

# Internet Safety Helplines: Exploratory Study First Findings

Thuy Dinh, Lorleen Farrugia, Brian O'Neill, Sofie Vandoninck, Anca Velicu

## Executive Summary

- This is the first short report on a study of Helplines, an essential component of the network of Safer Internet Centres coordinated by Insafe.
- 70% of all helplines are general service helplines with 30% dedicated specifically to internet safety. All helplines offer a confidential service that offers information, support, guidance and referral.
- Helplines offer a range of services using a variety of platforms: telephone counselling services, email support, support using online chat, text services, online forum, peer support, social networking and in some instances face-to-face support.
  - Among the most important success factors identified by helplines include: 'positive feedback from callers', the 'number of calls' and 'participation from stakeholders'.
  - Among the most persistent risks identified by helplines are bullying and cyberbullying (92%) followed by hate speech (88%) and sexual content (75%).
  - Recommendations arising from the study call for development of an alert system for emerging risks, access to technical expertise for helpline staff and support for further stakeholder collaboration.

many sorts of child helplines, and all have in common to provide a confidential service that offers information, support, guidance and referral. But what is specific to online safety helplines is that they offer advice about staying safe online and just-in-time assistance for young people (and in some cases adults) who encounter risks when using the internet. Helplines of the Insafe network consequently target a specific segment of the community (children/adults) and address particular issues (related to online activity).

- One third of all Safer Internet Centres come from a child protection background (Insafe, 2011). Helplines play a key role in responding to the questions and concerns of young people linked to their experiences online, or harmful or inappropriate content they encounter. 70 per cent of the helplines in the Insafe network are general helplines, providing advice, guidance and support on any issue. The remaining 30 per cent are specialist helplines dealing solely with online safety related issues. Since they were first launched, helpline services have contributed significantly in providing independent guidance and support for children and adults.
- In order to promote the effectiveness of helplines and to better understand the challenges they face, European Schoolnet (EUN), coordinator of the Insafe European network of awareness centres and helplines, commissioned EU Kids Online to undertake a short, 4 month study to identify some of the strategies which helplines can implement in demonstrating good performance and impact.

## Background:

- All countries from the Insafe network have a helpline as part of their Safer Internet Centre, although these vary widely in terms of their makeup and in some cases audience. Child helplines constitute an important first point of contact for children seeking assistance. There are

## Introduction to the Study

The research consisted of an exploratory comparative study of Insafe helplines to examine their experience in dealing with emerging issues, both in terms of operations and new online risks.

Four national helplines from Belgium, Ireland, Malta and Romania were selected as case studies to provide a balance of helpline service type, size and geographical coverage.

The research consisted of the following elements:

- A literature review of international practice in the area of internet safety helplines.
- Desk research including analysis of documentation about the work of the helplines, annual reports, EC guidelines.
- Interviews and focus groups with key helpline personnel, national stakeholders and experts in each participating country. A total of 18 interviews and focus groups were transcribed, translated and analysed using Nvivo 10.
- An online questionnaire was circulated to the Insafe network with a response rate of 85% or 26 helplines.
- A consultation workshop with staff from the Insafe helpline was held at its network meeting in Warsaw in December 2015.

## Research questions

The research focused on four main research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the main services that helplines provide?

**RQ2:** How do helplines measure the impact and effectiveness of their work?

**RQ3:** What are the key emerging issues and challenges that helplines are dealing with?

**RQ4:** What strategies should helplines employ to deal effectively with these issues and challenges?

## Findings

### Main services provided by helplines

Helplines were asked to identify the main features of their mission as well as relevant measures of success in operating their services.

- Helplines provide a multiple range of services, across a variety of platforms and for different audiences. For example, the UK helpline

addresses the needs of professionals working with children and young people and both the Finnish and the Irish helplines provide separate services specifically for parents alongside the helpline for children and young people.

- Insafe helplines primarily aim to empower children and young people to use the internet, as well as other online and mobile technologies, positively, safely and effectively (Insafe report, 2013). These objectives are reflected strongly at the national level and in the mission of each the helplines studied.
- It is important to view the work of helplines holistically, and not just as a telephone/online counselling service for online safety. Contributors pointed out that helplines are not just a stand-alone intervention, but a 'front door' to a range of community and social initiatives. Helplines can be the 'first point of contact' for young people and adults providing immediate support, information and referral. Consultations and the support given are not solely focused on online issues but often extend to other aspects of children's lives.

*Our first goal is to support people and to teach the youngsters on a prevention level enabling them to show their best possible behaviour on the Internet and also teach them good reflexes. BE*

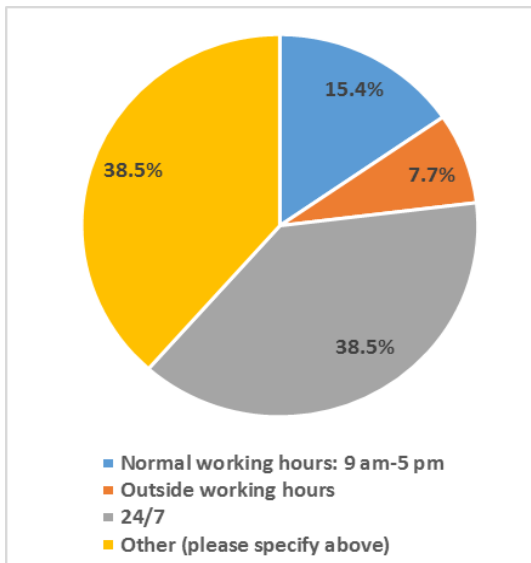
*As a support space for children, as a continuation of what we promote in schools. Basically in informative sessions we talk about benefits, risks, and also we talk about solutions to what they encounter online. RO*

*Its primary mission is to provide a service to the general public, information, help in crisis situations and referral to other services. We also provide support to people who are going through specific problems. MT*

- Responses to the online survey showed over a third of helplines offering support services on a 24/7 basis or outside normal working hours (see Figure 1).

*Our services run 24/7,... we always have staff on call" (IE)*

**Figure 1: Helpline Operational Hours**



Q2: What are the working hours for your helpline?  
Base: All helplines

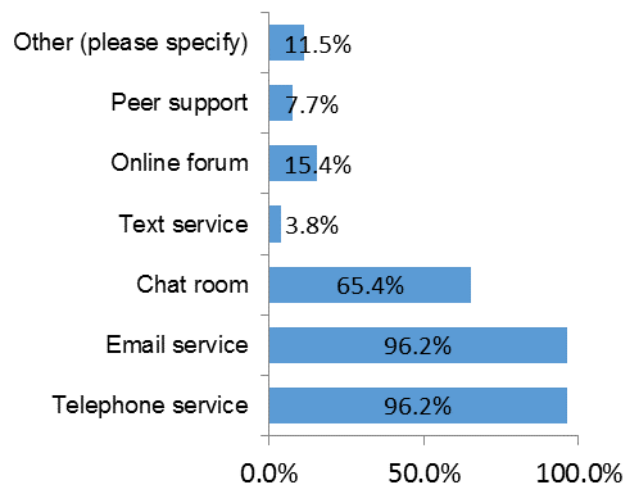
- Helplines across the Insafe network have developed a diverse range of services on multiple platforms. Services include: telephone counselling services, email support, support using online chat, text services, online forum, peer support, social networking and in some instances face-to-face support ...

*We do more with emails... we visit schools. (RO)*

*Sometimes, people can walk into our office and have a chat. (MT)*

- Most helplines provide services on more than one platform and include a telephone helpline service, a texting/SMS service, an online forum, chatroom and face-to-face consultation. The survey of helplines showed that the most prominent types of support and counselling are via telephone and email (96%). Other support platforms also play a significant role (e.g., chatroom, or online forum, see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Type of support or counselling**



Q7: What type of support/consultation does your helpline provide??  
Base: All helplines

- Furthermore, helplines reach a number of distinct target groups including children, young people to parents and professionals. Insafe data show that an increase in the number of contacts from each of these user groups (Insafe quarterly report, 2014).

### Impact and success factors for helplines

- Measuring the impact** and identifying indicators that capture the effectiveness of helplines can be difficult. For instance, without access to follow-on studies it is difficult to quantify the impact of helplines on supporting children's internet safety. Qualitative measures may also be used. However, these are often based on subjective responses that may be less reliable. The ultimate goal of Insafe helplines, but also a key indicator of impact, is their

capacity to encourage service access for those in need, distress and / or at risk in relation to online use. In other words, contact is a first indicator of success.

*Every call should have a positive outcome for the child" IE.*

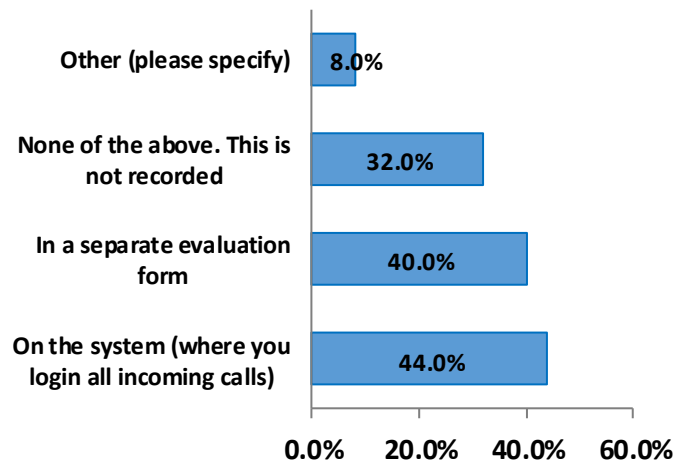
- A further indicator for measuring impact of helplines is **the acknowledgement from callers** (both verbal and written forms, through telephone, emails or feedback) of the positive effects of the interaction. However, recording systems are not in place in all instances and it is not always possible to fully capture callers' responses. Many helpline staff have developed an informal means of capturing the outcome of the call by asking callers and eliciting their feedback.

*So if you are summarising the conversation, so how was this call for you today? You know ... how did you feel at the start of the call? How are you feeling now? It could be all part of that winding down process. IE*

- **Recording feedback:** In the 4 countries studied there is no consistent set of criteria to measure the level of success of the service provided. With regard to the full network, Figure 3 shows only 44% of helplines recorded their feedback on the system; over one third of helplines do not have any recording system in place.

*When we manage to get professionals, other professionals cooperating in a situation which is happening on a support line we don't work on our own ....So there are a lot of people sometimes involved in calls and when you get everyone to work together you know and you see a certain kind of cooperation and willingness. RO*

Figure 3: Recording Feedback



Q 10: How do you record feedback after a call or contact from a client?

- **Awareness of helpline services:** An important element in the effectiveness of helplines is to ensure they are well-known and recognised for their service. Helplines utilise a wide range of awareness-raising activities, from mass media to door-to-door, from children to adults. Very different strategies are adopted from one country to another.

*When we do awareness sessions to parents I mention it and I tell them I'm glad when a child phones to disclose what's going on because that means that he/she really needs help so you should all be glad that they phone 179. MT*

- Collaborating **with other stakeholders** on specific cases or areas can be another good success indicator:
- In addition, helpline staff also reported that the type of questions asked by callers can influence the outcome of the interaction. For example, helpline staff commented that outcomes for technical questions raised during the course of a call are much easier to measure than for more-complex,

non-technical issues. Callers' expectations are also a key determinant in this regard.

*We can evaluate in that we get the results. So if I've taken down a photo of someone or if I reported a Facebook profile and it was taken down or Facebook took their action and the situation has improved, or... So, in a way we can see there was progress so for us it was a success. MT*

- Table 1 presents findings from the online survey about the factors that helpline staff rank most highly in measuring the success of their work (on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being *very important* and 5 as *not important*). In this ranking, 'positive feedback from callers' is considered the most important indicator (1.33), followed by the 'number of calls' (1.88) and 'participation from stakeholders' (1.88).

**Table 1: Indicators to measure the success of the helpline**

Option	Very important	Moderate & important	Important	Not important	Rating Average
Level of publicity	5	11	4	1	2
Number of calls	10	11	2	1	1.63
Positive feedback from callers	16	6	2	0	1.33
Participation from other stakeholders	4	13	6	1	1.88
Other (please specify)	0	0	0	0	4

Q 12: Which of the following would help in measuring the success of the helpline?

### Emerging Risks and Issues

- The rapid pace of technology innovation brings with it new trends and emerging risks for safety and positive online experience. Helplines are at the forefront in providing a listening ear for young people who often have the first experiences of such challenges. Helplines function therefore as an alert system for new and emerging risks for which

they can provide an early warning system for other stakeholders and users.

- Helplines need support when new challenges arise. Helplines do work closely with awareness centres and other experts in the field. But they also need to respond quickly with informational material and have access to expertise on risk prevention.
- The Better Internet for Kids (BIK) community and the BIK platform (<https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/web/portal/about>) can be used to gather and share information on new trends or issues that arise with new devices/applications. This platform would be a good resource for keeping track of young people's online activities and also to anticipate potential risks. Such a platform could also be a useful conduit to industry expertise and assist helplines getting in touch more easily with relevant contact points from companies.

- Both the online survey and qualitative research with helpline staff revealed similar patterns in relation to emerging issues.

Helpline personnel commented on the persistence of existing risks as well as the emergence of new ones:

**Cyberbullying:** while showing some decline, is still a dominant issue for all helplines:

*Every call has an element of cyberbullying...the most mentioned together with sexual. IE*

### Sexual-related content and sexual messages

featured prominently in the focus groups with helpline staff as among the most prominent issues they have to deal with.

**Grooming and sexual exploitation** were also cited as issues of serious concern by helplines:

*It's still quite shocking to hear a very young child being highly sexualised. because from talking to staff and volunteers that are on the phones, you know, one of the things that staff said to me probably 18 months ago, was they are seeing the change in the language, sexualised language that children are using. IE*

*More sexting. Actually, more sexual exploitation is now happening online. An exhibitionist, for example, does not have to be on the street anymore; it's now easier online. That is another form of sexual exploitation. Two of the biggest problems, I find, are grooming and sexting. BE*

**Sextortion** is a new risk that, according to the helplines consulted, is on the rise:

*New trends, such as sextortion, we have to be able to offer a preventative response..... They tell us that a lot of nude pictures are circulating and ask us how they should react: what they should do, which message they need to convey. BE.*

**Personal misuse/ fraudulent use of data** is also identified as an older risk that now appears to be developing into a new pattern:

*One of the emerging trends that we have seen is that nowadays fraudsters and perpetrators are not interested in sending out a large amount of messages and trying to get 100/200/300 euros off a large amount of people, but they will invest some more time into their particular actions and try to get a larger amount from fewer people. MT*

**Harmful content**, including user-generated content (anorexia, suicidal, hatred content) continues to be recorded as a topic of concern:

*That would be, say, under mental health, we would talk about eating disorders, and under mental health profile we talk about self-harm content. IE*

**Racism and hate speech** in all instances were recorded as being on the rise in issues raised by callers to helplines.

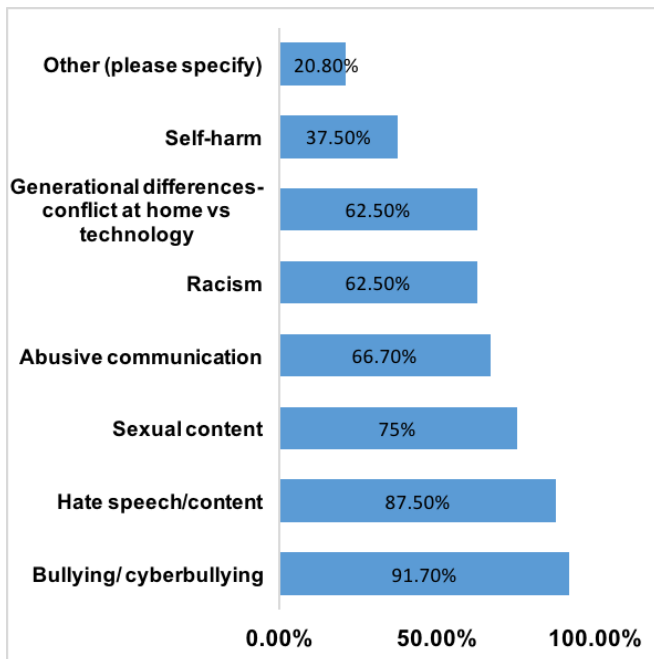
*It's still emerging, but definitely present and highly visible in the last period of time is the hate speech or discrimination based on race, religion, or concerning the refugees. I was looking on forums and groups on facebook because I was very shocked about it and I saw girls and boys commenting not aggressively, but effectively swearing...all nationalities taken together. RO*

Finally, **digital illiteracy and the misjudging by children of their own skills levels** emerged as an important topic of concern among helplines.

*The biggest problem is that we are digital illiterates, and that's a problem that no one wants to take seriously. .... it's said that for a child using a computer is no longer a secret. At the age of three he uploads drawings on YouTube on his own. What more do you want? And this is false. I find this to be the biggest risk: the fact that we don't realize that we're actually digital illiterates. RO*

Responses to the online survey of helplines highlight the following emerging issues and risks (Figure 4). Here, the top three concerns/issues raised were bullying and cyberbullying (92%) followed by hate speech (88%) and sexual content (75%).

**Figure 4: Risks and emerging issues identified by Helplines**



Q 15: Which of the issues listed below are likely to be of concern in relation to internet safety in the future?

## Challenges

Helplines were also asked to comment on the challenges they face in undertaking their role of providing an independent listening support service to internet users.

- One of the observations made by helplines consistently throughout the research was the limited authority and the constraints they experience in trying to act upon callers' complaints.

*That was an app that allowed people to publish anonymous statements. We could not find the moderator and we could not do anything to help. Later on, we were able to find a contact, but it took several weeks before we could provide structured assistance. Prior to that, we could only give support and let the children and parents know that we were motivated to dig deeper into the situation. RO*

- Children themselves are also sometimes too afraid to pursue the issue:

*And many times the idea was: no, no, I don't want to complicate matters with the police, I just want the pictures not to appear. This is difficult and where the helpline can't help, There is also a reticence, a mistrust in the State and the authorities...it's a cultural thing. That and the fact that they might not want their parents to know. RO*

- Helplines also stated that it was important for them to have sufficient staff with the appropriate knowledge and skills) to follow through on issues related to problems with internet services. The absence of a "systematic" follow-up procedure limits the ability of helplines to assess their impact or the success of their intervention.
- Dealing with "prank calls" is an issue that impedes the work of helplines. A variety of strategies about how to screen out such calls have been developed by individual helplines. This was raised in the workshop with the helpline network and further sharing of information and operational strategies would be helpful.
- Finally, it was acknowledged by helplines that they are reliant on very 'soft' measures of the positive impact of helpline support and consultation. By their nature, these can be very subjective and rely upon callers' expectations as well as responses by helpline staff. Therefore, it is very important to have inclusive reflective practice guidelines to ensure consistency and greater accuracy in

recording the evidence to support quality levels and success factors in helpline services.

*It depends on the caller expectation.BE, RO*

## Conclusion and recommendations

The evidence of this research shows that helplines provide a wide range of accessible and valuable sources of support for children as well as adults and professionals about how to keep safe online. Overall, helplines have delivered positive outcomes that are consistent with their goal of providing information, support and reducing risk or potential risk of children and service users in relation to internet safety.

Helplines also deliver additional outcomes and benefits that may go unrecognised by the wider community. Complementary modes of access by web, email, text and telephone enable children and young people to access support when and where they need it. In a fast-moving digital era, helplines play a vital role in awareness raising and in delivering flexible and effective help to the young people and community.

Preliminary recommendations arising from this research may be summarised as follows:

- **Create an alert system for new risks:** an online reporting form should be developed so that young people or other internet users can more quickly notify helplines when they identify potential risks, encounter new problems or technical challenges. This can act as a valuable resource for helpline staff to share information across the network and to inform other stakeholders (researchers, policymakers, industry) about new and emerging risks or challenges among young children and users.
- **Provide regular information briefings and training programmes** to assist helpline staff in dealing with new arising issues and challenges. Industry technologists and academic partners could provide a useful resource in this regard.

- **Awareness-raising** is an important task and outcome of the service provided by helplines. Many helplines work closely with Insafe Awareness Centres in national awareness raising campaigns. These efforts should be reinforced to inform parents, teachers and children’s about the role of helplines and the services they provide in order to build wider public awareness about the issues and the resources/facilities available.
- **Technical support:** Helplines would benefit from an update of the current system of recording and classifying calls and consultation sessions. It is important to ensure that all helplines have access to the same level of technology.
- **Better collaboration with other stakeholders:** more effort is needed to support usability and take-up of internet safety tools. Helplines have a vital role to play in providing feedback from users about the effectiveness of existing safety measures deployed by industry.
- **Information exchange among helplines:** Insafe as the coordinating body provides an excellent opportunity for helplines to share best practices, to support knowledge exchange and to build wider public awareness of the valuable services provided by individual helplines. All efforts to support this networking will be beneficial for the overall service.

## References:

- Insafe Annual Report (2011). Promoting safe and responsible use of online technology. European Schoolnet.
- Insafe-Inhope (2013). Working together for a better internet for children and young people. European Schoolnet.
- Insafe Quarterly report (2014). Helpline Report on issues and statistics. European Schoolnet.

---

*This research has been made possible through the support of Kaspersky Lab, which has kindly contributed to an Insafe helpline Fund, in order to provide capacity-building opportunities for helpline staff, while increasing visibility for the Insafe network as a whole.*