IPIE
International Panel on the Information Environment

Disrupting Digital Exploitation

Recommendations for Preventing and Responding to Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Summary for Policymakers 2026.1

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SYNOPSIS

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA) is an escalating crisis. Digital platforms, social media, livestreaming services, and online payment systems facilitate sexual abuse of children at a significant scale and speed.

Reports of online grooming, financial sextortion, livestreamed abuse, and AI-generated child sexual abuse material continue to rise across many regions. Existing interventions struggle to keep pace with technological change, allowing offenders to operate across borders with limited risk of detection or disruption.

This *Summary for Policymakers* distills key findings from the *Synthesis Report* "Detecting, Deterring, Investigating, and Prosecuting Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: A Systematic Review" (SR2026.1). Using standard PRISMA protocols, the review provides a methodologically rigorous synthesis of more than 100 studies on interventions published over the past decade. The review assesses technical, legal, policing, behavioral, and educational interventions and provides four key findings:

1. **Most interventions focus on detecting abuse after it occurs**. Far fewer disrupt the systems that enable exploitation and abuse, such as payment mechanisms and advertising and recruitment pathways, or address limited judicial capacity that falls short of deterrence or enforcement.

2. **Technical tools may reduce harm at scale but depend on legal authority, secure data access, safeguards, and effective enforcement**. Without these, such automated and AI-assisted tools have limited impact.

3. **Behavioral and educational interventions can reduce risk and increase awareness but cannot replace platform accountability**. Evidence of sustained behavior change remains limited without funding, including for longitudinal studies.

4. **Financial systems are the most underused leverage point against TF-CSEA**. Few interventions disrupt payments financing abuse, focusing instead on tracing transactions after harm occurs.

The synthesis provides the most comprehensive assessment of TF-CSEA interventions to date and was led by the IPIE's *Scientific Panel on Child Protection and Social Media*. The findings demonstrate a clear consensus on the need for coordinated legal authority, scalable technical tools, sustained enforcement, and action to interrupt financial flows.

INTRODUCTION

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA) has become a persistent and expanding global crisis [1]. Digital platforms, social media, livestreaming services, and online payment systems have transformed how abuse is produced, distributed, and monetized. These technologies allow offenders to reach children at scale, operate across borders, and evade detection more easily than in the past. Reports of online grooming, financial sextortion, livestreamed abuse, and digitally generated child sexual abuse material (CSAM) continue to increase worldwide [2].

Governments, technology companies, and civil society organizations have responded with a wide range of interventions to prevent TF-CSEA. These include technical tools to detect abuse material, policing and investigative strategies, legal and regulatory frameworks, behavioral interventions, and education and awareness-raising campaigns. However, these responses vary widely in scope, maturity, and effectiveness. Policymakers in all regions face growing pressure to understand which interventions reduce harm, which can be extended across jurisdictions, and where the most serious gaps remain.

Figure 1 illustrates how TF-CSEA unfolds across a connected chain of activities from recruitment to exploitation, highlighting multiple points where policy and enforcement interventions can disrupt abuse.

This Summary for Policymakers presents the key findings of a synthesis of TF-CSEA interventions from around the world. The assessment draws on a systematic look at over 100 peer-reviewed studies and evidence-based reports published over the past decade.

Figure 1. TF-CSEA Offending Chain.

Source: IPIE. [2]

The Panel examined interventions used in the technical, legal, policing, behavioral, and educational domains and mapped them along the TF-CSEA offending chain. Following PRISMA guidelines, this review systematically screened peer-reviewed studies and evidence-based reports, authored by hundreds of researchers worldwide, to assess TF-CSEA interventions used across disciplines using predefined inclusion criteria. The goal was to identify the policy interventions that are most likely to disrupt technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Here we highlight four key findings from the larger assessment, *Detecting, Deterring, Investigating, and Prosecuting Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: A Systematic Review* [2], and additional details are available in the main report.

RESULT 1. DETECTION OVER PREVENTION

KEY FINDING

Most interventions focus on detecting abuse after it occurs.

The evidence shows that most TF-CSEA interventions concentrate on detecting abuse after harm has already occurred. The peer-reviewed literature and organizational reports show that most interventions target detection, investigation, and content identification. These interventions focus on identifying child sexual abuse material, tracing offender activity, and supporting law enforcement investigations.

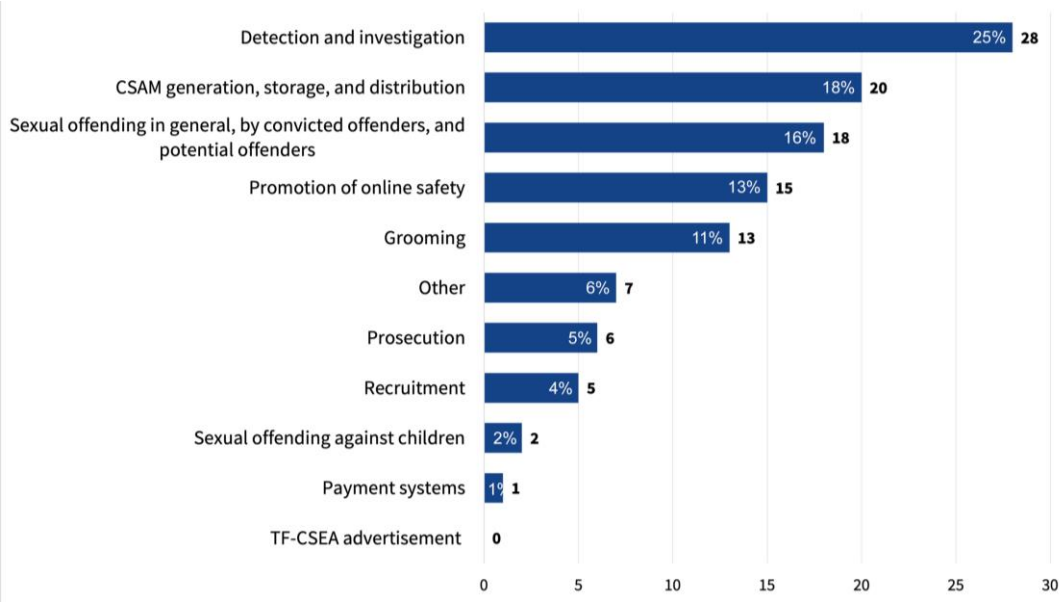
Most interventions involve using technological tools and protocols, followed by policing and investigation. Legal and regulatory interventions appear less frequently, while behavioral interventions and education campaigns are discussed mainly in the gray literature. Overall, the targets of interventions include detection, CSAM storage and distribution, grooming, and general sexual offending.

By contrast, several critical enabling systems have yet to be evaluated systematically. Very few interventions address recruitment pathways, the advertising of abuse, judicial capacity, or payment mechanisms. No eligible peer-reviewed publication has examined interventions targeting TF-CSEA advertising, and only one has documented an intervention with an indirect effect on payment disruption. No interventions aimed at improving the effectiveness of courts or judicial processes were found in the eligible peer-reviewed publications.

Figure 2 reveals that most interventions to detect, deter, investigate, and prosecute TF-CSEA over the last decade have not sufficiently addressed the critical upstream areas of recruitment and payments.

This imbalance limits prevention and deterrence. Detection-focused responses improve identification but do not disrupt the systems that allow abuse to increase and persist. As a result, policy responses remain reactive. The evidence indicates that addressing TF-CSEA may require shifting attention upstream, toward the systems that enable abuse to be organized, financed, and repeated.

Figure 2. Frequency of Intervention Locus Within the TF-CSEA Ecosystem.



Source: Data based on manually coded articles collected on 17 July 2025 from databases (SR2026.1).
Note: *n* = 114 (100%) intervention mechanisms and their impacts on the intervention chain. The units of analysis here are the occurrences of coded variables and not the number of publications coded. See main report for the coding frame and definitions of coded variables.

RESULT 2. TOOLS SHOULD BE BACKED BY AUTHORITY

KEY FINDING

Technical tools reduce harm at scale but depend on authority, data, safeguards, and enforcement.

Technical tools and protocols represent the most developed and scalable interventions against TF-CSEA. The assessment documents widespread use of automated content scanning, URL and hash lists, web crawling, and digital forensic tools. These technologies support cross-border identification of abuse material and enhance policing and investigation.

Several tools have contributed directly to investigations, prosecutions, and victim identification, particularly when integrated into law enforcement workflows. The use of artificial intelligence has expanded rapidly, especially for detecting CSAM and identifying predatory conduct, including grooming. Some AI-based tools demonstrate promising accuracy, particularly in controlled or laboratory settings, though real-world performance varies across deployment contexts (see main report, [2]).

However, the evidence also shows clear limits. The effectiveness of technical tools depends on access to high-quality, representative training data. Legal, ethical, and privacy constraints restrict access to verified CSAM, limiting model development

and testing. Many organizations deploying technological tools lack legal authority or enforcement power, reducing their ability to disrupt or take down illegal content and activities.

Additional challenges include scalability, platform dependencies, and the absence of mechanisms to address false positives and errors. None of the reviewed studies discussed processes for individuals who have been incorrectly identified as perpetrators to clear their names and get redress.

The evidence shows that technical tools reduce harm most effectively when paired with clear legal mandates, secure data-sharing arrangements, safeguards, and trained enforcement capacity. Without these conditions, their impact remains limited.

RESULT 3. SAFEGUARDS AND PLATFORM ACCOUNTABILITY

KEY FINDING

Behavioral and educational interventions reduce risk but cannot replace accountability.

Behavioral interventions and education, literacy, and awareness-raising campaigns play a supporting role in addressing TF-CSEA. The review identifies several behavioral interventions aimed primarily at potential or actual offenders. These include warning messages, therapeutic and deterrent communications, anonymous helplines, and structured online cognitive behavioral therapy programs.

Evidence from multiple studies indicates that these interventions can reduce attempts to access child sexual abuse material and encourage help-seeking. Nonjudgmental and confidential approaches appear particularly effective in lowering barriers to engagement. Some interventions have also targeted professionals, such as law enforcement officers, using training tools to improve investigative skills.

Education and awareness-raising campaigns primarily target children and young people. Interactive and game-based approaches show positive effects on their awareness of online risks and grooming tactics. Evaluations report increased knowledge and engagement among participants and educators.

However, the evidence base remains limited. Few studies examine long-term outcomes, and most rely on short-term or self-reported measures. The review finds little evidence that awareness gains consistently translate into sustained behavior change or reduced levels of victimization over time.

The synthesis cautions against overreliance on these interventions. Behavioral and educational approaches cannot substitute for platform accountability, legal enforcement, or system-level safeguards. The evidence supports their use as

complementary measures within a broader policy response—such as platform accountability.

RESULT 4. FOLLOWING—AND INTERRUPTING—THE FINANCING

KEY FINDING

Financial systems may be the most underused leverage point against TF-CSEA.

The review finds that financial systems are the least addressed systems but may be very powerful intervention points in the TF-CSEA ecosystem. Despite clear evidence that digital payments facilitate the commercialization and spread of abuse on digital platforms, almost no evaluated interventions directly disrupt payment flows.

Only one documented case showed an indirect effect on disrupting revenue streams from CSAM exchanges. No eligible peer-reviewed publications examined interventions explicitly designed to block, delay, or prevent payments associated with TF-CSEA.

Existing financial interventions primarily focus on tracking and reporting transactions after harm has occurred. Anti-money laundering frameworks and reporting duties allow financial institutions to share information with law enforcement. However, we do not yet have evidence showing that these mechanisms prevent transactions in real time.

Organizations' reports confirm this pattern. Collaboration between financial institutions, digital payment providers, and law enforcement supports investigations but does not disrupt the financial incentives that sustain abuse. As a result, TF-CSEA remains profitable and repeatable.

The synthesis concludes that focusing responsibility mainly on financial institutions and failing to directly disrupt digital payments may represent a critical missed opportunity. Addressing this research and policy gap could shift interventions upstream and target the economic structures that enable abuse to persist at scale. Financial interventions are a promising element of a broader package of policy initiatives to improve platform accountability for the disruption of digital exploitation.

CONCLUSION

This synthesis provides the most comprehensive assessment of TF-CSEA interventions currently available. The evidence shows that existing responses reduce harm but remain uneven and incomplete. Most interventions focus on detecting abuse after it occurs, and far fewer address the systems that enable abuse to persist, multiply, and generate profit.

Technical tools play a central role and can operate across borders. However, their effectiveness depends on legal authority, secure data access, safeguards, and enforcement capacity. Behavioral and educational interventions reduce risk and increase awareness, but evidence of sustained behavior change remains limited, particularly in longitudinal studies, due to limited research funding. Legal and regulatory frameworks have the greatest impact when they harmonize offences and impose enforceable duties across jurisdictions.

The most significant research and policy gap concerns financial systems. Despite their central role in enabling TF-CSEA, interventions rarely disrupt payment flows. Current approaches focus on tracing transactions after harm has occurred rather than on preventing abuse by interrupting its financing.

Major evidence gaps remain, particularly around payment disruption and long-term outcomes of interventions. Studies conducted since the assessment was completed are not included in this review. Nonetheless, the findings establish a clear scientific consensus. Ensuring platform accountability and reducing TF-CSEA requires coordinated legal authority, scalable technical systems, sustained enforcement capacity, and decisive action to disrupt the financial flows that sustain abuse.

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