

Preventing sexual abuse of children and young people: what do the experts say?

In May 2022, the European Commission published its proposal for a regulation to prevent and combat child sexual abuse. With its proposal, the European Commission aims to protect children and young people from sexual violence. This is an important problem that requires proven effective and enduring measures. In a great many ways, the Commission's proposal is anything but proportionate. The proposed measures are hardly effective, yet also harmful.

In the last few years several experts in the Netherlands have commented on the problem and/or the measures needed to better protect children and young people. Almost all of proposals focus on prevention and avoid almost all collateral damage. The experts do not see technology as a panacea. Which begs the question: If policymakers do not listen to the experts in this field, by whom are they guided?

The following is an anthology of recently published opinions from Dutch experts on combating the sexual abuse of children and adolescents.

National Rapporteur on Trafficking Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children

Who is the expert?

The National Rapporteur Human Trafficking and Sexual Violence against Children investigates the nature and extent of human trafficking and sexual violence against children in the Netherlands. She does this using her own research and by advising national and local governments, other organizations and aid workers on how to prevent and combat human trafficking and sexual violence against children. She uses an approach that focuses on both perpetrators and victims. The rapporteur is independent and reports to the Dutch government.¹

What does this expert say about the problem?

In November 2022, the rapporteur released her quadrennial Victim monitoring report on sexual violence against children 2017-2021.² This is a report on the characteristics of the victims and the nature and extent of the help and protection they receive. In this report, the rapporteur argues that the growing attention to sexual violence in our society offers opportunities for improvements. Improvements which are desperately needed:

¹ [Wat doet de Nationaal Rapporteur?](#), Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel

² [Sexual violence against children victims monitoring report 2017-2021](#), Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel

A quarter of victims [...] on the police's radar become victims again within 5 years. In more than half of the cases, they become victims of another sex crime or experience severe violence.

Moreover, she questions whether the help these victims receive is effective. Many are placed out of home, if they receive help at all, which delays their recovery and sometimes even traumatizes them. Additionally, the aid programmes pay too little attention to the personal situation of the victims, who are often struggling on many more fronts. The rapporteur also notes that “the field of professional signaling agencies is a patchwork” and that support and assistance for victims is fragmented.

Prevention is better than cure, which is why the rapporteur considers it a major problem that schools hardly use recognized and proven effective prevention methods. The rapporteur states:

Although most of the numerous preventive interventions are focused on education, they do not reach all young people in education. In addition, many interventions focus on preventing or stopping undesirable behavior, but much less on the positive aspects of and healthy handling of sexuality. Moreover, initiatives, measures and interventions are often not tested for effectiveness. [...] This is worrisome because the use of non-effective interventions can be useless and even have counterproductive effects.

The rapporteur also notes that the number of reports of grooming and unwanted sexting to the police has halved. The reason for this is not known, but it is not likely that the number of incidents has actually decreased. The rapporteur is concerned about the implementation of the Forensic Medical Examination (FMO) of underage victims of sexual violence. Because this is not permanently regulated, victims cannot be properly helped.

What recommendations does the expert make?

In her *Sexual violence against children victims monitoring report 2017-2021*, the Rapporteur makes three recommendations.³

1. The first recommendation is to “examine the effectiveness of existing preventive interventions in the field of sexual violence against children, ensure a coherent range of interventions that have been proven effective, and ensure their broad and uniform implementation. [...]”
2. Secondly the rapporteur recommends to ensure that the type of aid matches the needs of victims. The rapporteur recommends that the government “realize a support system that matches the personal needs of the child, the type of sexual violence a child has experienced, the context in which it took place and the age of the child. The support system should additionally address other factors and vulnerabilities that pose a risk of (repeated) victimization. [...]”
3. The last recommendation is to “achieve a structural and sustainable solution for conducting Forensic Medical Examination of minor victims of sexual violence.”

³ Translation by Bits of Freedom

Does the expert say anything more about the distribution of material?

Absolutely. The chapter entitled *Online signaling of sexual violence and sexual harassment* begins with the following text:⁴

For many victims, the step to report to a counseling agency [...] is very big. This is for example because they feel misunderstood, because of feelings of guilt or shame, because they are threatened or because they are afraid of the consequences.

She also indicates that many young people experience a high threshold when seeking access to mainstream assistance and that when this can be done anonymously, victims feel freer to share their stories.

Sexual Assault Center

Who is the expert?

The Sexual Violence Center (CSG) is a place where victims of sexual assault or rape can get the help they need: forensic, medical and psychological help. At the Sexual Assault Center, a team of doctors, nurses, police officers, psychologists, social workers and sex therapists work together to provide specialist care to victims of sexual assault and rape. The CSG is the only specialized center in the Netherlands for help with acute sexual violence and is a partnership between hospitals, GGD, GGZ, police and Slachtofferhulp Nederland.

What does this expert say about the problem?

This expert, like others, observes that “far from all victims know how and where to report after an unpleasant sexual experience.” Effective help is crucial to recovery, and to preventing repeat victimization. Another problem the CSG encounters is “the waiting lists in the mental health system when referring victims who have been abused.”⁵ The CSG also named the lack of capacity at the police, which only further increases the waiting times for handling sexual abuse cases.⁶

What recommendations does the expert make?

These are (some) of the recommendations of the CSG:

- Find a sustainable solution for the forensic medical examination of victims of sexual violence.⁷
- Initiate a public debate on sexual violence in order to create more awareness.
- Increase the capacity of law enforcement agencies.⁸
- Improve the cooperation between the various organisations assisting victims.⁹

4 Translation by Bits of Freedom

5 Jaarcijfers Centrum Seksueel Geweld 2021

6 CSG in podcast over gebrek capaciteit bij politie

7 Jaarcijfers Centrum Seksueel Geweld 2021

8 CSG in podcast over gebrek capaciteit bij politie

9 CSG: “Slachtoffers online seksueel misbruik moeten snellere en betere hulp krijgen”

Victim Support Netherlands

Who is the expert?

Victim Support Netherlands helps victims of a criminal offenses, traffic accident and disasters. The organization helps hundreds of thousands of victims and survivors every year. This involves emotional support, support in criminal proceedings and help in getting compensation for damages. One of the topics the organization also deals with is helping both adult and child victims of sexual abuse and sexual violence.

What does this expert say about the problem?

Shame often stands in the way of victims seeking help. Victims fear that others will blame them for the abuse. Many victims often receive judgmental reactions from those around them. Parents and other adults often react incorrectly, for example by judging.¹⁰

What recommendations does the expert make?

This experts stresses the need to remind young people that they are not alone.

Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR)

Who is the expert?

The NSCR conducts fundamental scientific research on crime and law enforcement. They aim to contribute to the solution of major societal issues in the field of security and justice. The NSCR is part of the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

What does this expert say about the problem?

In 2020, the NSCR¹¹ conducted a literature review of knowledge about the extent, nature and approach to online sexual violence.¹² The researchers note that online sexual violence is recorded in a variety of ways and that this makes it difficult to map its extent and trends. The researchers also note that “there [exists] a high degree of fragmentation in the approach of involved parties and little is still known about effective interventions.”

What recommendations does the expert make?

The researchers make, amongst other things, these recommendations:

- Investigate the extent to which the intended effect of the intervention is achieved and unwanted side effects are avoided.
- Ensure that interventions and campaigns place more emphasis on “the message [...] that distributing, sharing or posting sexually explicit images of others online without consent is wrong. This shifts attention from the victim to the perpetrator and can prevent victim blaming.”
- Map how the processes around taking sexually explicit images offline works out in

¹⁰ NOS: “Slachtofferhulp: schaamte bij gedupeerden van naaktbeelden zit hulp in de weg”

¹¹ Website van Nederlands Studiecentrum Criminaliteit en Rechtshandhaving

¹² Het fenomeen online seksueel geweld, 2020, Nederlands Studiecentrum Criminaliteit en Rechtshandhaving

practice and whether the needs are being met.”

Expertise Bureau Online Sexual Abuse (EOKM)

Who is the expert?

The Expertise Bureau Online Sexual Abuse (EOKM) is an independent foundation dedicated to the safety of all minors. Its mission is to prevent and combat (online) sexual abuse and exploitation of minors. Part of the EOKM is the *Hotline against child sexual abuse material on the Internet*, where reports can be made of images of sexual abuse of minors on the Internet. The organization asks Internet service providers to remove those images. The agency is affiliated with INHOPE, the international network of Internet hotlines around the world.

What does this expert say about the problem?

In the first half of 2022, the hotline received 93 percent fewer reports than in the same period a year earlier. International hotlines also received fewer reports about the Netherlands: down 77 percent since last year. According to the EOKM, this shows that the approach by the Dutch government is working. That approach relies on close cooperation between the public and the private sector and a focus on negligent companies. In the experience of the EOKM many service providers do not know where to start to prevent or address the problem on their network.

What recommendations does the expert make?

The EOKM makes the following recommendations:

- Strengthen the monitoring and enforcement, so that lax Internet service providers can be fined (better).
- Support to platforms to help them clean their networks.¹³

¹³ Part of EOKM's service is a technology that allows service providers to match all of the uploads of their users against a database of known child sexual abuse material. This is a voluntary service. Bits of Freedom does not endorse the use of such technology.