

## ONLINE VICTIMIZATION OF MINORS: A CRIMINOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53486/dri2026.86>

UDC: [343.62:343.43]:004.738.5

Natalia SĂVULESCU

University of Political and Economic European Studies "Constantin Stere"  
Republic of Moldova, Chișinău  
ORCID: 0009-0000-0648-3312

**Abstract:** *This article aims to analyze the phenomenon of the online victimization of minors from a criminological perspective, considering the rapid expansion of digital technologies and their integration into the daily lives of children and adolescents. The study examines the main forms of digital victimization, such as cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, grooming, as well as exposure to harmful content, highlighting the specific characteristics of these manifestations in relation to the offline environment.*

*The analytical approach focuses on identifying the criminogenic factors that facilitate the victimization of minors in the virtual space, including anonymity, increased accessibility, lack of effective parental control, and a low level of digital literacy. At the same time, the study considers offender typologies and the mechanisms through which they exploit age-specific vulnerabilities, such as the need for social validation or the lack of experience in risk assessment.*

*From a theoretical perspective, the analysis is grounded in relevant criminological models, such as routine activity theory, opportunity theory, and social control perspectives, adapted to the digital context. These explanatory frameworks enable a better understanding of the dynamics of online interactions and the ways in which the virtual environment becomes conducive to acts of victimization.*

*The article also highlights the psychological and social consequences of online victimization on minors, emphasizing both the short-term and long-term impact on their development. Finally, directions for prevention and intervention are outlined, with emphasis on the role of digital education, family, institutions, and the legal framework in reducing risks and protecting minors.*

*Through its integrated approach, the paper contributes to a better understanding of the phenomenon in the contemporary context and provides useful benchmarks for the development of public policies and effective strategies for preventing crimes targeting minors in the online environment.*

**Keywords:** *online victimization; minors; criminology; cybercrime; cyberbullying; grooming; criminogenic factors; crime prevention; digital environment; juvenile vulnerability*

**JEL:** K14, K42, D91.

### Introduction

The content of the scientific article "*The Phenomenon of the Victimization of Minors in the Online Environment: A Criminological Analysis*" is based on describing the evolution of criminological conceptions regarding the minor who commits an act provided by criminal law, as a starting point for analyzing the extent to which all sources of technology have expanded today. Understanding the meaning of legislative evolution is essential in order to anticipate problems and to reasonably discern which methods or measures can improve the current situation of minors in relation to criminal law. In this context, the accelerated dynamics of the digital environment have led not only to the diversification of forms of criminal activity, but also to the redefinition of the minor's position in relation to it. While traditional approaches focused predominantly on the minor as the perpetrator of a criminal act, there is כיום a significant increase in situations in which the minor becomes a victim, especially in the virtual space.

This paradigm shift requires a reassessment of criminological analytical tools, as the online environment presents distinct particularities compared to the offline one, such as its transnational character, the difficulty of identifying perpetrators, and the rapid spread of harmful effects. Under these conditions, the risks to which minors are exposed take on complex forms that are difficult to

anticipate and control through traditional means. At the same time, interactions in the virtual environment are characterized by a reduction of social barriers and an apparent freedom of expression, aspects that can encourage both deviant behavior and the exploitation of age-specific vulnerabilities. Minors thus become easy targets for criminal strategies adapted to new technologies, which amplifies the need for an in-depth analysis of victimization mechanisms. Against this background, the importance of correlating criminological perspectives with current social realities becomes evident, in order to outline an appropriate explanatory framework. Such an approach allows not only for understanding the phenomenon itself, but also for identifying effective directions for intervention, adapted to the specifics of the digital environment.

Consequently, the proposed analysis focuses on highlighting the relationship between technological evolution and transformations in criminal phenomena, with emphasis on the direct impact on minors. This involves a critical examination of how new forms of criminality influence the structure of victimization, as well as the limitations of current protection mechanisms.

The position of the minor in relation to criminal law has fluctuated alongside their role in society. Over time, minors have been treated in varying ways: sometimes society has fostered their development, while at other times it has treated them with indifference or even brutality.

This evolution reflects profound transformations in social and legal conceptions regarding criminal responsibility and the degree of discernment of minors. From the perception of the minor as a "miniature adult," subject to the same punitive rigor, to the recognition of their psychological and emotional developmental particularities, approaches have gradually become more nuanced, emphasizing protection, education, and social reintegration.

In this regard, modern criminology has significantly contributed to redefining the status of the minor, highlighting the role of social, familial, and environmental factors in the emergence of deviant behavior. Thus, the minor is no longer viewed exclusively through the lens of the committed act, but also as a product of a vulnerable context that may favor both deviance and victimization. This shift in perspective becomes even more relevant in the current context, where the digital environment significantly influences the process of socialization. Online interactions, easy access to information, and exposure to various behavioral patterns contribute to shaping minors' conduct, while also amplifying the risks to which they are subjected.

Therefore, understanding the position of the minor in relation to criminal law can no longer be achieved without analyzing the digital environment, which redefines both the forms of manifestation of criminal behavior and the mechanisms of victimization. This interdependence requires an integrated approach capable of capturing the complexity of the phenomenon in a contemporary context. This historical evolution highlights the complexity of the relationship between the minor and society, as well as the way in which the legal framework has reflected—or, on the contrary, ignored—the specific needs of this vulnerable group. The transition from severe disciplinary punishments to policies oriented toward protection and reintegration has been influenced not only by legislative changes, but also by research in developmental psychology and criminology, which has highlighted the fundamental differences between minors' and adults' capacity for discernment.

At the same time, technological development and the expansion of the digital environment have created new contexts in which minors interact, communicate, and socially develop, generating both opportunities and unprecedented risks. Phenomena such as cyberbullying, grooming, or access to harmful content have radically changed the way minors can be affected by criminality, emphasizing the need for a criminological approach that integrates both traditional aspects of victimization and the new particularities of the virtual environment.

Moreover, the contemporary minor occupies a dual position: on the one hand, they may act as an agent of deviant behavior, and on the other hand, they become a potential victim of sophisticated criminal acts facilitated by technology. This duality highlights the importance of an integrated analysis that connects classical criminological theories with current digital realities and allows for the

identification of criminogenic factors, vulnerabilities, and protection mechanisms adapted to new conditions. Therefore, this article aims to explore these complex interactions, highlighting how the evolution of the legal and social framework intersects with technological development, in order to provide a clear picture of the phenomenon of minor victimization in the online environment and possible directions for prevention and intervention.

### **The Minor and Social Responsibility**

#### **The Concept of the Minor in the Past and Present**

The term "minor" essentially refers to a person below the age at which the law recognizes full capacity to exercise civil and criminal rights and obligations. Throughout history, this notion has evolved significantly, influenced by cultural, religious, and legal norms. In medieval and premodern periods, the minor was often seen as a "miniature adult," responsible for their actions almost to the same extent as adults, yet lacking the necessary means and protection. In many societies, even very young children could be subjected to criminal punishment or forced labor; for example, within feudal systems, minors were involved in hard labor or armed conflicts under the authority of the family or ruler.

With the development of the modern concept of law and the emergence of studies in psychology and pedagogy, the perception of the minor changed, emphasizing their vulnerability and need for protection. Today, the minor is recognized as an individual with special rights, requiring support for physical, emotional, and social development. Contemporary criminal law reflects this shift by adapting criminal liability according to the minor's age and discernment, as well as by establishing alternative measures focused on education and reintegration.

#### **The Minor's Responsibility in Society: Historical Evolution**

The social responsibility of minors has also been subject to fluctuation. In traditional societies, children were directly integrated into economic and family structures, holding important functional roles such as working in the household, agriculture, or family trades. In this context, their responsibility was more practical than legal, and compliance with community rules was strictly monitored by the family and local authorities.

For example, in medieval Europe, children from artisan families learned trades from an early age, and their mistakes could lead to punishments or social sanctions, reflecting both their role in the family economy and the strict norms of the community.

As society evolved, the responsibility of minors became more nuanced: the emphasis shifted from punishment to education, from economic roles to social and moral development. Schools and social institutions began to promote the formation of responsible citizens, prepared to respect norms and collective values, without being exposed to severe sanctions before understanding the consequences of their actions.

#### **The Minor's Responsibility in Contemporary Society**

Today, the responsibility of minors is based on a balance between autonomy and protection. Minors have both rights and obligations, but the social, educational, and legal framework aims at the gradual development of their sense of responsibility. In the contemporary environment, responsibility is no longer limited to family or the local community, but also includes the digital environment, where minors frequently interact.

Recent examples include minors' participation in online communities, adherence to rules of digital behavior, and awareness of risks such as cyberbullying, grooming, or the distribution of inappropriate content. At the same time, minors may become vulnerable, which highlights the need for digital education mechanisms and balanced supervision.

Thus, the evolution of minors' responsibility reflects the transition from roles imposed by society and family to a progressively assumed responsibility, depending on individual development and the contemporary social and technological context.

## **The Link Between the Minor's Social Responsibility and Victimization in the Online Environment**

The evolution of the minor's role in society has direct implications for how they are exposed to risks in the digital environment. As minors gain autonomy and actively participate in social and online life, their responsibility extends not only to their own actions but also to managing the risks associated with virtual interactions. Lack of experience, the desire for acceptance in online groups, or misunderstanding the limits of digital interactions can transform the minor from an active agent into a potential victim of cybercrime.

In contemporary society, the online environment represents a space for socialization and expression, but also a context in which minors' vulnerabilities can be exploited by offenders through methods such as grooming, cyberbullying, or exposure to harmful content. The social responsibility of minors is therefore not limited to respecting traditional societal rules, but also includes developing digital safety skills and the ability to recognize risky situations.

Therefore, the analysis of the phenomenon of minor victimization in the online environment cannot be separated from understanding their social role. Understanding the evolution of responsibility and the minor's position provides an essential framework for identifying criminogenic factors, age-specific vulnerabilities, and ways in which educational, familial, and legal interventions can be optimized to protect minors in the digital age.

### **Criminogenic Factors and Vulnerabilities of Minors in the Online Environment**

#### **The Virtual Environment as a Space of Risk**

The expansion of access to technology and the integration of the online environment into minors' daily lives have created a context in which exposure to risks is significantly increased. The digital environment offers anonymity, rapid communication, and unlimited access to various types of content—elements which, if not properly managed, can facilitate situations of victimization. This characteristic makes minors more vulnerable to criminal acts than in offline spaces, and the risks are not only individual but also collective, affecting entire online communities.

#### **Main Criminogenic Factors**

Criminological analysis identifies several factors that contribute to the victimization of minors in the online environment. On the one hand, anonymity facilitates actions such as grooming or online harassment, giving offenders a strategic advantage. On the other hand, increased accessibility and the borderless freedom of social media platforms mean that minors spend significant amounts of time on these networks, often identifying with them. Additionally, a low level of digital education plays a crucial role: minors who are unfamiliar with online safety rules or unable to recognize risky situations are more prone to exploitation.

**Age-Specific Vulnerabilities** -In today's digital world, minors grow up in an environment where social interactions are no longer limited to school, family, or close friends, but extend into a vast virtual space where boundaries are often unclear. This reality brings numerous opportunities, but also risks, especially due to age-specific vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities do not arise randomly; they are closely linked to the stage of cognitive and emotional development in which minors find themselves.

One of the most important aspects is the strong need for social validation and acceptance. During adolescence, personal identity is still forming, and the opinions of others become highly significant. In the online environment, this need translates into the desire to receive likes, positive comments, or as many followers as possible. For a minor, these reactions can become a measure of self-worth. As a result, there is a temptation to post personal information, photos, or intimate details without fully understanding the consequences. In some cases, minors may accept friend requests or messages from strangers simply to increase their popularity or to avoid feeling "invisible" online. This need for validation can be exploited by ill-intentioned individuals who use compliments or attention to gain minors' trust. In addition, another important factor is the lack of experience in risk assessment. The

ability to anticipate the consequences of an action is not fully developed in minors, as it depends on the maturation of complex cognitive processes. Decisions are often made impulsively, under the influence of emotions or curiosity. For example, a minor may consider sending a personal photo to someone met online as harmless, without thinking about the possibility that the image could be shared further or used abusively. At the same time, lack of experience makes minors more vulnerable to manipulation. They cannot always distinguish between genuine and hidden intentions, especially when communication takes place through written messages, where cues such as tone of voice or facial expressions are absent.

This difficulty in assessing risks is amplified by the fact that the online environment creates a false sense of safety. Interactions occur through screens, and physical distance can give the impression that dangers are not real or immediate. Minors may believe they can control situations more easily than in real life, leading them to take greater risks. Moreover, the fact that many platforms are designed to be attractive and easy to use contributes to reduced vigilance.

Another essential element is the influence of peer groups and social pressure. During adolescence, belonging to a group is extremely important, and the fear of exclusion can lead to risky behaviors. In the online environment, these pressures can take various forms, from participating in dangerous challenges to sharing inappropriate content. Often, minors do not act out of personal desire, but to conform to group expectations. If most friends post certain types of content or interact with strangers, there is a tendency to do the same to avoid being left out. Social pressure can be subtle but very powerful. Comments, reactions, or even their absence can influence minors' behavior. For example, a teenager may continue communicating with a suspicious person simply because their friends consider it "cool" or interesting. In other situations, minors may ignore warning signs—such as persistent requests for personal information or inappropriate behavior—because they do not want to appear naive or overly cautious in front of others.

All these vulnerabilities are interconnected and can reinforce one another. The need for validation may lead to risky interactions, lack of experience makes it difficult to recognize danger, and peer pressure pushes minors to continue such behaviors. In addition, the online environment evolves rapidly, and new trends or platforms may introduce additional risks that minors are not prepared to manage.

It is important to understand that these vulnerabilities are not individual weaknesses, but normal characteristics of development. For this reason, solutions should not rely on rigid restrictions, but on education and support. Minors need to learn how to protect their personal information, how to recognize suspicious behavior, and how to make informed decisions online. At the same time, open dialogue with adults—whether parents, teachers, or counselors—is essential, so that minors feel safe asking for help when facing difficult situations.

In conclusion, age-specific vulnerabilities of minors in the online environment result from a combination of psychological and social factors. The need for acceptance, lack of experience, and peer pressure contribute to their exposure to significant risks. Understanding these aspects is essential for developing effective prevention and protection strategies adapted to the digital reality.

### **Typologies of Online Offenders and Mechanisms of Exploitation**

In a world where the internet has become part of everyday life, children and adolescents spend increasing amounts of time online, whether for school, entertainment, or staying connected with friends. Often, this space appears friendly and safe, yet behind screens there may be individuals who use the internet to cause harm. These individuals do not look like "criminals" in the traditional sense; they have no visible signs and cannot be easily recognized. That is why it is important to understand who they are, how they act, and especially how they manage to gain minors' trust.

Let us imagine a typical teenager who creates a social media account, posts photos, talks to classmates, and at some point receives a message from a stranger. The person seems friendly, claims

to share the same interests, and starts a normal conversation. At first, everything appears harmless. This is often the first step through which a certain type of online offender tries to enter a minor's life. One important category is that of online sexual predators. They never begin directly with their real intentions. On the contrary, they build an image of a trustworthy person. They may pretend to be the same age as the victim or even a close friend. They speak kindly, offer compliments, and try to create an emotional connection. This process is known as "gaining trust." Over time, conversations become increasingly personal. The minor may feel they have found someone who truly understands them, especially if they feel lonely or misunderstood in real life. Once this bond is established, the predator begins to request more intimate things, such as personal photos, private information, or inappropriate conversations. Everything happens gradually, so the minor does not realize when the interaction shifts from normal to dangerous. In some cases, if the minor refuses, the offender may become manipulative or threatening, claiming they will expose already received information. This leads to blackmail, leaving the child feeling trapped and frightened.

Another type of offender includes online harassers and aggressors. These individuals are not necessarily interested in building trust, but rather in exercising power over others. Often, they are people who know the victim in real life, such as classmates, though they may also be strangers. Online harassment can take many forms: insulting messages, spreading rumors, posting embarrassing photos, or deliberately excluding someone from online groups. For instance, a child may post a photo and receive hurtful comments instead of appreciation. At first, it may seem like a joke, but when repeated daily, the impact becomes severe. The child may feel ashamed, sad, or even scared. In some cases, aggressors escalate to threats or blackmail, forcing the victim to comply with certain demands to stop the harassment. The problem is that online abuse can continue constantly, leaving the victim with no safe space.

There is also a less obvious but equally dangerous category: economic or information exploiters. These individuals are not necessarily interested in personal relationships, but in what they can obtain from victims. They may send messages that appear to be offers, contests, or games, requesting personal data such as name, address, passwords, or family information. For a child, such requests may seem harmless, especially if presented as a game or an opportunity to win something. For example, a message might say: "You've won a prize! Enter your details to claim it." Without experience, a minor may believe it and provide important information. This data can then be used for fraud, account access, or other illegal activities. Sometimes, offenders use more sophisticated techniques, such as creating websites that closely resemble official ones to deceive users.

All these types of offenders share a common element: they rely on psychological manipulation rather than physical force. They understand how children think and feel. For example, they know minors seek friendship and acceptance, so they offer exactly that at the beginning. They know minors can be curious or impulsive, so they create situations that seem exciting or urgent. In many cases, they also create a sense of secrecy, saying things like "don't tell anyone about our conversation," which isolates the victim and makes them easier to control.

Another important mechanism is emotional exploitation. Offenders may use empathy, telling sad stories to gain sympathy, or fear, threatening serious consequences. Sometimes they alternate between positive and negative behavior, creating confusion and emotional dependence. The minor becomes unsure how to react and remains trapped in the relationship.

The digital environment provides offenders with a major advantage: anonymity. They can create fake accounts, use stolen photos, and pretend to be someone else. They can also communicate with multiple victims simultaneously and adapt quickly if one method fails.

For children, all these aspects can be difficult to understand, especially because the danger is not visible. There is no clear signal indicating that someone is dangerous. Therefore, education and awareness are essential. Children must learn that not every friendly person is trustworthy and that personal information must be protected. It is equally important for minors to know they are not alone

and can seek help. If something feels strange or uncomfortable, it is a sign to talk to a trusted adult. They should not fear consequences or believe it is their fault—the responsibility lies with the offender. At the same time, minors should learn some simple rules: do not accept friend requests from strangers, do not send personal photos, do not share passwords or sensitive data, and verify information before trusting it. They should also pay attention to warning signs such as persistent requests, pressure-inducing messages, or promises that seem too good to be true.

In conclusion, the online world is neither completely safe nor entirely dangerous. It is a space that must be used carefully and responsibly. Online offenders exist and use increasingly sophisticated methods, but with the right knowledge and support, children can learn to protect themselves. Understanding these typologies and mechanisms is the first step toward safety.

### **Implications for Societal Support in the Criminological Context**

After analyzing age-specific vulnerabilities and the typologies of online offenders, it becomes increasingly clear that the issue of minors' safety in the digital environment is neither simple nor solvable solely through children's individual responsibility. In fact, society as a whole plays an essential role in preventing and combating these risks. Criminological analysis does not only explain why certain behaviors or crimes occur, but also provides a foundation for developing real, context-adapted solutions.

First, it is important to recognize that minors cannot be considered fully responsible for their decisions in the online environment. As discussed, they are in a developmental stage where the ability to assess risks, anticipate consequences, and resist social pressure is not fully formed. For this reason, criminological analysis emphasizes the context in which these vulnerabilities arise—not only the child's behavior, but the interaction between the child, the digital environment, and surrounding social influences.

Society has the responsibility to create a safer environment for minors, starting with education. It is not enough for students to learn how to use technology; they must also learn how to use it safely. Digital education should include clear explanations about online risks, how offenders operate, and practical steps children can take to protect themselves. These concepts must be presented in an accessible and relatable manner.

In addition to schools, the family plays a crucial role. Parents do not need to be technology experts, but they must be involved and attentive. Open communication is key. A child who feels safe discussing online experiences is more likely to seek help when facing difficulties. Conversely, fear of punishment or misunderstanding may lead the child to hide problems, increasing vulnerability.

Another key aspect highlighted by criminological analysis is the need for effective public policies. State institutions must keep pace with technological developments and create strategies that address new forms of online crime. This includes clear laws, accessible reporting mechanisms, and rapid intervention in abuse cases. Cooperation between authorities and digital platforms is also essential to reduce harmful content and identify offenders more effectively.

Online platforms themselves bear significant responsibility. They are not neutral spaces, but environments that influence user behavior. Through their design, they can promote either safety or risk. Privacy settings, reporting systems, and content moderation are essential tools for protecting minors. Platforms that offer clear and user-friendly tools for blocking or reporting abuse directly contribute to risk reduction. The community also plays an important role. Teachers, school counselors, NGOs, and even peers can significantly support minors. Sometimes, a child may not turn to parents or authorities but may confide in a teacher or friend. Therefore, all individuals involved in minors' lives should be informed and prepared to recognize warning signs, such as behavioral changes, social withdrawal, anxiety, or reluctance to use certain devices.

## Conclusions

Criminological analysis shows that prevention is far more effective than intervention after harm has already occurred. Once a minor becomes a victim, the consequences—especially emotional ones—can be difficult to repair. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on preventive mechanisms that reduce the likelihood of such situations. These include awareness, critical thinking development, and encouraging responsible online behavior.

An essential aspect is fostering minors' sense of responsibility in a balanced way. It is not fair to expect them to manage all risks alone, but it is important to teach them to make better decisions. For example, asking themselves simple questions before acting: "Do I know this person?", "Is it safe to share this information?", "What could happen if this message is shared further?" Such reflections can make a significant difference.

At the same time, it is important to avoid scaring children or portraying the internet as entirely dangerous. This approach may lead either to rejection of the message or unnecessary anxiety. A balanced perspective is more effective, helping children understand both the benefits and risks of the online environment.

Overall, protecting minors is the result of collaboration among multiple actors: the child, family, school, community, state institutions, and digital platforms. No single factor can solve the problem alone. Only through an integrated approach can real results be achieved.

In conclusion, criminological analysis not only explains the phenomenon of online victimization but also provides clear directions for action. Understanding minors' vulnerabilities and offenders' methods allows for the development of more effective prevention strategies. Society has the responsibility to create a safe environment in which children are informed, supported, and protected. Through education, communication, appropriate policies, and active involvement, risks can be significantly reduced. Thus, the online environment can become not only a space for interaction, but also one in which minors can develop safely, confident that they are not alone and that support is always available when needed.

## References

1. Office of Justice Programs, 2000. *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth* [online] Available at: <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/online-victimization-report-nations-youth>.
2. Dort, J., n.d. *Online Victimization of Children: What Police Need to Know* [online] Available at: <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/online-victimization-children-what-police-need-know>
3. Wolbers, H., Cubitt, T., Carter, R. and Napier, S., 2025. *The impacts of sexual extortion on minors: A systematic review*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.
5. Marcum, C.D., Higgins, G.E. and Ricketts, M.L., 2010. *Potential Factors of Online Victimization of Youth: An Examination of Adolescent Online Behaviors Utilizing Routine Activity Theory*. *Deviant Behavior*, 31(5), pp.381–410.
6. Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K.J. and Wolak, J., 2000. *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.
7. Young, A., Young, A. and Fullwood, H., 2007. *Adolescent Online Victimization*. *Prevention Researcher*, 14(1), pp.8–9.
8. Sutton, S. and Finkelhor, D., 2023. *Perpetrators' Identity in Online Crimes Against Children: A Meta-Analysis*. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*.
9. Springer Nature, 2023. *Users of Online Child Sexual Abuse Material* [online] Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11896-023-09611-4>
10. Journal of Adolescent Health, 2011. *Youth Internet Victimization in a Broader Victimization Context*.
11. National Institute of Justice, 2025. *Online Victimization* [online] Available at: <https://nij.ojp.gov/taxonomy/term/online-victimization> .