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AI- and non-AI online child sexual victimisation, disclosures and help-seeking

A national study of Australian adolescents

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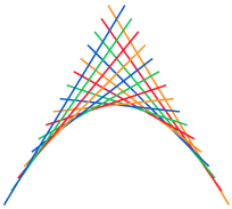

Australian
Centre to Counter
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Research Team

This research was conducted in collaboration between the *International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children Australia* (ICMEC), the *Australian Cybercrime Observatory* at *Adelaide University*, the *Australian Federal Police-led Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation* and stakeholders who advocate for the needs of victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse. The intention of this collaboration was to gather nationally representative data on the online sexual victimisation experiences of children in Australia, and the extent to which their experiences involved Artificial Intelligence. The research team consisted of academic leaders in online and offline sexual victimisation of young people, from Adelaide University and Queensland University of Technology.

Research team: Associate Professor Timothy Cubitt, Dr. Katie Logos, Professor Russell Brewer (Australian Cybercrime Observatory, Adelaide University) and Distinguished Professor Ben Mathews (Queensland University of Technology).

ICMEC Australia: Mikaela Jago, Dannielle Kelly, Colm Gannon and Cherise Holley.

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Foreword

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into our daily lives represents one of the most seismic shifts in the digital environment in recent years. As this report demonstrates, AI is no longer an emerging consideration. It already plays a central role in how young people interact, communicate, and increasingly, how they experience harm.

This national study provides an important and timely contribution to our understanding of online child sexual victimisation in Australia. Through robust, nationally representative data, it offers critical insight not only into the prevalence of harm but into the ways in which AI is reshaping the nature of victimisation, disclosure, and peer dynamics. The findings reflect a complex and evolving landscape in which young people experience harms and may be victims of exploitation. This new reality underscores the need for nuanced, evidence-led responses.

ICMEC Australia is proud to have supported this research through funding, collaboration, and ongoing advocacy. Our involvement reflects our commitment to strengthening the evidence base required to inform policy, practice, and prevention efforts aimed at protecting children in a rapidly changing digital world.

Importantly, this research must be understood as a snapshot in time. The pace of technological development, particularly regarding AI, means that the patterns of harm, and experiences of young people are likely to shift quickly. To ensure that interventions remain relevant and effective, there is a clear need for this type of nationally representative research to be conducted on a regular, ongoing basis. Only through consistent measurement can we meaningfully track change, understand emerging risks, and assess the impact of policy and practice responses over time.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the young people who participated in this study. Their willingness to share personal and often difficult experiences provides an essential foundation for this work. Without their contribution, it would not be possible to gain the insights needed to better understand and address these harms.

This report provides an important evidence base across sectors, for all those responsible for the protection of children. It reinforces the urgency of engaging with the realities of AI-enabled harm, while also highlighting the importance of sustained, high-quality research in informing effective responses.

Colm Gannon
Chief Executive Officer
International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children Australia

Key definitions

First, we provide definitions and explanations of key terms associated with online child sexual victimisation to offer a common understanding of terminology for this report.

Adolescent

Our research collects a sample of people 18 years and under in Australia, who we ask about experiences and behaviours prior to the age of 18. For ease of expression, we refer to these individuals as adolescents, because of their position in the mid-adolescent age range, however, they do not represent the totality of the adolescent age range.

Online child sexual victimisation

Online child sexual victimisation is measured using two victimisation types – non-consensual sharing of a sexual image, and sexual solicitation by an adult. These measures are based on the *Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire – R2: Adapted Version* (ACMS; Mathews et al., 2023). They are supported across research, especially in Australia, as the most salient types of online child sexual victimisation experiences to capture. Collectively, we refer to these experiences as online child sexual victimisation.

Victim/survivor

The term victim/survivor is used to refer to people who experienced one or more episodes of online child sexual victimisation.

Disclosure

Disclosure is defined as telling at least one source about an experience of online child sexual victimisation. We collect information on disclosures to parents; other family members; friends; and authority figures (including teachers, doctors, counsellors or psychologists, police, helplines or online reporting portals). We also collect information on disclosures to an AI, including platforms such as ChatGPT or Claude, but not including AI enabled reporting platforms or portals, which were captured under reports made to an authority.

Artificial Intelligence

This refers to a generative artificial intelligence platform, which we define broadly as a model that possesses the ability to reason, learn and act autonomously to manipulate or generate content. This definition was provided to survey participants alongside text describing AI as models capable of behaviours such as generating or manipulating images or generating or changing a voice, including, but is not limited to, models such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Deepseek, MyAI, Character.AI, Schoolhack, Grammarly, Lensa/FaceApp, Speechify and others.

Gendered language

While we report the national prevalence of behaviours and experiences, we also unpack these data by gender. To do this, we use the language girls and boys. We also do not refer to them as female and male as this language converts the participants of our research into objects. We are careful to use the language boys and girls rather than adult or object alternatives.

We also gathered data from people with diverse gender identities, referring to those who reported genders other than girls or boys. However, our sample of gender diverse participants was small compared with girls and boys, and given the importance of accuracy when reporting on the experiences of victim/survivors, we include gender diverse participants in our national sample, however, we do not disaggregate to describe their experiences independently. We are mindful not to misrepresent the experiences of young gender diverse people, and while our sample of girls and boys was independently nationally representative, our sample of gender diverse participants was not. We do not disaggregate to report findings specifically on this gender group because the sample size was simply too small to be confident in its accuracy.

Executive Summary and key findings

Executive sumary

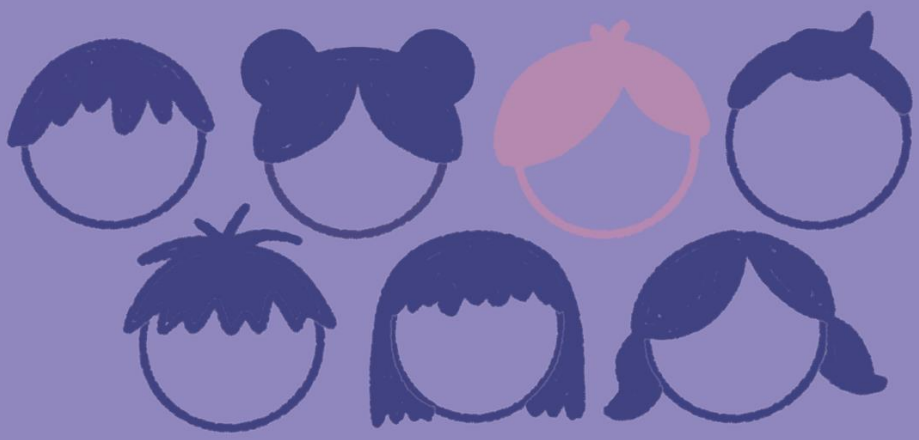
The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has intensified concerns regarding changes to the online environment and our understanding of victimisation experiences among young people. AI tools can now be used to generate new sexual images, alter existing clothed images into nude or sexualised images, imitate voices, and automate persuasive communication, with deepfake and digitally altered nude or sexual imagery identified an independent form of image-based sexual abuse (Flynn et al., 2022). Despite the rapid development of these technologies, empirical evidence regarding AI and online child sexual victimisation (OCSV) remains limited (Wolbers et al., 2025).

In Australia, the first nationally representative estimates of OCSV emerged from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), using data gathered in 2021 (Walsh et al., 2025). They reported a concerning rate of nonconsensual sharing of sexual images (7.6%), and sexual solicitation by an adult (17.7%) before age 18, and a collective OCSV prevalence of 21.3%. The ACMS also found that two-thirds of those who experienced OCSV disclosed, with friends and parents the most common recipients of disclosures (Mathews, 2025).

The research team aimed to measure the prevalence and characteristics of OCSV in Australia in 2026, the involvement of AI, disclosure and help-seeking behaviours, and peer group experiences. Between March and April 2026, we conducted a nationally representative survey of adolescents in Australia. *We report our findings under six domains*:

1. The prevalence of online sexual victimisation;
2. AI involvement in online sexual victimisation;
3. Disclosure of online sexual victimisation;
4. Peer group dynamics;
5. Help-seeking; and
6. Concern regarding the use of AI

Before turning 18



More than one in seven experienced online sexual victimisation.

More than **1 in 4** experienced, or have a friend who experienced, online sexual vicitimisation.

Girls were more likely than boys to experience online sexual victimisation.

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Before turning 18

1 in 25

experienced, or have a friend who experienced, online sexual victimisation where the perpertrator used AI.

14.9%

of online sexual victimisation involved the use of AI.

Boys were more likely to experience online sexual victimisaton involving AI than girls.

One in four who experienced nonconsensual sharing of sexual images said the perpetrator using AI.

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Of those who experienced online sexual vicitimisation before age 18

Disclosure to an AI was more common than to an authority (including teachers, doctors, counsellors, police or reporting service).

More than **two-thirds** disclosed their experience, nearly one-third did not.

Boys disclosed victimisation to an AI at higher rates than girls.

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Before age 18

Nearly one in four know someone who has experienced online sexual victimisation.

Victimisation clustered within peer groups

One in three of those whose friend experienced sexual victimisation involving AI had the same experience

Two in five of those whose friend experienced sexual victimisation had the same experience.

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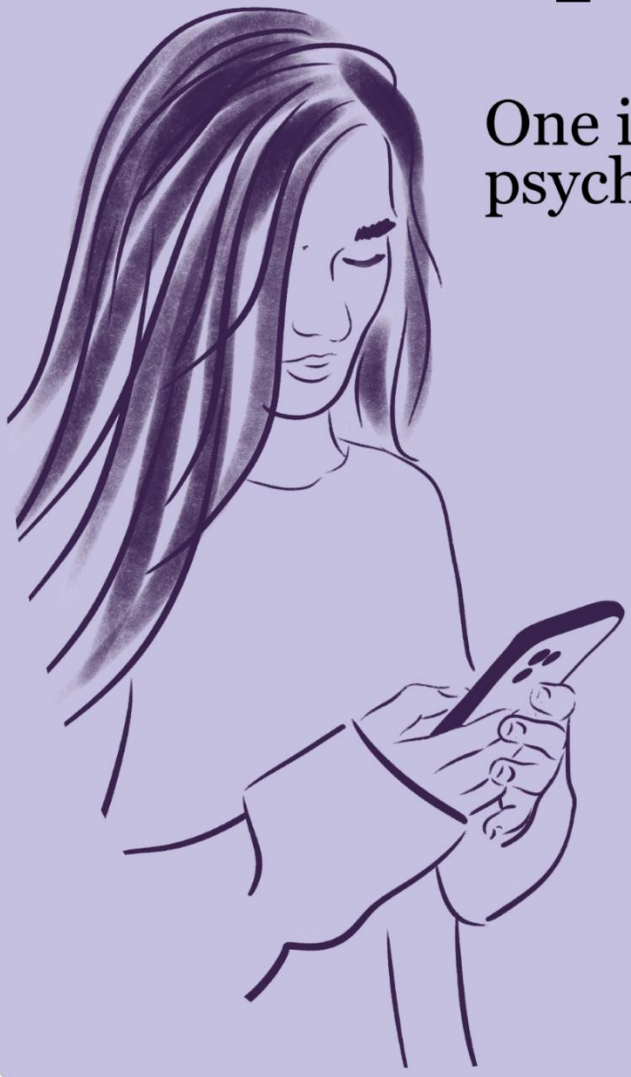
Before turning 18, at least once per week



One in six seek personal or psychosocial help from an AI.

More than one in ten disclosed personal hurtful experiences to an AI.

More than **two-thirds** asked an AI for personal life advice .

More than one in five asked AI for psychosocial counselling.

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Before the age of 18

More than one in three were worried about victimisation involving AI.

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The research

Introduction and overview

The integration of online technologies into adolescents' everyday lives has created new conditions for sexual victimisation. Smartphones, social media, encrypted messaging, image-sharing, and video communication platforms provide new spaces for young people to interact, socialise and develop their identities during adolescence. However, these same environments also create opportunities for sexual contact, coercion and deception, making young people vulnerable to victimisation. OCSV can be perpetrated by adults or by other adolescents, by known or unknown people (Finkelhor et al., 2022; Finkelhor et al., 2023; Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2019; Wolak et al., 2018). The most recent national prevalence estimates of OCSV emerge from Walsh and Colleagues (2025), who gathered their data in 2021. In their study they acknowledged that "even in the few years since data collection, new domains of online sexual victimization of children have appeared, including AI-enabled capacity to generate and distribute nude images and other sexual images" (Walsh et al., 2025, p. 10). This report summarises data gathered in April 2026 to provide an updated estimate of OCSV in Australia, including the first national prevalence estimates of AI use in the online sexual victimisation of children.

Types of online child sexual victimisation

Two forms of OCSV are especially important for population-level measurement: non-consensual sharing of sexual images of a child, and online sexual solicitation by an adult. Non-consensual sharing of sexual images is a form of image-based sexual abuse involving the distribution, threatened distribution, or exposure of intimate or sexual images without consent (Powell et al., 2024). These images can be generated in a range of ways including by the individual, captured by a romantic partner, produced coercively, or created or altered without the young person's involvement (Finkelhor et al., 2023; Flynn et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2025). The harm lies not only in the sexual content of the image, but in the loss of autonomy and potential for repeated victimisation once an image has entered digital networks (McGlynn et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2024).

Online sexual solicitation by an adult is conceptually distinct. It involves an adult using an online medium to request sexual conversation, information, images, or other sexualised interaction from a child (Madigan et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2001). While not every instance of online sexual solicitation is identical in seriousness, requests made by adults raise concerns because of the power differential and potential for escalation into other harms (Finkelhor, Cavanaugh, et al., 2024; Noll et al., 2022; Ortega-Barón et al., 2022).

Population benchmarking studies

Recent population studies have begun to clarify the scale of OCSV, while also demonstrating the importance of measurement specificity. A global systematic review and meta-analysis by Fry and colleagues (2025) found an aggregate past-year prevalence was 12.5% for online solicitation, and 12.6% for non-consensual capturing, sharing, or exposure to sexual images and videos; with overall past-year prevalence of OCSV 8.1%. However, Fry and colleagues also found substantial heterogeneity across studies included in their analysis, driven especially by differences in definitions, sampling and data collection methods.

The most directly relevant Australian evidence is provided by Walsh and colleagues (2025), who asked a national prevalence sample about experiences of nonconsensual sharing of sexual images, and sexual solicitation by an adult before age 18 in 2021 as part of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS). They estimated 7.6% and 17.7% respectively, with 21.3% experiencing either. They also found gender differences; girls were significantly more likely than boys to report non-consensual image sharing (10.9% compared with 3.8%) and online sexual solicitation by an adult (26.3% compared with 7.6%). These findings established OCSV as a significant concern for young Australians and provided a strong methodological foundation for prevalence.

Disclosure of online child sexual victimisation

Using the same ACMS sample, Mathews and colleagues (2025) found that two thirds of those who experienced non-consensual image sharing disclosed the experience to someone (64.3%), while three-in-five who experienced sexual solicitation disclosed (59.2%).

Friends were the most common recipients of first disclosure for both non-consensual image sharing (50.5%) and sexual solicitation (58.1%), followed by parents. These findings aligned with broader evidence that adolescents often turn first to peers rather than formal systems when navigating sexual victimisation or online harm (Alaggia et al., 2019; Gemara et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2013; Pijlman et al., 2024).

The role of artificial intelligence in online child sexual victimisation

The emergence of generative AI has created a new measurement gap. AI tools can now be used to fabricate sexual images, alter clothed images into nude or sexualised images, imitate voices, and automate communication—each presenting new methods facilitating perpetration of OCSV. Flynn and colleagues (2022) identified deepfake and digitally altered nude or sexual imagery as an emerging form of image-based sexual abuse across Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, finding that digitally altered imagery abuse was associated with risk of poly-victimisation. More recent legal and child protection scholarship has warned that generative AI creates new risks for AI-generated child sexual abuse material, including both synthetic imagery and manipulated imagery involving real children (Dushi et al., 2025). Despite the rapid development of these technologies, population-level evidence on AI-facilitated OCSV remains limited (Henry & Beard, 2024; Wolbers et al., 2025).

Our goal

This research responds to three linked gaps: the need for current Australian prevalence estimates of OCSV among adolescents; the need to measure AI-facilitated dimensions of OCSV; and the need to better understand how such harms are situated within adolescent peer groups. We reproduce measures of the ACMS (Walsh et al., 2025) to investigate two types of OCSV: (i) nonconsensual sharing of sexual images of the child, by any perpetrator (referred to generally hereafter as nonconsensual sharing of sexual images), and (ii) requests by an adult to the child to talk about sex or to send sexual images of themselves (referred to generally hereafter as online sexual solicitation by an adult).

We also reproduce the items of Mathews and colleagues (2025) to report prevalence and characteristics of victimisation experiences, disclosures, peer experiences, and the involvement of AI.

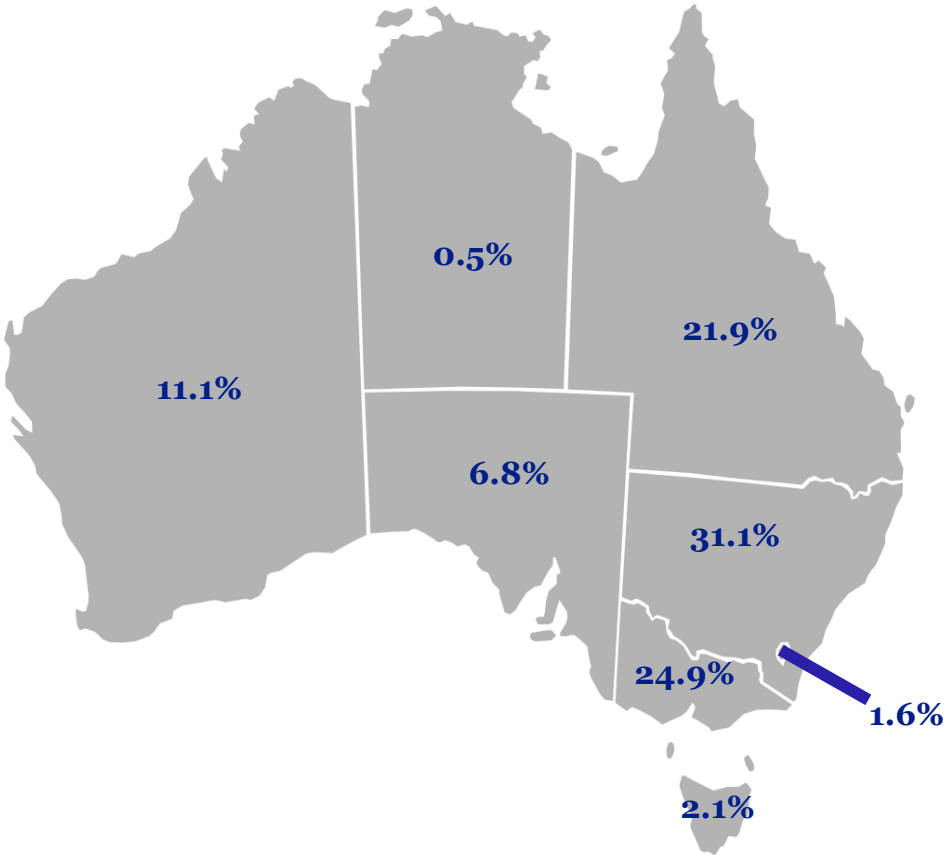
Methodology

This analysis draws on data from a nationally representative survey of adolescents aged 16-18 in Australia, conducted between March and April 2026. Data were collected via an online panel. Self-administered online surveys assist to reduce interviewer presence and increase perceived privacy, both of which are important when surveying on sensitive behaviours (Tourangeau et al., 2013). Proportional quota sampling was used to recruit participants based on age, sex and usual place of residence strata, aligning with Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024) population data. Rigorous response validation strategies were implemented, including duplicate detection, speed and straight lining checks, attention checks, and monitoring of nonresponse, with these respondents removed from the sample (n=16). Australia provides a useful setting for the study of OCSV, given the high level of internet use and device ownership. In 2017, approximately 97% of Australian households with children aged under 15 years had internet access, with an average of 7.8 devices per household (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017), meaning internet access is near ubiquitous for Australian adolescents.

Participants

Our final analytic sample, following validation checks, comprised 1,894 respondents aged 16 to 18 years living in Australia (see Figure 1 for geographic distribution). Invitations were sent to 39,196 respondents, with 303 participants beginning the survey but not completing it, and an average length of survey 15 minutes.

Figure 1. Location distribution of survey respondents



Survey measures

Experiences of online child sexual victimisation

We drew survey items from the validated Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire – R2: Adapted Version (ACMS; Mathews et al., 2023). Our survey collected retrospective self-report data about the experience of two forms of OCSV at any time in childhood: non-consensual sharing of a sexual image, and sexual solicitation of the participant by an adult. Two dichotomous screening questions were administered to all respondents: (i) "Did anyone ever use the internet or a mobile phone to share sexual images of you without your consent?" (nonconsensual sharing of sexual images) and (ii) "Did an adult ever ask you over the internet or a mobile phone to talk about sex or send sexual images?" (online sexual solicitation by an adult). Response options were yes/no/don't know/refuse to answer.

Participants who answered "yes" to one or both these questions were then asked a series of follow-up questions about the characteristics of these experiences including: "How many times did this happen?" (chronicity), and "About how old were you the first time this happened?" (age at onset). We then asked a final, simple follow-up question: "Did any of these experiences feature the use of an online platform? If yes, which one?", with response options including a list of online social media, messaging, and gaming platforms, an open response category, "I don't know" and "prefer not to say".

AI and the experiences of peers

When respondents indicated they had experienced a type of OCSV, for each type we followed up to ask "Did any of these incidents involve the use of any AI?". We also supplied text to specify that the use of AI "may include (but is not limited to) generating or manipulating images, generating or changing a voice using AI, or use of large language models such as ChatGPT." Peer group experiences were measured by asking respondents "Did an adult ever ask one of your friends about sex or has anyone shared one of your friend's sexual images over the internet or a mobile phone without consent?" those who responded "yes" were then followed up with the same prompt regarding whether they knew if this experience involved the use of AI. We note that the measure we use here for peer experiences requires a peer to have disclosed to the respondent, and provided additional detail regarding their experience (i.e., that it either featured sexual solicitation or nonconsensual image sharing). Those who said that their friend's victimisation experience involved AI required an additional degree of disclosure; their friend identifying their experience, and that it involved AI, and the respondent then disclosing that information to the research team. As a consequence, we are confident that our metric for peer experiences of OCSV likely undercounts the *actual* population rate of peer group OCSV.

Disclosures of victimisation

When a respondent reported that they had experienced a type of OCSV, a follow-up question asked: "Did you ever tell anyone about any of this?" (yes/no). A response of "Yes" was counted as disclosure, and a response of "No" was counted as non-disclosure.

For those who disclosed, we followed up to ask: "Who did you tell?", providing the response categories used by Mathews and colleagues (2025): parents; other family members; friends; and authority figures (e.g., teachers, doctors, counsellors or psychologists, police, helplines or online reporting portals); I don't know; and prefer not to say. One additional response category was offered: a chat-bot or AI (this may include ChatGPT or others but does not include AI enabled online reporting portals).

Online help-seeking using AI and concern regarding AI victimisation

We report prevalence estimates for a range of help-seeking behaviours using AI, and subsequently, we use these measures to develop a scale reflecting regular engagement with AI for help seeking. The help-seeking behaviours we asked about were (1) asking AI for personal life advice, (2) asking AI for counselling regarding personal problems, and (3) disclosing personal or hurtful experiences to AI. We asked respondents how frequently they engaged in each one of these behaviours independently, on a five-point scale, with response options ranging from 1 = never to 5 = daily, and options for "I don't know" and "Prefer not to say". We dichotomise these findings to reflect whether respondents engaged in these behaviours at least once per week, allocating all respondents who said "I don't know" or "Prefer not to say" to the denominator. We then computed internal consistency across these items for all respondents who answered all three, using Chronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Combining multiple Likert-type items into a composite or mean scale is a common measurement approach when items are conceptually aligned and intended to capture a shared underlying construct (Carifio & Perla, 2008; Sullivan & Artino, 2013). This scale was used to create an indicator of whether respondents, on average, engaged in help-seeking from an AI at least once per week.

Finally, we asked all respondents a simple question about their perception of AI: "Are you ever worried that someone might use AI to make a fake image of you or someone you care about?". Response options ranged from 1 = not at all worried to 5 = extremely worried, with an option provided for "I don't know" and "Prefer not to say".

Responses were dichotomised to reflect those who were either very or extremely worried that someone may use AI to make a fake image of them or someone they care about (response options 4 or 5), compared with those who are not at all worried, a little bit worried, or moderately worried (response options 1-3). We took a conservative approach to this measure, allocating those who responded "I don't know" and "Prefer not to say" to the denominator in the dichotomous measure. To complement this question, we also asked: "Do you know if it's legal or illegal to use AI to make fake or nude pictures of real people?", with response options: "Legal", "Illegal", "I don't know" and "Prefer not to say".

Post-stratification weighting

Post-stratification survey weights were constructed using ABS Resident Population benchmarks for 16–18-year-olds in Australia, ensuring the sample aligned with the population distribution by age, sex and location. Weighted estimates are therefore interpretable as population-level estimates. Standard errors and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were estimated using Taylor series linearisation, which approximates the sampling variance of nonlinear estimators and is widely recommended for weighted prevalence studies (Wolter, 2007; Walsh et al., 2025). Bivariate subgroup differences were assessed using design-adjusted Wald χ^2 tests.

Analytical approach

Prevalence estimates for the full sample were calculated and stratified by gender. Prevalence of each type of OCSV was calculated by counting participants who endorsed each respective screening item. ***Chronicity*** is classified into five groups: 1 time; 2–5 times; 6–10 times; 11–50 times; >50 times (see Jonson-Reid et al., 2012 for reasoning). ***Age at onset*** is provided as percentages for each individual year of age from 10 to 17. Percentages for the years of age below 10 were aggregated with weighted medians reported to provide the central tendency of chronicity and age at onset. Both chronicity and age at onset were ordered categorical outcomes, we therefore measure differences between boys and girls using a survey-weighted ordered logistic regression to preserve the ranked structure of the categories.

Significance for these items is reported as odds ratios comparing girls with boys, with 95% confidence intervals and survey-adjusted Wald tests.

Disclosure was summarised using weighted percentages for each disclosure type. We then developed a binary indicator reflecting respondents who had disclosed their experience of OCSV to at least one other human. Binary indicators were derived for ***AI involvement*** in nonconsensual sharing of sexual images, online sexual solicitation for respondents, and separately, for the reported experiences of peers. Results are presented for all participants, and disaggregated for girls and boys.

It is critical to ensure accuracy when reporting on the experiences of victim/survivors. However, our sample of gender diverse participants was small, and did not independently adhere to national prevalence, and we could not be certain that findings for this group were reflective of broader experiences. By comparison, our sample of girls and boys was large and both genders were independently nationally representative, we could therefore be confident our findings were representative. To avoid the risk of misrepresenting the experiences of gender diverse participants, we only disaggregate and report findings for girls and boys. For findings on the experiences of gender diverse participants, see Cubitt and colleagues (2026).

A note on the metric used to measure AI-facilitated victimisation

At times, it may be difficult to identify whether AI was involved in an experience of OCSV; if AI was used to alter an image, a victim/survivor will likely know whether they took that image, or that image was taken of them. However, if AI is used to modulate the image content or voice of a perpetrator to look or sound younger, or appear to be a different gender, this is not as readily identifiable. We therefore included response categories “I don’t know” or “Prefer not to say” across those measures. However, in doing so, we created mixed categories: it is likely that, in reality, the experiences of some who selected these responses involved AI, and some did not, the respondent simply couldn’t be certain. Further, we asked these questions across both forms of OCSV, meaning there were two opportunities for respondents to report uncertainty.

By allocating respondents who said “I don’t know” or “Prefer not to say” to the denominator (i.e., classifying them as not involving AI), we are confident that our findings do not overestimate victimisation, rather they likely underestimate the involvement of AI in OCSV.

Ethics approval

The research protocol and survey instrument were approved by the Adelaide University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Limitations

Several types of online sexual victimisation were not captured; some of these, such as non-consensual image capturing, have been found to be common (Finkelhor et al., 2023), although we note that by including metrics on AI, we gather data on victimisation via deepfake and digitally altered images, which has not previously been gathered (Flynn et al., 2022). We also note that, because we aggregated the “I don’t know” and “Prefer not to say” categories into the denominator in estimating the involvement of AI in OCSV, these estimates are likely to be conservative. This analytical decision ensures we can be confident that the rates reported do not overstate victimisation, or the involvement of AI.

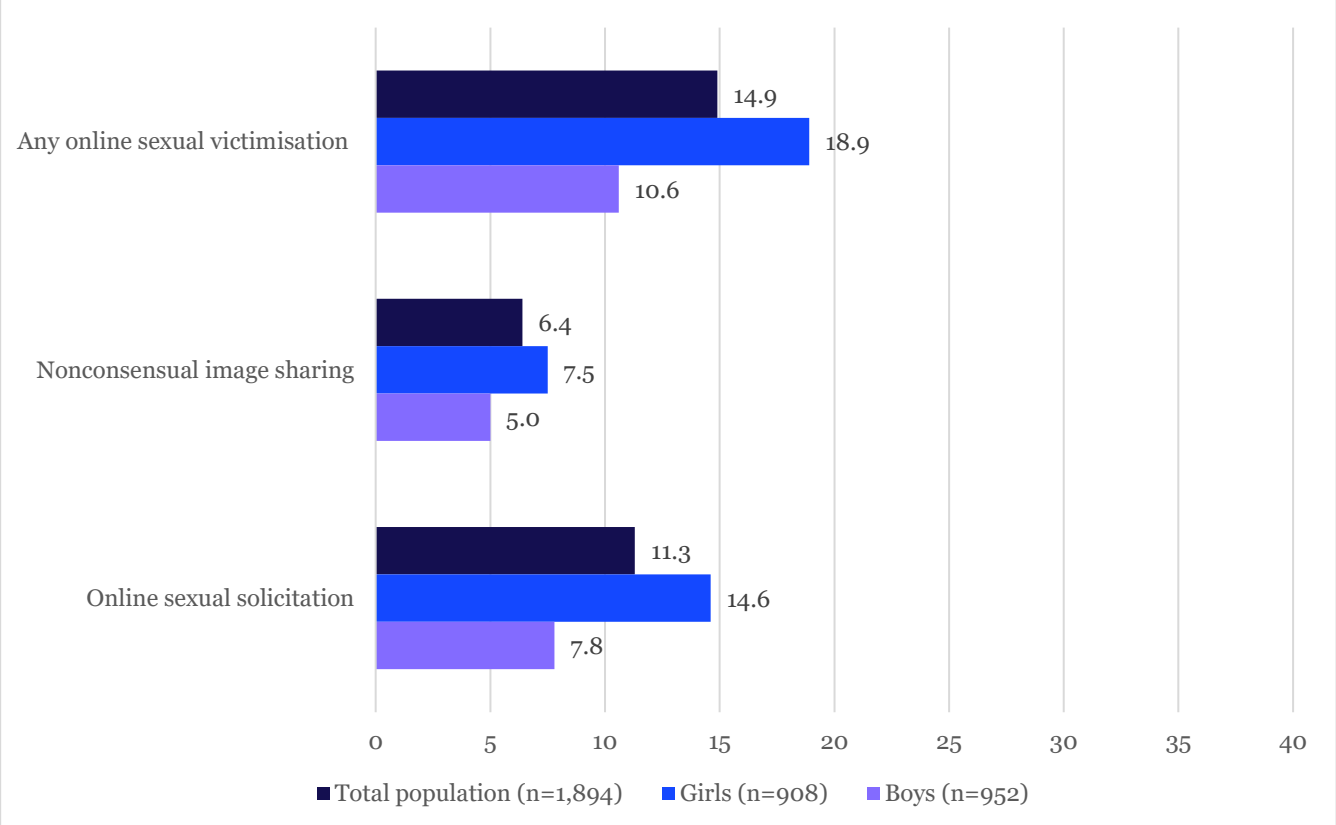
Findings

The prevalence of online sexual victimisation

One in six experienced online sexual victimisation before turning 18

We find that 14.9% of adolescents experienced OCSV before the age of 18 (95% CI: 13.3-16.6; Figure 2), comprising 6.4% nonconsensual sharing of sexual images (95% CI: 5.4-7.6), and 11.3% online sexual solicitation by an adult (95% CI: 9.9 – 12.8). Girls experienced a significantly greater rate of nonconsensual sharing of sexual images (+2.5%; $p<0.05$), online sexual solicitation (+6.8%; $p<0.01$), and either type of OCSV (+8.3%; $p<0.01$). Given marginal sampling differences, our estimates align with the ACMS findings from 2021 (Walsh et al., 2025). However, it is also important to acknowledge that there has been a significant change in the online environment since 2021, including the uptake of AI among young people, and as we have shown below, this has impacted upon the characteristics of victimisation experiences, and subsequent disclosures.

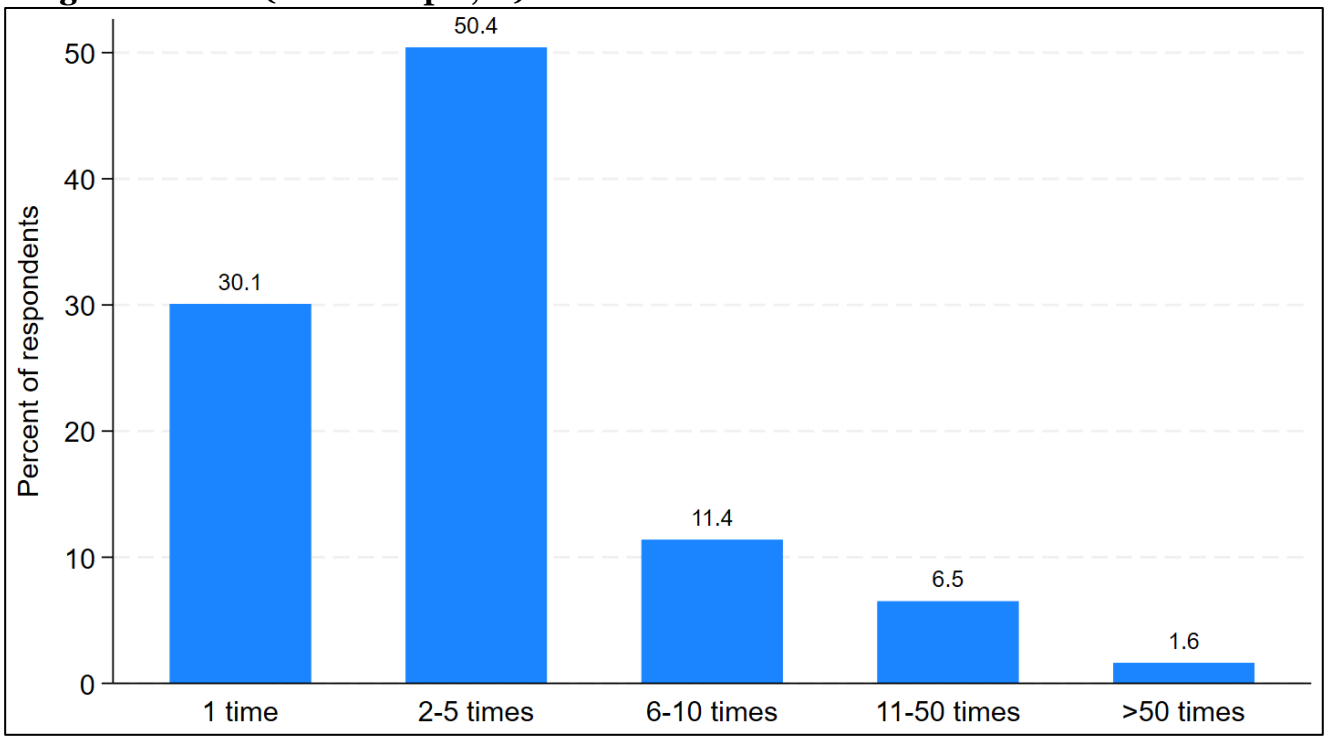
Figure 2. Online sexual victimisation before age 18, by subtype and gender (%).



Nonconsensual sharing of sexual images

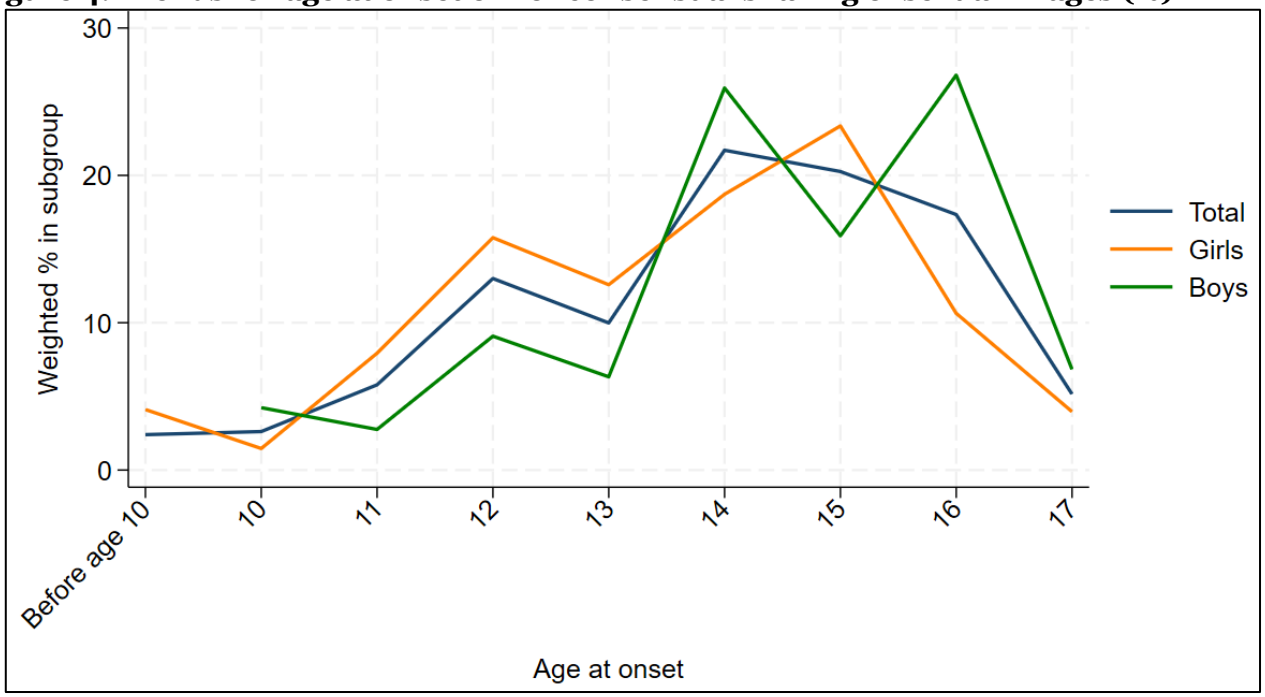
Chronicity. The majority of those who experienced the nonconsensual sharing of sexual images reported more than one victimisation episode. The weighted median number of experiences was two for the full sample, and for boys, while girls reported three (Figure 3). There was no statistically observable difference between boys and girls on the number of times they experienced nonconsensual sharing of sexual images.

Figure 3. Number of times participants experienced nonconsensual sharing of sexual images before 18 (Total sample, %)



Age at onset. The weighted median age at first nonconsensual image sharing experience was 14 for the full sample, and for girls, and 15 for boys (Figure 4). The difference between the age at onset for girls and boys was statistically significant ($p<.05$).

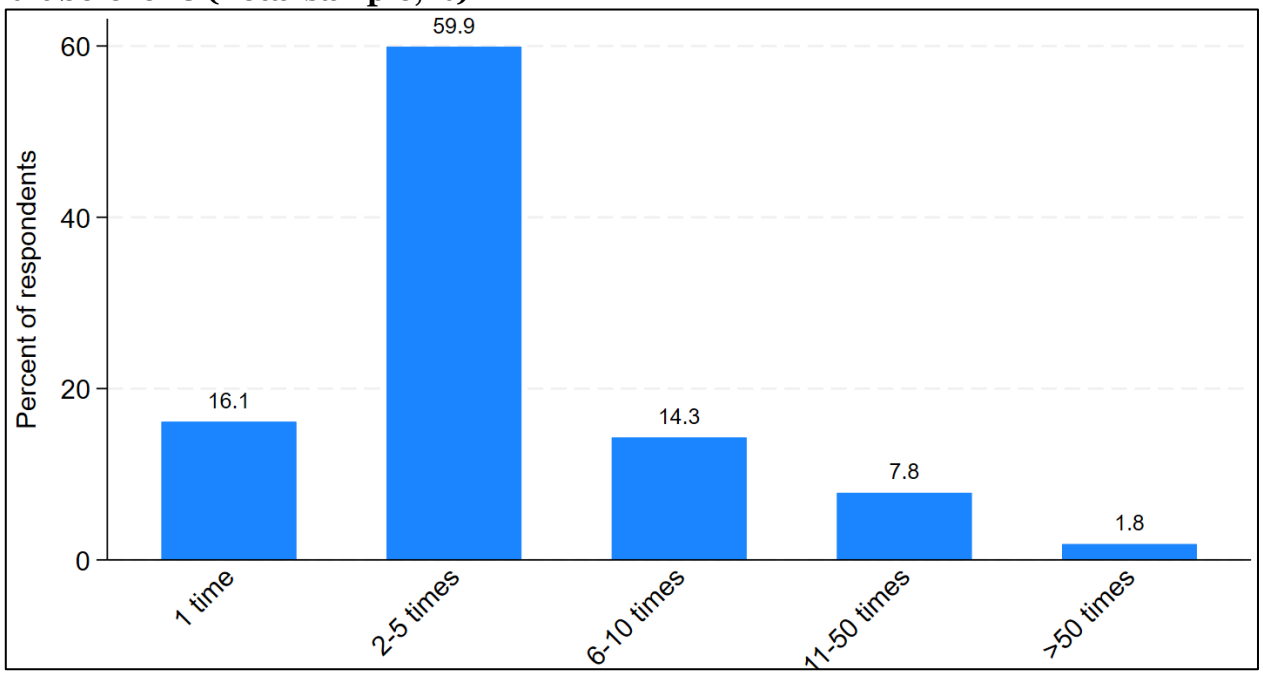
Figure 4. Trends for age at onset of nonconsensual sharing of sexual images (%)



Online sexual solicitation by an adult

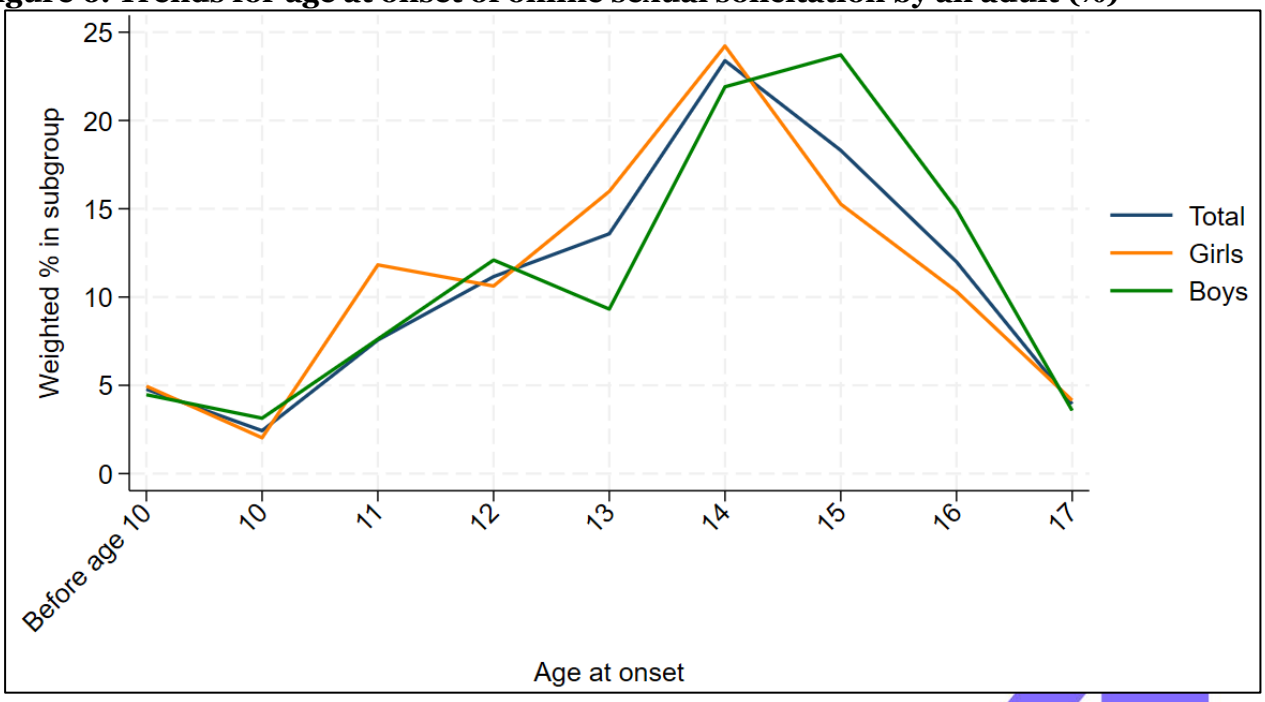
Chronicity. Similarly, the majority of those who experienced online sexual solicitation by an adult reported multiple experiences. The weighted median number of experiences was three for the full sample, two among boys, and four among girls (Figure 5). Girls experienced online sexual solicitation by an adult at significantly greater rates than boys (p<.01).

Figure 5. Number of times participants experienced online sexual solicitation by an adult before 18 (Total sample, %)



Age at onset. Of those who experienced online sexual solicitation, the weighted median age at first experience was the same for girls and boys; 14 (Figure 6).

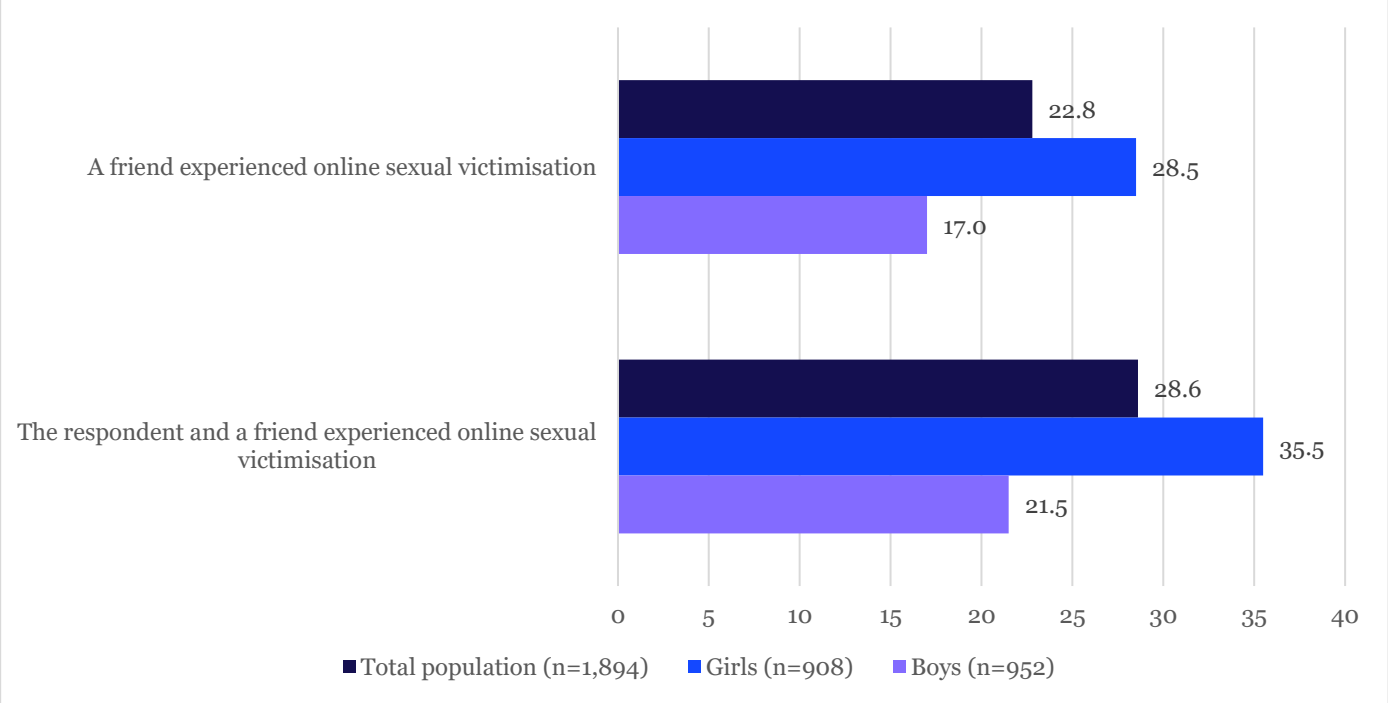
Figure 6. Trends for age at onset of online sexual solicitation by an adult (%)



Prevalence of peer and personal experiences of online sexual victimisation before turning 18

We find that more than one-in-four either personally experienced, or had a friend who experienced OCSV before turning 18. The national prevalence of at least one peer experiencing OCSV was 22.8% (95% CI: 20.9-24.7; Figure 7), with adolescent girls significantly more likely to report knowing a friend who has had an OCSV experience than boys (+11.5%; $p<.01$). The combined national prevalence of personal or peer experiences of OCSV was 28.6% (95% CI: 26.6-30.7), significantly more common among girls (35.5%; 95% CI: 32.5-38.5) than boys (21.5%; 95% CI: 18.7-24.2, $p<.01$).

Figure 7. Peer, and combined peer and personal experiences of online sexual victimisation (%)



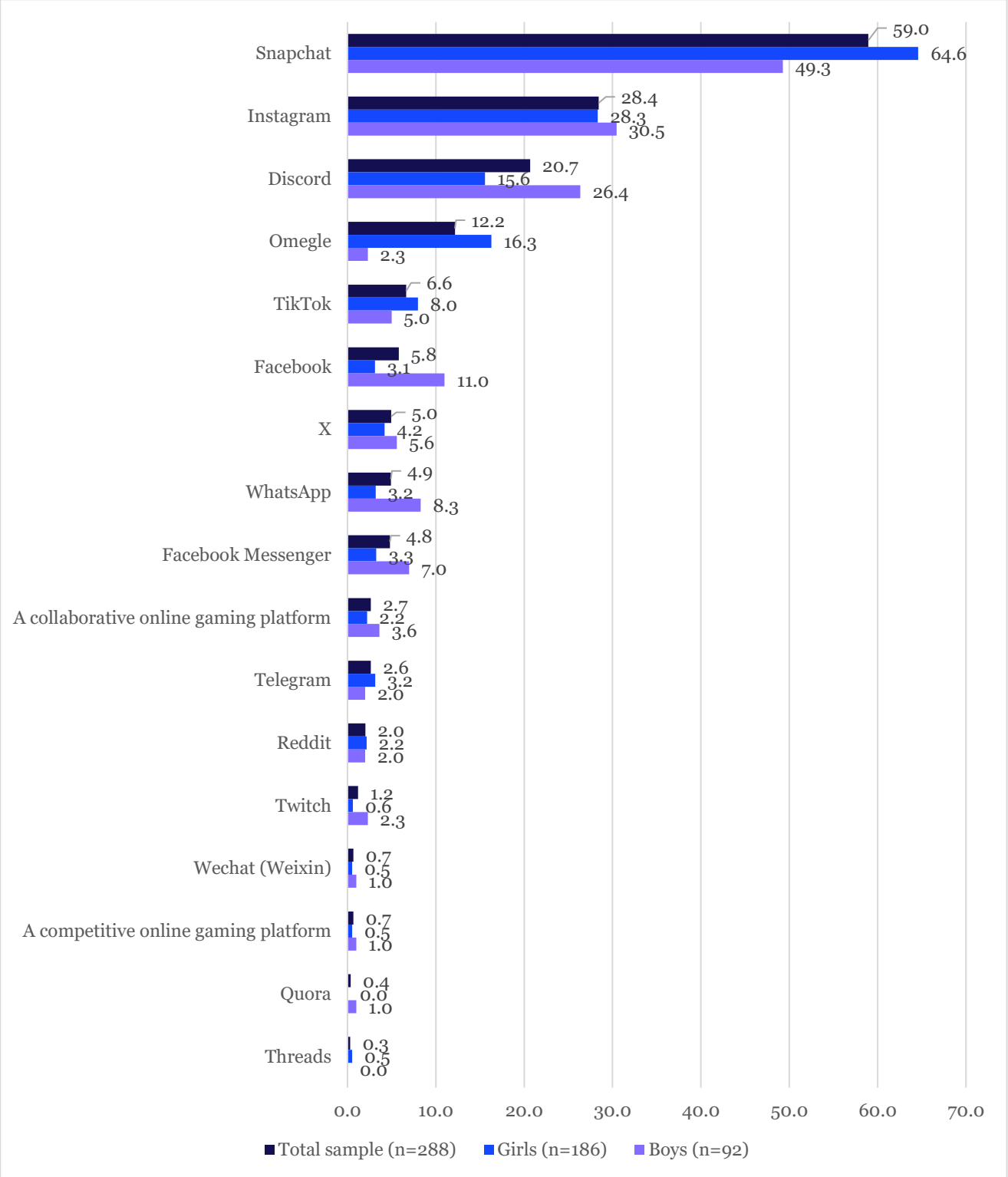
Online child sexual victimisation was most common on Snapchat, Instagram and Discord

Among those who reported experiencing OCSV, we then asked about the platforms on which they were victimised (Figure 8). Most victimisation occurred on image or video sharing platforms; 59.0% said that their victimisation experience occurred on Snapchat (95% CI: 53.2-64.7), 28.4% on Instagram (95% CI: 23.1-33.8), and 20.7% on Discord (95% CI: 15.9-25.5). The most common dedicated messaging platforms where OCSV occurred were WhatsApp (4.9%; 95% CI: 2.37-7.45), Facebook Messenger (4.8%; 95% CI: 2.3-7.3) and Telegram (2.6%; 95% CI: 0.8-4.4) respectively, while 2.7% (95% CI: 0.68-4.61) reported victimisation on a gaming platform.

The platforms on which victimisation was experienced was also gendered (see Figure 8). Girls experienced significantly more online sexual victimisation on Snapchat (+14.7%; $p<0.05$) and Omegle (+14.0%, $p<0.01$), while boys were experienced significantly more victimisation on Facebook (+8.9%, $p<0.05$) and Discord (+10.8%, $p<0.05$). While there were some trends toward differences between girls and boys across the remaining platforms, they did not achieve statistical significance.

It is important to note that these are the platforms where victimisation occurred, however, it is possible that the interaction with a perpetrator began on a different platform.

Figure 8. The social media platforms where online sexual victimisation occurred (%)



Note: Some respondents experienced victimisation on multiple platforms and percentages therefore do not equal 100.

The prevalence of AI involvement in online sexual victimisation

One in seven who experienced online sexual victimisation said their experience involved AI - one in four for the nonconsensual sharing of sexual images

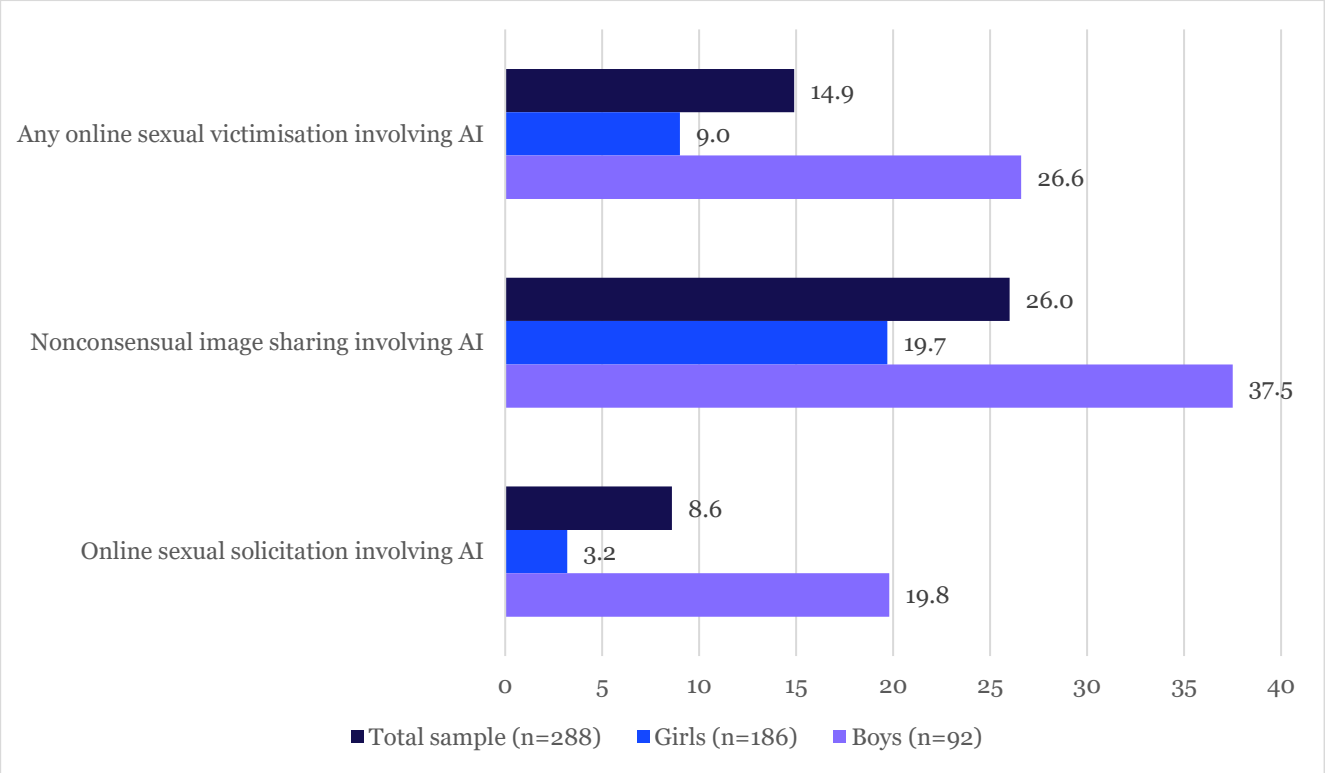
One-in-four of those who experienced nonconsensual sharing of sexual images said that their experience involved the use of AI (26.0%; 95% CI: 17.45-34.63). For online sexual solicitation 8.6% (95% CI: 4.4-12.8) reported that their victimisation experience involved AI, resulting in a prevalence of AI involvement in OCSV of 14.9% (95% CI: 10.8-20.0).

Boys were more likely than girls to experience online sexual victimisation when it involved AI

In contrast with the gender distribution for overall OCSV, boys (26.6%, 95% CI: 17.7-37.9) reported the use of AI in their victimisation experiences at significantly higher rates than girls (9.0%, 95% CI: 5.5-14.5; $p<.01$). The most recent analogous research from Australia collected data in 2021, finding that girls were nearly three times as likely as boys to experience each form of OCSV by age 18: nonconsensual sharing of sexual images (10.9 % vs 3.8 %), and online sexual solicitation (26.3 % vs 7.6 %; Walsh et al., 2025). Five years later, our findings reproduced this trend across both victimisation types, and aggregate OCSV. However, when AI was involved in victimisation experiences, the gender distribution reversed: boys (37.5%, 95% CI: 21.3-53.7) were significantly more likely than girls (19.7%, 95% CI: 9.8-29.5, $p<.05$) to experience OCSV involving AI across both nonconsensual sharing of sexual images (Figure 9) and online sexual solicitation (19.8%, 95% CI: 8.9-30.6 vs 3.2%, 95% CI: 0.1-6.3, $p<0.01$). We therefore find that while girls experience more OCSV overall, AI facilitated victimisation disproportionately targeted boys, signalling that emerging technology may have influenced the nature of online sexual victimisation.

These reflect the first estimates of AI involvement in OCSV, and signal a seismic shift in the online victimisation experiences of young people. This change was forecast by work by Flynn and colleagues (2022), however, our findings confirm that this risk is no longer emerging, it has arrived on a population level among adolescents.

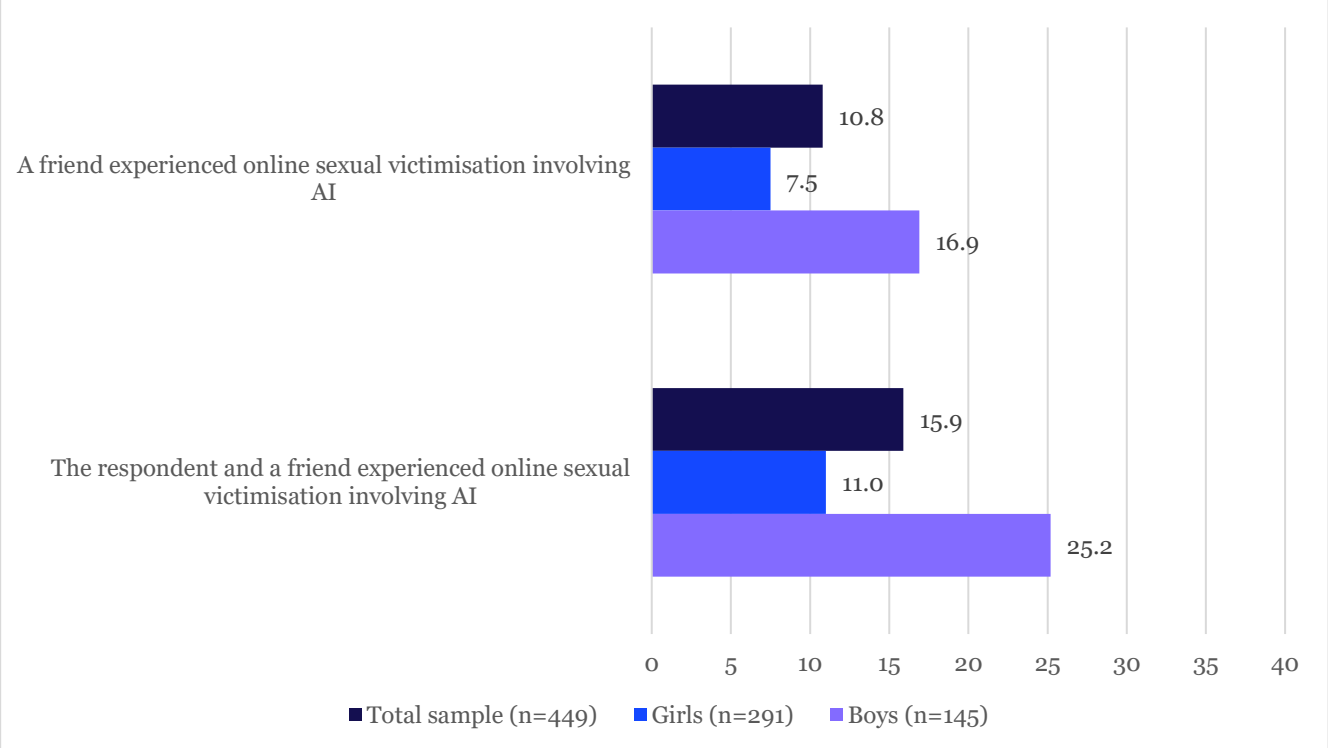
Figure 9. Prevalence of AI involvement in online child sexual victimisation by subtype (%)



One in 25 experienced, or have a friend who experienced, online sexual victimisation involving the use of AI

The aggregate national prevalence of AI involvement in peer or personal experiences of OCSV was 3.9% (95% CI: 2.9-4.8), equating to one-in-25 under the age of 18 in Australia. The prevalence of AI involvement in peer experiences of OCSV was 10.8% (95% CI: 7.8-13.8; Figure 10), with boys significantly more likely to report a friend having a victimisation experience involving the use of AI than girls (+9.4%; $p<0.01$). Among those who reported personal or peer experiences of OCSV, 15.9% said that it involved AI (95% CI: 12.4-19.3), with boys significantly more likely to report AI involvement in this aggregate metric (25.2%; 95% CI: 17.9-32.5, $p<0.01$) than girls (11.0%; 95% CI: 7.4-14.7).

Figure 10. The proportion of peer, and combined peer and personal online sexual victimisation involving AI (%)

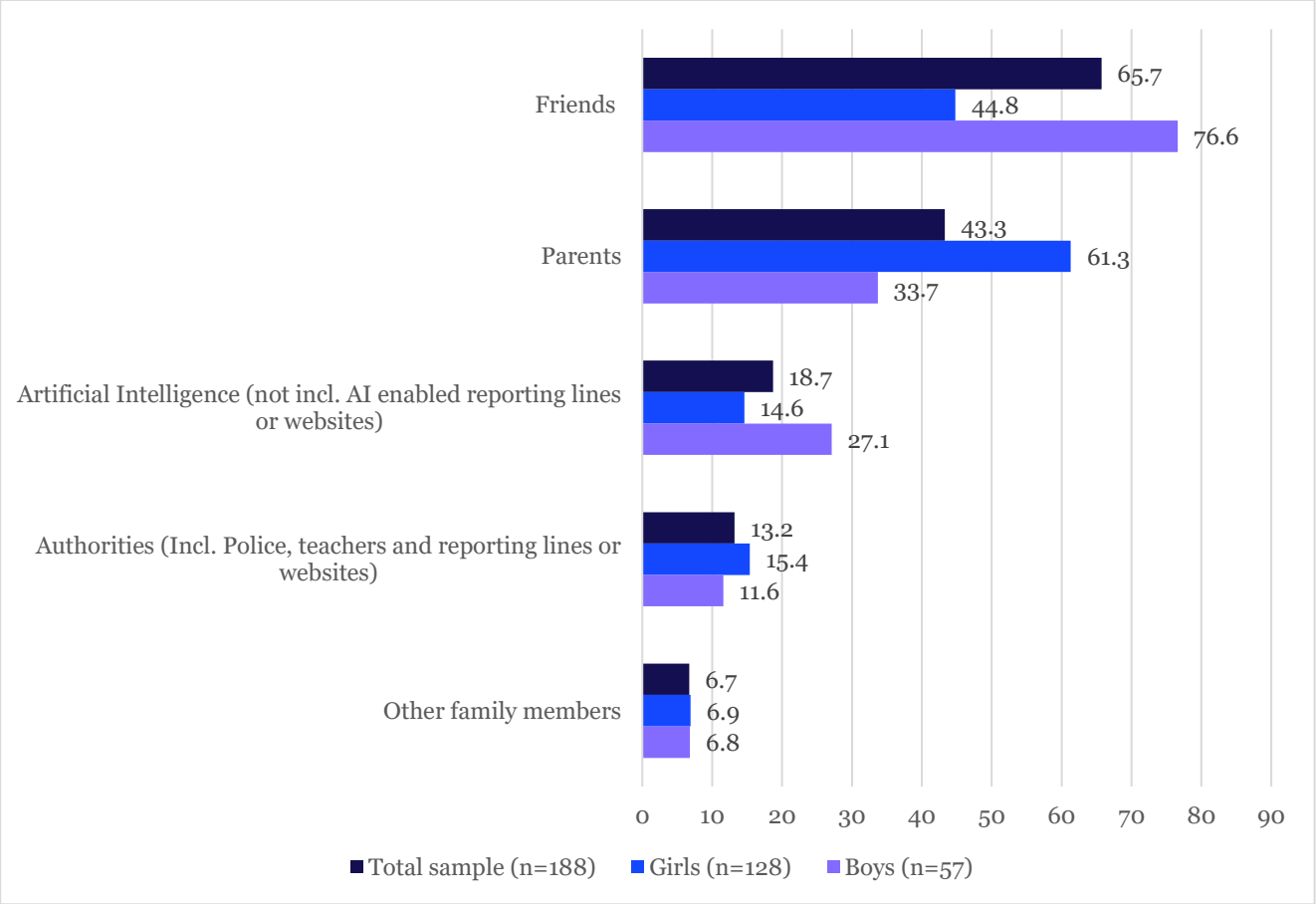


Disclosure of online sexual victimisation

More adolescents disclosed online sexual victimisation to artificial intelligence than to authorities

Most of the respondents who experienced OCSV reported disclosing their experience (65.7%; 95% CI: 57.9-72.0), although girls (68.9%, 95% CI: 62.2-75.7) were significantly more likely to disclose than boys (62.5%, 95% CI: 2.3-72.6, $p<0.01$). This finding closely mirrored findings from the 2021 ACMS data collection, in which more than 60% who experienced OCSV disclosed their experiences (Mathews et al., 2025). There were significant differences in the overall rates of disclosure to different recipients between girls and boys. Girls were significantly more likely to tell parents (+27.4%, $p<0.01$), and boys were significantly more likely to tell friends (+31.8%, $p<0.01$). However, we also find that those who experienced OCSV were more likely to tell an AI (18.7%; 95% CI: 12.9-24.4) than authorities (13.2%; 95% CI: 8.3-18.2). This finding also had a gendered element, boys (27.1%; 95% CI: 15.2-38.1) disclosed to an AI at significantly higher rates than girls (14.6%; 95% CI: 8.2-21.1, $p<0.01$).

Figure 11. Recipients of disclosures of online sexual victimisation (%)



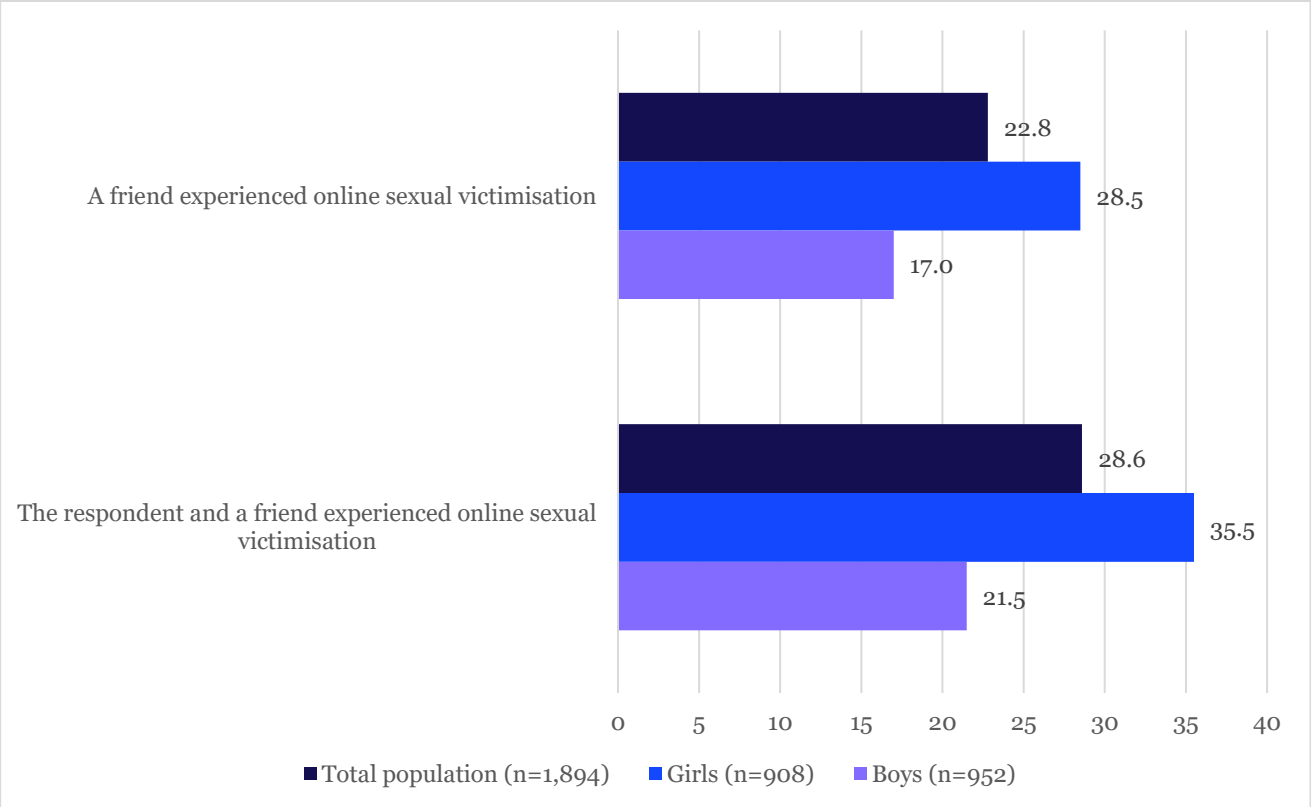
Of those who experienced OCSV, 64.6% (95% CI: 58.7-70.2) told at least one other human, meaning no one knew about the victimisation experience of more than one-third of those who experienced OCSV (35.4%,95% CI: 29.8-41.3) as they disclosed to no one or disclosed only to AI. Girls (67.9; 95% CI: 60.6-74.5) were more likely to tell at least one other human than boys (62.5%; 95% CI: 51.8-72.2). Of those who disclosed, 42.2% (95% CI: 36.5-48.1) disclosed to one source, 16.4% (95% CI: 12.6-21.2) disclosed to two, 5.9% (95% CI: 3.7-9.3) disclosed to three, and 0.8% (95% CI: 0.2-3.2) to four sources. However, among those who disclosed to an AI, only 18.9% (95% CI: 13.8-25.5) also told a human.

Peer group dynamics

Peer groups experienced concerning rates of sexual victimisation

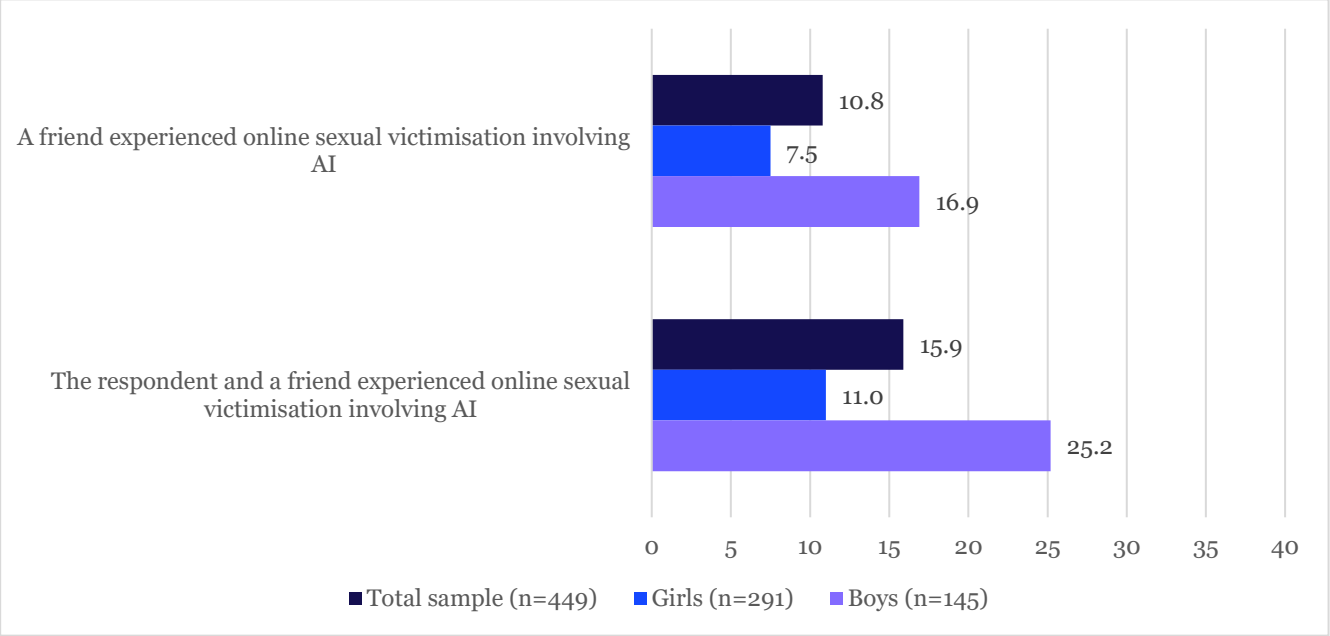
Across the nationally representative sample, 22.8% (95% CI: 20.9-24.7) said they had a friend who had experienced OCSV, when aggregated with personally experiencing OCSV, the combined national prevalence of personally experiencing, or having a friend who experienced OCSV was 28.6% (95% CI: 26.6-30.7; Figure 12). Our findings on gendered effects for personal victimisation and disclosures were also consistent with peer groups; that is, girls (28.5%, 95% CI: 25.7-31.3) were significantly more likely to report a peer experiencing OCSV than boys (17.0%, 95% CI: 14.5-19.6, p<0.01).

Figure 12. Prevalence of at least one peer experiencing online child sexual victimisation, and combined prevalence of peer and personal experiences (%)



Among those who had a friend who experienced OCSV, 10.8% (95% CI: 7.8-13.8) reported that the experience involved AI, 15.9% (95% CI: 2.4-19.3) on the combined metric (Figure 13). However, consistent with our findings on OCSV experiences and disclosures, when AI was involved, boys 16.9% (95% CI: 10.7-23.1) were significantly more likely to report a friend experiencing OCSV than girls (7.5%; 95% CI: 4.4-10.6, p<0.01). This difference persisted to the combined metric, with 25.2% of boys (95% CI: 7.9-32.5) reporting a personal experience, or a friend who experienced OCSV involving AI, a significantly higher rate than among girls (11.0%; 95% CI: 7.4-14.7, p<0.01).

Figure 13. Prevalence of at least one peer experiencing online child sexual victimisation, and combined prevalence of peer and personal experiences involving AI (%)



Both AI and non-AI online child sexual victimisation clustered within peer groups

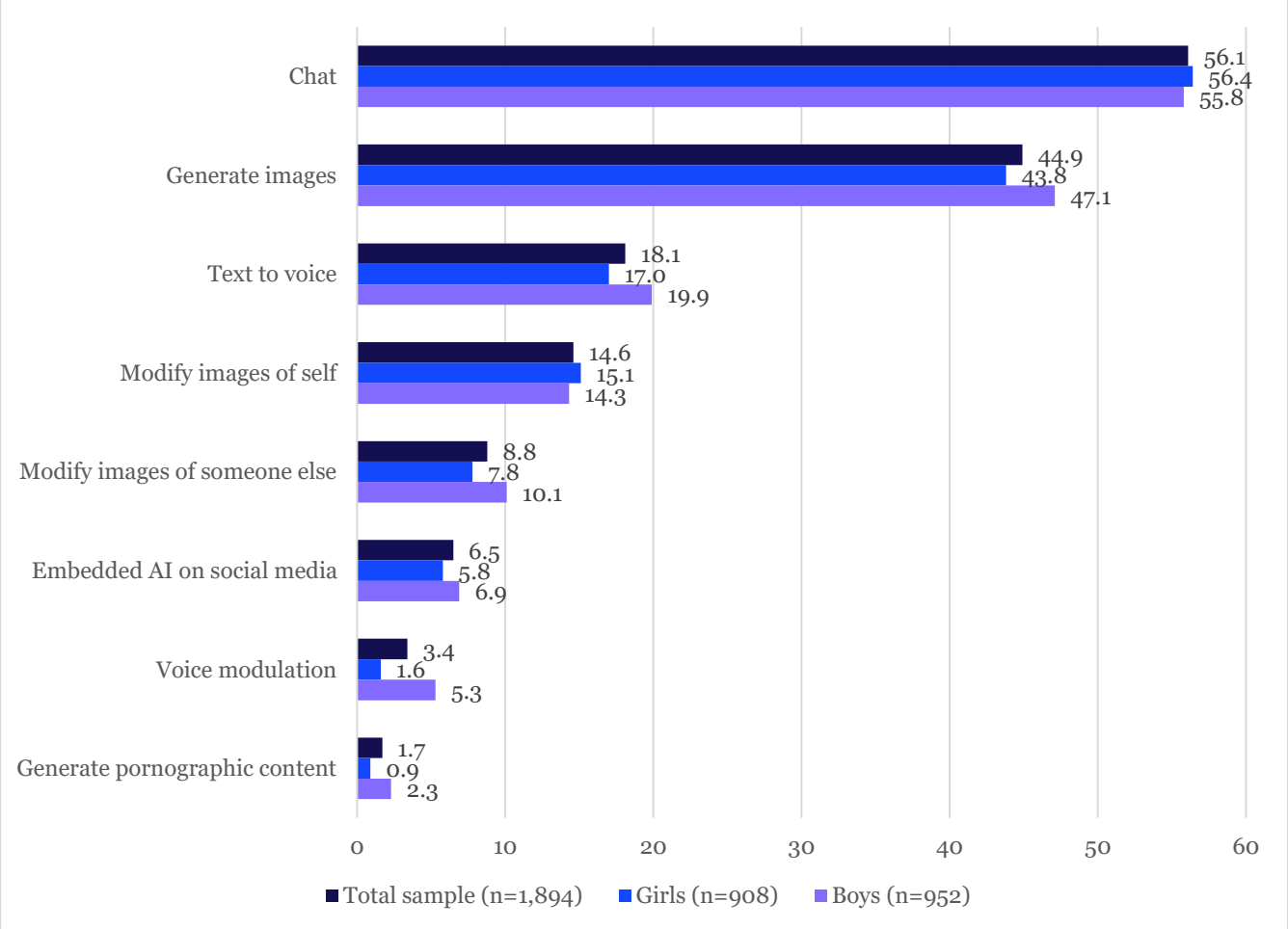
Among those who reported that they had a friend who experienced OCSV, 39.7% (95% CI: 35.1-44.4) also had an experience, while a similar effect was found for experiences of OCSV involving AI (29.6%, 95% CI: 15.5-43.6). These rates suggest that these experiences clustered within friend groups. The result leads us to find that when a single case of OCSV is identified, AI or otherwise, there is around a one-in-three chance that another person within the peer group has experienced the same type of victimisation.

Help-seeking

Four-in-five under the age of 18 use AI

We find that the lifetime prevalence of AI use under 18 years of age in Australia was 80.6% (95% CI: 78.7-82.3), and that this rate was consistent between boys and girls. The majority of AI use related to chatting with an AI (56.1%; 95% CI: 53.8-58.3) or generating images (45.1%; 95% CI: 42.8-47.3), while text-to-voice was also common (18.4%; 95% CI: 16.6-20.2). Importantly, only 6.5% (95% CI: 5.4-7.6) had used AI embedded into social media platforms, and 1.7% reported using AI to generate pornographic content (95% CI: 1.1-2.3). Rates of AI use were consistent between boys and girls, with the exception of two use-types. Boys (5.3%; 95% CI: 3.8-6.8) were significantly more likely than girls to use AI for voice modulation (1.6%; 95% CI: 0.8-2.3, $p<0.01$), and for generation of pornographic material (2.3%; 95% CI: 1.3-3.3 vs 0.9%; 95% CI: 0.4-1.6, $p<0.05$).

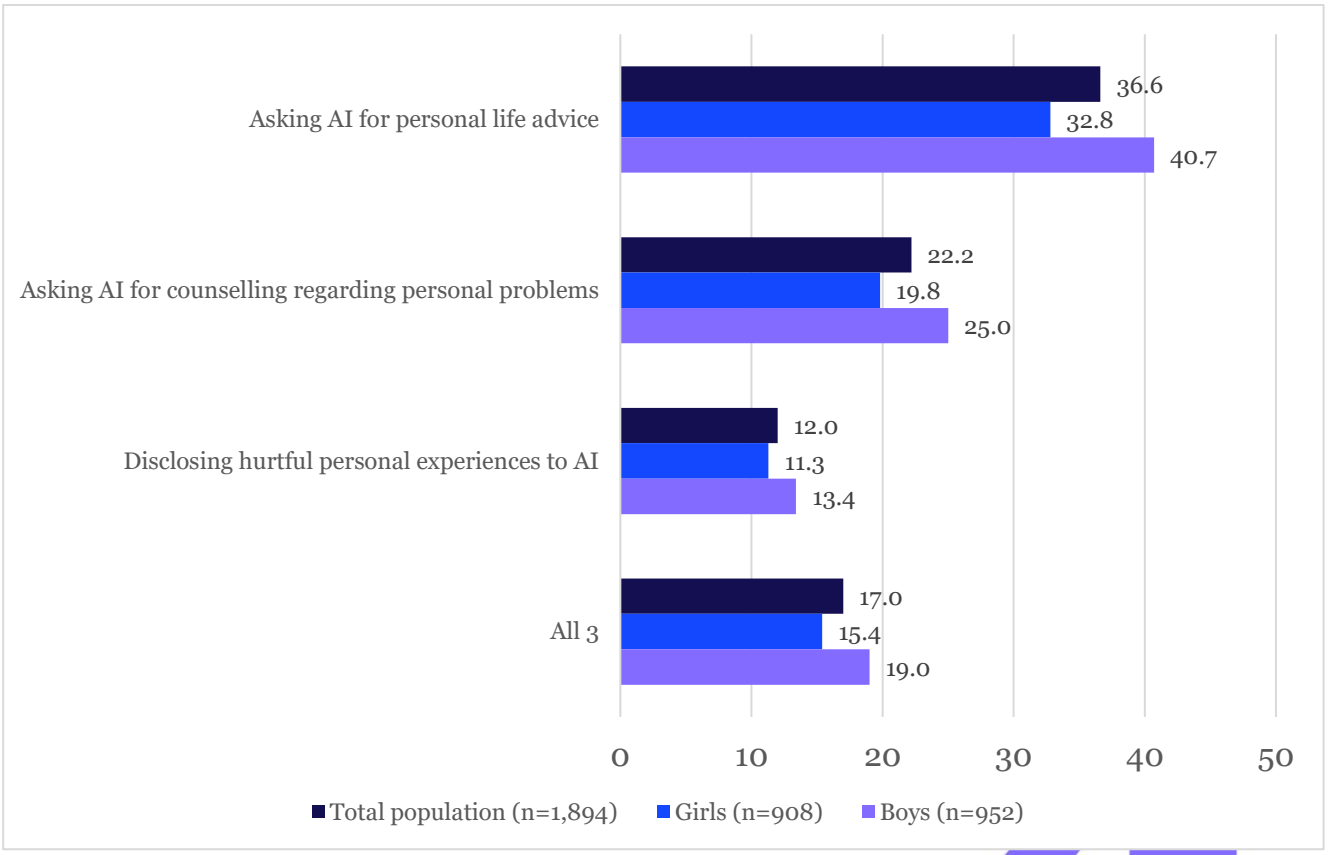
Figure 14. Uses of AI under the age of 18 (%)



Adolescents regularly seek life advice, disclose hurtful experiences, and request counselling from AI

For those under the age of 18, 36.6% (95% CI: 34.3-38.8) asked an AI for personal life advice, 22.2% (95% CI: 20.3-24.2) asked for psychosocial counselling, and 12.3% (95% CI: 10.8-13.8) disclosed hurtful experiences *at least once per week* (Figure 15). Cronbach's Alpha suggested inter-item consistency of 0.84 across these measures. We proceeded by generating the average response from participants who provided an answer to all three of these questions (i.e., did not respond "I don't know" or "Prefer not to say" (n=1,827)). On average, 17.0% (95% CI: 15.4-18.8) engaged in *all three help-seeking behaviours at least once per week*. Using this aggregate metric, we find that boys (19.0%; 95% CI: 16.5-21.8) were significantly more likely than girls (15.4%; 95% CI: 13.2-17.8, $p<0.05$) to engage with AI at least once per week for help-seeking. These findings suggest that young people, especially boys, may be turning to AI for psychosocial help.

Figure 15. Help-seeking behaviour involving the use of AI (%)

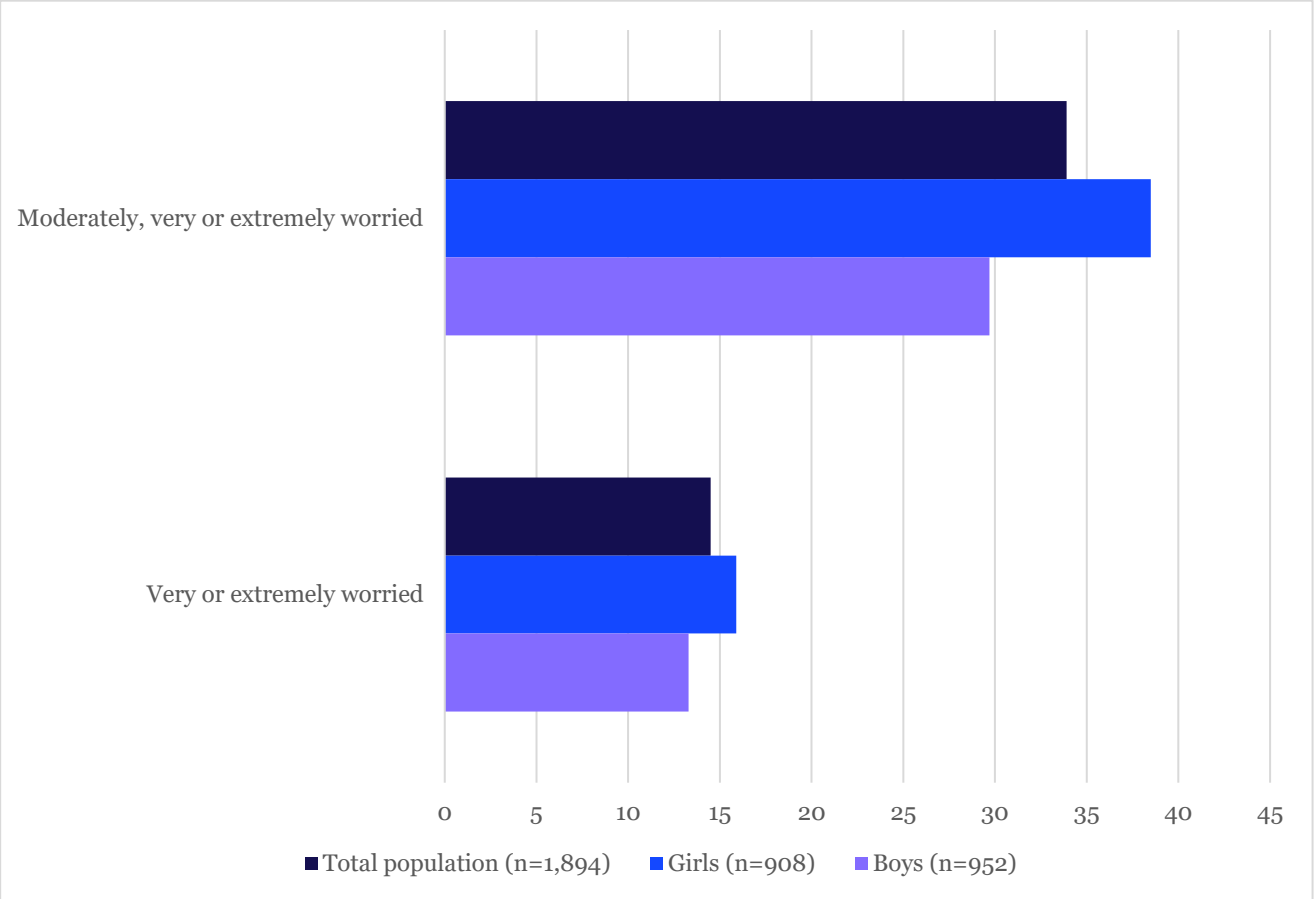


Concern regarding the use of artificial intelligence

One in three were worried that someone would use AI to make a fake image of them or someone they care about

The prevalence of worry regarding the use of AI to create fake images of the respondent, or someone they cared about, was measured by combining the moderately, very and extremely worried categories. The national prevalence of worry regarding AI victimisation was 33.9% (95% CI 31.8-36.1), significantly more girls reported being at least moderately worried (38.5%; 95% CI: 35.4-41.5) compared with boys (29.7%; 26.6-32.8, $p<0.01$). However, importantly, there was no statistically discernible difference between girls (15.9%; 95% CI: 13.7-18.3) and boys (13.3%; 10.9-15.5) for the rate at which they were very or extremely worried (Figure 16).

Figure 16. National prevalence of worry AI facilitated image-based abuse (%)



Conclusion

This research reflects the first national prevalence estimates of the involvement of AI in OCSV, disclosures and help-seeking. Beyond the concerning rate of OCSV experienced under the age of 18, we make six central findings:

1. Girls experienced OCSV at higher rates than boys;
2. AI is being used to victimise young people at concerning rates, especially through image-based sexual abuse;
3. Boys reported significantly higher rates of OCSV involving AI than girls;
4. Disclosures to an AI were more common than disclosures to authorities such as teachers, police or reporting lines, especially among boys;
5. More than two-in-five did not disclose their OCSV experiences to any human, instead either not disclosing at all, or disclosing to an AI; and
6. Both AI and non-AI OCSV experiences clustered within peer groups.

Five years on from the data collection by the ACMS, the current study again found a concerning prevalence of OCSV, with nearly one-in-six Australians aged 16-18 experiencing OCSV. We also found that adolescent girls had a significantly higher rate of victimisation. Our findings show that AI has a considerable role in the victimisation of young people. One-in-25 experienced, or had a friend who had experienced, OCSV involving AI, with boys disproportionately victimised. Further, disclosures of OCSV to an AI exceeded disclosures to authorities, and nearly one-in-five were using AI for help-seeking behaviours at least once per week. These findings raise important implications for the way we understand online sexual victimisation, disclosures and help-seeking among people under 18. It will be crucial to monitor these trends over time, and to understand the outcomes of disclosures to AI, and associated help-seeking. AI has entered the OCSV space as both an enabler of victimisation, a pathway to disclosure and help-seeking, signalling a significant change in the experiences of young people.

Supplementary information

For data tables and full findings regarding statistical tests see:

Cubitt, T.I.C., Logos, K., Brewer, R., Mathews, B., Jago, M. & Gannon, C. (2026). Prevalence and disclosure of AI and non-AI online child sexual victimisation: Findings from a national study of Australian adolescents. SSRN. https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.7000199

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