

# SEARCHLIGHT 2025

Technical Notes

## Who benefits?

Shining a Light on the Business of  
Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse



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## Who benefits?

Shining a Light on the Business of  
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STUDY A: Clicks for Cash: The Multi-Billion-Dollar  
Exploitation of Children. A Rapid Review of the  
Economy of Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual  
Exploitation and Abuse (TF-CSEA)

Established by

**HUMAN  
DIGNITY  
FOUNDATION**

Hosted by



THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* EDINBURGH

## 1. Background

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA) causes harm to its victims physically, emotionally and mentally, as well as the harm it presents to them financially. In a study of the cost of sexual offending against children, it was determined that in the United Kingdom, applying the principal of one victim per offender, the lifetime cost was between 1.2 and 1.35 billion pounds (Giles & Alison, 2021). The costs alone do not tell the full story of this crime, which requires looking at the estimated economy surrounding child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and TF-CSEA, which, according to one study, amounts to many billions of dollars annually (Acar, 2017). To better understand the financial impact of this crime and how it has been allowed to evolve, this rapid review seeks to understand the many aspects involved.

## 2. Rationale

This rapid review of the literature from the last 10 years (2014–2024) attempts to contextualise the profitability of TF-CSEA. This is meant to highlight the way in which TF-CSEA has become an economy that involves active and passive participation. It looks at how monetary gain is created for offenders and financial systems, as well as internet and electronic service providers. It discusses how this economy has evolved to provide children with remuneration for their abuse and exploitation to ensure the continued supply of new material.

The study aims to highlight the layers and players involved in TF-CSEA. It breaks down the ways in which technology has increased the capacity for CSAM to be shared and created new ways in which it can be proliferated.

## 3. Research questions and aims

What does the profitability of TF-CSEA look like? How has it evolved? Does the profitability of TF-CSEA extend beyond the direct proceeds of crime? Does this system impact on those who are not directly involved in the sexual exploitation or abuse of a child?

### 3.1 Objectives

This study aimed to identify where and how money influences TF-CSEA. By understanding this, Childlight hopes to be able to identify the proper venues for future research, prevention and response. Childlight also hopes to develop collaborations that promote the safeguarding of technology-facilitated spaces for

children and child users.

## 4. Study design and methods of data collection and analysis

The rapid scoping review format is a flexible and efficient method of gathering data concerning a given research question (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). For this rapid review, academic and grey literature from the past ten years were selected to ensure relevance. Given the rapidly changing nature of technology and associated costs, research prior to 2014 was deemed less applicable to present contexts.

A review of Google, Google Scholar and the University of Edinburgh Digital Library was conducted. The University of Edinburgh Digital Library includes most of the University's subscriptions including EBSCO content, as well as the many physical holdings possessed by the library. The review applied the principles of Boolean search terms for profitability including 'profit\*', 'commod\*', 'commer\*' and 'financ\*' used in combination with search terms for child abuse 'child sex abuse', 'child sexual abuse', 'child sex exploitation' and 'child sexual exploitation'.

The results were then reviewed by screening the abstracts and discussion sections for relevance to the research question.

## 5. Sample and recruitment

### 5.1 Inclusion criteria – for both primary research and scoping/systematic and legislative reviews

The rapid review included all studies and relevant reports, identified through the search terms and databases indicated above, including an analysis of the financial aspects of TF-CSEA. Studies were included if they:

- Were published between 2014 and 2024
- Focused on online and/or TF-CSEA
- Contained analysis on the financial aspects of TF-CSEA
- Included a stated purpose to discuss the implications and impact of TF-CSEA

#### 5.1.2 Exclusion criteria

Studies and reports were excluded if they:

- Were published prior to 2014

- Did not focus on online, or TF-CSEA.
- Did not discuss or provide an analysis of the financial aspect of TF-CSEA.

## 5.2 Sampling

The rapid review found 20 studies that referred to the financial aspects of TF-CSEA. These studies took a variety of forms including systematic reviews, discussion papers, criminal record reviews, book chapters and reports. Twelve of the studies were from social science or academic research. The remaining eight were categorised as grey literature. Six of the grey literature sources were based on reports produced by organisations that focused on safeguarding children from TF-CSEA. The remaining two grey literature sources were a study produced as a part of doctoral research and a study produced by the United Nation Office of Drugs and Crime.

## 6. Ethical and regulatory considerations

### 6.1 Safeguarding and researcher well-being

The study was conducted by members of the Childlight research staff, a specialised child safety institute within the University of Edinburgh whose primary focus is on the analysis of data concerning child sexual abuse and exploitation. Staff at Childlight undergo a series of trainings and wellness activities that attend to the impact of the research subject matter. Childlight, as a specialised institute, also has regular individual meetings with line managers who work in the field and have specific staff devoted to the overall health and well-being of employees.

### 6.2 Research approvals

As Childlight only used publicly available data for its research, a formal ethics review board review was not required. However, for studies such as this, which do not meet the threshold for formal board review, there is still an ethics review process in place via Childlight's internal processes.

### 6.3 Study advisory committee and peer review

An advisory committee made up of academic experts in the field of political economies and profitability was gathered to provide input on the findings, methodology and impact of this research. The members are part of the Lancet Commission Report Group working on global violence against women and children.

The group met on November 11, 2024, and provided feedback on the findings of the rapid review as well as the organisation of same. They provided input on where best to take this research in terms of further study and outputs. Advisors were provided with drafts of the report during the research, which they reviewed and provided comments on. Finally, the advisors provided analysis of the methodology and gave input into the way the current methodology could be adapted for future pieces of research and publications.

The group will meet again to discuss any changes made to the Searchlight report as well as the ongoing development of further publications from this research.

### 6.4 Data management

All extraction and project related materials are stored on Childlight's shared network within Microsoft Office Suite and in accordance with University of Edinburgh and Childlight's data protection policies, found on the University of Edinburgh website – Data Protection Handbook v12.pdf.

### 6.5 Access to the final study dataset

The final data extraction sheet will be publicly available upon submission of the review to an academic journal.

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