

Pocket Money Dates: Sexual Exploitation of Children and the Role of Online Advertising Platforms

Exploitation of and trafficking in children (any person under the age of 18) are increasingly shaped by digitalisation processes and are thus constantly changing their forms. ›Pocket money dates‹¹ represent a newer form of sexual exploitation of children and combine sexual exploitation in the digital and analogue space.

ECPAT Germany has commissioned, for the first time, a qualitative study² to shed light on this specific form of sexual exploitation of children in Germany. The study evaluates journalistic reports, analyses the general terms and conditions of four online advertising platforms, conducts nine interviews with experts from specialised counselling centres, the judiciary and online advertising platforms and places this in the context of other international studies.

The study clearly shows that a comprehensive approach is needed to protect children from exploitation and trafficking, an approach that also holds the private sector accountable. The inadequate regulation of online advertising platforms such as classified advertising and dating platforms and their failure to take responsibility with regard to child protection facilitates the initiation of sexual exploitation of and sexual violence against children.

¹ This study uses the term ›Pocket Money Dates‹ because this term is commonly used when describing this phenomenon in Germany. At the same time, ECPAT Germany clearly points out that the term trivialises the sexual violence and sexual exploitation that is taking place.

² The extended German version of this study ›Taschengeld-Treffen: Sexuelle Ausbeutung von Minderjährigen und die Rolle von Online-Anzeigenportalen‹ is available on the following website: www.bkk.ecpat.de/publikationen.

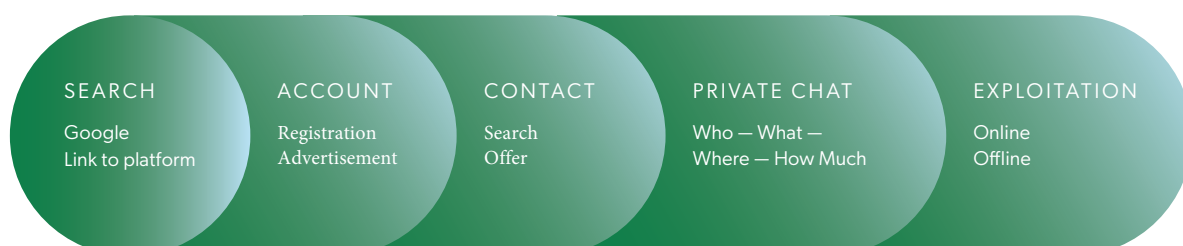
1. What are ›pocket money dates‹?

›Pocket money dates‹ are meetings where sexual acts are offered in exchange for a fee. In Germany, ›pocket money dates‹ take place in person with physical contact, e. g. in private homes, hotels or parks. ›Pocket money dates‹ are also offered digitally in the form of photos, videos or live streaming. The fee is often money. However, it can also take the form of monetary consideration, such as purchasing branded products or items from a digital wish list. The term pocket money implies that these are amounts that are similar to additional income.

According to current knowledge, the majority of those affected in Germany are teenagers and young adults. This study focuses on children subjected to ›pocket money dates‹. They experience sexual violence and exploitation in the context of ›pocket money dates‹.

Contact is usually initiated on online advertising platforms, but also on social media. The affected children either place advertisements themselves via online advertising platforms, advertisements are created for them by perpetrators, or they respond to search advertisements that are published by perpetrators.

Children often hope to earn extra money in a short amount of time but are unable to assess the consequences of the meetings and the violence inflicted. As things stand at present, ›pocket money dates‹ mainly appear to be offered without any obvious commercial coercion or a third party directly profiting from them. At the same time, experience from specialised counselling centres shows that social dynamics, e. g. between peers, also play a role and can exert pressure on those affected.



Example of the solicitation process for ›pocket money dates‹ via online advertising platforms

2. Key findings of the study

The majority of ›pocket money dates‹ take place in secret and therefore rarely appear in official statistics. Specialised counselling centres for trafficked persons assume that there are high numbers of unreported cases.

THE ROLE OF THE DIGITAL SPACE AND ONLINE ADVERTISING PLATFORMS

- Easy access to the digital space in general, in particular to online advertising platforms without age verification, makes it easier for perpetrators to sexually exploit children.
- Private chat functions on online advertising platforms and in social media enable perpetrators to communicate with affected children undetected.
- Online advertising platforms differ greatly in the quality and transparency of their child protection governance, as the analysis of the terms and conditions shows.
- Inadequate monitoring and moderation on the part of online advertising platforms and their lack of responsibility with regard to child protection facilitate the initiation of sexual exploitation of and sexual violence against children on these platforms. The platforms become crime scenes.
- A lack of enforcement of child media protection regulations increases the risk of sexual exploitation.

CHILDREN SUBJECTED TO ›POCKET MONEY DATES‹

- The wording of the advertisements indicates that those offering the services are young.
- Children from all socio-economic backgrounds and school contexts are subjected to ›pocket money dates‹.
- Children often find out about ›pocket money dates‹ through their peer group. ›Pocket money dates‹ are usually described by the peer group as an easy way to make extra money.

- In most cases, children are affected by sexual exploitation through ›pocket money dates‹ for several months, sometimes years.
- Those affected describe serious psychological and physical consequences.
- In order to suppress what has happened, drug use sometimes plays a role and those affected try to repress what they have experienced.
- Children affected often feel shame and guilt. They often do not perceive themselves as victims of sexual violence and sexual exploitation. An awareness of the context of exploitation can develop even years later.
- Affected children are rarely willing to make statements to law enforcement authorities.

PERPETRATORS

- The perpetrators often appear to be adult men over the age of 40.
- The perpetrators belong to various social classes.

LEGISLATION AND CRIMINAL PROSECUTION

- Identifying affected children is challenging.
- There is often a lack of incriminating witness statements against the perpetrators.
- Securing relevant evidence beyond affected children's statements is also a major challenge.
- The enforceability of existing regulations is inadequate in Germany.

SPECIALISED COUNSELLING CENTRES

- Establishing contact and trust with trafficked children is a challenging and lengthy process for specialised counselling centres for trafficked persons, as trafficked children are often reticent and withdrawn.
- Digital counselling is significant both for the initial contact and further counselling. This form of counselling is low-threshold and available regardless of location.
- There is a blatant lack of resources in the area of counselling, support and accommodation services for trafficked children. Specialised counselling centres for trafficked persons are not comprehensively schooled for the special needs of children.
- Prevention work on ›pocket money dates‹, e. g. in schools and in the digital space, is considered very important by specialised counselling centres.

3. Summary of the most important recommendations for action

Children subjected to ›pocket money dates‹ urgently need support and protection. To effectively address the phenomenon, a holistic, interdisciplinary, multi-stakeholder approach based on children's rights is needed, implemented at both national and EU levels.

POLITICAL DECISION-MAKERS

- Implementation of legally binding age verification for digital service platforms in the dating and erotic sector. Additionally, effective measures for age assurance on services and platforms with user generated content should be supported in order to ensure age-appropriate digital experiences.
- Introduction of accountability and liability mechanisms for companies.
- Consistent enforcement of existing child protection regulation in the digital space.
- Long-term and sustainable funding of prevention services in the digital space.
- Consistent implementation of the federal cooperation concept for ›Protection and help in cases of trafficking in and exploitation of children‹, as a nationwide, sustainable and long-term support network is required for children subjected to trafficking in human beings and exploitation

— with safe, needs-based accommodation and specialised counselling centres in every federal state and services also available in the digital space.

- Equipping law enforcement and the judiciary with qualified personnel and financial resources. This includes a special public prosecutor's office specialised in the trafficking in and exploitation of children in each federal state as well as child-friendly justice procedures.
- Funding of research into emerging phenomena of exploitation of and trafficking in children.

PRIVATE SECTOR

Preventive measures can have a greater impact if the private sector is proactively committed to child protection and works closely with other stakeholders to protect children from exploitation, violence and violations of children's rights.

- Age verification, especially in the contact and erotic sections of classified advertising platforms and when regis-

tering on dating platforms for all users. Also, an effective age assurance for services and platforms with user generated content is recommended to provide age-appropriate digital experiences.

- Proactive cooperation with specialised agencies, law enforcement authorities and other stakeholders in order to be able to take preventive protective action when new forms of exploitation emerge, and to promote easy and efficient cooperation when dealing with cases.
- Use of precautionary measures, such as child-friendly reporting mechanisms, information on counselling centres and prevention networks for potential perpetrators and affected children, as well as a reporting option when a child is identifiably behind an advertisement for sexual services or this is suspected.
- Regular, continuous risk analyse by the operators. This includes monitoring to ensure that no children are sought, offered and/or can create advertisements for themselves on the platforms.
- Implementation of stronger prevention and awareness-raising work on the phenomenon of "pocket money dates" as well as other risks of sexual violence and exploitation to sensitize the users of services and platforms.

SPECIALISED AGENCIES AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Our lives are now equally analogue and digital. Accordingly, prevention and intervention should take both dimensions into account.

- Child protection concepts in the analogue space should also take into account violence and exploitation in the digital space.
- Nationwide awareness-raising, training and networking campaign for relevant professionals on trafficking in children, including phenomena such as ›pocket money dates‹.
- Stronger, nationwide embedding of topics such as ›pocket money dates‹ as well as other forms of exploitation of and trafficking in children as well as sexual violence against them in the digital space, in social work at schools and extracurricular youth work. This requires sufficient human and financial resources as well as raising awareness among respective professionals.

- Existing campaigns and reporting platforms against sexual violence and exploitation of children should draw attention to ›pocket money dates‹.

Further information and contacts for counselling centres

Nationwide overview of contact points and networks that support trafficked persons, including trafficked children:

→ www.bkk.ecpat.de/netzwerke

Recommendations for cooperation between youth welfare offices, police, specialised counselling centres and other entities involved in the identification and protection of trafficked children: BMBFSFJ (2018).

Pulling together as one! Federal cooperation concept »Protection and help in cases of trafficking in and exploitation of children«.

→ www.bkk.ecpat.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Cooperation-Concept-Child-Trafficking-GER.pdf

International reporting platform ›Don't look away‹ by ECPAT International and ECPAT member groups for reporting suspected cases of sexual violence against and exploitation of children in over 29 countries:

→ www.dontlookaway.report

Nationwide overview of specialised counselling centres for trafficked persons by the German NGO Network against Trafficking in Human Beings — KOK e.V.

→ www.kok-gegen-menschenhandel.de/en/kok/specialised-counselling-centres

Federal Coordination of Specialised Counselling against Sexual Violence in Childhood and Adolescence:

→ www.bundeskoordinierung.de

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