



Study on Intervention Strategies for the Rehabilitation
and Reintegration of Child Victims / Survivors of
**Online Sexual Abuse and
Exploitation in the Philippines**
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

The Philippines has emerged as a global center of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC),¹ with almost half of Filipino children vulnerable to online sexual abuse. ² According to the National Baseline Study on Violence Against Children in the Philippines conducted by UNICEF and Council for Welfare of Children in 2016, about 43.7% of children aged thirteen to eighteen have experienced violence online.³ A fourth of these children have experienced sexual violence online.⁴

To protect children from OSAEC and provide appropriate services to child victims / survivors, evidence is required about the types of interventions currently available in the Philippines for the rehabilitation, healing and reintegration of children. The present study is designed to contribute to the establishment of this critical evidence base by focusing specifically on identifying and assessing current intervention models and therapeutic and rehabilitative services provided by child protection and health authorities and civil society organizations for child victims / survivors of OSAEC and their families.

The Philippines is fortunate to have a significant amount of research, evidence and studies on OSAEC conducted by the many dedicated Government and non-government agencies focused on this issue, including the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children's recent *Disrupting Harm* country report (2022).⁵ The present study does not replicate this important work but consolidates and triangulates these findings with the perspectives of service providers to identify existing gaps and bottlenecks preventing effective service delivery, as well as strategies to ensure interventions deliver improved outcomes for children.

The study identified several important findings and questions with significant implications for OSAEC service provision. Study respondents from different sectors highlighted the need to rethink or reframe the current approach to OSAEC service provision to better align with the perceptions and needs of child victims / survivors. The study findings underscore the validity of UNICEF's Child Protection System Strengthening Approach, which emphasizes that children do not usually fit into neat categories according to the protection needs they experience.⁶ Children affected by OSAEC often unfortunately experience multiple forms of abuse over time, including physical, verbal and psychological harm, as well as other forms of sexual abuse and exploitation. This may be compounded by challenges in access to education, healthcare and other fundamental rights. Efforts to tackle OSAEC should therefore be designed within the CPSS framework, which aims to address the programmatic fragmentation that has characterized issues-based approaches to child protection. There is a critical need to reorient service approaches and focus efforts on prevention of problems and harm by proactively engaging with children, families and communities before cases are formally reported or enter the legal system.

¹ IJM, et al. (2020). *Online Sexual Exploitation of Children In the Philippines: Analysis and Recommendations for Governments, Industry, and Civil Society*.

² UNICEF & DSWD-IACAP (2020b). Philippines kids online: The online experiences of children in the Philippines: Opportunities, risks and barriers.

³ UNICEF & CWC (2016). *National Baseline Study on Violence Against Children*, p. 8.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF (2022). *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse*. Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

⁶ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2021). *Child protection systems strengthening: Approach, benchmarks, interventions*. UNICEF, New York.

In terms of scope, the study covers national, regional and local levels of service provision and data collection was conducted at the sub-national level in four locations nationwide: National Capital Region (Quezon City, Taquig City), Central Visayas (Cebu City), Northern Mindanao (Cagayan De Oro City, Iligan City) and Central Luzon (Pampanga). Service interventions provided by Government agencies, with emphasis on Social Welfare and Development Offices and Women and Children Protection Units, as well as civil society organizations, are reviewed. Criminal investigation procedures and the legal framework for OSAEC, analyzed in other studies and reports, are not covered in detail. The recommendations specifically address the implications of the findings in relation to the recent *Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) and Anti-Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials (CSAEM) Act* and UNICEF's 2021 CPSS Approaches, Benchmarks and Interventions framework.

Study Findings and Recommendations

Services for OSAEC survivors can be viewed along a continuum, from the time children are first identified as at-risk or having been exposed to harm by service providers to their integration back into their communities / families, including any support provided after this point. Ideally, services should be provided well before children are exposed to OSAEC to prevent this from occurring, including community-based information and education and family support services to reduce child vulnerability and strengthen the protective environment. In general, the study found that the service interventions and services for OSAEC survivors that are currently available do not appear to be sufficient.

Key study findings and recommendations in relation to interventions and services for child victims / survivors of OSAEC are highlighted below, structured under UNICEF's core components of child protection systems:

Strengthen policy, legal and regulatory frameworks

There is a need to review the legal framework in relation to OSAEC and related child protection issues to ensure current legislation is contributing to effective interventions and positive outcomes for children. The scope of the current study does not include an in-depth analysis of the legal framework for OSAEC in the Philippines, as this has been addressed in numerous studies, including the 2022 *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines* report⁷ and the 2020 study commissioned by UNICEF pursuant to a request by government.⁸ However, the study found significant challenges in implementation of policy, legal and regulatory frameworks, particularly at the local level. Another important challenge identified is the reality that the majority of cases are not formally report and do not enter the legal system. These children and families are much less likely to receive services and support, especially those provided by government agencies. Child victims that do enter the legal system often find this experience lengthy and traumatic.

⁷ ECPAT, INTERPOL, & UNICEF. (2022). *Disrupting harm in the Philippines: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse*. Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children. Retrieved from https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/DH_Philippines_ONLINE_FINAL.pdf

⁸ UNICEF Philippines & DSWD – IACACP (2020a). *National study on online sexual abuse and exploitation of children in the Philippines*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/media/2711/file/UNIPH-2021-NationalStudyOSAEC-FullReport.pdf>

Annex VI of the study provides specific recommendations to strengthen the recent Republic Act No. 11930: *“An Act Punishing Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children Penalizing the Production, Distribution, Possession and Access of Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials.”* This critical legislation, if effectively interpreted and implemented, will play an important role in preventing OSAEC in the Philippines.

Recommendations:

- The burden to prosecute offenders should no longer be on evidence provided directly by the child. Alternative options should be explored and where children’s testimony is required, child-friendly procedures that avoid secondary trauma should be utilized.
- Adopt the use of the Child Protective Prosecution, which strives to meet two standards: the burden of proof and the duty of care. The burden of proof protects the accused’s right to be presumed innocent, while the duty of care requires taking primary consideration of a child’s best interests in all actions or decisions that concern or affect them.⁹
- The Rules on Examination of a Child Witness, which aim to “create and maintain an environment that will allow children to give reliable and complete evidence, minimize trauma to children, encourage children to testify in legal proceedings, and facilitate the ascertainment of the truth,” should be upheld.¹⁰
- Support and implement Republic Act 11222 or the Simulated Birth Rectification Act and Republic Act 11642 or the Domestic Administrative Adoption and Alternative Child Care Act that streamlines the adoption process, allowing those who seek to adopt a child to file a petition with the regional alternative child care office and avoid lengthy and expensive court proceedings.

Establish governance and coordination structures

Effective governance and coordination structures are critical for the successful reintegration of OSAEC survivors into communities. This includes multi-disciplinary case conferencing and functioning LGU / BCPCs offering long-term service provision and support to prepare families and communities. While the majority (73%) of survey respondents stated that there was a referral mechanism for children affected by OSAEC in their location, respondents also indicated that these referral mechanisms are not effectively functioning or operating consistently in practice, although flowcharts and referral pathways have been designed.

⁹ IJM. (2021). *Child-Protective Prosecutions: A Strength-Based, Child-Centered Approach to Assess Prosecution Results*. Retrieved from: <https://osec.ijm.org/documents/64/IJM-child-protective-prosecutions-2021.pdf>

¹⁰ Supreme Court of the Philippines. (21 November 2000). *Rule on Examination of a Child Witness*. Retrieved from https://lawphil.net/courts/supreme/am/am_004_07_sc_2000.html.

Recommendations:

- Conduct an assessment of Local Councils for the Protection of Children, including their integrated plans of action, resources for addressing child rights, and specific interventions for children exposed to all forms of violence, including OSAE.
- The BCPC should strengthen its work with CSOs, parish-based groups and other community organizations. In addition to barangay officials, prevention efforts should also proactively involve faith-based organizations, Parent Teachers Associations, youth councils at the barangay and city level, MOVE or men's support groups, as well as other groups and individuals at the sub-village level such as zone leaders.
- There is a need for innovative solutions and coordination strategies using different platforms and modalities including online case management, counseling and VAC reporting apps. Efforts to strengthen referral flow in the context of pandemic (Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), etc.) should be targeted, as well as enhancement and activation of the child protection mechanism from the barangay level.

Reinforce a continuum of services

Given the focus of this study on OSAEC intervention strategies, the majority of the findings and recommendations are in relation to the service continuum and how this impacts OSAEC survivors. Key findings related to this CPSS priority area include:

- OSAEC cases are often not disclosed, reported or identified as sexual exploitation or abuse. Children in these situations often therefore do not receive any services and many children affected by this form of violence may not come into contact with services at all.
- Current interventions tend to focus on response, rescue and legal procedures, with less availability of services for prevention, healing and recovery of children affected by OSAE.
- When asked to identify interventions currently available for the protection, rehabilitation and reintegration of child victims / survivors of OSAEC in their location, the majority of interventions mentioned are response strategies to support OSAEC victims / survivors after cases have been reported and entered the legal system.
- Non-shelter-based alternative care options currently available for OSAEC victims / survivors remain limited. There is a need to increase the availability of non-shelter-based care options for OSAEC victims / survivors as a critical priority for these children and youth by strengthening family-based alternative care settings, foster care system and other options.

- The majority of existing interventions for OSAEC survivors do not appear to address social and disability inclusion and many shelters do not have the capacity to accept persons with disabilities. Some shelters specifically state that they do not accept children with mental challenges or who are in need of special care and services. Study respondents highlighted the lack of specific OSAEC interventions for children with disability as a significant gap in service provision.
- There appears to be a significant gap in the availability of services and programs for OSEC victim / survivors from a gender standpoint. Respondents explained that services are often not equipped to deal with boys and that the majority of adult care providers are women, who may find it more challenging to care for adolescent boys. Most victim witness coordinators, however, are male. This could also represent a challenge for service provision, as female OSAEC survivors may find it more difficult to establish trust with a male witness coordinator.
- 75% of survey respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the delivery of rehabilitation and reintegration services for children affected by OSAE in their location. The pandemic restricted mobility while also reducing access to and availability of services, resulting in non-reporting or late reporting of cases. Service providers were focused on delivery of social and medical interventions as part of the case management process. Home visits to monitor at-risk children and families were also restricted.

Recommendations:

Top-line recommendations in relation to service provision, see report for complete list.

- Targeted prevention systems should be established in communities, ideally spearheaded by trained BCPC who understand the dynamics and pathways of exploitation for children affected by OSAE. Preventive approaches should be systemic, and behavior-oriented, based on institutional elements that are maintained regardless of changes in political leadership in the community.
- Review the existing case management protocol for relevance in dealing with OSAEC with specific assessment of the current coordination and referral mechanism for handling OSAEC at the local level to ensure that sufficient capacity and services are in place to effectively handle referrals and support case management as envisioned in the protocol.
- All involved in assessing the needs of children affected by OSAE should be trained in more child-sensitive and culturally appropriate needs assessment approaches as a basis for developing intervention models.
- Protect children from psychological harm by developing a child-sensitive rescue protocol that prevents child victims from experiencing further trauma.
- A local children's code, one of the requirements for child-friendly local governance, should be updated and used as a practical guide by LGUs when responding to OSAEC issues.

Establish & implement standards and accountability mechanisms

The study found that standards and accountability mechanisms for the care of children affected by OSEC should be reinforced, including in relation to the length of time children are placed in shelters. Children typically stay in shelters for a duration of 6 months to 2 years. Respondents indicated that this timeframe may have been extended after the COVID-19 pandemic. This is clearly problematic and does not reconcile with international guidelines that strongly recommend shelter care should be a short-term placement.

Recommendations:

- Develop guidelines for addressing inclusivity in service provision for children affected by all forms of violence that address gender, disability, ethnic considerations and other factors contributing to exclusion and marginalization of children.
- Oversight mechanisms should be designed and implemented to ensure implementation of laws blocking pornographic content in internet cafes and public Wi-Fi hotspots in communities.
- Organise discussion forums and workshops with key stakeholders, including the private sector and ISPs, and child protection experts to discuss and agree on how this will be carried out. This includes agreement on how to design effective blocking mechanisms to identify pornographic content and prevent over-blocking.

Strengthen human, financial & infrastructure resources

Limitations in services and types of help currently available for OSAEC victims / survivors was attributed by respondents to several factors, including lack of human resources and staff capacity. This is especially challenging at the local level, where service delivery providers fulfil multiple roles and often receive limited specialized training and skill development. It was emphasized that the direct interface where services encounter children and families is where infrastructure gaps and lack of skills and capacity are often greatest. Many service providers have limited knowledge of OSAEC or understanding of how to deal with this complex issue.

Recommendations:

- Conduct a systematic capacity needs analysis of key service providers to understand existing strengths and areas for improvement in understanding OSAEC and related interventions for children.
- There is a need to create and continuously upgrade the capacities of the social service workforce. A comprehensive capacity development plan needs to be institutionalized, including levels of supervision, technical support, and oversight at various governance levels.
- Advocate for appointment of social workers in each barangay given the additional resources from each LGU's national tax allotment under the Mandanas ruling. The appointment of social workers in each barangay could bring the continuum of services closer to the communities and possibly help

engage community stakeholders more actively to protect children from OSAE.

- In addition to upgrading the capacity of social service workers, there is a need to expand the circle of advocates and implementers by including key private actors such as internet service providers and others who play a role in enabling OSAEC.
- Design and deliver a basic and tailored training module appropriate to the roles and responsibilities of service providers engaged in child protection, focusing on OSAEC.
- Develop strategies to address gaps in the provision of psychological interventions due to the lack of qualified professionals at the community level. Clear guidelines on what social workers can and cannot do should be developed, as well as the technical support to be provided.
- Ensure the involvement of schools, teachers, and guidance counselors/ designates in efforts to address and protect children from OSAE.
- Partner and advocate with key private stakeholders engaged in the online technology environment and those whose services are being used to facilitate financial transactions to develop programs to complement existing services for children affected by OSAE.

Promote & prioritize mechanisms for child participation and community engagement

Study respondents noted that children are often frightened by the rescue process, their interaction with the police, and being sent to a shelter. Shelter staff and police are perceived as the “bad guys” who were responsible for their separation from their families. While it was not possible to directly interview children and young people for this study, previous studies and research with children in the Philippines corroborate this finding. Greater understanding and recognition of the situation and perspectives of children affected by OSAE should lead to service adaptations and reform. Indeed, when a population is so ‘marginalized’ but also not wanting to engage with services, service design should be led by them or it is unlikely to be accepted or effective.

Respondents also explained that OSAEC survivors often do not perceive themselves as victims or having been traumatized by their experience. For this reason, both government and NGO service providers in some locations explained that they do not know how to handle OSAEC victims / survivors, and also highlighted challenges in identifying residential placements for these children and youth. Government social workers noted that better understanding of the perspectives of OSAEC victims / survivors and how to deal with the effects of their experience on behavior is an area that they need assistance with. Promoting and prioritizing mechanisms to create space for the voices of OSAEC victims / survivors to share their views and recommendations for appropriate and more effective intervention strategies would directly address this.

Recommendations:

- Explore the possibility of training para-professionals and community volunteers to perform basic counselling and social work functions at the local level.

- Strengthen commitment and ensure child participation in all matters affecting children’s protection from OSAE, making specific effort to understand children’s views on interventions and services provided, including OSEAC victims / survivors.
- Nurture community-based mechanisms and support their functionality as informal (or formal) structures. Government needs to reach out and include civil society groups, faith-based groups, the private sector and others with ongoing initiatives to empower communities on various child rights issues.

Invest in data collection and monitoring systems

Existing data on OSAEC should serve as a compass for calibrating and challenging existing elements of the Philippine child protection system, to understand and work toward appropriateness and effectiveness of interventions, both in the short-term and long-term, ensuring that the rights of children are safeguarded in the paths taken for the prevention of OSAEC, and children’s special protection, healing, recovery and reintegration to a safe community.

Study respondents highlighted gaps in the assessment of final outcomes for children and factors impacting success of recovery planning, as well as understanding the extent to which children have recovered and gained their sense of overall well-being. This information is crucial to ensuring and designing effective and appropriate service provision.

Recommendations:

- Enhance information-sharing of all agencies involved (including courts) on OSAEC cases through a centralized database system for prevention and monitoring. Efforts to develop a single database, as well as harmonize templates and definitions used by different stakeholder agencies, should also be supported and continued.
- Barangays should establish databases with information on vulnerable children and families, for the purpose of providing targeted support for the prevention of OSAEC and children’s special protection.
- Further investigation and research are needed on efforts to prevent re-victimization and or trauma of children during rescue and during their involvement in the justice system, which appear to impact and, in some cases, hinder healing and recovery from their initial OSAEC experience.
- While this study presented information on current reintegration services and processes, there is a need to collect more in-depth information on effective strategies for reintegration of OSAEC survivors, factors that contribute to successful integration, and models of effective reintegration based on experience to date. Ideally this should include the perspectives of young people who have direct experience of these services to allow them to share their insights and recommendations.

