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Technical Notes

Who benefits?

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

HUMAN DIGNITY FOUNDATION

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

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Who benefits?

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

Study C: Following the Money: Examining Online Financial Behaviour to Detect Child Sexual Exploitation

Study D: Swipe Wrong: How Sex Offenders Target Single Parents on Dating Apps to Exploit their Children

Established by

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1. Background

Preliminary evidence indicates around 12.4% of people who use dating apps or websites have received requests to facilitate the sexual exploitation of their own children or children they have access to (Teunissen et al., 2022). More than half of people under 18 who use these platforms have received at least one sexually exploitative request from another user who knew they were a minor (Teunissen et al., 2024). Notably, frequent dating app/website use is a key risk factor for receiving requests for child sexual exploitation material. Online child sex offenders spend significant amounts of time online (Babchishin et al., 2014) and are likely to also have frequent access to online dating services.

The analysis for the current study is based on a recent multi-country survey of men representative of the Australia, United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) adult male populations, and was designed with the aim of better understanding the prevalence and nature of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) perpetration. The survey includes many measures relating to CSEA, including sexual interest in children, online and offline sexual behaviours towards children, attitudes towards online CSEA, and engagement in routine online activities. This technical note explains how data for the indicator analysis was collected and analysed while also reflecting on the quality and limitations of the data.

2. Rationale

Current research on the use of subscription-based dating apps to sexually exploit children is based on parent and victim surveys; little is known about the characteristics of these perpetrators. To date, no research has examined the factors that potentially distinguish CSEA offenders from non-offending men who frequently engage in online dating services. Research on actual or potential CSEA perpetrators outside of non-representative clinical samples is rare and often underpowered. Evidence from samples representative of the general population is key for understanding the characteristics of perpetrators who have not yet been, and may never be, detected by forensic and criminal justice agencies.

Online economic activity associated with CSEA is a sorely under researched area. Studies based on nationally representative samples is key for

understanding the economic activities of perpetrators who have not yet been detected by financial and criminal justice agencies.

3. Research questions and aims

Given the lack of prior evidence, the objective of both studies was to conduct exploratory research.

The aim of Study C was to identify the types of online economic indicators associated with men who (i) have sexual feelings towards children, but have not engaged in CSEA, and (ii) have engaged in CSEA, relative to men who have no sexual feelings towards children and have not engaged in CSEA.

The aim of Study D was to compare the factors associated with online dating frequency among three independent groups of men aged 18 years or older who reportedly (i) have no sexual feelings towards children and have not engaged in CSEA, (ii) have sexual feelings towards children, but have not engaged in CSEA, and (iii) have engaged in CSEA.

4. Study design and methods of data collection and analysis

Data were collected from three stratified samples of men aged 18 years or over representative of the Australian (n = 1,939), UK (n = 1,506), and US (n = 1,473) male populations in terms of age, residential region, annual household income, and educational attainment. Selection bias was reduced by applying population weights to the samples using iterative proportional fitting based on benchmarks for six demographic factors (race, marital status, employment status, age, annual household income, and educational attainment) sourced from each country's 2021 census. Data were derived from anonymous online self-reported cross-sectional surveys.

This section describes the variables and data analysis for the economic indicator of CSEA perpetration and online dating.

4.1 Variables

Sexual feelings and offending. Sexual feelings towards children were determined if participants indicated any of the following: (i) sexually attracted to people under age 16 years; (ii) concerned about sexual feelings towards children; (iii) would watch a webcam sex show of someone under

the age of 18 years if anonymity was guaranteed; or (iv) would view CSEA online if anonymity was guaranteed. Engagement in CSEA was indicated if participants did any of the following: (i) knowingly and deliberately viewed pornography of a person below the age of 18 years; (ii) flirted or had sexual conversations with a person below the age of 18 years online; (iii) engaged in a sexually explicit webcam interaction with a person below the age of 18 years; (iv) paid for online sexual interactions, images or videos involving a person below the age of 18 years; or (v) had sexual contact with a person under 18 years of age during adulthood. From these responses, men were grouped according to if they (i) had no sexual feelings towards and had not sexually offended against children (n = 3,812, 77.5%), (ii) had sexual feelings only (n = 566, 11.5%), or (iii) had sexually offended against children (n = 541, 11.0%).

Frequency of routine online economic activities. Participants indicated how often (1 = never; 2 = less than monthly; 3 = monthly; 4 = weekly; 5 = daily), for personal and work use, they (i) purchased items from online marketplaces (e.g., Facebook marketplace, eBay), (ii) used online banking and other financial activities online, (iii) engaged in online romance and/or dating websites or apps, or (iv) engaged in online gaming and esports.

Cryptocurrency. Participants indicated (0 = no, 1 = yes) if they (i) own cryptocurrency, or (ii) have used cryptocurrency to purchase items or services online.

Purchasing sexual content online. Participants indicated (0 = no, 1 = yes) if they have ever purchased (i) webcam or livestream of sexually explicit acts and behaviours, (ii) a subscription for sexually explicit content and services, (iii) nude images or sexual videos from people online, or (iv) any sexual service or content online.

Demographic factors. Participants indicated if they were aged 18–24 years, 25–34 years, 35–44 years, 45–54 years, 55–64 years, and 65 years or older. Respondents also reported (0 = no, 1 = yes) if (i) they had one or more children under 18 years living in their household, or (ii) their work currently involves contact with children under age 18 years. Information on highest level of educational attainment was also obtained (1 = did not finish high school; 2 = Completed high school; 3 = vocational or similar; 4 = university bachelor's degree or higher).

Online dating frequency. Participants reported the frequency of their

engagement on online romance and/or dating websites or apps. Responses coded on a five-point ordinal scale ranging from never (62.8%), less than monthly (8.6%), monthly (6.6%), weekly (11.6%), and daily (10.4%).

Social support. A dichotomous indicator was created denoting participant relationship status (1 = married or de facto relationship; 0 = not currently married, never married, not living with partner, or single). Social support was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Dahlem et al., 1991). The MSPSS includes 12 questions (1 = very strongly disagree; 7 = very strongly agree) measuring perceived social support from significant others, family, and friends. Scores were averaged for each domain and for all items separately.

Friends' engagement in CSEA. Participants indicated (0 = no, 1 = yes) if they have a friend who they know or suspect intentionally (i) looks at CSEA online; (ii) sends sexually explicit messages to children online; or (iii) views sexually explicit webcams or livestreams of children online.

Frequency of routine online activities. Participants indicated how often (1 = never, 5 = daily), for personal and work use, they engaged in (i) online blogs, forums, and interest groups (e.g., Reddit, Quora); (ii) online gaming and esports; (iii) sexually explicit websites (e.g., Pornhub, Xvideos); (iv) private video chatting over apps and platforms (e.g., Zoom, Teams, Webex); or (v) livestreamed videos of themselves online (e.g., YouTube, Facebook live, Instagram live).

Social media platform use. Participants indicated (0 = no, 1 = yes) if they currently used (i) YouTube, (ii) Instagram, (iii) TikTok, (iv) WhatsApp, (v) Twitter, or (vi) Discord.

Privacy tools. Participants indicated (0 = no, 1 = yes) if they current use (i) The Onion Router (TOR) browser, (ii) a VPN, or (iii) currently own cryptocurrency.

Online pornography and solicitation. Participants reported how often they intentionally watch pornography (1 = never, 2 = less than once a month; 3 = two to three times a month; 4 = once a week; 5 = a few times a week; 6 = daily). Participants also indicated if they have ever (0 = no, 1 = yes) been approached online by an (i) adult or (ii) child selling sexual content and/or services.

Analyses were conducted based on the pooled sample of men (n = 4,918) using survey weights, with country-defined strata, and standard errors adjusted to account for poststratification weights. Study C included ordinal and binary logistic regression analyses to examine the economic indicators associated with men who (i) only had sexual feelings towards children and (ii) had sexually offended against children, relative to men who had no sexual feelings towards children and had not offended against children. Study D comprised of a series of ordinal logistic regression analyses examining the factors associated with online dating frequency separately for men who had (i) no sexual feelings towards children and had not offended against children, (ii) sexual feelings only, or (iii) sexually offend against children. Potential moderation effects were examined through formal comparison of odds ratios (OR) and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) using the procedure outlined by Altman (2003). This procedure calculates the standardised differences (d) between effect sizes, indicating if the strength or direction of the association differs between the outcome groups. Standardised differences were converted to ORs to more intuitively illustrate the between-group differences in the magnitude of the associations.

4.2 Data quality and limitations

The perpetrator survey was implemented across different countries and asks questions about experiences over the whole life span. There is variation within and between the three countries in relation to the age of consent and the definition of a child in relation to online and offline CSEA offences, and these definitions varied considerably over time within each jurisdiction. As such, the survey adopted the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's definition of a child as any person under the age of 18 years, and CSEA as any actual or threatened sexual interaction with a person under the age of 18 years.[1]

Stemming from this definition of 'child', there is some ambiguity regarding if certain survey questions only capture criminal or illegal behaviours. Some CSEA indicators may include men who engaged in consensual and legitimate behaviours because of their proximity to age 18 years. For example, participations may indicate that they have 'had sex or sexual contact with a person below the age of 18 while they were over the age of 18' to indicate a lawful relationship between a 19- and 17-year-old.

[1] See World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for the relevant definition of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Nonetheless, as the question is posed in the context of a survey explicitly about CSEA, it may instead be interpreted to indicate non-consensual and/or unlawful sexual interactions with a child. Moreover, responses to other, less ambiguous survey questions (e.g., sexually attracted to people under the age of 15 years; would have sex with someone under age 15 years if no one would find out) suggest the latter interpretation to be most likely. Nevertheless, there is a need for further testing and validation of this survey instrument.

Future testing of the survey instrument could include cognitive testing of the survey questions to examine how participants understand them. Moreover, future testing should also consider biases in this type of survey. Population-based victim surveys have been used for decades, and we know these are biased in many ways. For example, large retrospective victimisation surveys are likely to include some participants who do not disclose experiences of victimisation. Furthermore, such surveys do not capture all parts of the population (for example, younger age groups, and vulnerable populations such as refugees or travelling communities). Similarly, it is important to consider the biases in a population-based perpetrator survey.

It is important to consider that the results are based on a single cross-country study. Although this influential study is the first of its kind, it is not immune to the various biases (e.g., response, recall, and selection bias) inherent in self-report surveys. To move to a more robust level of evidence, updates to the indicator should ideally be drawn from future research replicating this survey across more populations. Moreover, given that all data sources in the field of CSEA will be biased in their own ways, triangulating survey-based estimates with estimates from other data sources such as administrative data will add to the quality of the evidence.

As a final limitation, it should be noted the survey was conducted with men aged 18 years or older. As such, it does not cover female perpetrators or harmful sexual behaviour against children by other children and youths younger than age 18.

5. Study setting/information about the data source

CloudResearch, an online research platform with access to more than 100 million participants globally, agreed to recruit and administer the online survey.

The survey design drew on validated instruments for some sections while other questions were developed by the research team. The following validated measures were used:

- Correlates of admission of sexual interest in children (Seto et al., 2017)
- Interest in sex with children (Seto et al., 2015)
- Offense-supportive attitudes and beliefs (Seto et al., 2015)
- Peer influences (Seto et al., 2015)
- Pornography viewing (Seto et al., 2015)
- Age of attraction (AoA) (Ó Ciardha et al., 2022)
- Sexual attraction to children (Ó Ciardha et al., 2022)
- Proclivity to sexually offend (Ó Ciardha et al., 2022)
- Sexual offending (Ó Ciardha et al., 2022)
- Honesty and debriefing (Ó Ciardha et al., 2022)
- Phq-4: The Four-Item Patient Health Questionnaire for Anxiety and Depression (Kroenke et al., 2009)
- NIDA Quick Screen V1.02[2]
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's screening question on heavy drinking days (Smith et al., 2009)
- Brief Disability Questionnaire (Von Korff et al., 1996)
- The multidimensional scale of perceived social support (Dahlem et al. 1991)
- Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998)
- An adapted version of the child sexual abuse myth scale (Collings, 1997).

Iterative proportional fitting was conducted to improve the representativeness of the sample by calibrating the weight of each participant until the sample distribution was concordant with the population distribution (Speed, 2005) according to age, annual household income, race/cultural background, educational attainment, marital status, and workforce participation. Benchmark weights were based on census data of Australian males aged 15 years and over (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021)[3], UK males aged 16 years and over (Office for National Statistics, 2021)[4], and US males aged 18 years or

[2] https://nida.nih.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/nmassist.pdf

[3] Weighted by age, annual household income before tax ([i] less than $30,000, [ii] $30,000–$49,999, [iii] $50,000–$79,999, [iv] $80,000–$99,999, [v] $100,000–$149,999, [vi] $150,000–$199,999, [vii] $200,000 or more), Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander identity (yes; no), country of birth (Australia; outside Australia), highest level of educational attainment ([i] completed year 10 or below, [ii] completed year 11 or 12 or equivalent, [iii] completed cert 3 or 4, or [iv] advanced diploma/diploma or university degree), marital status ([i] married or living together, [ii] not currently married or living together), workforce participation.

[4] Weighted by age, annual household income before tax ([i] less than £20,000, [ii] £20,000–£39,999,

over (US Census Bureau, 2021)[5]. Weights exceeding the median weight plus six times the interquartile range were truncated to minimise biasing the mean squared errors (Battaglia et al., 2009).

6. Sample and recruitment

6.1 Eligibility criteria – primary research studies

From November to December 2022, survey invitations were sent to stratified samples of men aged 18 years or over living in Australia, the UK, and the US. Of the 7,343 people who consented to participate, 6,577 completed the survey (retention rate: Australia = 92.2%; UK = 87.4%; US = 88.6%). Participants were then excluded if they indicated they were either female at birth, did not identify as male, failed the mid-survey attention check, or reported that they had not answered the questions honestly. An additional 68 participants were removed because they were missing data for one or more demographic benchmark variables used for data weighting. This resulted in an analytical sample of 4,918 participants (Australia = 1,939; UK = 1,506; US = 1,473).

6.2 Sampling

The target sample size was 1,500 eligible participants per country. Given Prime Panels aggregates survey participants from dozens of platforms, the total number of people invited to participate or who accessed the study could not be ascertained. Assuming that the response distribution of child sex offending among adult men is 5%, the 95% confidence interval for the margin of error is ± 1.10%. Stratification categories were limited to the pre-survey participant data available to CloudResearch, which include age, ethnicity (only available for US participants), residential region, annual household income before tax, and highest educational attainment.

[iii] £40,000–£59,999, [iv] £60,000–£99,999, [v] £100,000 or more), ethnic origin ([i] white, [ii] Asian, [iii] other), educational attainment ([i] did not complete high school, [ii] completed high school or equivalent, [iii] vocational degree or apprenticeship, or [iv] university degree), marital status ([i] married, [ii] living with partner, [iii] separated/divorced, [iv] widowed, [v] never married), workforce participation.

[5] Weighted by age, annual household income before tax ([i] less than $25,000, [ii] $25,000–$49,999, [iii] $50,000–$74,999, [iv] $75,000–$99,999, [v] $100,000–$149,999, [vi] $150,000 or more), race ([i] white, [ii] Hispanic or Latino origin, [iii] African American, [iv] other), educational attainment ([i] did not complete high school, [ii] completed high school or equivalent, [iii] associates degree, [iv] bachelor's degree or higher), marital status ([i] married, [ii] separated/divorced, [iii] widowed, [iv] never married), workforce participation.

6.3 Recruitment

The survey was conducted by CloudResearch using Prime Panels, which aggregates numerous market research platforms, each with its own opt-in participant pool profiled on hundreds of variables. Targeted invitations were sent to male participants based on their demographic profiles. Participants were paid an undisclosed amount at the discretion of each market research platform.

6.3.1 Consent

Prospective participants were informed that the survey would take around 15–20 minutes to complete, and they would receive compensation upon its completion (the exact value was undisclosed to the research team). Upon opening the survey, participants were presented with detailed information regarding its purpose, contents, ethical approvals, risks and benefits, information regarding the research team, assurances of anonymity, and the contact details of local resources for those who may experience distress (also presented at the end of the survey). Participants could only proceed to the survey if they indicated they had (i) read the participation information, (ii) understood their right to withdraw at any time without prejudice, (iii) consented to participating in the study, and (iv) consented to the use of their information for the purposes of this research.

7. Ethical and regulatory considerations

The survey was developed by the research team and reviewed by a project advisory group which included representatives from law enforcement, financial intelligence units, government departments, and mental health support services. Funding was provided by Westpac's 'Safer Children, Safer Communities' programme as part of a collaborative research project between academia and civil society. Ethical approval was provided by the University of New South Wales (HC220317).

7.1. Safeguarding and researcher well-being

No risks were raised during the study.

7.2. Study advisory committee and peer review

A study advisory committee was constituted by a range of key stakeholders who met regularly throughout the course of the study to provide input into survey design, review of the survey instrument, analysis of survey findings and project recommendations. These stakeholders included representatives of the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department, Crime and Intelligence Command (Queensland Police), Westpac Financial Intelligence Unit, Australian Institute of Criminology, Bravehearts, Victorian Police, Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation, and eSafety Commission.

7.3. Data management

Each participant was assigned a unique random ID, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. Surveys were hosted on researcher-owned Qualtrics accounts, ensuring that CloudResearch did not access or store responses. Data were password protected and transmitted using transport layer security encryption.

7.4. Access to the final study dataset

Data may be available on request.

8. References

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