support group anonymously. This speaks to the systemic problems of dismissal of survivors, implicit bias, and not believing women more broadly.

Alan

Alan's experience sheds light on the ease and accessibility that online social platforms provide to potential perpetrators of OSEA, especially in the context of online grooming. However, he also found community on the same online platform that facilitated violence against him. His story demonstrates that with informed platform safety and security measures, technology can be a positive space for young people.

In 2020, Alan joined a role-playing Discord server designed for members to create characters, engage in storylines, make friends, and have fun. The server had approximately 200 people ranging from 13 to 30 years old. A not safe for work (NSFW) channel was accessible to both adults and children, where members were encouraged to post provocative images, framed as body positivity. Members as young as 13 were posting nearly nude images.

Ariel, the server mom, a 21-year-old member, quickly became a prominent figure. Alan consistently received messages from the server mom and other adult users requesting that they engage in erotic role play (ERP). Participation in ERP often led to further requests for sexual images. These adults were highly regarded, and refusal resulted in being ostracised, slandered, and ridiculed.

Alan started dating another member who ended up sexually abusing him online. The other user coerced Alan into Discord calls and made him act out sexual things. He forced Alan to send nude images under the claim that he would commit suicide if Alan did not comply. Alan sent the photos. Alan went to Ariel, the trusted server mom, who encouraged him to send more pictures to both his partner and her. Alan declined, but this interaction opened a barrier between the two. Under the guise of asking friends how she looked, the server's mom began sending sexual images to Alan and his ex-partner.

The server mom frequently used the site to enforce a cult-like atmosphere, engaging in online grooming and retaliation. She claimed to have spiritual powers, could see ghosts, communicate with gods, and speak to deceased family members and spirit guides. A young user spoke out against the server mom, who immediately denied the accusations and removed them from the group.

The abuse continued as Alan received sexual solicitations daily. The abuse from Alan's ex-partner extended to the nonconsensual sharing of sensitive images with other online and in-person friends, which was incredibly traumatising. Alan constantly monitored Discord, fearing his parents would learn of the situation, had difficulty sleeping, and was failing classes. At age 16, Alan became aware he had Derealisation Depersonalisation Disorder (DDD) and explained that these events, compounded with his DDD, majorly affected his ability to complete daily tasks.

Alan discovered that the server mom formed a strange relationship with a 14-year-old member, moving from Utah to live in a neighbouring house. The server's mom also tried to convince Alan and others to move to her home. One day on a call, Ariel admitted to Alan she was a paedophile, and he reported the server with evidence to Discord, who informed the 15-year-old server owner. Adult members encouraged the owner to delete the server, and the community was torn down. Although Discord was unable to launch a full legal investigation, Alan noted that the report and deletion restricted further interactions on the server.

However, this experience brought Alan together with other Discord users through a shared understanding and ultimately inspired him to advocate for improved online safety measures. He still uses Discord today, working to facilitate groups that encourage safe, healthy, and age-appropriate connections.



Recommendations

Participants were asked for their input on recommendations for combating OSEA, both broadly and for specific ideas relevant to their own experiences. All were asked whether legal, institutional, or social consequences would be most effective in deterring perpetrators. Across all levels, survivors emphasised the need for accountability. Seven of the thirteen participants highlighted the legal implications, as they felt that perpetrators do not fear the risk of prosecution. Six survivors noted that recognising OSEA as socially unacceptable would be an effective prevention strategy as a social consequence. Participants also briefly mentioned institutional repercussions, such as losing a job or getting expelled. Explicit recommendations are listed below.

Recommendations for legal systems

The following recommendations are intended for individuals working in the judicial system, courts, and criminal justice personnel.

Training & education

Survivors of OSEA often experience doubt and scepticism, victim-blaming, and failure of institutions to provide an effective response. These interactions compound the harm caused by trauma and reveal critical gaps in professional training, digital literacy, and survivor-centred policy. The recommendations below provide clear and actionable measures for policymakers from the participants in this study:

- ◆ **Recognise OSEA as sexual violence.** Ensure that laws, policies, and practices define OSEA as sexual violence requiring equal protections and remedies for survivors.

- ◆ **Mandate trauma-informed training.** Require standardised, survivor-centred training for frontline workers to prevent retraumatisation, reduce disbelief and victim-blaming, and build institutional trust. Responders may include law enforcement, court staff, attorneys, judges, and healthcare providers.
- ◆ **Strengthen digital literacy.** Invest in public and professional programming to educate about the permanence of online content, data vulnerability, and the risks associated with AI tools.
- ◆ **Implicit bias training.** Fund and develop mechanisms to eliminate bias against survivors of OSEA. Provide specialised training on how racism, sexism, classism, and other biases influence institutional response.

Susanna: But we need to develop and fund training programs for prosecutors and for law enforcement, and ideally have at least one person who's trained in this in each department, or each jurisdiction or division

Nikki: I'm actually working through apprenticeship program to develop a human trafficking training for one and a half hours. And they're gonna pair with a national organization. Then I'm in my county's tracking task force as the only person who's been through it. So they have a one on one training, but they do not have the next training for judges, prosecutors, lawyers, things like that to understand the behaviours and whatnot of someone who's been through trauma.

Legal language and processes

The legal system poses major barriers to survivors of technology-facilitated sexual violence. The broad nature of OSEA, its multiple forms, complex geographical nature, and ongoing presence require laws and policies that expand coverage to ensure survivors are supported and to establish clear lines of accountability. The following recommendations provide comprehensive actions for legal actors:

- ◆ **Develop a comprehensive definition of OSEA in federal legislation.** Draft a legislative definition of OSEA covering sexually exploitative and harmful behaviours that occur online, and that is standardised across jurisdictions in the US. Include online grooming, livestreaming of sexual abuse, CSAM, online sexual coercion and extortion, online sex trafficking, and IBSA.
- ◆ **Swift system response.** Ensure survivors get relief through swift system response, including expedited hearings, prompt takedown orders, and emergency protective orders.
- ◆ **Increase platform and third-party accountability.** Modify statutes to impose liability on online platforms and third-party distributors who facilitate or profit from OSEA.
- ◆ **Expand civil remedies.** Create civil causes of action at federal and state levels to cover OSEA harms.

Anonymous #1: Obviously, it'd be nice to have lawyers who had an answer to what could be done. Once again I feel pretty involved, and yet I'm still pretty confused about what the right choices are and what paths I could take theoretically. All of it still feels pretty overwhelming, and none of them seem like they're like a good answer. There's always downsides to whatever path I was gonna take. Yeah. And then the fact that this happens to so many people– it would be nice to be able to kind of go in as a group. It feels like I had to do everything by myself, because getting other people involved was difficult legally. So it was that? And yeah, I mean the fact that there's no, there's no law made it kind of hard to pursue anything legally.

Taylor: A universal ban on nonconsensual intimate images regardless...And if possible require platforms to practically delete and remove these images, or preserve evidence. For law enforcement, even face fines if they knowingly host or amplify abuses. I think that that will be very encouraging, actually.

Recommendations for policy reform

The following are recommendations for legislators and government workers at the local, state, national, and international levels.

Advocacy and international collaboration

The borderless nature of OSEA makes it difficult for existing systems to adequately address the issue. The rapid changes to technology result in delayed policy responses. Perpetrators exploit procedural differences between countries, disproportionate resource allocation, and limited information sharing, making it harder for survivors to seek justice and access support. The recommendations below outline practical measures to address these gaps:

- ◆ **Create and maintain systems for international information-sharing.** Develop databases to track OSEA, platforms, and perpetrators. Coordinated efforts can help identify trends, reduce redundancy, and expand access.
- ◆ **Close gaps in legal protections.** Advocate for stronger international collaboration to make laws and practices consistent across borders. Draft agreements to share information, introduce common definitions of OSEA across jurisdictions, and establish universal survivor protections.
- ◆ **Support global research and prevention.** Invest in studies that inventory response mechanisms to OSEA, outline barriers, identify best practices, and provide guidance for implementation.
- ◆ **Promote culturally responsive advocacy.** System responses should be informed by survivors' diverse experiences of religion, gender identity and orientation, nationality, socio-economic status, and culture, with a clear understanding of intersectionality.

Izzy: Unfortunately, what happened to me did happen overseas, and that's something that I know you have to fight on a global scale, not a, you know, here we are in the US now scale.

Alan: ...some of the groups...are targeted only towards cisgender women and are not very welcoming towards queer people...I have gone into some conversations before with smaller support groups in the area and talked about my experiences with sexual abuse from women, men and non-binary individuals. And just straight up, being told that I'm being homophobic because I was sexually assaulted by a girl my own age once and...I internalized homophobia.

Intersectionality and inclusion of survivor voices in developing law and policy

Survivors discussed how their identities influenced experiences with OSEA, including access to legal remedies, institutional response, and support services. Policies often overlook factors such as race, gender identity, class, and sexual orientation, leading to limited representation. The following review recommendations are to increase inclusivity.

- ◆ **Ensure survivor representation in law and policymaking.** Encourage the participation of survivors from diverse backgrounds in policy decisions. Include survivors on task forces and advisory boards, engage through consultations, and gather feedback for improvement.
- ◆ **Fund inclusive resources and services.** Provide funding for inclusive resources and community-based survivor services that represent cultural diversity, expand language access, accommodate disabilities, and support historically underserved communities.

Anonymous #2: Because when these policy discussions are being had.. the people who are most impacted by that are not in the room. Either because they're deemed as not important, or because they don't want to engage with other folks that are in the room because of the way that they've already been treated by them... It's important to be able to really understand what intersectionality means when you're using it and considering it and implementing it into the things that you do. And I think that that's 1 thing that gets kind of lost when the word is used in the mainstream.

M.C.: I also believe that one of the challenges as a Latinx living in the US is that it also it's limited. I mean, culturally speaking, we don't share these things at all, because it involves a lot of shame. And because I couldn't find any Latin Hispanic community for me it was also very difficult, and was like in my head... So in some way connect each other, especially within the Latinx community, and see if we can create a space where we can share our experience, because that was something that I was craving at that moment... I was isolated. I was not talking to anyone, and it was very difficult to talk about my experience with people that have never experienced this.

Recommendations for survivor support

The following are recommendations for sexual violence and online abuse support groups, nonprofits, advocates, and service providers, as well as survivors' friends and family.

OSEA-specific support services

Current support systems for survivors are inadequate in addressing OSEA. Testimonials reveal barriers to access, the limited scope of resources, and the burden of seeking support. The following describes recommendations to improve OSEA-specific support.

- ◆ **Improve accessibility of services.** Advance service support by providing safe spaces, options for individual and group counselling, and varied modes of service, including in-person, audio, video, and text.
- ◆ **Expand OSEA-specific services.** Extend OSEA-specific survivor services by funding takedown support, offering counselling and legal assistance from trained providers, and digital safety and prevention education.
- ◆ **Reduce the burden on survivors.** Develop networks to connect survivors to resources. Support professional, mentoring, and advocacy roles for survivors with lived experience.
- ◆ **Support services should be survivor-led.** Formal avenues for support should hire survivors with lived experiences and elevate them to leadership roles; groups that are led by survivors should be funded and sustained through federal grants.

Taylor: Not everybody feels comfortable going out to seek support. So if there was somewhere, or maybe a safe space where – and it's not something crowded... I want something that is just me and maybe a few people, if I could even get one-on-one, that would be really good.

Nikki: [I would have liked to have] a mentor. Lived experience. I really think that should be a job, because that's where the gap is in the movement of human trafficking survivors is when there's no paid leadership... The paid leadership and lived experience is not very prominent, and that's a big gap in the movement. And what we're trying to fight for because, you know, you have experience of being a psychologist, you get paid for it, and you get experience in this. You get to get paid for it.

Reduce stigma to build community support

Survivors spoke about the importance of feeling supported by their community through their experience with OSEA. However, many felt victim-blamed or shamed by their loved ones, or did not disclose the abuse at all for fear of judgment. This requires public education and a concerted effort to spread awareness that OSEA is sexual violence and should be treated with the same care and understanding. The recommendations below outline opportunities to increase community support.

- ◆ **Change the narrative surrounding OSEA.** News organizations, educational institutions, and public service organizations have the power to reframe conversations around OSEA to be victim-centric and to address the issue as sexual violence.
- ◆ **Educate communities and parents.** People should be aware of how to react when someone discloses OSEA to them. Trauma-informed responses, including listening without judgment and validating survivor experiences, are vital to build support for survivors.

Taylor: Okay. Now, one reason why I couldn't [tell my community] is because I'm from a religious background. And I faced a lot of criticism back then, and I didn't really find any support at all. So because of my background and, like I said, the judgmental looks. I didn't see anybody that I could look up to, or I could meet for whatever form of help or support. So it was just me fighting my battles.

Jenna: My mom at the time – this is so like fucked up thinking about it now, and so punitive. But I was like, why are we moving? And she was like, “because you’re gonna get pregnant if we don’t move.” The narrative was “you’re totally out of control and you’re just the slut... The sluttiness is going to get to a level of pregnancy.” ...And so I definitely was a factor like, and it definitely felt like, “Oh, it’s my fault, I’m so out of control. I’m so crazy and, you know, nonchalant about my body that we have to totally uproot ourselves.”

Recommendations for prevention

The following are recommendations for prevention practitioners, anti-rape educators, and technology companies.

Prevention framework

Prevention can be understood through the SVPA's definition of sexual violence: “Sexual violence includes all forms of rape, sexual assault, harassment, and abuse. Sexual violence is both the result of existing power imbalances and a tool used to gain and maintain power, control, and oppression. This can be on an individual, institutional, or systemic level or a combination thereof.”

Framing sexual violence through the lens of power and control is helpful to understand the underlying motivations and how to effectively prevent it. Sexual violence on the various levels– individual, institutional, and systemic– underlines the fact that this problem is not always individualistic. For example, Avatar's perpetrator targeted him individually but also used existing systemic oppressions to gain more power and control by threatening to out him as gay.

Because OSEA and sexual violence more broadly often involve consent violations on multiple levels, prevention also requires a layered approach:

- ◆ **Understand primary prevention.** People can be prevented from becoming perpetrators by collective changes to values, attitudes, and social norms. This includes recognising OSEA as sexual violence and changing social motivations for perpetrators.

- ◆ **Engage in secondary prevention.** Secondary prevention requires identifying and addressing short-term or immediate threats of OSEA, often in the form of bystander intervention. It requires preventing potential perpetrators from taking action by challenging their beliefs, controlling the environment, and intervening before they act.
- ◆ **Tertiary prevention is the bridge between prevention and response.** This involves preventing repeat perpetration and/or continued perpetration. A common example would be a perpetrator facing legal consequences and therefore being deterred from committing OSEA again.

Education is prevention

As Angelique said, “Education is prevention.” Educating people about sexual violence, technology, and technology-facilitated sexual violence are all important for prevention.

Technology is evolving quickly, and many people are not aware of the ramifications of this on sexual violence. Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and author of *The Anxious Generation*, explains the ways in which parents today lag behind in protecting their children: “We overprotect our children in the real world and underprotect them online.” Paedophiles, he notes, are not at the playground; they’re on Instagram. Most parents have no idea how many interactions their children are having with strangers online; thus, understanding this element of technology and the evolution of social media is critical for parents to engage in prevention.

Education surrounding technology is critical for everyone, not just parents. Alan spoke about how easy it can be for someone to narrow down another person’s location:

You may not think you’re doxxing yourself, this information is doxxing... Saying things like.. a pretty [regionally] specific [grocery] store. So if I went online on my live stream and I said, “yes, I was at [this store] the other day,” people can immediately narrow down my location to a select few states. And people don’t realise that. And that can lead to online sexual abuse, especially for kids who don’t know what doxxing is and isn’t. It’s pretty easy to reveal your location to people, and then they can use that information to harm you.

An important note on digital literacy and technology-focused education is that it still puts the burden on survivors and potential survivors to protect themselves, rather than a more primary-focused prevention strategy.

Some participants did emphasise that perpetrators– particularly those who are young people themselves– may not realise that what they are doing is sexual exploitation and abuse. The ubiquity of AI deepfakes, for example, has normalised them to some extent. Studies have found that many teenage boys who have created sexually explicit AI deepfakes of their classmates thought of it as a prank or even a form of cyberbullying, but not sexual violence.¹⁷⁴ It is important to educate young people that this is a serious offence. Indeed, the FBI recently classified AI deepfakes involving minors as CSAM.¹⁷⁵

The following are recommendations for prevention education:

- ◆ **Expand digital literacy.** People should understand how technology can facilitate sexual exploitation and abuse. They should be informed about the risks involved in sharing content online and how complex technological systems can be weaponised.
- ◆ **Invest in consent education.** Consent education is imperative for OSEA prevention.¹⁷⁶ Part of the unique nature of OSEA is that there are often multiple consent violations throughout that can be prevented. Consent must be continuous, specific, informed, unambiguous, and freely given by someone with sufficient mental capacity, free from coercion, and over the age of 18 if engaging with an adult.¹⁷⁷
- ◆ **Bystanders hold a powerful role in preventing the spread of OSEA.** The SVPA has created a toolkit for Digital Bystander Intervention.¹⁷⁸

Bystanders hold a powerful role in preventing the spread of OSEA. The SVPA has created a toolkit for Digital Bystander Intervention, outlining the ways in which bystanders can effectively prevent or safely intervene in digital sexual violence.¹⁷⁹

Jenna: The only thing I can think of [for prevention] is other people refusing to share it. I just keep thinking about the social repercussions... Even thinking about now, I feel so old school, someone sending a nude of someone around, but I don't really know how to stop that other than people not participating in furthering it.

Ending misogyny and rape culture

OSEA can be prevented by ending misogyny and rape culture. Although OSEA is specific to technology, the problem of humiliating women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ people through their sexuality has been around for centuries. This can be understood as systemic sexual violence, which requires systemic prevention measures to address, such as changes to social structures, addressing embedded harms within laws and policies, and education. Preventing gender-based violence and other forms of systemic oppression reduces sexual violence online and offline by decreasing power imbalances.¹⁸⁰ Prevention mechanisms also include ensuring that survivors of OSEA, women, and other historically oppressed groups are in leadership and policymaking roles.

Rape culture exists when misogyny and violence are both prevalent and normalised.¹⁸¹ Attitudes that minimise, dismiss and make light of violence do not exist in a vacuum; these are the result of long-standing cultural and social norms. Changing societal attitudes to prevent misogyny and rape culture would prevent OSEA and sexual violence more broadly. The recommendations below outline methods for combating systemic misogyny:

- ◆ **Identify and combat rape culture.** Characteristics of rape culture include victim-blaming, rape myths, dismissal of violence, lack of accountability for perpetrators, and the acceptance of harmful stereotypes about women, LGBTQ+ people, and people of colour.¹⁸²

- ◆ **Meaningfully elevate survivor voices.** Prevention mechanisms also include ensuring that survivors of OSEA, women, and other historically oppressed groups are in leadership and policymaking roles.

Susanna speaks to the ways in which rape culture and misogyny permeated her entire community, including the beliefs expressed by other women: *Those women wouldn't talk to me and were mad at me because their husbands watched these nonconsensual videos of me. And they wouldn't get mad at their husbands. They were mad at me... None of them asked me what happened. They just stopped talking to me because they were mad at me. And their husbands felt entitled to watch these videos, and felt entitled to name their fantasy football team something about me.*

Anonymous #1 spoke about the ways that women who are successful in the ASMR space face resentment from men. Misogyny led to many of them becoming victims of nonconsensual sexual deepfakes: *So because I was pretty adamant about my [Youtube] content not being sexual, and a lot of other creators were the same way, a lot of the deepfake and AI stuff and things were men trying to take that power away from us because we said we weren't doing anything sexual. They just made the sexual content themselves, without our consent, obviously. And so that again also fueled me to keep doing what I was doing, because I didn't want that. I didn't want them to take me out of the career that I enjoyed doing.*

Technology regulation

Participants for this study overwhelmingly blamed technology companies for allowing their content to be posted, distributed, viewed, and remain online. The compounding nature of OSEA also creates multiple opportunities for prevention. Regulations on technology could prevent the spread and continued harm of OSEA, including making it easier to remove content.

The following are recommendations for technology regulation:

- ◆ **All companies should flag and remove CSAM immediately.** There should be an automatic reporting process to protect children, and these processes should be standardised internationally.
- ◆ **Technology companies should provide guardrails against AI deepfakes.** This would include removal at the survivor's request, but also a labelling process so viewers are aware that the material is not real.
- ◆ **Companies should allocate resources to reporting platforms.** It should be easier for survivors to contact platforms and get materials removed. There should also be a stricter process for posting sexually explicit materials that requires consent from the participants.
- ◆ **Platforms should make it easier to remove content and more difficult to post it.** Survivors should be able to report nonconsensual materials, and perpetrators should not be able to upload content without consent. Importantly, guardrails must be in place to protect consenting adults who wish to have content remain online.

- ◆ **Data privacy should be standardised.** Personal data, including private images and communications, must be protected from unauthorised use or distribution. Enforcing stricter data privacy standards would reduce the risk of images or sensitive content being misused for exploitative purposes, especially those sexual in nature.

Data collection and reporting

There are profound gaps in research and data collection surrounding OSEA. Understanding the unique nature of online sexual abuse, its impacts, and the trends surrounding it provides vital information for creating prevention policies. As this report demonstrates, survivor voices are critical. It is also important to hold technology companies responsible for data collection, as well as authorities at local, national, and international levels. There should be a broad effort to understand this problem as both a traumatic and urgent issue affecting individuals and a larger, troubling trend alongside technology. Unless informed, people will not be aware of this problem or the harm it causes, which leaves their communities vulnerable and allows OSEA to continue to grow in prevalence. Without solid data, gaps in prevention solutions will also continue to persist.

Data collection and reporting, including interviewing survivors and incorporating their recommendations, are vital for effective prevention policy.

- ◆ **Invest in research geared toward adult survivors.** Most studies on issues surrounding online sexual abuse are focused on children, which leaves significant gaps in understanding methods for preventing harm done to adult victims.
- ◆ **Require data collection from technology companies.** Technology companies are in a unique position to keep records of reports of OSEA, generate statistics surrounding types and frequency of abuse, and respond to takedown requests in conjunction with sexual violence prevention experts.

Susanna spoke about how, even those who were supportive of her, simply did not grasp the impact of her situation: *Because again, even people who wanted to be supportive and are supportive are shocked that I lost my job. Like we have to make it so that when this happens women don't lose their job. You know, like they're not victim blame and shame. They're not having sitting legislators feel justified in passing around naked images of a female colleague.*

Understanding perpetrator motivations

One of the gaps in prevention research is a lack of information on perpetrator motivations. Most research, including this report, does not engage with abusers themselves, so participants were asked to speculate based on their experiences.

Although most participants in the nonconsensual distribution of explicit materials could identify a perpetrator who posted the materials or exploited them directly, none specifically spoke about the apparatus of anonymous users who viewed, spread, and distributed their content. The proliferation of OSEA, including its ongoing harm and the recurring trauma it causes, would not be possible if others did not participate in its spread. The complicity of anonymous

viewers and distributors of OSEA is a motivation for the primary perpetrators. The recommendations below outline measures for perpetrator prevention:

- ◆ **Invest in research focused on understanding perpetration.** Researchers should engage with perpetrators to understand their motivations and craft policies, programs, and interventions to prevent perpetration based on this data.
- ◆ **Allocate resources toward combating secondary and anonymous perpetration.** The complicity and active participation of anonymous perpetrators through hidden online profiles indicate that anonymity is a significant factor in the spread of OSEA. Studies should be dedicated to understanding and preventing this.

The person who groomed and exploited Avatar online was demanding money. M.C. and Angelique both ended relationships with people who then threatened them. This suggests that the perpetrator's motivation in their cases was feelings of betrayal or hurt, and they expressed their anger through OSEA.

Taylor, who was groomed and exploited by someone who blackmailed her for more content, said: *I feel there are also people that just do this because of the feel of power and control, you know, having to derive satisfaction from manipulating and humiliating their victims. Yeah, and there could also be people that do this as a sort of revenge, you know, maybe on their ex, or rejected individuals, maybe, to actually leak their content just for some sort of revenge. It could be a whole range of motivations.*

Some participants had sympathy for the perpetrators and genuinely tried to understand their situations in order to prevent abuse in the future. Katherine: *I mean, if we're going to go way back right then we would allow boys to feel and to feel their worth. Ultimately, it came down to a child not being seen, not being able to express how he felt, and so he had to be silent. So that's what it comes down to ultimately, right?*

Conclusion

OSEA is a growing problem

The lived experiences of survivors within this report illustrate the ongoing and compounding harms caused by OSEA. Current US legal frameworks are insufficient to address this problem, as our system has not kept pace with technological innovations and thus cannot ensure accountability and survivor safety. This deficiency shifts the burden to survivors to navigate platforms, oversee case events, and report risks to agencies.

As technology continues to evolve, there is a corresponding risk that OSEA will develop in new and unknown ways alongside it. Reports such as this are intended to call attention to this issue and recommend policies and other reforms through the voices of people who have been directly affected. Their participation is vital to understanding this issue as well as to demonstrating the potential risks for the future.

Future research

While this report sheds light on OSEA in the US, there is much more to learn. Future research should examine distinct forms of OSEA, such as cyberstalking and doxxing. Researchers may consider examining differences across demographics, such as age, identity, and context of abuse. The insight gained from the lived experiences of survivors is invaluable and can inform prevention mechanisms and resolutions that uphold accountability and safety.

Call to action

Policies should be drafted with survivor voices at the forefront. Further research is needed to better understand the problem and to address current gaps in the literature. There are very few robust studies of OSEA on adult victims in the US. There is little to no data on global sex trafficking specifically facilitated by technology. There should also be a concerted effort to centre the voices of people of colour, people with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community in research and policymaking. As the participants of this study overwhelmingly called for, there should be more regulation on technology companies to mitigate harm from OSEA. There should also be better education and training, as well as policies to prevent such incidents from happening in the first place.

Closing existing gaps requires comprehensive legal reform to set clear and enforceable responsibilities for online platforms. Technology continues to evolve rapidly, and the proliferation of applications and digital platforms gives perpetrators new avenues for exploitation.¹⁸³ Consequently, the means by which OSEA occurs regularly adapt and expand. In concurrence, misogyny in online spaces has increased in use and acceptance.¹⁸⁴ Online misogyny is becoming mainstream, promoting harmful masculinities and discriminatory messages that endorse violence against women and girls.¹⁸⁵ Online networks facilitate the normalisation of this ideology and recruitment of supporters who advocate for rolling back women's and girls' rights.¹⁸⁶ These threats to public safety underscore the urgency of addressing OSEA given the risks it poses to democracy, human rights, and security. Policymakers must act now to prevent abuse and support survivors.

Izzy: Survivors need to be in the room... I think if we are going to see legal reform for and policy change for survivors, that it needs to be led by survivors.

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