

# Challenges associated with Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA)

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**Context** - With the increasing popularity of **social media platforms**, utilization of education apps and shift to online classes, children these days have a much higher chance of being exposed to harmful content. Hence, the need to secure **children's welfare** and safety online is more urgent than ever.

## **What is Online Child Sex Abuse?**

- Online child sex abuse and exploitation refers to activities such as the production and distribution of child sex abuse material (CSAM), live streaming sexual assault of minors, obtaining sexually explicit material, exhibitionism and meeting the abuser in-person.
- This poses serious harm to children who experience psychological stress such as anxiety, trauma and depression. It can also lead to behavioral changes like drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm and lower motivation for academics.
- The consequences of online child sex abuse in childhood are far-reaching and may well extend into adulthood bringing forth issues with intimacy and affecting interpersonal relationships.



## Issues in dealing with online abuse

- **Encryption and Anonymity** - The rapidly evolving digital landscape and advances in information technology have given rise to better encryption services and the dark net, which provide a safe cover of anonymity to offenders, allowing them to engage in child sexual abuse.
- **Slow Pace of Response** - Needless to say, the danger and complexity of online abuse has escalated at an alarming rate and needs to be dealt with swiftly. Moreover, the ubiquitous nature of the internet and online interaction has made it so that almost all cases of child sexual abuse feature a virtual aspect. Therefore, a broad perspective and a systems-level approach should be considered when deciding on strategies to tackle online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA).
- **Limited Capacity of Police** - Broadly speaking, the main administrative challenges when dealing with OCSEA are limited law enforcement capacities, gaps in legislative framework, and a lack of awareness and urgency around the issue.
- **Understaffing of Workforce** - The workforce in relevant social welfare organizations is understaffed. The need of the hour is close collaboration between non-traditional partners from the industry, government ministries dealing in technological communication, and law enforcement.

## Measures taken by India to fight OCSEA

- **Improved mechanism and new tools** - India has made a significant effort to tackle the wave of rising OCSEA cases in recent years. Not only has it improved the mechanism for reporting online offences against children, but it has also developed new tools and software to control and remove the presence of CSAM on social media and other platforms.
- **Sensitise school and boosting capacity** - Efforts have also been made to sensitize schools and boost the technological capacity of law enforcement agencies to further

deal with the issue. Although this four-pronged model has shown some promising results, it is surpassed by the exponential rise in cases across the country.

## Steps that can be Taken

- **Evaluation and Improvement of Governance Systems** - It is imperative to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of cross-sectoral governance mechanisms that are set up to systematise the national response to child sexual abuse material.
- **Fast Tracking OCSEA cases** - The huge backlog for cases of OCSEA in India must also be fast-tracked. As for prevention, institutionalizing the collection of national-level data on CSAM can also assist in strengthening children's online security. The recent Digital Personal Data Protection Bill, 2022 issued by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology can provide an opportunity to meet this exigency.
- **Clear mandate and responsibility of stakeholders** - There should be further development of clear mandates and creation of a logical framework of roles and duties of all relevant stakeholders within standard operating procedures for investigation. Continuous dialogue between the industry, government and other collaborators, with a distinct agenda and division of responsibilities is necessary.
- **Training of Enforcement Agencies** - Industry partners, in particular the IT industry, must be provided with suitable training and awareness of the magnitude of OCSEA, along with proper toolkits and guidance. Promoting a systematic and constant approach to training the judiciary and prosecution on CSAM can prove beneficial, if centered around child-sensitive protocols.
- **Reparation for Victims** - In the same vein, comprehensive remedies or reparations for victims are just as important and need to be handled by a specialized workforce.
- **Parental and Community Training** - Basic online safety measures, parental support initiatives and community awareness training can be integrated into existing education programmes for violence prevention, and sensitizing the most vulnerable audience.
- **Ethical media reporting** - Dedicated effort must be made to aid ethical and informed media reporting on relevant cases.

## Conclusion

A collaborative effort of various institutions across the nation is required to build a safer cyberspace. The highest priority is assessment of current OCSEA response systems and reporting mechanisms, stricter implementation of prevention laws, and adequate resources to sustain these efforts. The end goal must be to ensure long-term safeguards for online platforms that allow secure navigation for minors and a disruption of the actions of offenders.