Online Harms and Risks During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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KEY INFO

Research question:

- What has been the impact of COVID-19 and social isolation on young people's experiences of online sexual risks and gendered harms?
- How might these harms differ based on age, gender, and sexuality?

Policy area or themes:

- Gender and sexual based violence
- Healthy relationships
- Online harms
- Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

Methods: Our findings are based on surveys, focus groups, and interviews with 647 young people age 13-18; 77 parents, and 64 teachers/safeguarding leads across England.

Geographical area: England

Research stage: In progress

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Summary of the research

Sexual and gender-based violence has emerged as a key issue during the pandemic – at home, in schools, on the streets, and online. While digital technologies have helped young people feel connected, they also opened them up to risks and harms such as grooming, harassment, and non-consensual image sharing.

Conducted by world-leading academics, and a sexual education charity, this briefing summarises evidence gathered through surveys, focus groups, and interviews with 647 students, 77 parents, and 64 teachers/safeguarding leads across England, about the technology facilitated sexual and gender-based harms young people age 13-18 experienced during the pandemic. It discusses challenges students, schools and parents face in addressing these issues, policy, and educational recommendations for preventing, mitigating, and coping with these risks and harms. We also highlight the need for the Department for Education and Ofsted to have clearer language relating to the scope and forms of technology facilitated sexual and gender-based violence.

Policy Recommendations

Comprehensive Relationships and Sex Education
Students need to be taught about sexual and gender-based violence from an early age, and how it can be facilitated by technologies. Parents and schools have key roles to play in this education, and young people desperately want more information from diverse sources (including Relationship and Sex Education curriculum) to help them form, manage, and maintain healthy relationships. Young people of all genders

expressed the ways that many harmful practices such as sending and receiving unsolicited sexual images are routinely 'normalized,' and how potential negative consequences are often dismissed. Working with a sex education charity the School of Sexuality Education, we are piloting and rolling out two workshops for students, and accompanying teacher training workshops, which meets this need.

School Policy
We recommend that schools adopt specific sexual and gender-based violence policies (including those addressing the prevalence of technology facilitated sexual violence). They also need to develop diverse strategies for reporting, and victim support mechanisms for dealing with (online) gendered harms and sexual violence.

Government Policy
The Department for Education and Ofsted must provide clearer language and terminology relating to the scope and forms of technology facilitated gender and sexual violence. This will help young people to recognize practices which are often normalized, trivialized, or dismissed. Current policies do not reflect the breath of young peoples' lived experiences, particularly digitally facilitated risks and harms, nor offer advice on appropriate victim supports.

Key findings

Normalized Violence
- Surveys, focus groups and interviews with 647 young people overwhelmingly show a desire for more comprehensive Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) covering topics including consent, healthy relationships, respect, dignity, and digital technologies.
- The risks of technology facilitated sexual and gender-based violence is unevenly spread, and is experienced more by girls, trans, and gender-nonconforming youth, and increases for all genders with age. Girls, trans, and non-binary people face more sexually explicit risks and harms than boys.
- The experiences, risks, and harms of technology facilitated gender and sexual violence are routinely normalized, trivialized, and dismissed by peers, teachers, and schools. Many of these practices are not taken seriously, and victims, rather than perpetrators are often punished.

Struggling Schools
- Schools are struggling to address issues of (technology facilitated) sexual and gender-based violence. Recent reports (Ofsted 2021; Ringrose et al. 2021), and the Everyone's Invited campaign highlight sexual and gender-based violence as an urgent concern, while schools are given few resources or training.
- Schools' inability to address these issues was compounded by different factors including: teachers who do not recognize the scale or scope of the problem; teachers who are keen to address it, but have so little time dedicated to RSE or PHSE; school leaders who perpetuate rape culture and victim blaming attitudes; outdated policies and those that ignore the highly gendered and sexualized dynamic at play in peer on peer abuse.
- The materials produced by the Department for Education and Ofsted do not address the realities of young people's experiences. Policies do not appear to have been created in consultation with young people to address the complex risks and harms that they experience, or how these are rapidly changing amidst algorithmic and technological developments, new social media platforms of choice etc.

Accountability
- Snapchat and Instagram and the platforms where most girls experience online harms and risks, where gaming platforms pose the most risk for boys.

- Social media companies must be held accountable for online harms that young people experience. There are serious concerns with automatic privacy settings disabled for young people, exposing them to various harms and risks (e.g. grooming and cyberflashing by unknown adults). Reporting features rarely lead to satisfactory resolutions, with some social media companies not responding to reports (e.g. Snapchat), and others saying what is reported can't be addressed (e.g. it doesn't break 'community standards')

Further information

Everyone's Invited: https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/

Ofsted (2021) 'Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges' 10 June. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges

Ringrose, J., Regehr, K., and Milne, B. (2021) 'Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse' https://www.ascl.org.uk/ibsha

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