

PHILIPPINES

RESEARCH AND RESPONSE TO ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN (OSEC) AMIDST COVID-19 IN THE PHILIPPINES

RESEARCH TEAM

World Hope International
University of Southern Philippines
Foundation

PROJECT GOALS

The project's overall aim is improved therapeutic care for survivors of OSEC in the Philippines through specialized training for caregivers, provision of care for OSEC survivors, and to produce research to inform the general practices of care and policies on the unique challenges and trauma associated with OSEC, particularly in a time of a global pandemic.

Specifically, the objectives include improved understanding of the impact of OSEC and its intersection with COVID in the Philippines through research and reporting; increased capacity and knowledge among care providers (social workers, psychologists, counselors) in providing therapeutic care for OSEC survivors; and provision of therapeutic care to children and families impacted by OSEC

OSEC RESEARCH

The research will employ a descriptive mixed-method design collecting quantitative data utilizing standardized instruments to assess the survivors and semi-structured interviews for the phenomenological perspective of the families and care-providers, which will provide a holistic overview of the intersection of OSEC and COVID-19. Specifically, the study will investigate the following:

- Mental health profile of OSEC survivors rescued during the pandemic in the domains of trauma, internalizing, and externalizing symptoms
- Efficacy of various modalities of therapeutic interventions in the reductions of trauma symptoms and problem behaviors
- Lived experiences of the care-providers in residential facilities handling the OSEC survivors during the lockdown
- Family dynamics and driving factors among families who engaged in OSEC during the pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has brought tremendous positive changes to society, but it has also created new risks and crimes that prey upon vulnerable children. With Internet access growing in developing countries and an uptick in children and adolescents using the Internet - a new type of crime, Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) is emerging. OSEC is a form of exploitation and child sexual abuse that occurs virtually, on websites and social media platforms. It includes the manufacturing and distribution of materials online that contain child abuse images, the grooming of child victims online with the purpose of sexual exploitation or abuse, as well as live-streaming of child sexual exploitation and abuse. In the Philippines, more than half of the population has easy access to the Internet. It has been labelled the global epicenter of OSEC by UNICEF in 2016. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought disruptions in the lives of people around the world, forcing people to stay at home, increasing online activities. The Philippines is experiencing an economic downturn caused by the lockdowns, with 4.6 million Filipinos unemployed as of July 2020. The pandemic has facilitated a more conducive environment for OSEC activities.

OSEC PROGRAM

The need for evidence-based interventions is imperative to ensure effective clinical care for the survivors. Thus, social workers, counselors, and psychologists handling OSEC survivors will be trained on specialized trauma treatment protocols. The caregiving staff will likewise be provided with trauma informed care trainings. The trained professionals will then provide therapeutic interventions to OSEC survivors guided with case supervisions. The families will also be involved in the healing process through family therapy and reintegration assistance.

PROJECT VALUE ADD

The research will shed light into the impact of OSEC victimization on the mental well-being of survivors and the vulnerabilities of the families that engage in OSEC. Knowledge of the families' narratives will advance the understanding of this emerging form of trafficking beyond the figures and provide insight on how to better provide clinical care for survivors and their families especially during a global pandemic that is impacting the economic, psychological, and social well being of already vulnerable people. A deeper analysis of the OSEC phenomenon will facilitate crafting of policies to stop the proliferation of sexual exploitation of children in the Philippines.