



THE STATE OF ONLINE CHILD EXPLOITATION IN THE UNITED STATES

A Report by the Protect Us Kids Foundation

Protect Us Kids Foundation Washington, DC | USA

www.protect-us-kids.org
info@protect-us-kids.org

Main: +1(866)772-3354 | WhatsApp: +1(202)596-2979

The only organization using a Cybersecurity Sustainability Framework™ to prevent child exploitation in rural and under-resourced regions.

[View Our Report](#)



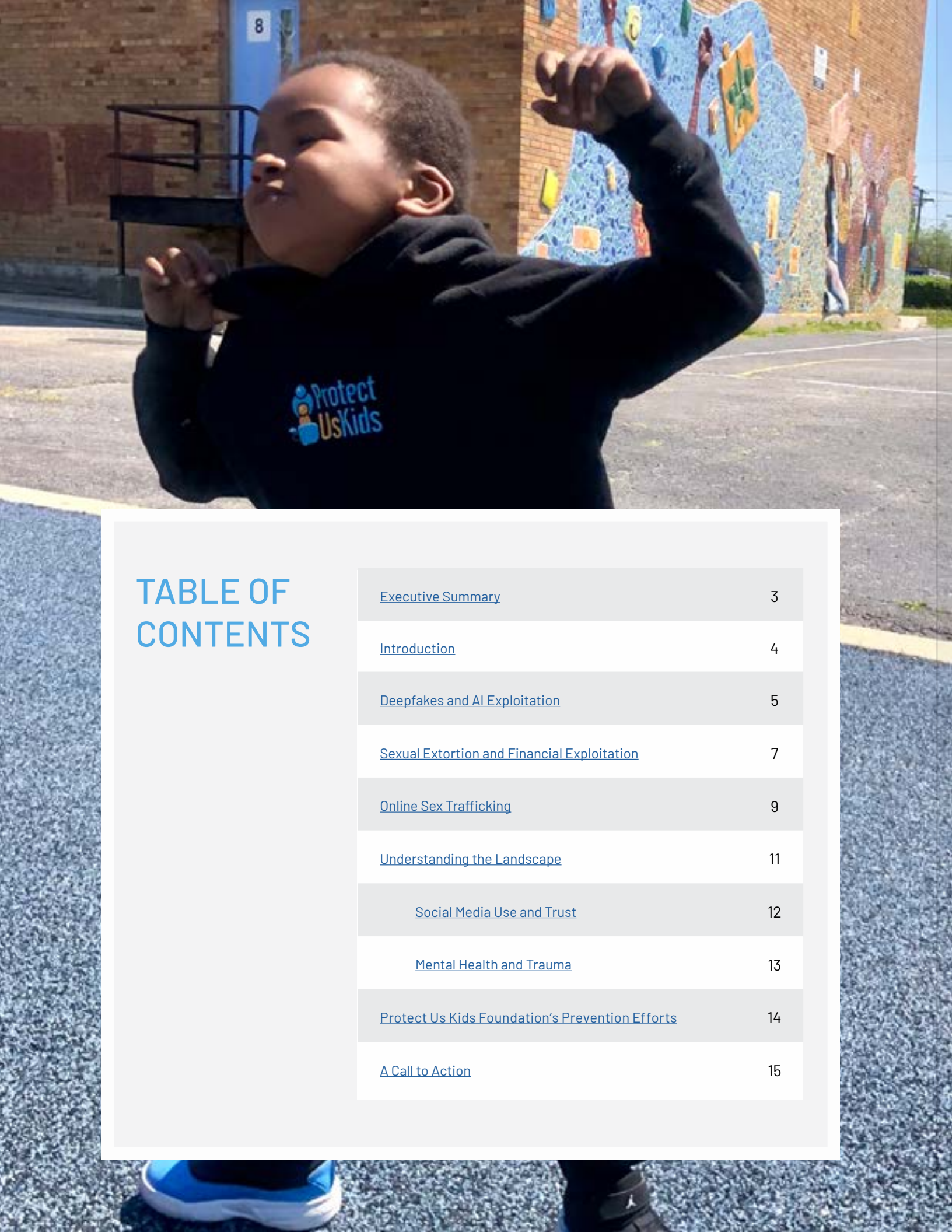


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Deepfakes and AI Exploitation	5
Sexual Extortion and Financial Exploitation	7
Online Sex Trafficking	9
Understanding the Landscape	11
Social Media Use and Trust	12
Mental Health and Trauma	13
Protect Us Kids Foundation's Prevention Efforts	14
A Call to Action	15

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth in the United States face unprecedented online risks, especially those in rural and under-resourced¹ communities. The convergence of global conflicts, rising political extremism, and unregulated technology has created fertile ground for grooming and exploitation. Children are being extorted, recruited, and traumatized online at a rate that outpaces current response systems.

One growing risk is due to the rise of generative AI and encrypted messaging platforms that enable predators to create synthetic sexual images of minors and distribute them globally in minutes—often with no legal consequence. Disturbingly, [42%](#) people who reported that they had viewed child sexual abuse material (CSAM) said they sought direct contact with children through online platforms afterwards—a chilling escalation made easier by platforms unequipped to detect synthetic content.

This report is grounded in [Protect Us Kids Foundation's](#) frontline community work and informed by federal law enforcement data, national child protection reports, and insights from industry leaders. It offers one of the clearest pictures to date of how modern child exploitation in the United States works, as well as what must change to stop it.

Key Findings:

- ▶ National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) now receives nearly 100 reports of financial sextortion per day—averaging more than 800 per week—reflecting a sharp rise in financially motivated exploitation targeting U.S. youth.^{2,3}
- ▶ Nearly all sextortion threats are delivered through digital platforms—primarily social media and messaging apps—underscoring how youth connectivity doubles as exposure.^{4,5,6}
- ▶ Teen boys have been identified in most sextortion-related suicide cases investigated nationally, revealing how financial coercion and shame drive fatal outcomes.^{7,8}
- ▶ Girls (ages 13–17) and LGBTQ+ youth continue to face higher exposure to online grooming and recruitment into sexual exploitation and trafficking.^{9,10}

¹ Throughout this report, the term “rural and under-resourced communities” refers to environments where children and youth experience limited access to reliable digital infrastructure, cybersecurity education, or trusted adult supervision online. This includes both rural regions—where broadband access, technology literacy, and institutional support remain limited—and urban under-resourced neighborhoods, where economic hardship, overcrowded schooling, and systemic inequities similarly restrict safe digital participation. The use of this combined term reflects Protect Us Kids Foundation’s inclusive approach to addressing online child safety risks that stem from structural, not merely geographic, disadvantage.

² [NCMEC — 2024 in Numbers: CyberTipline and Sextortion Data \(2025\)](#)

³ [NCMEC — Where Is Sextortion Happening? New Trends in a Growing Crisis \(2024\)](#)

⁴ [NCMEC — New Sextortion Data Released \(2024\)](#)

⁵ [FBI — The Financially Motivated Sextortion Threat \(2023\)](#)

⁶ [NCMEC — Where Is Sextortion Happening? New Trends in a Growing Crisis \(2024\)](#)

⁷ [NCMEC — 2024 in Numbers \(2025\)](#)

⁸ [FBI — The Financially Motivated Sextortion Threat \(2023\)](#)

⁹ [Polaris Project — LGBTQ+ Youth and Human Trafficking \(2023 Update\)](#)

¹⁰ [NCMEC — Where Is Sextortion Happening? New Trends in a Growing Crisis \(2024\)](#)

INTRODUCTION

The digital world has become a central space for youth connection, education, and self-expression. But it has also become a gateway for predatory behavior. Protect Us Kids Foundation (PUK) was founded to protect all children from cyber-related crimes, with a focus on youth who are most vulnerable due to poverty, geography, systemic racism, and limited access to mental health or educational resources. This includes approximately 20%¹¹ of children in the United States who live in rural areas, and 16%¹² who live in poverty, as well as populations that face disproportionate barriers to safe digital participation and protection. This 2025 report reflects the current landscape of online risks and offers a roadmap for action. It outlines the four most prevalent risks that youth face today:

1. [Deepfakes and AI exploitation](#)
2. [Online grooming and exploitation](#)
3. [Sexual extortion and financial exploitation](#)
4. [Online sex trafficking](#)

It also highlights trends in two adjacent categories to provide context about the causes and outcomes of these risks:

1. [Social media use and trust](#)
2. [Mental health and trauma](#)

This report is intended to educate teachers, parents, and community members so they may better protect youth from online predators. It's also a call to action for government and industry professionals to implement the systems required to address these risks. Together, we can prevent these devastating outcomes for our nation's children.

As digital tools evolve faster than regulation or public awareness, so do the methods used to exploit children. The risks youth face online are no longer limited to chatroom predators or explicit websites—they now include hyper-realistic AI content, manipulative recruitment tactics, and anonymous extortion schemes. Understanding these threats begins with one of the most urgent and least understood: Deepfakes and AI exploitation.



¹¹ [National Center for Education Statistics: Public elementary and secondary school enrollment](#)

¹² [The Annie E. Casey Foundation: 2025 KIDS COUNT Data Book](#)

DEEPFAKES AND AI EXPLOITATION



The rise of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) has introduced a new frontier of child exploitation—one that often escapes detection and legal accountability. AI-generated explicit content, especially when used to target or impersonate youth, has become a powerful tool for abuse, harassment, and control. In 2024 alone, there was a 380%¹³ increase in AI-generated CSAM, with over 20,000¹⁴ explicit images discovered in a single dark-web scan. These synthetic images often depict minors who do not actually exist, complicating efforts by law enforcement to intervene or prosecute.

PUK and its partners have also documented multiple cases of youth targeted with “nudified” images, deepfakes, and AI-enhanced avatars used in sexual extortion or peer harassment. These threats are growing fastest in rural and low-supervision digital environments, where detection tools and education have not kept pace.

Exploitation Methods:

- Deepfake peer impersonation to gain trust or blackmail
- Sexual extortion using fabricated sexual images of real youth
- Sale or trade of AI-CSAM on dark web forums
- Harassment via “nudify” apps that create fake nudes from public photos

Key Risks:

- Extremely difficult for law enforcement to detect or prosecute under current laws
- Normalizes sexual abuse imagery and increases the likelihood of offender escalation
- Causes real psychological harm—shame, identity confusion, school avoidance—even when the image is fake



¹³ [Internet Watch Foundation: AI-generated child sexual abuse](#)

¹⁴ [Internet Watch Foundation: Artificial Intelligence \(AI\) and the Production of Child Sexual Abuse Imagery](#)

ONLINE GROOMING AND EXPLOITATION



Grooming¹⁵ remains a cornerstone tactic for perpetrators targeting children online. According to data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)¹⁶ and Thorn¹⁷, the most frequently reported platforms used in online grooming and sextortion cases include Snapchat, Instagram, Discord, Facebook Messenger, and gaming consoles. Snapchat is consistently cited in NCMEC's CyberTipline¹⁸ reports as one of the top platforms associated with online enticement and exploitation incidents. Experts note that features such as disappearing messages and transient content can create a false sense of privacy, making it easier for offenders to contact and manipulate youth. Many young people in the United States use at least one or two of these platforms daily—often without privacy settings enabled or consistent adult supervision¹⁹—conditions that increase vulnerability to grooming, sextortion, and other forms of online exploitation.

Grooming Dynamics:

- Typically unfolds over hundreds of messages in 2–6 weeks
- Youth often don't recognize grooming until after sharing explicit content, sometimes after only 20–50 messages
- Perpetrators often pose as teens from nearby towns to gain trust

Top Grooming Outcomes:

- Soliciting explicit photos
- Sexual extortion for money or control
- Trafficking or abuse through in-person meetups
- Recruitment into extremist or financial schemes

¹⁵ Grooming is the deliberate process by which an individual (often an adult or someone in a position of trust) builds a relationship, emotional connection, and often access to a child (or young person) – and potentially their caregivers or community – with the intent of preparing for sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or other forms of harm. It can occur both offline and online, and may include strategies such as giving gifts or attention, normalizing inappropriate behaviour, isolating the child, and shaming or silencing potential disclosures. – [ECPAT International & the Inter-agency Working Group. Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse \(2016 and updated 2025\). The “Luxembourg Guidelines” provide globally-recognised language for issues including grooming.](#)

SEXUAL EXTORTION AND FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION



Teen boys (especially ages 14–17) in the U.S. are frequently victims of financially motivated sextortion. In 2024, NCMEC reported a rate nearly equivalent to 100 financial sextortion reports per day, and since 2021 has documented at least 36 teen suicides linked to sextortion. Cases have escalated rapidly—in 2023, NCMEC received 26,718 financial sextortion reports, up from 10,731 in 2022. FBI data also confirms rising trends. Perpetrators use fake profiles on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Discord, and gaming consoles to lure boys into sharing explicit content, then blackmail them using AI-manipulated images (67,000 AI reports in 2024) or screen recordings. Hotspots for this activity have been documented in West Africa (e.g., Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire) and Southeast Asia (e.g., the Philippines), alongside cases emerging worldwide. Offenders exploit encrypted apps, VPNs, burner phones, and ephemeral chats to evade detection, contributing to a 6.9 million report drop from Facebook in 2024. Risks in XR/AR and gaming metaverses align with a 192% rise in enticement reports (546,000 in 2024).

Rural teens face heightened risks due to stigma around male victimization, limited digital safety education, and scarce crisis support in under-resourced areas, amplifying susceptibility and underscoring the need for targeted prevention and support.



¹⁶ [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children \(NCMEC\). Where Is Sextortion Happening? New Trends in a Growing Crisis \(2024\)](#)

¹⁷ [Thorn. Financial Sextortion: Emerging Trends and Tactics \(2024\)](#)

¹⁸ [2023 NCMEC CyberTipline data](#)

¹⁹ [Pew Research Center. Teens, Social Media, and Technology 2024](#)

Main Perpetrator Groups in Financially Motivated Sextortion:

- Financially motivated offender groups exploiting youth online, with activity clusters reported in West Africa and Southeast Asia.²⁰
- Predator groups using livestream platforms (e.g., Philippines, other Southeast Asian hubs)²¹
- Individuals and groups impersonating teens globally²²
- Use of evasive technologies²³
- AI-driven impersonation²⁴

By the Numbers: Financially Motivated Sextortion of Youth in Rural and Under-Resourced Communities:

- In 2022 alone: 3,000+ minors were victims of sextortion; some took their own lives²⁵
- 10,500+ Weekly Sextortion Reports in 2024²⁶
- 36+ Youth Suicides Since 2021²⁷
- 67,000 AI-Driven Sextortion Reports in 2024²⁸
- 200% Increase in Sadistic Online Exploitation than in the previous year in 2024²⁹



²⁰ [2024 CyberTipline Report](#)

²¹ [Reuters: Coronavirus fuels cybersex trafficking fears for children in Southeast Asia](#)

²² [2024 CyberTipline Report](#)

²³ [2024 CyberTipline Report](#)

²⁴ [2024 CyberTipline Report](#)

²⁵ [FBI: FBI and Partners Issue National Public Safety Alert on Financial Sextortion Schemes](#)

²⁶ [2024 CyberTipline Report](#)

²⁷ [2024 CyberTipline Report](#)

²⁸ [2024 CyberTipline Report](#)

²⁹ [2024 CyberTipline Report](#)

ONLINE SEX TRAFFICKING



Online sex trafficking remains a growing threat to youth, particularly those in rural or under-resourced communities. According to the 2024 NCMEC CyberTipline report, 26,823 reports of child sex trafficking were received, marking a 55% increase from 2023, likely driven by new reporting mandates under the REPORT Act. Traffickers exploit digital platforms to initiate contact, build trust, and manipulate vulnerable children into exploitative situations. Recruitment often involves false promises of jobs, romantic relationships, or access to basic needs. Youth facing poverty, domestic instability, or identity-based discrimination are especially susceptible due to their limited access to resources and support networks.

Traffickers target platforms popular among teenagers for social interaction, including Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook Messenger, Discord, and TikTok, which provide direct and often unmonitored access to potential victims. The 2024 CyberTipline data highlights a 192% increase in online enticement reports (546,000 total), which often overlap with trafficking schemes, as predators use private chats to coerce victims. In rural communities, traffickers may also employ peer-led recruitment, where older youth are paid to target younger victims online, exploiting trust within social circles.



Common Recruitment Tactics:

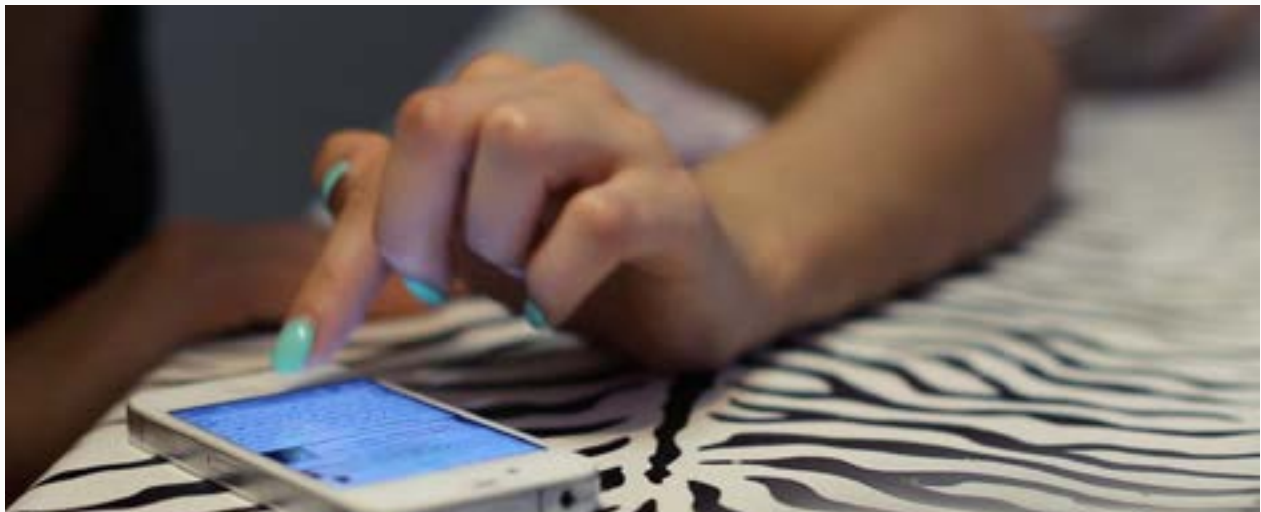
- Fake modeling or talent agency offers
- Romantic grooming (“online boyfriend/girlfriend” dynamics)
- Promises of money, food, shelter, or safety
- Peer recruiters embedded in local social networks

Youth Most at Risk:

- Girls aged 13–17, especially those lacking access to shelters or supportive female mentors
- Boys aged 13–17, often targeted through manipulation, shame, and impersonation schemes
- Black, Latino, and Indigenous youth, disproportionately affected by systemic poverty and digital inequities
- Foster care and group home youth, frequently targeted due to unmet basic needs
- Disabled youth, particularly those with intellectual or cognitive disabilities, who may not recognize exploitation

Trafficker Tactics:^{30,31,32}

- Use of encrypted messaging apps (e.g., Telegram, WhatsApp, Signal)
- VPNs and burner phones to avoid detection
- Ephemeral chat, cloud storage, and anonymous image-sharing platforms
- AI tools (e.g., voice changers, avatars) used to impersonate youth
- Recruitment in XR/AR environments and youth-oriented gaming metaverses
- Child sex trafficking networks
- Exploitation of under-reporting platforms



³⁰ [2024 NMEC CyberTipline Report](#)

³¹ [Human Trafficking Front: Encrypted Message Apps and Child Safety](#)

³² [U.S. Department of Justice](#)

UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE



While AI exploitation, online grooming, sexual extortion, and trafficking represent the most visible and urgent threats, they do not exist in isolation. These harms take root—and often go undetected—in a broader digital ecosystem shaped by how youth consume media, whom they trust, and whether they have the mental health support to cope with what they experience online.

To fully address online exploitation, we must also examine the conditions that allow it to thrive. The following sections explore two critical areas that influence both vulnerability and recovery: how youth engage with others through digital platforms and how online harm impacts their psychological well-being. These insights are essential for designing prevention strategies that are not only reactive, but also holistic and preventative.

Five Signs a Child May Be at Risk of Online Exploitation:

1. Sudden secrecy about device use or new “friends” online
2. Increased anxiety, mood swings, or school avoidance
3. Unexplained financial activity (Cash App, crypto, etc.)
4. Use of multiple social media accounts or usernames
5. Changes in sleep, appetite, or social behavior

If you notice these signs, calmly talk with your child and consult digital safety resources at

- [Protect Us Kids Global Youth Life Network | Inspire Zone](#)
- [Protect Us Kids Foundation | Research, Reports & Whitepapers](#)
- [Protect Us Kids Foundation - YouTube](#)

ADJACENT CATEGORY ONE

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND TRUST

Today's youth are growing up in an environment where digital platforms are not just sources of entertainment—they are central to identity, friendship, and information. From YouTube and TikTok to Discord and Snapchat, these spaces are where young people form opinions, seek validation, and build social connections. But this dependence on social media also creates blind spots: Many young people trust content shared by peers more than guidance from parents, schools, or traditional news sources. In rural and under-resourced areas, where media literacy education is limited and adult supervision may be inconsistent, this trust can make youth particularly vulnerable to grooming, misinformation, and manipulation.

Digital habits shape vulnerabilities. Youth increasingly rely on peer content, viral trends, and social validation from online platforms to inform their beliefs and behaviors, often with little ability to discern manipulation from authenticity.

Top Platforms by Age:

- Ages 3–8
 - YouTube Kids installed on 62% of devices among children ages 3–5³³
 - Minecraft: Played by 39% of children ages 6–8 (rising to 68% of boys)
 - Roblox: Used monthly by half of U.S. children under 16, including many in the 6–8 range
- Ages 9–12: YouTube, Minecraft, Roblox, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat^{34, 35}
- Ages 13–17: YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat³⁶

Risk Factors:

- Early exposure to explicit content via autoplay: Even very young users report encountering sexual or inappropriate content through autoplay features on platforms like YouTube and TikTok. These moments often occur on shared family devices with no parental controls in place, leading to desensitization or confusion about consent and boundaries.

- Trust in peer-shared misinformation: Youth frequently believe what they see in group chats, viral videos, or trending posts, especially on platforms like TikTok and Discord. PUK sessions revealed that rural teens often view social media as more authoritative than school-based education or traditional news, increasing the risk of exposure to manipulative recruitment, grooming, or scam content.

³³ [The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Zero to Eight](#)

³⁴ [Tween Cyberbullying in 2020](#)

³⁵ [Hindenburg Research: Roblox: Inflated Key Metrics For Wall Street And A Pedophile Hellscape For Kids](#)

³⁶ [Cloudwards: Social Media Addiction Statistics: Facts, Stats & Trends in 2025](#)

— ADJACENT CATEGORY TWO

MENTAL HEALTH AND TRAUMA

The psychological impact of online exploitation is deep and lasting. For many youth, especially those living in rural or under-resourced communities, the shame, fear, and social fallout from exposure, sexual extortion, or harassment can lead to emotional crises with few support options. While some children bounce back with support from peers or parents, others suffer in silence—isolating themselves from school, friends, and family.

The risk of anxiety, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and self-harm is **more than three and a half times higher**³⁷ for children who experience cyber-related abuse, especially in environments where mental health services are scarce or stigmatized.

Key Impacts on Youth Well-Being:

- Depression and anxiety: Heavy social media use, exposure threats, and online harassment correlate with significantly elevated rates of depression and anxiety—especially among youth aged nine and up.³⁸
- PTSD symptoms: Teens targeted by sexual extortion or impersonation often display signs of trauma, including hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance of previously safe environments like school or social spaces.
- Social withdrawal: Many victims retreat from both online and offline communities out of fear or shame, resulting in “ghosting”³⁹ friends and avoiding interactions altogether.
- Self-harm and suicidal ideation: Studies show that youth exposed to sexual extortion or cyberbullying are 3.64 times more likely to have self-injurious behavior compared to their peers.⁴⁰

Risk Factors Amplifying Trauma:

- Lack of access to therapy or crisis services: In rural or under-resourced areas, youth often have no access to trauma-informed care, school counselors, or mental health support that’s inclusive of the lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+) community.
- Stigma around disclosure: Boys and LGBTQ+ youth report intense fear of judgment or rejection if they reveal they’ve been targeted—especially in religious or conservative communities.
- Ongoing fear of exposure: Many victims live in a constant state of anxiety, fearing that images or threats will resurface. This fear can disrupt sleep, concentration, and daily functioning.

³⁷ [Journal of Health Promotion and Behavior: The Impact of Cyberbullying on Self-Harming Behavior and Suicidal Thoughts among Adolescents: A Meta-Analysis](#)

³⁸ [Jama Network: Social Media Use and Depressive Symptoms During Early Adolescence](#)

PROTECT US KIDS FOUNDATION'S PREVENTION EFFORTS

The Protect Us Kids Foundation tackles online exploitation through a strategic combination of education, mental health support, intelligence sharing, and technology. This includes peer-to-peer youth programs, community learning sessions, research partnerships, and real-time tools that protect children in digital spaces. At the heart of its mission is a commitment to serving youth in rural and under-resourced communities—those most often overlooked yet most at risk.

PUK collaborates with schools and universities to integrate online safety and cybersecurity education into classrooms. It also advances research that strengthens child protection. Its [Global Youth Life Network](#) empowers children through peer-to-peer support networks, helping them recognize grooming, build self-awareness, and foster safe digital relationships. On the mental health front, PUK's Health Affairs Program delivers trauma-informed emotional support and wellness training, especially in areas with limited access to care.

Through its We-Rise portal and tech innovation initiatives, PUK offers young people safe digital spaces, real-time crisis resources, and tools for resilience. At the same time, its Collaboration & Intelligence Program works with law enforcement and intelligence partners to identify threats, track exploitation trends, and escalate high-risk cases for intervention.

PUK bridges the gap between vulnerable youth and the resources meant to protect them. But with the scale and sophistication of online harm growing daily, this work urgently needs more support.

You can help protect children from online exploitation by donating or volunteering. Visit www.protect-us-kids.org to learn more.

³⁹ Ghosting refers to the sudden and unexplained cessation of all communication by one party in a relationship—whether romantic, social, or professional—without warning or explanation. The person who “ghosts” withdraws from contact and avoids further interaction, leaving the other party without closure or understanding of the reason. While the term originated in digital dating culture, it is now widely used to describe similar behavior across friendships, workplace interactions, and online communication. Psychologically, ghosting is often viewed as a form of avoidant behavior that can contribute to confusion, distress, or rejection for the person being ghosted. - [Merriam-Webster. \(n.d.\). Ghosting. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary.](#)

⁴⁰ [Journal of Health Promotion and Behavior: The Impact of Cyberbullying on Self-Harming Behavior and Suicidal Thoughts among Adolescents: A Meta-Analysis](#)

A CALL TO ACTION



Youth in rural and under-resourced communities face the threat of online exploitation, including sextortion. Limited resources in these areas heighten young people's vulnerability. The Protect Us Kids Foundation urges immediate, practical action to safeguard these diverse young populations from evolving digital risks. We call for the creation of community systems that respond with compassion, not stigma.

Lawmakers:

- **Criminalize synthetic Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM):** Close legal gaps around AI-generated child sexual abuse material, including deepfakes and nudified images.
- **Fund prevention and recovery programs:** Prioritize resources for education, trauma-informed care, and digital resilience—tailored for rural and under-resourced communities with scarce services.
- **Enforce tech accountability:** Mandate platforms to detect and report grooming and sextortion, ensuring solutions work in low-connectivity areas.
- **Support safe community reporting:** Partner with local governments and trusted organizations to establish non-stigmatizing, confidential reporting pathways that protect youth and those who advocate for them.

Educators and School Systems:

- **Integrate digital safety into education:** Integrate free online safety resources into curricula, using offline tools where internet access is limited.
- **Train school staff:** Equip teachers and counselors to recognize the signs of exploitation and respond with trauma-informed care, leveraging local partnerships.
- **Expand peer education models:** Support youth-led groups to foster digital citizenship and empower safe peer-to-peer communication.

Parents and Caregivers:

- **Talk with your child:** Create open, judgment-free conversations about online experiences to help youth seek help early.
- **Use privacy and safety tools:** Apply basic settings and free parental controls, even in low-tech environments.
- **Know the warning signs:** Learn to recognize signs of grooming, extortion, and emotional distress. Visit www.protect-us-kids.org for practical tools and guidance.

Local Governments & Community Leaders

- **Bridge the response gap:** Coordinate between law enforcement, social services, and community organizations to ensure timely, youth-centered intervention.
- **Protect those who report:** Establish safe pathways for disclosure that do not criminalize or shame youth, families, or community advocates.
- **Invest in local prevention capacity:** Support community-based awareness, mental-health access, and technology training programs that strengthen protection at the local level.

This is our collective responsibility. Children's safety cannot wait.

