



# What do EU Citizens think of the balance between online privacy and child protection?

**Summary results from a public poll  
in 8 EU Member States**

Defence for Children – ECPAT the Netherlands  
and ECPAT International



The Netherlands



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# INTRODUCTION

## What was the research?

Between August and October 2021, a qualitative and quantitative public poll was conducted in 8 EU Member States on behalf of Defence for Children – ECPAT Netherlands and ECPAT International.

## Why was the research conducted?

Ensuring the rights of children to safety and protection online requires active engagement with the ongoing digital transformation in the EU. For children's rights organisations, this means advocating for the best interests of children in key processes and initiatives such as the [Digital Services Act](#), the E-Privacy Directive, [the proposal](#) for legislation on the detection, removal and reporting of [child sexual abuse](#) material as part of the EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, and the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#).

Against this background, Defence for Children – ECPAT Netherlands and ECPAT International considers it essential to explore public attitudes in the EU towards the issues of child protection, data privacy and the balance, if any, between them.

## Research Methodology

### Qualitative research phase – Not representative

- 7 x countries – France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain
- Conducted in local languages via online qualitative tool (Remesh)
- 30 x people recruited via polling companies (mix of genders and ages) per country
- Conducted early 2021, across 4 months, via Outrageous Impact

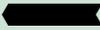
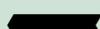
This data was used to formulate the 5 questions for the representative phase of the research.

### Quantitative research phase

- Representative polls of adults aged 18+
- 5 questions in 8 x countries – France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden
- More than 9,000 in total: 1,000 people in each country except Germany (2,000)
- Conducted in local languages in September 2021, online, via YouGov

## QUESTION 1 – RELATIONSHIP TO CHILDREN

Which of the following roles (people could select as many as applied)

Role	Percentage
Parent	34% 
Carer	6% 
Grandparent	19% 
Aunt/Uncle	26% 
Cousin	16% 
Teacher	4% 
Youth Worker	3% 
None of the above	32% 

### Who took part?

The data was made up from groups representative of the eight countries where the poll was deployed, including those with and without children in their live (i.e. parents). This means that this issue is relevant to all, not just parents.

## QUESTION 2 – PEOPLE BELIEVE ONLINE PRIVACY HAS

### GONE

#### How much privacy online, if any, do you think there currently is?

(Please select the best option that applies)

#### Overall responses (all 8 markets)

There is a lot of privacy online – 5%

There is some privacy online – 21%

There isn't much privacy online – 44%

There isn't any privacy online at all – 24%

Don't know – 7%

NET: There is privacy online – 25% 

NET: There is no privacy online – 68% 

Country	NET No online privacy (ranked on this option)	NET Yes - Online privacy	Don't know
Italy	83%	14%	4%
Spain	74%	23%	3%
Germany	72%	22%	6%
France	71%	16%	12%
Poland	68%	27%	5%
Netherlands	64%	32%	3%
Sweden	58%	24%	18%
Hungary	45%	49%	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>68%</b> 	<b>25%</b> 	<b>7%</b>

#### What does the data say:

- Nearly 7/10 people feel that there is no privacy online. Those who believe privacy does not exist online outnumber those who believe it does by more two to one.
- Typically, older audiences are more sceptical when it comes to the existence of online privacy (55+: 70%) than younger audiences (18-24: 63%).
- In most countries, more female respondents doubt the existence of online privacy than male respondents (female: 70%, male: 65%).

**Our conclusions:**

These findings show that in 8 major EU countries, online privacy is seen by a majority of people to have disappeared. Protecting privacy is often used as a counter argument against specific actions to tackle the problem of online child sexual abuse. However, this data suggests that this concern, while valid, may not be shared by the public.

Quote from Remesh session:

“I have a feeling that  
I am constantly spied on/followed online.”

(Participant, Poland)

## QUESTION 3 – PEOPLE BELIEVE KIDS ARE NOT SAFE

### ONLINE

**Even if you do not have any particular roles with children aged under 18 years old, we are still interested in your opinion. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement “I feel confident that kids can safely use the internet without being approached by adults seeking to harm them online”?**  
(Please select the best option that applies)

#### Overall responses (all 8 markets)

Strongly agree – 5%  
Somewhat agree – 15%  
Somewhat disagree – 33%  
Strongly disagree – 40%  
Don't know – 7%

NET Agree – kids can safely use internet - 20%   
NET Disagree: - kids can't safely use internet - 73% 

Country	NET Agree (Kids can safely use internet)	NET Disagree (Kids can't safely use internet) (ranked on this option)	Don't know
France	15%	79%	6%
Hungary	17%	77%	5%
Italy	19%	77%	4%
Spain	23%	76%	1%
Netherlands	24%	72%	4%
Sweden	17%	72%	12%
Poland	23%	71%	6%
Germany	22%	68%	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20%</b> 	<b>73%</b> 	<b>7%</b>

### What does the data say:

- Adults across 8 EU countries believe kids are at risk of being approached online by adults who intend to harm them.
- Scepticism about kids being safe online is driven by older age groups in each country: Respondents aged 55+ have greater doubts (78%) than 18-24 years old (67%).
- 77% of female respondents believe that kids are not safe online compared to 69% of male respondents.

### Our conclusions:

Across all ages and genders, people believe that the internet is not safe for children. This problem is too big for parents, families, individual countries or companies to fix. The automated tech tools have worked for many years to detect sizeable amounts of online child sexual abuse. These must now be turned on permanently, with online platforms having a legal duty to use them.

Quote from the Remesh sessions:

“Due to the anonymity on the Internet, ugly incidents can happen very quickly. You never know who is actually sitting behind the other screen and what their intentions are, for example in chat rooms.”

(Participant, Germany)

“Creation of an artificial intelligence that could capture inappropriate content and pass on to the Police.”

(Participant, Poland)

## **QUESTION 4 – DETECTION IS PERCEIVED TO BE AS OR MORE IMPORTANT THAN PEOPLE’S PERSONAL PRIVACY ONLINE**

**There are automated technology tools, currently used on a voluntary basis by a number of online service providers (e.g. social media platforms) that search the personal activity of their users (e.g. direct messages), in an attempt to detect and flag signs of online sexual exploitation and abuse (e.g. illegal photos or contact with children). However, the usage of such automated technology tools means users give away some of their personal privacy when accepting to join the latest terms and conditions of those online service providers, because the tools scan images and messages in order to protect children. How much more or less important is allowing online service providers to be able to detect and flag signs of child online sexual exploitation or abuse compared to your own privacy online, or is it as important?**

### **Overall responses (all 8 markets)**

Detection more important – 36%

Detection and privacy equally important – 40%

Detection less important – 7%

Don’t know – 13%

Prefer not to say – 4%

Country	Allowing online service providers to be able to detect and flag any signs of child online sexual exploitation or abuse is more important than my privacy online <b>DETECTION MORE IMPORTANT (ranked on this score)</b>	Allowing online service providers to be able to detect and flag any signs of child online sexual exploitation or abuse is as equally as important as my privacy online <b>DETECTION AND PRIVACY EQUALLY IMPORTANT</b>	Allowing online service providers to be able to detect and flag any signs of child online sexual exploitation or abuse is less important than privacy online <b>DETECTION LESS IMPORTANT THAN PRIVACY</b>	Don't know	Prefer not to say
Italy	42%	34%	9%	12%	3%
Sweden	39%	27%	9%	20%	5%
NL	37%	41%	5%	14%	2%
France	36%	36%	5%	20%	3%
Germany	36%	35%	8%	12%	8%
Spain	36%	46%	8%	8%	3%
Hungary	30%	54%	5%	8%	3%
Poland	27%	49%	9%	11%	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>4%</b>

### What does the data say:

- Adults across 8 EU countries believe protecting children from abuse is as important or more important than the protection of their own privacy (privacy which they believe is only minimal – see question 2).
- Over 3/4 of people across the 8 countries in Europe believe protecting children from abuse is as important or more important than the protection of their own privacy.

**Our conclusions:**

Keeping children safe online is a daily challenge, with 7/10 people feeling worried that kids are not safe, including those who are not parents themselves. The challenge is clear; children need to be protected online. EU citizens believe this is important and are willing to give up some of their personal privacy for that. The time is right for automated tech tools to become a legal duty.

Quote from Remesh session:

“I don’t mind losing my privacy if it helps protect others.”

(Participant, Spain)

## **QUESTION 5 – THERE IS VERY STRONG SUPPORT FOR THE PROPOSED LEGISLATION, EVEN WHEN PEOPLE HEAR ABOUT THE DOWNSIDES**

**The EU is considering whether to create a new law for EU countries to implement that makes it a legal requirement for online service providers (e.g. social media platforms) to use automated technology tools to detect and flag signs of online sexual exploitation and abuse (e.g. illegal photos or contact with children). These tools continuously check the personal activity of all users on the platform, looking for signs of online sexual exploitation and abuse (e.g. illegal photos or contact with children). However, this automated technology means users give away some of their personal privacy, because the tools scan images and messages in order to protect children. To what extent, if at all, would you support or oppose this proposed law?**

### **Overall responses (all 8 markets)**

Strongly support – 33%

Tend to support – 35%

Tend to oppose – 10%

Strongly oppose – 5%

Don't know – 13%

Prefer not to say – 4%

NET Support – 68%

NET Oppose – 15%

Country	NET Support legislation (ranked on this option)	NET Oppose legislation	Don't know	Prefer not to say
1 – Italy	75%	13%	10%	2%
2 – Spain	75%	16%	7%	2%
3 – NL	72%	15%	12%	1%
4 – France	68%	11%	18%	3%
5 – Hungary	67%	15%	12%	5%
6 – Germany	65%	15%	12%	7%
7 – Poland	64%	17%	16%	3%
8 – Sweden	61%	18%	16%	5%
<b>9 – Total</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>4%</b>

#### What does the data say:

- Support for the draft EU legislation is robust and consistent across all 8 countries.
- The proportion of people who ‘don’t know’ indicates the technical complexity of the issue.
- The legislation is supported by more female and older people.

#### Our conclusions:

Among some of the EU’s largest countries, the message is clear; the public wants action taken to protect children online. This issue is too complex to be left to individuals, companies or countries. We need the EU to legislate now and fast. The automated tech tools that protect children exist and work. They are currently used intermittently. They must now be used all the time to protect children. The risk of harm from not doing so is far too great.

Quote from Remesh session:

“It’s so easy to get fooled on the net. We can put all the protections we want. The State must do something but also the sites [social media platforms].”

(Participant, France)

## **Colophon**

### **About the organisations**

Defence for Children the Netherlands is a Dutch NGO promoting and protecting children's rights as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Netherlands and abroad, through legal support in our legal defence centre, advocacy, lobby, research, training and international programmes with sister organisations.

Defence for Children the Netherlands is member of the Defence for Children International – network as well as ECPAT International.

ECPAT International is a global network of organisations focusing on ending the sexual exploitation of children.

### **Cover photo**

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