Crime & justice research 2022: Online sexual exploitation of children

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**Series**

Special reports

**Abstract**

This compendium brings together 15 recent studies on child sexual abuse published by the Australian Institute of Criminology. The first six chapters investigate the nature of the problem, including the specific crime commission processes offenders use, the language offenders use to persuade children to produce images and videos, the production of child abuse material by parents, and rates of reoffending. Chapters 7 to 11 explore solutions to the problem, from cyber strategies and law enforcement interventions to offender treatment programs, biometric software that helps police identify victims appearing in multiple videos, and warning messages that discourage potential offenders from viewing illegal content. The last four chapters examine live streaming of child sexual abuse, analysing the profile of offenders, whether financial transaction data can reveal the most prolific offenders, and how offenders negotiate with facilitators and access victims.

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**Introduction**

The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) has a long history of conducting research on the

online exploitation of children—the first such study dates back over 25 years. In response to

the rapid growth of this crime in recent years, the AIC has invested significant research effort in

better understanding online child sexual exploitation and identifying ways to reduce the problem.

Supported by funding from the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, the AIC launched the Child Sexual

Abuse Material Reduction Research Program in 2018. This program funded eight multidisciplinary

academic teams to research innovative approaches to reducing the production, distribution,

storage and consumption of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Many of those studies are

reported in this book. These projects were followed by a more in-depth body of research focusing

on the live streaming of child sexual abuse, which had not been covered by the earlier program.

This book reports on 15 studies completed and published by the AIC since January 2019. These

broadly fall into three categories. Chapters 1 to 6 analyse several aspects of online sexual

exploitation of children and shed light on issues that demand further attention. Chapters 7 to 11

explore approaches that might be taken to tackle the problem. Finally, chapters 12 to 15 examine

the nature of live streaming of child sexual abuse.

Based on a systematic review of the available literature, chapter 1 examines the crime commission

processes involved in producing and distributing CSAM. It describes the typical profile of victims

and offenders and demonstrates the important role played by peer-to-peer networks, the darknet

and encryption more generally in the proliferation of CSAM. As an extension of this work, chapter

2 uses a crime script methodology to unpack the way in which CSAM offending occurs on the

darknet, highlighting three key stages: (1) crime set-up, (2) crime completion and (3) crime

continuation. Chapter 3 examines self-produced CSAM, focusing on the language offenders use

to persuade children to produce images and videos that are then widely circulated online. This

research identifies the variety of tactics used in online chat, outlining 72 discrete linguistic tactics

grouped into eight themes. Chapter 4 focuses on a particular group of perpetrators—the children’s

parents and parental figures, who account for a significant proportion of CSAM producers. In

particular, it describes the roles played by biological mothers, biological fathers, stepfathers, foster

fathers and mothers’ partners.

Chapters 5 and 6 are slightly different to the preceding four, in that they address the prevalence

of child sexual abuse more generally, although they also highlight the extent to which offending

occurs online. Chapter 5 reports the results of a rapid evidence assessment of the available

literature on the extent of reoffending by child sexual offenders. It shows that non-contact

(typically online) offenders are characterised by lower levels of recidivism, based on official

sanctions, than contact offenders. Escalation in offending is also low, with between one and eight

percent of non-contact offenders escalating to contact offending. Chapter 6 examines the results

of an empirical study of recidivism among child sexual offenders in New South Wales. It shows that

seven percent committed another sexual offence within 10 years, and recidivism ranged from six

percent for child sexual assault offenders to nine percent for CSAM offenders.

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Where approaches to addressing the online sexual exploitation of children are concerned,

chapter 7 provides an overview of the literature, identifying five cyber strategies to reduce the

problem. These include peer-to-peer network monitoring, automated CSAM detection tools, web

crawlers that can identify CSAM sites, pop-up warning messages, and facial recognition. Focusing

more specifically on criminal justice responses to CSAM offending, however, identified little robust

evidence of effective interventions. A systematic review of the available literature, reported in

chapter 8, identifies a number of effective police interventions. Specialist cybercrime task forces

and departments tend to result in a higher number of CSAM investigations and arrests, while

specialist training for officers also seems to increase CSAM investigations. In addition, the tactical

use of polygraphs can lead child sexual abuse suspects with no prior sexual offending history to

admit to having committed such offences. Other criminal justice measures include providing a

budget for expert consultation in CSAM prosecutions.

Chapter 9 describes the development of a new group-work program for CSAM offenders and

explains why general sex offender treatment programs are not suitable for CSAM offenders.

The next stage of this project will involve trialling the program with small groups of offenders.

Chapters 10 and 11 explore technological solutions to online child sexual exploitation. Chapter

10 describes the development of a new software tool that matches faces and voices across CSAM

videos to help police investigations. Chapter 11 provides the results of an experiment to test

whether pop-up messages are effective in discouraging people from accessing CSAM-related

websites. It demonstrates that warning messages can significantly reduce people’s willingness to

click through to view such material.

The AIC’s work on live streaming of child sexual abuse has focused on understanding the problem

to identify points of intervention. Chapter 12 describes an analysis of financial transactions data

provided by AUSTRAC. It outlines the typical profile of an Australian live streaming offender, along

with the patterns of transactions, demonstrating that the amounts paid and the frequency of live

streaming sessions increase over time. With the same data, chapter 13 uses machine learning to

create a statistical model showing the key factors that differentiate the most prolific live streaming

offenders from other offenders. Chapters 14 and 15 examine the negotiations that take place

online between live streaming offenders and facilitators and describe the different relationships

that exist between them.

Taken together, this significant body of research provides new insights into the contemporary

nature of the online sexual exploitation of children. More importantly, it identifies effective

approaches to preventing and detecting this crime and offers points of intervention that may help

to reduce harm to children. This typifies the AIC’s capacity to produce applied research, fulfilling

its mandate to reduce crime and promote justice by undertaking, funding and disseminating crime

and justice research.