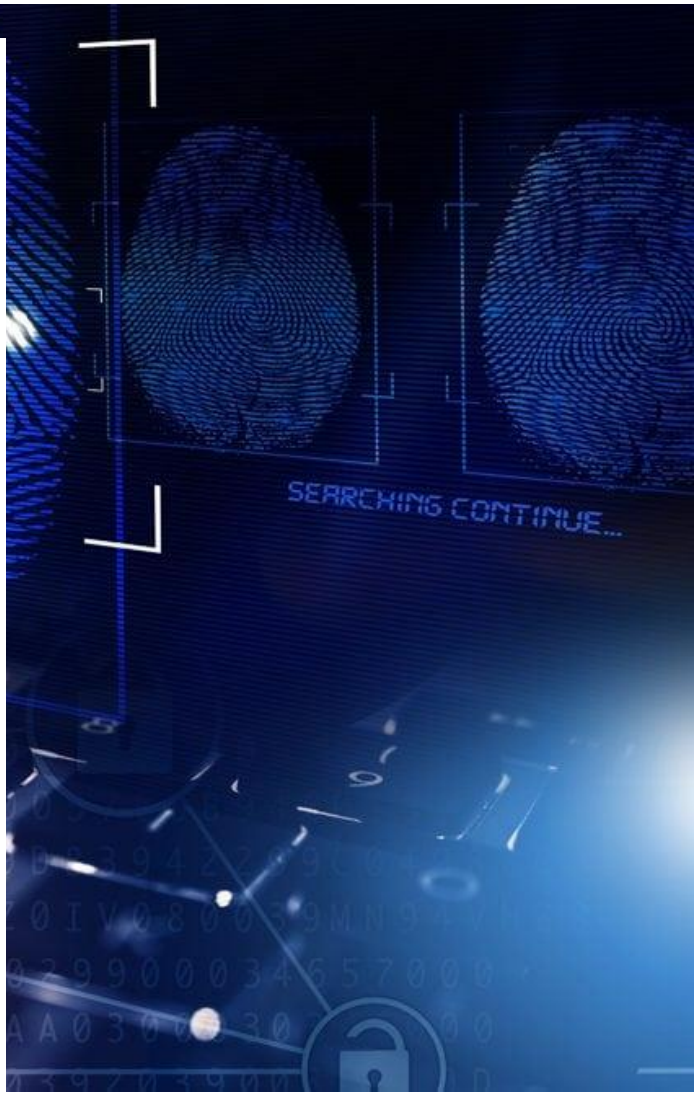
Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: The Views of Police Officers on Offending Involving Indecent Images of Children



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (JULY 2021)

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Introduction and Methodology

This small-scale exploratory study employed a qualitative approach (focus groups). The aim was to expand on previous research on online child sexual abuse and exploitation (O-CSAE) by exploring the views of police officers within the CSAE team in Tarian ROCU on offending involving indecent images of children (IIOC). Access to participants was facilitated by a member of staff at TARIAN ROCU who acted as gate keeper for the research. Two focus groups were undertaken with a total of 8 police officers in Wales, all of whom had experience of conducting interviews with O-CSAE offenders. Focus group 1 comprised 6 police officers - 3 of whom were male and 3 female. Two police officers participated in focus group 2, both of whom were males.

Research questions

- **What is the average profile of offenders who engage in offending involving IIOC (and to what extent, if any, has it changed over the years)?**
- **To what extent, if any, has the nature of offending involving IIOC changed in recent years?**
- **How do offenders justify their offending?**
- **To what extent, if any, do those who engage in offending involving IIOC reoffend?**

Research findings

Key themes

- **Offender profiles;**
- **Offenders' IT skills;**
- **Justification for offending;**
- **Changes in the nature of offending;**
- **The impact of Covid-19; and**
- **Changes associated with the role of policing IIOC**

The **diverse nature of this population of offenders** was highlighted by officers, with offenders drawn from all age groups. On **gender**, officers were of the view that female perpetrators rarely feature. It appears that **offenders' IT skills are often well-developed**, enabling more effective concealment of offending. Attention was drawn, in particular, to the heightened IT skills of registered sex offenders (RSOs) and those who reoffend, who may have learnt from past "mistakes". A **range of justifications** for offending were cited by officers, including: **mental health issues; confusion about sexuality; substance abuse; minimisation of harm, resulting from no direct contact with victims; and sexual victimisation in childhood**. In recent years, officers appear to have witnessed a number of **changes in the nature of offending involving IIOC**, including the **age of victims**; in some cases, the **severity of abuse**; and also the digital environment within which offenders operate, namely in the **downloading of IIOC, the storage of collections, and the sharing of images.**

Isolation as a contributory factor in offending was evident in the responses of several officers in this study: this related to offenders living alone with no social relationships "outside" the internet; being **"socially inept";** retired; and, in particular, due to the **impact of Covid-19**. While officers held contrasting views on reoffending rates, attention was drawn to the extent to which re-offending might result from the confusion and uncertainty evident as to **whether officers should visit offenders at the outset of the pandemic.** Indeed, with telephone contact made with offenders as opposed to individual visits, opportunities to re-offend may have presented. Officers were clearly concerned about the **increasing problem of "youth produced sexual imagery"** (NSPCC, 2021), and the impact of the pandemic on that. While children and young people who take, possess or share nudes or semi-nudes of themselves, or peers, are committing an offence and possibly placing themselves and others at risk, **concerted efforts are made not to criminalise** them. Rather, attempts are made to ensure that children receive appropriate support and advice, and their vulnerability is acknowledged.

Implications of the findings for policy and practice

Key recommendation areas

- **Offenders' IT skills;**
- **Changes in the nature of offending;**
- **The impact of Covid-19; and**
- **Officers' training needs**

Offenders' IT skills

Officers' views that offenders' often well-developed IT skills enable more effective concealment of offending is of concern. The implications of these enhanced skills for **future policing and safeguarding and prevention measures** warrant further consideration.

Changes in the nature of offending

If offenders are to be detected and victims safeguarded, every effort should be made to ensure that **police forces are sufficiently equipped to meet the challenges associated with keeping pace with changes in the nature of offending**, namely: in the downloading of IIOC, the storage of collections, and the sharing of images.

The impact of Covid-19

Isolation: The theme of isolation as a contributory factor in offending was evident in the responses of several officers in this study. The **impact of the pandemic** on this warrants attention, as it is likely that some of the restrictions associated with Covid-19 which compound isolation may persist for some time.

Re-offending: The impact of Covid-19 on the management of offenders also requires some careful thought. With attention drawn by some officers to the confusion and uncertainty evident as to whether they should visit offenders at the outset of the pandemic, and telephone contact made with offenders as opposed to individual visits, **opportunities to re-offend** may have presented.

Children and young people self-producing indecent images: Officers in this study were clearly concerned about "youth produced sexual imagery" (NSPCC, 2021). While some progress has been made on a UK basis by means of recent initiatives such as Childline's 'Report Remove' service, further thought could be given as to **how best to deliver messages about risk within schools through more local policing efforts,** while also ensuring that children and young people feel supported in their own

community. Aligned with this, consideration could be given as to the **impact of children and young people self-producing indecent images on their families.**

Officers' training needs

A number of training needs were evident in data collected for the study. While some gaps in knowledge were highlighted by officers themselves, others were implicit in their narratives, namely:

- On the scale and nature of offending. Some officers referred to the **impact of their workload on their knowledge of the scale and nature of offending involving IIOC**, with some clearly valuing an opportunity to further develop that knowledge. It is crucial that where training needs are identified, they are met, so that officers are fully equipped to undertake a policing role which is so complex and which demands so much of them.

- On the nature and extent of female sexual offending. While officers appear to have limited contact with female sexual offenders, it is crucial that they develop an understanding of the nature and extent of this form of CSA. **Further training, specific to female sexual offending**, would increase understanding and address under-recognition of this form of abuse, which remains so well-hidden and presents considerable risk to children.

- On the barriers that inhibit disclosure of childhood sexual victimisation. As is the case with other males in the general population, sexual offenders are neither likely to disclose or report CSA in childhood or later in life. The numerous **barriers that inhibit disclosure of childhood sexual victimisation** are influential in under-reporting. Yet, such barriers are rarely understood or acknowledged, and this too, could be addressed by further training.

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