TECHNICAL NOTE

The Prevalence of Online Perpetration

INTO THE LIGHT

Childlight global index of child sexual exploitation and abuse prevalence

Introduction

The perpetrator prevalence indicator presents the estimated proportion of men aged 18 years or older in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and the United States (US) who reportedly engage in one or more forms of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA).

To date, most research on the prevalence of online CSEA is based on the number of victims. Research on the prevalence of actual or potential perpetrators outside of non-representative clinical samples is sparse. Prevalence estimates from samples representative of the general population are necessary for understanding the number of perpetrators who have not yet been, and may never be, detected by forensic and criminal justice agencies, as well as the factors that may increase the risk of perpetration among those in the community.

The perpetrator prevalence indicator is based on a new, multi-country survey of men representative of the Australia, UK and US adult male populations, and was designed with the aim of better understanding the prevalence and nature of CSEA perpetration. The survey includes many measures relating to CSEA, including ages of sexual attraction, attitudes towards CSEA, and relationships with perpetrators. However, the perpetrator prevalence indicator only focuses on measures of online CSEA offending, in line with the overall focus of the Global CSEA Index. This technical note explains in detail how data for the indicator was collected and analysed while also reflecting on the quality and limitations of the data.

Data Collection

An online survey was conducted examining the prevalence and factors associated with men's sexual attitudes, feelings, and behaviours towards children. Behaviours were classified as offending behaviours based on international standards of violence against children identified through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. 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 V1.0 [1]
- 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).

Data were collected from three stratified samples of men aged 18 years or over representative of the Australian, U.K, and U.S male populations in terms of age, residential region, annual household income, and educational attainment. Survey recruitment and administration was conducted by CloudResearch (https://www.cloudresearch.com), an online research panel company with access to an international pool of over 1.5 million participants. The survey was reviewed by a project advisory group which includes representatives from law enforcement, financial intelligence units, government departments, and mental health support services. Surveys were administered from November to December 2022. Ethical approval for this study was provided by the University of New South Wales (HC220317).

Initial data was provided by 7,343 respondents. Participants were excluded if they either did not complete the survey, indicated that they were female at birth, did not identify as male, failed the mid-survey attention check, reported that they had not answered the questions honestly, or were missing data for one or more demographic benchmark variables used for data weighting (n = 2,425 removed). Selection bias was reduced by applying population weights to the Australian, U.S, and U.K samples using iterative proportional fitting based on six demographic factors (race, marital status, employment status, age, annual household income, and educational attainment) sourced from each country's most recent census. This was performed to increase the representativeness of the data. The analytical sample comprised of 4,918 participants (Australia = 1,939, UK = 1,506, US = 1473).

Variables, Measures, and Data Analysis

This section explains the variables that were used for the perpetrator prevalence indicator, how each of them was measured, and how the data was analysed.

Survey participants were asked if they had engaged in any of the following types of online CSEA: (i) *knowingly and deliberately viewed*

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

pornography of a person below the age of 18 years;[2] (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*; and (iv) paid for online sexual interactions, images or videos involving a person below the age of 18 years. Participants who indicated engagement in one or more of these types of online CSEA were designated as having engaged in any type of online CSEA perpetration.

The proportion of men who engaged in any and specific types online CSEA was calculated for the pooled sample (N = 4,918) and separately for each country. The stated uncertainty around each estimate for the overall population is a 95% confidence interval based on the sample values. The statistical significance of differences in prevalence across countries and types of online offending was determined using the Wald Chi-squared test. All estimates were calculated using survey weights, and standard errors adjusted to account for the complex sample design resulting from the application of post-stratification weights.

Data Quality and Limitations

The index estimates the prevalence of perpetration for whole populations based on data from stratified samples drawn from the focal populations. Such estimates always come with some degree of uncertainty, regardless of the representativeness of a sample. To create transparency regarding this uncertainty, we have included 95% confidence intervals (reflecting a 95% probability that the true prevalence in the overall population is within the range of the confidence intervals) as well as point estimates.

The perpetrator survey was designed to be used across different countries and asks questions about experiences over the whole life span. This presents some inconsistency in who is considered a child in the context of CSEA, given that the age-cut off demarcating child status varies across jurisdiction, legislation, and time.

As such, the survey adopts the World Health Organisation 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.[3]

Stemming from this definition of "child", there is some ambiguity regarding if certain survey questions only capture behaviours reflecting CSEA. Some CSEA indicators may include men who engaged in consensual and legitimate behaviours because of their close proximity to age 18 years. For example, participations may indicate that they have "had sex or sexual

[2] Please note that the survey asked about 'pornography' and thus this term is used in various tables and graphs, however when referring to this type of behaviour, Childlight uses the term 'Child Sexual Abuse Material' as pornography is often seen to indicate a degree of mutual consent. We recognise that many jurisdictions, including countries in this study, still use the term 'child pornography' in their legislation and this was a term more commonly understood by a general population of men and hence used in this prevalence study.

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

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. Therefore, some of the activity identified as illegal in this study may have been lawful. However, online sexual interactions between a child and adult, regardless of how closely aged (e.g., between a 19- and 17-year-old), are generally illegal in all jurisdictions covered in this study. Nonetheless, this study does not specify the ages of the involved parties at the time of these behaviours. 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 and 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 that these are biased in many ways, for example due to non-disclosure and because they do not capture all parts of the population (for example, younger age groups, vulnerable populations such as refugees or travelling communities). Similarly, it will be important to consider the particular biases in a population-based perpetrator survey.

Given the sampling and data collection strategy for the survey underlying indicator 2, a bias might arise because the population accessing and choosing to participate in online surveys may not fully represent the broader male population, particularly those with limited internet access or distrust in online research platforms.

Another potential source of bias in the analysis for indicator 2 that needs to be explored further is the exclusion of the responses of all men who failed the honesty check (i.e., indicated that they had not answered the survey honestly). It is possible that the rate of offending is higher in this group than in the group of men who report that they have answered the survey honestly. If this is the case, then the data presented in this indicator underestimates the true prevalence of offending. Further analysis of excluded answers and a comparison with the analysis of valid responses would allow us to determine whether this or any other bias is introduced by excluding all responses that fail the honesty check.

It is important to consider that the perpetrator prevalence indicator is 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 perpetrator prevalence indicator should ideally be drawn from future research replicating this survey across more populations, with the goal of pooling multiple prevalence estimates through proportional meta-analysis. 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 that the survey was conducted with men age 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.

Suggest Citation:

Salter, M., Whitten, T., Woodlock, D., Vermeulen, I. Indicator 2: Prevalence of Online Perpetration, Technical Note for Into the Light 2024: Childlight's Global Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Index. Edinburgh: Childlight, 2024.

Link to Registered Protocol: https://osf.io/j7xh2

Ethics Approval: University of New South Wales (HC220317)

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