



Combating online child sexual abuse

Virtual Global Taskforce Environmental Scan 2012

Public Version

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TASKFORCE



EUROPOL



The VGT aims to make the internet a safer place, identify, locate and help children at risk and hold perpetrators appropriately to account. The Report Abuse button on the VGT website is an effective way to report suspicious online behavior.

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Contents

Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction	2
2. Literature Review	3
2.1 Justification, Advocacy and Motivation	3
2.2 Female Offenders	5
2.3 The Role of the Internet in Fostering Compulsive Behaviours	5
2.4 Links between Online and Offline Child Sexual Exploitation	7
2.5 Online Grooming and Sexual Solicitation	9
2.6 Self-generated Indecent Material	12
3. Law Enforcement Trends	14
3.1 Justification and Advocacy	14
3.2 Access to and Storage of Material	15
3.3 Forensic Awareness	16
3.4 Offender Networking	17
3.5 Online Grooming and Sexual Solicitation	18
3.6 Self-generated Indecent Material	20
4. Future Considerations	21
4.1 Legislation	21
4.2 Internet Adoption	21
4.3 Law Enforcement Concerns	21
5. Concluding Remarks and Opportunities	23
Appendix – Bibliography	24



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Executive Summary

Key findings are as follows:

- Online networks of individuals with a sexual interest in children and the compulsive qualities of Internet usage appear to create environments which reinforce online child sexual exploitation (CSE) and may escalate offending in some cases.
- Mainstream use of the term “child pornography” has been subject to criticism for some years. But there are now indications that it may be assisting offenders in distancing themselves from the abusive and criminal nature of their involvement in online CSE.
- Individuals involved in the distribution of child abusive material (CAM) are increasingly making use of hidden services, anonymisers and encryption, be this by default or by design. Offender networks foster this trend, which is expected to continue in the coming years as broadband speeds increase and the technology becomes ever more user friendly.
- Young people are now actively exploring their sexuality online, as part of the construction of their social identity. Education programmes which aim to restrict such behaviour and generation of social content will as a result be largely ineffective.
- Notable differences have been identified between the methods used in the online solicitation of boys and that of girls, with implications particularly for law enforcement specialists involved in covert investigation. In general, there is a continued shift from *modi operandi* involving deception to more direct and aggressive approaches involving blackmail and threats.
- There is currently some inconsistency in responses to the distribution by young people of Self-generated Indecent Material, and uncertainty in both the academic and law enforcement communities on how problematic behaviour of this nature should be identified and categorised.
- Online CSE will continue to evolve in line with technological developments. In particular, greater levels of Internet adoption in previously underconnected regions of the world are expected to result in the identification of new offenders, new victims and new methods of offending.

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1. Introduction

The Virtual Global Taskforce (VGT) is a collaborative partnership of law enforcement agencies, who have come together across the digital divide to combat online child sexual abuse worldwide. This environmental scan has been commissioned by the VGT Board of Managers. It is a sanitised version of an assessment intended for law enforcement, and is structured in three parts.

The first part comprises a review of the last four years' published research literature on online child sexual exploitation (CSE). This **Literature Review** is intended as a summary of advances in our understanding since the publication of the last VGT assessment in 2008, and to set the subsequent analysis of current trends in context.

The second section focuses on **Law Enforcement Trends**. Analysts engaged in the assessment of global criminal phenomena such as online child sexual exploitation (CSE) invariably face methodological challenges regarding data collection. In the first instance, data on online sexual offences against children is not always collected at national level: this is particularly the case where countries lack national police intelligence and recorded crime databases. Secondly, without exception data is recorded and collected at national level according to the relevant articles of national penal codes. By this token, even where national legislations are approximate, variations in the precise provisions will mean that data collected according to these specifications will never be truly comparable to those of other countries.

While internationally comparable crime data remains something to which to aspire, this assessment consciously takes a more qualitative approach to identifying trends in offending and victim behaviours, and current and future challenges to law enforcement operations. Recognising that quantitative analysis sometimes precludes detailed understanding of criminal methods and techniques, and that the pace of technological development puts up to date analysis of its misuse at a premium, the assessment of current trends is based on the observations of online child sexual exploitation investigators themselves.

The section on **Future Considerations** draws both on the opinions of interviewees and on comprehensive scanning of open source material on legislative, technical, social and organisational developments anticipated in the next four years. It cannot hope to be exhaustive: rather, its intention is to highlight aspects of the evolution of online CSE for which today's decision makers may need to prepare.

Europol wishes to express its gratitude to the law enforcement specialists from VGT agencies and from EU Member States for being so generous with their very limited time, and providing invaluable insight into current trends in online CSE.

The logo for the Virtual Global Taskforce is a large, light blue stylized figure of a person with arms raised in a 'V' shape. Below the figure, the words 'VIRTUAL GLOBAL TASKFORCE' are written in a large, bold, light blue sans-serif font.

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2. Literature Review

The subjects of focus for this section have either been expressly requested by the VGT Board of Managers or reflect notable advances in research in recent years. By way of example, demographic analysis of offenders has received considerable attention over the years in both academic and law enforcement analysis, and has therefore not been included, but there are dedicated sections on female offenders and the links between online and offline CSE which reflect new insights into aspects of offending which have previously presented as intelligence gaps.

2.1 Justification, Advocacy and Motivation

Recent research, notably by Carr (2009), Holt et al. (2010), Winder & Gough (2010), and O'Halloran and Quayle (2010), highlights the role of online networks in supporting and validating the behaviours of those with a sexual interest in children¹. For reasons of accessibility and data protection, published academic research into these environments concerns itself largely with open forums. In this context, observations that members of online forums "did not go into graphic detail concerning the actual sexual acts they performed" may be as much a reflection of the security features of a specific environment as of the paedophile subculture, particularly in light of evident preoccupations with legal issues².

The attractions of online networking combine with the compulsive qualities of Internet usage to create a large paedophile subculture which is at once supportive and immediate, and arguably has an impact on individual behaviour³. Online forums foster the evolution of individual justifications into subcultural norms which in turn have the potential to reinforce problematic belief systems and disinhibit offending. Norms apparent in open forums include:

- marginalisation (experience of social stigma, brainwashing of society)
- acting in the best interests of children ("child love", consensual relations)
- legal issues
- security⁴

Advocacy of marginalisation constructs the rest of society as "other", invoking a defensive stance and a keen sense of subcultural identity. As Holt et al. note, such emphasis may contribute to the disinhibition of members, "freeing them to offend as they are already social outcasts"⁵. Notions of child love and consensual relations, meanwhile, reinforce perceptions of adult-child sexual activity as something which does not necessarily injure a child⁶. Such expressions can serve to establish artificial distinctions between "child love" and "child rape", and are often accompanied by an attribution of consent to victims in child abusive material (CAM) who appear to be smiling⁷.

In networks of non-contact offenders, these may be accompanied by justifications which minimise online offences such as the distribution of CAM or sexual activity on webcam in comparison to contact (offline) offending. Moreover, justifications which deny injury, minimise non-contact offending and emphasise the willingness of children to engage in sexual activity have been observed to be more characteristic of Internet offenders than contact offenders⁸. Elliott and Beech (2009) posit that this may be due to contact offenders' greater exposure to the reality that children are not in fact sexual beings, but also draw attention to the "deliberate and stylized nature of CAM" as a potentially contributory factor in this regard.

Legal considerations can colour not only the justifications expressed but also the construction of identity and means of expression in online forums. Besides enabling interpretations which minimise certain offending behaviours, pseudo-legal arguments may be introduced not only to legitimise offending but also to heroise individual behaviours. Analysis of one open forum reveals posters who claimed to confine themselves to non-contact offending because they would not want to expose a child to the social stigma attached to offline sexual activity, while others argued for the decriminalisation of CAM possession by appealing to statistics apparently showing increased numbers of child abductions, rapes and murders in countries subject to more recent criminalisation⁹. Given that these arguments may be deployed as much to persuade

¹ Holt, Blevins & Burkert (2010) 4; O'Halloran & Quayle (2010) 80

² Holt, Blevins & Burkert (2010) 12

³ Ibid. 5

⁴ Ibid. 8

⁵ Ibid. 21; O'Halloran & Quayle (2010) 76

⁶ O'Halloran & Quayle (2010) 77

⁷ Holt, Blevins & Burkert (2010) 14; Winder & Gough (2010) 130; cf. Sheehan & Sullivan (2010) 155

⁸ Cf. Howitt & Sheldon (2007) 482

⁹ Holt, Blevins & Burkert (2010) 13; cf. O'Halloran & Quayle's ((2010) 79) observation of some Usenet newsgroup members "basking in reflected glory"

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other members as to justify individual behaviours, analysis of online forums reveals the extent to which individuals' justifications in turn have the potential to affect the beliefs and behaviour of others.

None of these justifications are decidedly new¹⁰. Rather, it seems that while the justifications remain largely the same, the technology provides greater opportunity for disinhibited networking and reinforcement.

In addition to the above Winder and Gough (2010) identify a central theme of self-distancing in the accounts of Internet sex offenders, which includes rejection of the label of "offender", dismissal of CAM as sexually arousing, an inability to control one's own actions, experience of sexual abuse in childhood and access to CAM for research purposes¹¹. Of particular note is the line of defence of victim ignorance used by CAM offenders – specifically that the children in the material will never know that they have masturbated over them¹². As the discussion of recent research into grooming and online solicitation will highlight later in this section, such a justification is very far from the experience of some victims.

Articulation of the victim experience of course gives the lie to this form of justification. In particular, Leonard (2010) notes that victims of Internet offending not only feel unsafe using technology but also in the world at large due to the possibility of encountering someone who has seen images in which they have been abused. Children depicted in CAM continue to feel victimised and misrepresented, especially in cases where the images distributed appear to show them enjoying themselves¹³. In stark contrast to the assessment of the subject in Winder and Gough's research above, victims not only can feel guilt for performing the actions recorded but are also acutely aware of how downloaders who are unknown to them will use their image¹⁴.

The notion of CAM offending as victimless aligns to a certain degree with some offenders' location of these activities in the private, fantasy realm, "where the children become almost fictional images, thereby breaking the link with the acts of abuse required to produce such images"¹⁵. Of note, Winder and Gough raise the possibility that the normative connotations of the term "child pornography" may exacerbate this by minimising the abusive and criminal nature of the offences committed¹⁶.

As might be expected, Seto et al. (2010) have found evidence that explanations expressed by CAM offenders may be subject to change, with marked discrepancies between police and clinical samples. Between one third and one half of CAM offenders sampled were found to have changed their explanations for offending at some point¹⁷. Offenders in the study's police sample were more likely to give no or only one explanation, while those in the clinical sample were more likely to give multiple and sometimes contradictory explanations for CAM use¹⁸. Naturally, offenders may be much more reluctant to talk at length about their offending while in police custody; it may also be the case that treatment gives offenders the tools to better articulate their reasons for offending. Further comparative analysis would be required to test these assumptions.

Open forums especially can reflect concerns for remaining within the law when posting. Accordingly, narratives of offending may be routinely disguised as dream sequences or similar, and there are often rules about what may be posted, included bans on images¹⁹. With security in mind a range of practices may be advised, including the use of encryption, concealment of storage media, use of proxies, wiping of files and clearing of caches²⁰. As Holt et al. assert, by identifying less risky methods of offending this kind of information may also make offending more likely²¹. In this context, the apparent circulation of misconceptions and misinformation – for example, that the police use real children in Internet stings – again highlights the extent to which members of these forums may entertain untruths and inaccuracies in the interests of legitimising their activities and identities²². Additionally, online forums for individuals with a sexual interest in

¹⁰ Cf. O'Halloran & Quayle (2010) 83 for the persistence of previously used justifications in Usenet newsgroups

¹¹ Winder & Gough (2010) 128

¹² Ibid. 130

¹³ Leonard (2010) 252

¹⁴ Ibid. 253f.

¹⁵ Winder & Gough (2010) 132; cf. O'Halloran & Quayle (2010) 78

¹⁶ Winder & Gough (2010) 138

¹⁷ Seto et al. (2010) 178

¹⁸ Ibid. 176

¹⁹ Holt et al. (2010) 15

²⁰ Ibid. ad loc. it.

²¹ Ibid. 21

²² Ibid. 17

children can provide valuable information to members on methods for approaching children and evading detection by parents²³.

2.2 Female Offenders

While female online CSE offenders are still rare in criminal justice systems, the increasing amount of research on females with a sexual interest in children and analysis of open forums reveals similarities, but also notable differences, in motivations for male and female offending and justifications used²⁴. Lambert and O'Halloran (2008) identified a clear sexual motivation for female membership of online forums²⁵. Elliott and Ashfield (2011), meanwhile, have observed some female offenders to hold beliefs that children can initiate sexual activity, that children in CAM enjoy the sexual abuse depicted because they are smiling, and that sexual activity is not morally wrong but merely happens to be illegal in their country²⁶. Additionally, female offenders may justify their sexual activity with children by appeal to the implicit theory that men are dangerous²⁷.

Elliott and Ashfield (2011) also note recognition barriers which may benefit potential female offenders, in as much as they may be afforded easier access to victims. It has also been asserted that female offending may be subject to a form of gender bias, which results in perceptions of online solicitation by women "in terms of emotional loneliness, relationship forming and motivated by a need for intimacy, while male online grooming is perceived as predatory, impersonal and motivated by sexual gratification"²⁸.

Personal motivations for female offenders have so far been found to be broadly the same as those for male offenders, namely early sexualisation, poor socialisation and low self-esteem²⁹. For the specific group of male-associated female offenders (i.e. those who assist males in the commission of CSE), "There is evidence that frequent, intense online communication can: (1) accelerate the perception of intimacy and level of self-disclosure, which may provide males with personal information that aids the process in the grooming; and (2) negatively influence women's decisions regarding engagement in risky sexual behaviours"³⁰. Clearly, however, the comparatively small number of identified female offenders currently precludes more conclusive findings.

If we accept Holt et al.'s assertion that these norms are used to "affect attitudes toward sexual relationships with children, and structure identity"³¹, then there must also be a dynamic relationship between justification and advocacy (the professed reasons for sexual interest in and behaviours towards children) and motivation (their underlying causes).

2.3 The Role of the Internet in Fostering Compulsive Behaviours

"Cognitive distortion" is a term often used when examining child sex offender justifications and the reasoning they use to overcome potential inhibitors to offending. Work in recent years by Ward and Casey (2010) amongst others has stressed the need to view these as dynamic, context dependent and responsive to situational and environmental factors³². In addition to broader social and cultural factors such as employment status and substance abuse, they also bring technology to bear:

While we may not be "natural born cyborgs", we are certainly technology using beings whose capacity for augmenting and extending our sensory experience and amplifying our ability to act upon the world is unprecedented³³.

²³ Ibid. 18

²⁴ Elliott & Ashfield (2011) 93

²⁵ Lambert & O'Halloran (2008)

²⁶ Elliott & Ashfield (2011) 98, 100

²⁷ Ibid. 99

²⁸ Ibid. 95

²⁹ Lambert & O'Halloran (2008)

³⁰ Elliott & Ashfield (2011) 96

³¹ Holt et al. (2010) 8

³² Ward & Casey (2010) 55f; for an alternative explanation of cognitive distortions as "merely post-offence justifications used to avoid punishment or criticism rather than a causal factor in offending", see DeLong et al. (2010) 67

³³ Ibid. 58

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Whether the Internet has a role in increasing offending behaviours is a matter of contention. While the prevailing popular view is that technology itself is neutral, it remains the subject of scrutiny regarding its potential to escalate sexually compulsive behaviour³⁴. Noting the function of sexual arousal as a natural anti-depressant, Wood (2011) stresses the capacity of the Internet for enabling individuals to find gratification while dispensing with the “requirement to take account of the other's thoughts, feelings or mind”³⁵.

Internet technology and sexual arousal therefore work in tandem to divorce the individual from reality, encourage a disregard for authority and regression to a childlike state of sexual curiosity, and transform the object of desire into a narcissistic object: “More than this...the Internet seems to come to represent a corrupt authority which sanctions transgression and the breaching of social codes. Indeed elaborate systems exist to tempt the user to remain online, to visit additional websites or to scan more extreme imagery³⁶”. Lack of censorship could also go some way to explaining the continued popularity of some online forums that one might consider to be outmoded or old-fashioned in technological terms. As O'Halloran and Quayle (2010) observe:

While the Usenet newsgroups were popular in the 1980s and 1990s, their unattractive interface and low signal-to-noise ratio had web users predicting that they would be obsolete by the 21st century...the reason usage of the Newsgroups has not declined is because the forums are mainly uncensored by hosts, and thus groups can exist on any topic and host almost any type of content...they fit the ideal of internet communication in that they are uncensored, peer-moderated spaces for sharing information³⁷.

Counter to this, Sheehan and Sullivan assert that most participants in their study of CAM offenders developed a sexual interest in children before using the Internet, and that this “might suggest that identifying the internet as a motivational factor is a post hoc justification rather than a primary precipitating factor”³⁸. Such an argument may well apply to the current generation of offenders. It remains to be seen whether it will be pertinent to future generations of offenders who will have grown up using the Internet from an early age.

Middleton (2009) discerns a clear link between compulsivity in Internet usage and the phenomenon of collecting amongst CAM offenders³⁹. Taylor & Quayle (2008), meanwhile, see speed of access to a tangible commodity as one reason for the prominence of pornography sales in e-commerce⁴⁰. Coupled with a high state of arousal, this immediacy of access to CAM may therefore have a strong reinforcing effect. This, and what in situational terms might be described as the perceived absence of a capable guardian, serve to lend a compulsive quality to access to CAM⁴¹.

With regard specifically to forums Carr (2009) has proposed that some individuals may become involved in CAM production in order to increase their social status in online networks of CAM collectors⁴². Add to this Sheehan and Sullivan's (2010) observation of one subject's claim that his online contacts' preferences served as an additional incentive for production of CAM with boy victims, and it would appear that – in some cases, at least – online networking has the potential to influence both the scale and the nature of contact offending for CAM production⁴³.

Perhaps somewhat controversially, Wood (2011) further asserts:

The pursuit of child abuse images may gratify more than just Oedipal fantasies of cross- generational intimacy ... It may be that thoughts about childhood sexuality, the abusive treatment of children, and sexual intimacy between adults and children are not the sole preserve of a very disturbed group of people deemed “paedophiles”, but are much more common, are usually experienced as disturbing, and are thoughts that are, largely, kept unconscious and not elaborated⁴⁴.

³⁴ E.g. Wood (2011)

³⁵ Wood (2011) 130; see also Taylor & Quayle (2008) 121 for the disinhibiting, validating and anti-hierarchical qualities of Internet interactions

³⁶ Ibid. 131f., 135; cf. O'Halloran & Quayle's assertion ((2010) 84) that Usenet newsgroups provide members with a “Virtual space free from the potential sanctions present in their offline lives”.

³⁷ O'Halloran & Quayle (2010) 83

³⁸ Sheehan & Sullivan (2010) 155

³⁹ Middleton (2009) 212

⁴⁰ Taylor & Quayle (2008) 120

⁴¹ Taylor & Quayle (2008) 124

⁴² Carr (2009)

⁴³ Sheehan & Sullivan (2010) 157

⁴⁴ Ibid. 137

Accordingly, Internet sex acts as a catalyst to break down the defences which usually prevent the entertainment of more infantile sexual urges widely considered to be taboo⁴⁵, which in turn can potentially lead to people with no previous history of offending into greater proximity with CAM. This position is supported by Briggs et al. (2011), who also note the role of the Internet in facilitating compulsive sexual behaviours which can reinforce isolation and avoidance amongst chat room offenders⁴⁶.

There is perhaps greater consensus about the factors which make individuals vulnerable to the stimulus of Internet sex. For Wood these are as follows:

- depression and tendency to resort to sexualisation as a manic defence
- experience of sexual over-stimulation in childhood
- very unresolved experience of childhood, driven to project distress into a fantasy child
- intolerable anxieties aroused by adult intimacy⁴⁷

In addition, emotional and social isolation are frequently cited as risk factors for the development of strong compulsive Internet use behaviours, online networking with other individuals with a sexual interest in children and contact sexual offending⁴⁸. With regard specifically to adult intimacy, Elliott & Beech (2009) note the role of the Internet in providing “a social outlet for individuals who have difficulties initiating and maintaining relationships with other adults”⁴⁹. It thus becomes apparent that there are key interdependencies between offender justifications, individual motivational factors and the social and compulsive aspects of Internet use.

2.4 Links between Online and Offline Child Sexual Exploitation

The links between Internet based and contact offending remain difficult to define. Amongst recent research, Briggs et al. (2011) have sought to distinguish between “contact driven” and “fantasy driven” offenders, observing that for the fantasy driven group in their sample of 51 individuals the motivation was for sexual climax to occur online (e.g. by viewing CAM or interacting with a child over the Internet) rather than during an offline encounter⁵⁰.

The role of the Internet as an enabler again comes into play here, the suggestion being that “clinically, the chat room sex offenders’ motivation to offend does not appear to stem from sexual deviance or criminological behavior patterns but instead from social isolation, dysphoric moods, and increased social isolation due to increasing involvement in the Internet community”⁵¹. More specifically, it has been postulated that increased involvement in Internet mediated sexual activity may result in a reduction in offline interpersonal and sexual interactions, thereby compounding the emotional and social isolation deemed characteristic of Internet sex offenders⁵².

In 2009, the “Butner Redux” study of Bourke and Hernandez found a high prevalence rate of historic contact offending amongst 155 child sex offenders in treatment⁵³. Since then, a number of publications have challenged this finding, amongst them Seto and Hanson (2011), who stress that this study is exceptional in the recent research literature⁵⁴.

Specifically, there is some evidence of clinical differences between Internet based and contact offenders. Subjects in Babchishin et al.’s 2011 study scored higher in victim empathy and lower in impression management than contact offenders, yet also scored higher in sexual deviance⁵⁵. As Seto et al. (2011) note, “the implication is that online offenders, compared to contact sexual offenders, may have a greater ability to inhibit acting on their deviant sexual interests”⁵⁶.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 136

⁴⁶ Briggs et al. (2011) 87

⁴⁷ Wood (2011) 140; Briggs et al. ((2011) 88) additionally identify a high frequency of diagnoses of bipolar disorder and anxiety disorder amongst chat room offenders.

⁴⁸ Kim et al. (2009), O’Halloran & Quayle (2010) 83f.

⁴⁹ Elliott & Beech (2009) 183

⁵⁰ Briggs et al. 85

⁵¹ Ibid. 87

⁵² Ibid. ad loc. cit.

⁵³ Bourke & Hernandez (2009)

⁵⁴ Seto & Hanson (2011) 5

⁵⁵ Babchishin et al (2011)

⁵⁶ Seto & Hanson (2011) 4

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Howitt and Sheldon (2007) had previously observed that Internet offenders in their sample presented more cognitive distortions concerning the sexual sophistication of children, while Reijnen et al. (2009) found no specific personality profile for CAM offenders compared to other sexual offenders⁵⁷.

Historically, conclusive analysis of comparisons between Internet and contact offenders has been hindered by an absence of large data sets⁵⁸. Seto et al. (2011) have gone some way to addressing this with meta-analysis of the contact offence histories of online offenders. This found that approximately 1 in 8 online offenders had a contact sexual offence history that was known to the authorities at the time of their index offence, while approximately one in two online offenders admitted to a contact sexual offence in the studies containing self-report data⁵⁹. Most recently Carr (2012) has cautioned against extrapolating too much about offender populations from clinical samples, noting in particular that the entry requirements associated with many clinical programmes – including admission of guilt and commitment to change – and the potential impact of contact offence history on correctional outcomes make it unlikely that clinical and correctional samples are representative of the wider CAM offender population⁶⁰.

Elliott et al. (2009) have analysed the largest sample in recent years, comprising 505 Internet and 506 contact offenders⁶¹. Their findings are summarised here.

Contact offenders:

- are characterized by a greater number of victim empathy distortions and cognitive distortions than Internet offenders
- have greater difficulty identifying the harmful impact of sexual contact on a child
- have maladaptive beliefs relating to the sexual sophistication of children that diminish their ability to display empathy
- presented higher levels of emotional congruence with children

Internet offenders:

- are characterized by a greater ability to identify with fictional characters
- do not appear to have the same levels of cognitive distortions or victim empathy distortions
- display a lower frequency of pro-offending attitudes and beliefs that serve to legitimize and maintain sexually abusive behaviours⁶²

The authors conclude that as a result Internet offenders “may be unlikely to represent persistent offenders or potentially progress to commit future contact sexual offences”⁶³. In addition, Carr (2012) places special emphasis on the desire of CAM offenders for social acceptance, noting that “many of the differences that distinguish child pornography [*sic*] and contact offenders concern child pornography offenders' social ties to other individuals and pro-social institutions and desire for ongoing social interaction and acceptance”⁶⁴.

According to Elliott et al.'s schema, were an Internet offender to develop maladaptive beliefs concerning the sexual sophistication of children and a reduction in victim empathy, s/he would potentially present an increased risk of contact offending⁶⁵. Here, too, the situational impact of the Internet is emphasised:

⁵⁷ Howitt & Sheldon (2007) 469; Reijnen et al. (2009) 611, using the The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)

⁵⁸ So Glasgow ((2010) 87) notes that “the sheer volume, complexity and inaccessibility of digital evidence has deterred a systematic analysis of the relationship between downloaded material and potential risk”.

⁵⁹ Seto et al. (2011); cf. Wolak et al.'s (2011) finding that 1 in 6 cases that began with investigations of CAM possession detected offenders who had also committed contact offences; also Bouhours' & Broadhurst's ((2011) 2) finding that 15.5% of suspects of P2P CAM distribution were also engaged in contact child sex offences at the time of their arrest.

⁶⁰ Carr (2012) 97 in Quayle & Ribisl

⁶¹ Elliott et al. (2009)

⁶² In addition, Elliott & Beech ((2009) 191) note that Internet offenders in their sample did not appear to have highly sexualised childhoods; Middleton ((2009) 204) observes that Internet offenders report higher levels of intimacy deficits or emotional dysregulation

⁶³ Elliott et al. (2009) 87

⁶⁴ Carr (2012) 101 in Quayle & Ribisl

⁶⁵ Elliott et al. (2009) 88

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The perceived anonymity, speed, and global character of the Internet and the ability to create virtual social groups all create an environment that challenges conventional notions of social organization and control and creates a substantial potential for criminal behaviour.⁶⁶

By extension, Carr's (2012) emphasis on the role of offender networking in the production of CAM would suggest that forums may be one of the conduits from Internet to contact offending⁶⁷.

Evident similarities and differences between Internet and contact child sex offenders, and the apparent need for due consideration of situational and environmental factors, would indicate that online child sexual abuse is a complex phenomenon with a heterogeneous population which does not admit of a universal approach. As Middleton (2009) observes, "it appears from the evidence available to date, that there is not a substantial generic risk of escalation but clearly there are subgroups of Internet offenders who expand their online activities from viewing to communicating with children"⁶⁸. So also Wood (2011) notes a "highly variable relationship between viewing child pornography [*sic*] and contact offending"⁶⁹.

2.5 Online Grooming and Sexual Solicitation⁷⁰

Recent research has gone some way to exposing a number of myths concerning the online sexual solicitation of children, and the harm experienced by children who engage in risk taking behaviour and are exposed to sexual content online.

The 2011 EU Kids Online final report has found that 30% of 11-16 year olds have had online contact with someone they haven't met face to face, but only 9% have met an online contact offline, and very few found this a problematic experience⁷¹. Online social networking has evolved in such a way as to make expansion of a user's network both inevitable and desirable: accordingly, 40% of 9-16 year old Internet users in Europe had "looked for new friends" on the Internet in the past year, and 34% had added people to their friend list or address book that they had never met face-to-face. Against this backdrop, attempts to restrict children's online interactions so that they engage only with people they already know offline may no longer be effective.

In Europe, 93% of 9-16 year olds go online at least weekly, 60% daily or almost every day⁷². 2% of 11-16 year old Internet users have been asked to talk about sexual acts with someone online and 2% have been asked for an image of their genitals⁷³. This is not to minimise the threat to children's safety posed by online sexual solicitation, not least because there is cause for concern regarding the safety skills of younger Internet users aged 11-13. While 74.5% of 14-16 year old Internet users in Europe said that they knew how to block messages from someone they didn't want to hear from, 69% said they could change privacy settings on a social networking profile and 72% could find information on how to use the Internet safely, percentages were notably lower for 11-13 year olds (52%, 42.5% and 52.5% respectively). This would indicate a need for greater focus on awareness raising measures that target this age group, particularly as the average age for first Internet use in these countries is 9 years old.

Risk factors for victimisation

In recent years a range of factors has been associated with risk of online sexual solicitation. These include:

- Being female - as Svedin (2012) observes, the ratio appears to be 2-4 girls for every boy, similar to that reported for children who are sexually abused offline⁷⁴
- Being of black ethnicity

⁶⁶ Elliott et al. (2009) 89

⁶⁷ Carr (2012) 106, 111 in Quayle & Ribis

⁶⁸ Middleton (2009) 207

⁶⁹ Wood (2011) 139; see also Endrass et al. (2009) *passim*, McCarthy (2010) 192f., Glasgow (2010) 87, 103, Jewkes (2010) 14, Davidson et al. (2011) 55

⁷⁰ As Quayle notes at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 50, "online luring, grooming and solicitation are country-specific terms which refer to a process through which someone with a sexual interest in a child prepares the child for future sexual contact". Recognising international variations in the understanding of these terms, "online grooming" and "online solicitation" this report adopts Davidson et al.'s (2011 8) definition of online grooming as online contact with a child with the intention of establishing a sexual relationship involving cyber sex or sex with physical contact. Accordingly, online sexual activity with a child, for instance via webcam, is considered not as grooming but as an instance of sexual abuse.

⁷¹ Livingstone et al. (2011a) 3 – 2010 data

⁷² Livingstone et al. (2011b) 5

⁷³ Cf. Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak's (2007) finding that 4% of Internet-using youth (10-17 years old) reported an online request to send a sexual picture of themselves during the previous year. Only one out of 65 children actually complied.

⁷⁴ Cf. Baumgartner et al. (2010b) 444, Ellonen et al. (2008), Mainardi and Zraggen (2010), Wolak et al. (2008)

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- Experiencing physical, sexual or emotional abuse offline⁷⁵
- Experiencing a negative parental or family relationship (e.g. alcoholism or a difficult financial situation)
- Social isolation - having few friends
- Lower rates of satisfaction with school and higher rates of truancy
- Having a self-identified homosexual or bisexual orientation⁷⁶
- Alcohol or drug consumption
- Exhibiting rule-breaking behaviours
- Early engagement in sexual activity
- Being disabled
- Experiencing depression.⁷⁷

While there is some consensus that young females may just be the main target group for perpetrators of sexual solicitation, Baumgartner et al. (2010) assert that their use of the Internet primarily for communicating may combine with a propensity to self-disclose and to share intimate details online to increase their risk of victimisation⁷⁸. It remains to be seen whether this observed gender divide in Internet use persists despite continued convergence of social media with other types of platform, including gaming.

Although “the studies reveal that a large majority of youth are restrictive when it comes to exposing themselves sexually online”, it would appear that insufficient family attachment or neglect may be particularly instrumental in the development of a need “to be seen”, leading young people to seek affirmation online. This in turn may make some young people more vulnerable to online solicitation by adults⁷⁹.

Due to their high levels of Internet usage, sexual curiosity and risk-taking behaviour, there is some consensus that teenagers are more likely to become targets of Internet related sexual abuse than younger children⁸⁰. In this respect the focus of awareness raising and education measures on this age group would appear to be well placed, although there remains a requirement to ensure that younger children are fully equipped to protect themselves when using the Internet. This is of particular importance in light of the following finding:

Generally, children who are older, higher in self-efficacy and sensation seeking, who do more online activities (i.e. are higher on the ladder of opportunities) and who have more psychological problems encounter more risks of all kinds online. In contrast, children who are younger, lower in self-efficacy and sensation seeking, who do fewer online activities, have fewer skills, and who have more psychological problems find online risks more harmful and upsetting⁸¹.

The distinction between risk and harm may prove useful not only for victim support design but also for the design of awareness raising measures, since it would appear that, in Europe at least, more skilled children encounter more risk but experience less harm. Specifically, children with more Internet skills are more likely to have seen sexual images or received sexual messages, but those who self-reported harm have fewer skills than those not harmed⁸².

Experience of victimisation

Research indicates that boys use the Internet more frequently for sexual activities than do girls, visiting pornographic websites more often and doing so intentionally; accordingly, they not only encounter more sexual content online, but are less upset by it than are girls⁸³. More generally, there is some evidence that boys are less likely to have had an online experience that they found “threatening”, and are twice as likely to do nothing about any such experience⁸⁴. In this context, the receipt of fewer reports of online solicitation of boys may reflect a greater level of resilience in some cases.

⁷⁵ Cf. Mitchell et al. (2011), who observed a considerable overlap between online and offline victimizations (96% of the youth reporting an online victimization also reporting at least one offline victimization).

⁷⁶ Cf. Lööf at Quayle & Ribisl (2012) 142. In addition, Grosskopf ((2010) 4) has observed that “some offenders target boys who are still coming to terms with, or who are confused about, their sexuality”.

⁷⁷ Svedin at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 39, 41; Suseg et al. (2008); Wolak et al. (2008)

⁷⁸ Baumgartner et al. (2010b) 444

⁷⁹ Svedin at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 41; Svedin & Priebe 2009, Daneback & Månsson 2009

⁸⁰ Soo & Bodanovskaya at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 46; cf. Baumgartner et al. (2010a), Ellonen et al. (2008)

⁸¹ Livingstone et al. (2011a) 30

⁸² Livingstone et al. (2011a) 32

⁸³ Soo and Lööf at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 61 & 99 respectively; Livingstone et al. (2011b) 23

⁸⁴ Davidson, Lorenz, Martellozo & Grove-Hills, 2009), 3f.

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Useful work can therefore still be done to make boys aware of the illegal nature of sexual approaches made by adults, perhaps also emphasising that while many boys may not be bothered for themselves, they could help to stop the sexual solicitation of other young people by reporting their experiences.

It is also evident that different countries experience the problem differently. EU Kids Online's comparative analysis of harm as a result of exposure to various online risks reveals that in some countries, a similar level of risk is less upsetting than in others⁸⁵. While these findings relate not only to sexual solicitation but to a range of online risks, this may suggest that Internet safety programmes tailored to national sensibilities stand a greater chance of success than "one size fits all" approaches.

In addition to cross-national differences within Europe, there are indications that Australian children, three quarters of whom go online daily, are twice as likely as children in Europe to be bothered by something online, and twice as many say that they have seen sexual images online⁸⁶.

Where online solicitation results in the production of CAM (e.g. via webcam) assessment of victim support must also take into consideration the harms attached to continued victimisation discussed above in section 2.1.

Online Solicitation Methods

In terms of *modi operandi*, Svedin notes that "our understanding that 'online predators' use the Internet to gain access to young victims through trickery and violent behaviour has changed as a consequence of new studies in the field which have revealed a more complex picture"⁸⁷. This is certainly reflected in the observations of law enforcement, where blackmail, extortion and aggression are increasingly used in approaches to children at the expense of more deceptive tactics (see section 3.5 below).

As in the case of CAM distribution, the speed of Internet communication and widespread use of social technologies clearly have roles to play in facilitating the online sexual solicitation of children, at once making more young contacts more immediately available. In particular, as Quayle notes, the search capabilities of social media enable the rapid identification of precriminal situations that would be much less available offline⁸⁸. In light of Sheehan and Sullivan's (2010) assertion based on observation of offender selection methods that the availability of a child may be more important than his/her attractiveness, there is good reason to maintain – or in some cases renew – focus on the situational aspects of crime prevention with respect to the online solicitation of children⁸⁹.

Research in Australia has identified possible differences in the methods used to solicit boys and approaches to girls. In her analysis of grooming methods observed in operations in which law enforcement officers posed as children online, Grosskopf (2010) found the following:

Offending behaviour towards boys was noted by some police as being geared towards establishing mutual respect and trust, while with female children it was often structured toward domination. Police suggested that aggressive tactics such as blackmail and threatening behaviour may be used more against female victims. In contrast, the 'boy' invoked protracted conversations where the focus was on establishing a friendship rather than the short-term sexual gratification that typically characterised interactions with a female child.⁹⁰

This has practical implications for law enforcement:

There is evidence to suggest that paedophiles, reportedly with a higher rate of sexual attraction to boys, are willing to procure a child over time with the ultimate goal of committing contact offences. A tendency to focus on securing a quick arrest, rather than engaging in protracted interactions may be excluding some offenders from arrest, although they may represent an equal or greater danger to children. Police may be more successful in conducting protracted investigations in cases involving a 'boy' and concentrating on developing a relationship

⁸⁵ Livingstone et al. (2011a) 31

⁸⁶ Livingstone et al. (2011a) 49

⁸⁷ Svedin at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 38

⁸⁸ Quayle at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 52-54; cf. Wise et al. (2010)

⁸⁹ Sheehan & Sullivan (2010) 157

⁹⁰ Grosskopf (2010) 3

with those who show a resemblance to the cautious and more restrained exchange offender group as they may later progress to more overt grooming tactics.⁹¹

These insights may be of use not only to investigators involved in similar operations, but also to those required to assume a specific gender preference persona in online offender networks, and could also help to inform assessments of immediate risk of harm in online solicitation cases.

When considered in combination with boys' often more positive perceptions of sexual content online, the less overtly sexually explicit approaches made to boys may also go some way to explaining why law enforcement agencies continue to receive a higher proportion of reports of online solicitation involving girls.

In addition to using aggression, research indicates that adults continue to offer a range of incentives for online and/or offline sexual activity, often tailored to the demographics and interests of young victims and responsive to changing consumer trends. These include:

- Money
- Clothing and accessories
- Phones
- Mobile phone and online services vouchers
- Concert tickets
- Virtual items for online gaming environments
- Modelling and performing arts contracts⁹²

With regard to the last of these, the immediacy of the Internet has a role to play here in social engineering, not only making bogus offers seem more plausible, but also encouraging a reduction in the time a potential victim might take to evaluate such an approach⁹³.

Finally, for some offenders there is clearly a dynamic interaction between child abusive material (CAM) and online solicitation. Not only is material produced as a result of sexual solicitation often subject to further distribution; CAM can also be used as part of the grooming process to desensitise children and young people to the idea of sexual activity with adults⁹⁴.

2.6 Self-generated Indecent Material

The last few years have seen a proliferation in public and media attention towards the phenomenon of "sexting" – essentially, the production and distribution of sexual images or content by peers. Although mostly produced for a limited audience – a boyfriend or girlfriend, for example – this content often finds its way to wider peer groups and is distributed and used in ways not intended by the originator. There is, for instance, some evidence that a limited amount of self-generated indecent material is finding its way into CAM collections of online child sex offenders⁹⁵.

In terms of prevalence:

- 15% of 11-16 year olds in Europe and the same percentage of 12-17 year olds in the US say that they have received sexual messages or images from peers
- 3% of 11-16 year olds in Europe and 4% of 12-17 year olds in the US say they have sent such messages
- Just under a quarter of children surveyed in Europe who received sexual messages had been bothered by them⁹⁶

Prevalence increases with age: in the US 8% of 17-year-olds with mobile phones have sent a sexually provocative image by text and 30% have received a nude or nearly nude image on their phone⁹⁷. It is also reasonable to assume that higher

⁹¹ Ibid. 5

⁹² Bryce (2009) 329; Lööf at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 97 & 104

⁹³ Lööf at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 97, and at Quayle & Ribisl (2012) 139

⁹⁴ Quayle at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 51

⁹⁵ Davidson et al. (2010) 2

⁹⁶ Livingstone et al. (2011) 7; Lenhart (2009) 2

⁹⁷ Lenhart (2009) 2

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rates of prevalence may be seen in countries with high levels of camera and Internet enabled mobile phone adoption: according to one recent estimate, in such countries it is to be expected that around 50% of adolescents have sexted⁹⁸.

From a strictly legalistic perspective, where the children depicted are below the age of consent and/or protected by national child protection legislation the children who take the images are producing and distributing child abusive material (CAM). This may be perceived as problematic, but in many senses the issues raised are no different from those associated with the engagement of children in sexual activity on webcam or in video chat environments. Rather, the challenge lies in distinguishing more “innocent” attempts by young people to explore their sexuality which may have unintended consequences from activities which may be more persistent, predatory and exploitative⁹⁹. Lenhart's (2009) US focus groups revealed three main scenarios for sexting: exchange of images solely between two romantic partners; exchanges between partners that are shared with others outside the relationship; and exchanges between people who are not yet in a relationship, but where at least one person hopes to be.

Meanwhile, Ostrager (2010) has suggested a three tier approach, comprising i) young people who send content to one other person or who possess one picture but do not disseminate it ii) “mass” sexters who send graphic content to up to ten people, and “repeat” sexters who send content to up to five people per month and iii) “mass” sexters who send content to more than ten people and “repeat” sexters who distribute to more than five people at different times per month. Quayle (2012) remarks that the numbers chosen to mark these divisions are “somewhat arbitrary”¹⁰⁰: while the attempt to codify the different behaviour patterns is to be applauded, law enforcement officers with experience of explaining why CAM investigations cannot simply be expedited by quantifying the amount of material in an offender's possession may equally feel that volume is not necessarily a valid indicator of risk or threat. Clearly, further detailed research is required for the reliable and routine identification of genuinely problematic sexting behaviours.

From a socio-cultural perspective, there is perhaps a risk that familiarity with sexual performance on camera for peers may reduce the barriers of some young people to online sexual activity with strangers, including adults. To this end, high levels of engagement in randomised video chat by children in some countries may provide opportunities for the reinforcement of behaviours which may put some young people at increased risk of sexual exploitation by adults.

Atkinson & Newton's (2010) finding that “youth identify most sexual solicitations as being from other adolescents” is perhaps a salutary reminder that children and young people may not perceive the distinction between solicitations from adults and those from other young people quite as clearly as do the adult professionals charged with combating online child sexual abuse, particularly in those environments where the age of a contact cannot immediately be established¹⁰¹. Accordingly, Lööf advises that “grooming a child online with the intention of meeting the child offline for sex may...be placed on a continuum where some young people may feel that they are acting voluntarily”¹⁰². In light of this, it may be time to give serious consideration to updating awareness raising initiatives for young people so that they incorporate information on the potential pitfalls of sexual relationships in which there are large age differences.

⁹⁸ Lööf at Quayle & Ribisl (2012) 137

⁹⁹ Cf. Atkinson & Newton (2010) 107; Lööf at Quayle & Ribisl (2012) 137

¹⁰⁰ Quayle at Ainsaar & Lööf (2012) 57

¹⁰¹ Atkinson & Newton (2010) 116

¹⁰² Lööf at Quayle & Ribisl (2012) 138

3. Law Enforcement Trends

In the largest survey of its kind to date, face to face and telephone interviews were conducted with 13 specialists between June and September 2012, of whom 4 represented VGT member agencies, and 9 agencies from Member States of the European Union. Five further sets of questionnaire responses were received in written form - 4 from VGT member agencies, and 1 from an EU Member State. The resulting analysis thus draws on a total of 18 contributions.

The contributing specialists drew on a combined experience of 162 years in combating online child sexual exploitation, an average of 9 years per contributor. Among their daily tasks they cited victim identification, national and international coordination and information exchange, management of operational teams, proactive monitoring, forensic and technical analysis, research and strategic analysis, intelligence development, behavioural profiling, policy development and administration. This diversity of functions has inevitably yielded a rich set of responses.

Questions were designed to fill specific intelligence gaps as identified and agreed by the VGT Board of Managers. Respondents were asked to base their answers on their professional experience in the last four years, and in particular to consider what has changed in that period, and possible future developments.

3.1 Justification and Advocacy

Respondents were asked to give examples of the justifications given by offenders for their engagement in online CSE. They observed offenders pre-arrest (in environments such as online forums) expressing their offending in terms of child love, and identifying children as sexual agents. Additionally, some suspects identified themselves as belonging to a legitimate and victimised minority, and the sexual abuse of children as a modern construction. More specifically some suspects claimed to view their activities as not intrinsically criminal but as just happening to be illegal in their country at the time.

At the same time, a number of respondents noted that suspects in online forums often had no need to justify their activity to like-minded individuals, but rather used these environments to boast of their exploits, at times relaying narratives with clear elements of fantasy in order to impress their peers. In particular, a disregard for the impact of offending on children was observed to be more prominent in closed forums, with children seen as a tool for sexual gratification.

Justifications observed post-arrest are of a somewhat different order. In addition to the persistence of claims of having experienced sexual abuse in childhood, some suspects continue to claim that they are conducting research into online CSE – in some cases with the professed intention of handing their findings over to law enforcement. A recent analysis of VGT data relating to investigations into P2P CAM distribution and downloading found also that offenders with a low level of involvement in online CSE (based on range, length and management of offending, and size of collection) were more likely to deny their offending than those more deeply involved¹⁰³.

Crucially, in a number of cases it has been observed that suspects alter their explanations in order to be accepted by a given audience. This may manifest in seeking to minimise offending during interview, or in the invention of alternative narratives to prevent victimisation during a custodial sentence. Some respondents noted that justifications often depend on what the suspect thinks is already known to law enforcement: for example, by minimising the extent of their offending until such time as it is established by forensic analysis.

Accordingly, access to CAM continues to be explained on the basis that the suspect stumbled upon the material while looking for adult pornography. In addition, some CAM suspects still claim that they have not done any harm because they did not physically abuse a child. Claims of lack of legal clarity are also apparent in the responses: these include professed ignorance of the illegality of CAM possession, of the illegal nature of images featuring victims aged 16 or over, and disputing the age of the victims depicted.

Also of note, some suspects claimed no sexual interest in children, but rather an addiction to the act of collecting (and possessing) material. A number of respondents also noted self-heroising tendencies in some suspects who have professed to confining themselves to online offending in order to protect children from their offline sexual advances.

¹⁰³ Bouhours & Broadhurst (2011) 26

CAM producers, i.e. contact sexual abusers, may likewise profess nothing but good intentions towards children, for instance when travelling sex offenders pay children or families for recorded sexual activity, or when offenders perceive themselves to be fulfilling a parental gap in the lives of the children they are abusing. Associated with this are assertions – perhaps even the belief – that the victims depicted engage in sexual activity consensually, enjoy and are not injured by sex with adults.

The perception of sexual activity with a child as consensual is likewise reflected in the justifications of those suspected of grooming offences. Moreover, grooming victims are often cited as provoking the suspect, proactively seeking out a relationship by starting a conversation online, flirting and sending sexualised images. This in turn enables the suspect to cast him/herself (rather than the child) as the victim in the scenario.

While it is now commonplace to talk of the speed of technological change, according to the respondents the justifications used by suspects of online CSE appear to have remained strikingly consistent over time. Novelties include claims to have been a victim of cybercrime – specifically infection by malware which resulted in the download of CAM. At the same time, a not insignificant number of respondents noted suspects' reference to the role of the Internet in encouraging their offending. While this can in no way be considered to be a legal defence, similarities to research findings on the Internet's compulsivity and disinhibiting effects (see section 2.3 above) and the role of online networking in facilitating offending (3.4 below) would suggest that this justification may reflect genuine beliefs on the part of suspects, rather than merely an attempt to minimise criminal activity to the authorities.

3.2 Access to and Storage of Material

Perhaps as expected, the majority of respondents estimated that a very small amount of CAM is now paid for. Those respondents who felt able to give a percentage estimate (n=11) identified an average of 10.1% of CAM as commercial. The median value of 6.25% is perhaps more representative in this case due to the presence of an outlier value of 40% in one response. This is certainly comparable to the estimate of 7.5% supplied in 2008¹⁰⁴. The wide availability of free material, especially via P2P technology, is felt to be the dominant reason for such a low percentage. A slightly higher percentage of 18% cited in INHOPE's statistics for 2011 may be explained by the fact that this data refers only to websites, and therefore does not include P2P platforms¹⁰⁵.

Some respondents observed that new, and therefore more desirable, material is most likely to be exchanged in non-commercial environments, and that paying by credit card to download from websites – once the most popular method for accessing CAM – is now seen largely as an option for the inexperienced, not least because payment for material by credit card is often accompanied by compromise of the owner's details by organised crime groups. These views correlate with the 2010 analysis of the European Financial Coalition, which found a significant reduction in the number of active commercial sites identified, and that images on these sites were generally "historic and recycled"¹⁰⁶.

In addition, it was noted that an ever increasing demand has made new material so desirable as to be a currency in itself. The value is in the novelty of the image, as a result of which images and videos have become bargaining chips. From an investigative perspective, new material means ongoing abuse and unidentified victims, and for this reason amongst others detection of non-commercial distribution has received greater priority in recent years.

But commercial distribution has evidently not been completely eradicated, and there are indications that it is evolving in response to technological developments and to meet the demand for new material. While some specialists have seen no new cases of commercial CAM distribution for some time, successful international law enforcement cooperation and information exchange can mean that a single investigation in one country can identify numerous subscribers in another.

The demand for new material appears to be reflected in the prices seen by respondents. While individual video clips can cost as little as 10 USD each, and subscriptions as little as 50 USD for 3 months, one video file of new material on can demand as much as 1200 USD. While payments by named and prepaid credit card are still detected, along with money transfer services, virtual payment systems – including peer-to-peer digital currencies such as BitCoin – are misused as soon as they reach the general market. It is therefore reasonable to assume that future developments in payment methods will be exploited by those engaged in commercial CAM distribution.

¹⁰⁴ Baines (2008) 34

¹⁰⁵ INHOPE (2011) 17

¹⁰⁶ European Financial Coalition (2010) 5, 18; cf. Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell (2011) 22, who found that CAM offenders using P2P possessed more extreme images (e.g., younger victims, sexual violence) and larger numbers of images than those who did not use P2P.

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14 of the 18 respondents cited public P2P networks such as Gnutella, eDonkey and eMule as one of the top three means of non-commercial distribution. These networks were deemed to be where the greatest volume of offending is identified, but this was attributed more to the ease of detection due to the open nature of these services than to the extent of their misuse. It was noted that public P2P may also be used by more sophisticated offenders on occasion, for instance to rebuild a collection quickly after accidental loss or apprehension. While one recent study of 103 cases from VGT agencies found national differences in the P2P services used and the seriousness of their offending, it is worth emphasising that these may reflect the investigative priorities of individual law enforcement agencies (including the receipt of cases from other countries) as much as differences in offending behaviours¹⁰⁷.

Gigatribe continues to be the platform of choice for mid-level offenders. The ability to establish closed groups of like-minded individuals for encrypted P2P transfer appeals to those with a desire for both convenience and security. Effective law enforcement activity, however, may be prompting a move to other services: at least one respondent had observed users leaving Gigatribe due to the amount of perceived police presence on the network.

Distribution in closed groups in social media (both Facebook and locally popular services) has also been observed. Contrary to expectations that they would be entirely superseded by more recent social services, bulletin boards (BBS), newsgroups and IRC remain in use. It is thought that some offenders may see greater security in continuing to use a trusted platform and view newer untested services with suspicion. BBS, social media and closed forums serve as meeting points which facilitate a move to one-to-one communication and distribution (for instance on VoIP, email or instant messaging) and to advertise links to content stored on bulletproof hosting sites or in encrypted online storage facilities, for which passwords and encryption keys will be shared directly. There also appears to be some evidence of distribution on public photo sharing sites.

Respondents noted a marked increase in recent years in the use of hidden services like Tor and Freenet. Tor in particular is associated with the more sophisticated offender, in as much as its network of virtual tunnels is designed specifically to anonymise Internet use. A higher proportion of new, home-made material has been observed on Tor, the rationale being that the newer material, the higher the risk and the greater security required. In recent years Tor has become easier and quicker to use, and this is believed to be one reason for its increased misuse by CAM distributors. At the same time, some respondents felt that a wider availability of security advice on online forums for those with a sexual interest in children has made even lower level offenders better informed on how to protect themselves, encouraging them to seek more secure means.

A majority of respondents anticipate that CAM distribution *modi operandi* will develop in line with technological adoption. Increased bandwidth was cited as a reason for much larger amounts of video material seized in recent years, the analysis of which puts considerable pressure on the resources and psychological well-being of law enforcement units. Further bandwidth increases around the world are naturally expected to result in even larger numbers of investigations involving even larger amounts of video.

Also of note, there is some suggestion that CAM offenders may be adopting techniques and services first used by the wider digital underground. Evidence of distribution on hacked web servers and disused address space, and posting of images on imageboards such as 4chan would appear to support this, as would recurrent activity on the part of Anonymous exposing online CSE in these environments.

3.3 Forensic Awareness

Levels of forensic awareness exhibited by offenders appear to interact with the environments used for CAM distribution and to be affected by the investigative priorities of law enforcement units. Accordingly, teams that focus on the more sophisticated offenders tend to encounter higher levels of forensic awareness, while those working primarily on public P2P distribution may see very little. At the same time, identification in the recent VGT P2P study of a higher level of computer literacy amongst offenders with the deepest levels of involvement in online CSE (based on range, length and management of offending, and size of collection) may reflect an increase in technical skill in line with experience in offending, or indeed the extent to which the sophistication of a particular environment for offending may dictate the level of technical skill required for access, even preventing some offenders gaining access to new or more extreme material¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁷ Bouhours & Broadhurst (2011) 10, 22, 29

¹⁰⁸ Bouhours & Broadhurst (2011) 23

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The majority of offenders in the experience of respondents were identified as exhibiting either “some” or “good” forensic awareness, categories aligned with some form of password protection, IP masking, or evidence elimination. Other security measures cited include hard drive partitioning and physical sequestration of portable hard drives and thumb drives, for instance behind false panels.

As the above discussion on distribution methods indicates, however, the security consciousness of an individual offender can be shaped by a number of factors, including the default settings of preferred platforms, previous encounters with law enforcement, considerations of ease of access to CAM when desired, and the influence of other members of a particular online network. As one respondent noted, awareness is not the same as execution. Very few offenders are 100% secure all of the time or in all respects. The collecting impulse and sexual drive of offenders often prevents them from being as secure as they would like.

Equally, offenders cannot entirely control the behaviour of others. Participating in online forums, while necessary to access newer material, was deemed by some respondents to be something of a risk in itself, even in those environments in which administrators enforce security standards. In this respect, anonymity is never absolutely assured.

3.4 Offender Networking

The vast majority of respondents agreed with the assertion that online networks of like-minded individuals with a sexual interest in children may facilitate offending by:

- normalising or legitimising this sexual interest
- providing technical or security advice
- providing advice on how to access or approach children
- providing online locations for abuse to order

Technical and security advice was seen to be extended in particular to newcomers, as a form of coaching. This includes how to produce and distribute CAM, the equipment to use, where to store CAM safely, what not to disclose in forums, and the sharing of encryption keys for remote storage. With regard to access and approaches to children, a number of respondents cited the manuals and handbooks for solicitation methods that circulate in online forums, but also:

- advice on how to effectively manage multiple online solicitations
- information on how to commit contact sexual offences without leaving visible signs of physical injury
- specialist travel advice for those looking to commit offences overseas
- facilitation of offline “parties” at which children are sexually abused.

In addition, online forums may provide storage for archived CAM, information on the location of new material, and – last but certainly not least – fulfilment of needs for social status, particularly for producers, distributors and administrators.

Only 3 respondents agreed with the suggestion that online networks may in some cases prevent contact offences: indeed, the dominant response was that such networks encourage the sexual exploitation of children and young people. This may well reflect the fact that law enforcement is more likely to have recent experience of closed forums dedicated to distribution of CAM and mutual fantasy than of open forums purporting to serve as self-help groups.

Offenders are already known to exploit legal obstacles by using online storage in jurisdictions other than their own, especially those in which possession of CAM is not currently a criminal offence. In addition, the advent of web streaming of video content has enabled access to CAM without the need to download. The mainstream adoption of processing in the Cloud (distributed computing) will see Internet users routinely accessing online resources using virtual machines and storing files on these, rather than on their devices.

The *Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse* (Lanzarote Convention) of 2007 introduced the offence of “knowingly obtaining access, through information and communication technologies, to child pornography”¹⁰⁹. An equivalent offence was identified in 8 of the 15 national jurisdictions surveyed. Variants included offences relating to access with intent to view and registration or subscription to websites. Good practice has been observed in the provision of specialist prosecutors for online CSE charged with keeping with changes in

¹⁰⁹ CETS No. 201, Article 20.1

offending and legislation, while yet others identified the need for common international standards and guidance on the provision of digital evidence, not only for “knowing access” offences, but for online CSE as a whole. Meanwhile, the current and expected plethora of distributed computing services means that many more relationships will need to be established in order to gather this kind of evidence. International organisations like Interpol and Europol can assist by serving as contact points and facilitators in this regard.

3.5 Online Grooming and Sexual Solicitation

The majority of respondents confirmed the provision in their national criminal legislation of offences equivalent to grooming or online solicitation to engage in sexual activity. In the EU, the 2011 *Directive on Combating the Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of children and Child Pornography* has given Member States two years to introduce grooming legislation. In some countries, a request for sexual activity constitutes an attempted sexual offence, while in others proof of grooming requires establishment of sexual intent, or more specifically the intention to meet for sexual purposes. The importance of precision and law enforcement consultation in the development of grooming legislation is highlighted by the experiences of those countries which stipulate that the offender interact with a “child” rather than a person “believed to be a child”, thereby preventing the identification of offenders by means of sting operations.

Some respondents stated that lack of clarity in the distinction between online solicitation (chat with sexual intent) with online sexual offences (e.g. exposure or requests for exposure on webcam), especially at the political level and in the media, can sometimes result in overreactions to the former and desensitisation to the latter.

Regarding the environments in which children and young people are subject to online solicitation, there was general consensus that environments popular with children are necessarily preferred environments for those with a sexual interest in them. A variety of social media services are misused in the online solicitation of children and young people – including globally popular platforms, domestic services in national languages, and age appropriate immersive virtual worlds. National differences were noted, both in the social media services used by young people and, by extension, the locations for online solicitation. Services with largely domestic markets will for the most part enable online solicitation only from fellow nationals. In contrast, services with global reach can facilitate online solicitation by both local perpetrators and those in a different country. This is an important distinction, implying as it does that globally popular services are likely to give rise to (and indeed report) more internationally complex cases.

Some respondents emphasised the persistence of chat rooms as a location for online solicitation, thereby illustrating that as regards popularity they have clearly not been entirely eclipsed by their more sophisticated successors. The section of the interview concerning the “typical” demographics and behaviours of victims provoked complex responses which themselves beg further questions. In terms of gender, 8 respondents identified the typical victim as female. A further 6 respondents identified that both genders were targeted in relatively equal measure¹¹⁰. While a number of respondents indicated that boys may still be underreporting, the above distribution would suggest that law enforcement has begun to see greater gender balance in terms of reporting in the last few years.

Most respondents identified the typical victim of online solicitation as being between the ages of 12 and 17. Pubescence and sexual curiosity were thought to be prerequisites for the lower age limit, as was the reduced parental supervision and greater personal freedoms entailed by the transition to secondary education (high school). This of course does not preclude the online solicitation of younger children, as observations of online solicitation in immersive environments for preteens demonstrate. At the same time, some respondents noted that young people in later adolescence (16-18) were also vulnerable to online solicitation by adults, particularly when they lacked a strong social or family network.

Hence, in the experience of law enforcement there is no single risk factor for victimisation. Rather it seems that a combination of factors relating to gender, age, online behaviour, risk-taking, sexual orientation and offline experiences can make a particular child vulnerable at a particular time. The *modi operandi* used by offenders can also vary according to the victim: so, some respondents observed that boys are more likely to be solicited in role playing gaming environments.

Children and young people aged 12-17 conduct their social lives and construct their identities online. For some years now it has no longer been appropriate to recommend restricting their access to social media or what they choose to post – indeed, we are arguably infringing their human rights in doing so. Moreover, since a young person’s social status is

¹¹⁰ Four respondents did not answer this question on the basis that they do not work on grooming/online solicitation cases.

measured at least in part by the number of friends they have collected online, it is no longer practical or acceptable to ask them to refuse friend requests from people with whom they do not already have an offline friendship.

And yet this was deemed by some respondents to be a risky behaviour, which in turn highlights some of the difficulties faced by those tasked with preventing the online solicitation of children and young people, not least because seeking attention and need fulfilment – further behaviours identified as perhaps making some young people more vulnerable – is a stereotypical teen behaviour.

Respondents also identified sexually precocious behaviour as risky, citing in particular online flirting, sexualised chat, and sharing of sexualised or indecent images. Profile photos in which young social media users are scantily clad or appear to pose provocatively, were perceived as the most visible example of this, and even as an initial means of selection for some offenders. But given that teenagers are necessarily both constructing their social identity and exploring their sexuality online, it is perhaps only to be expected that they will engage in this way. This in turn would suggest a requirement for more nuanced approaches to awareness raising which encourage children and young people to understand the implications of their choices, and equip them to manage risk and unwanted approaches in online environments.

The current trend observed by some respondents for sexualised behaviour on randomised video chat platforms is therefore a natural extension of young people's need to be seen and sexual exploration. But this activity is now being exploited by individuals with a sexual interest in children, employing “sextortion” techniques in particular to ensure continued compliance. “Sextortion” is the popular term for the process by which young people are coerced into continuing to produce indecent material by the threat of exposure, and is one of the cornerstones of this evolved solicitation strategy.

Coercion and blackmail have been features of the online solicitation of children for some time. While some offenders continue to pose as children in order to make contact with young people, respondents have noted an increase in recent years in the use of aggression and coercive tactics to ensure victim compliance. This appears to have been accompanied by a reduction in the time taken by offenders to build an online relationship. From an offender perspective, such immediacy is more efficient, enabling them to solicit multiple victims simultaneously, and resulting in cases involving hundreds of young victims in total.

A number of specialists interviewed also saw a dynamic relationship between coercive tactics and a reduction in rewards offered for sexual activity – the rationale being that many offenders now consider threats to be more efficient than incentives. But it could equally be the case that threats are designed to achieve different ends to incentives. Respondents tended to associate rewards such as money, jewellery, electronic gadgets, clothes and holidays more with solicitation which subsequently moves offline. In numerous cases, mobile phones and phone credit serve as both a reward for the victim and a means for the offender to maintain contact. In contrast, blackmail and threats tended to be associated more with solicitation aimed at online offences, for instance the generation of webcam material or sexual activity on VoIP.

Technically assisted coercion, or the threat of it, remains a feature of the *modus operandi* of some offenders. The threat of elimination or manipulation of a social media profile has been employed to facilitate both online and offline offences. Meanwhile, there is evidence that some suspects have used social engineering techniques reminiscent of phishing scams to gain control of the social media accounts of children¹¹¹. These have then been used not only to blackmail the account holders into sexual activity, but also to access much larger networks of young people. Regardless of the particular online environment in which first contact is made, the dominant offender tactic continues to be to move from public spaces such as social media to private messaging, including phone contact, email, instant messaging and VoIP.

There was some agreement with, and some experience of, the assertion that young people with a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) orientation may be at heightened risk of online solicitation because of their potentially more active online searches for support for their emerging sexual identities. Some respondents also stressed the need to set this within a more general context of marginalisation, which sees differing ability and other groups also as more vulnerable than the general population.

For the future, the majority of respondents naturally expected to see a continuous migration of offending to those online environments which will be popular with children and young people. On the issue of solicitation methods, some respondents expected to see a further reduction in approaches using deception – perhaps as a result of increased awareness on the part of children and young people – and a further increase in threatening behaviour. At the same time,

¹¹¹ CEOP (2012) 10

the view was expressed that logically there will always be new Internet users, and that awareness and education campaigns will need to be sustained in order to be effective.

3.6 Self-generated Indecent Material

In the experience of a number of respondents the need to be seen clearly interacts with the phenomenon of self-generated indecent material. There is limited evidence that this kind of material is starting to appear in CAM collections and be circulated online. This then raises important questions for whether and how law enforcement should notify a young person who may be completely unaware of their victimisation.

This and the social engineering aspects of online solicitation suggest that awareness raising and education programmes should give renewed focus to encouraging children and young people to be more critical in their online interactions, to the consequences of producing this material and how it can be misused – rather than attempting to prevent them engaging in behaviours which enact the exploration of their sexual identities.

Regarding the future of self-generated indecent material there appears to be much uncertainty. One respondent cited the possibility that offenders will increasingly use young people's sexualised behaviour online as a justification for their sexual exploitation. There is also concern amongst respondents about the possible long term effects on young people of increased exposure to sexual content online, and of their own sexualised behaviour, including the production and sharing of indecent images and footage of themselves.



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4. Future Considerations

This section draws both on open source scanning and responses of interviewees to future oriented questions concerning external developments, key uncertainties and challenges.

4.1 Legislation

The 2011 EU *Directive on Combating the Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of children and Child Pornography* obliges Member States to provide for criminal penalties in their national legislation in the form of “effective, proportionate and dissuasive” penalties for the online solicitation of children for sexual purposes¹¹². Member States have until December 2013 to transpose the Directive. In those states which are yet to criminalise online solicitation, it is anticipated that this transposition will result in increased workload for law enforcement units – especially where public reporting mechanisms are introduced – and may demand new skills from investigators. Additionally, the global nature of online CSE means that an increased investigative focus on online solicitation in one country is also likely to result in an increase in the number of referrals to law enforcement partners in others. By this token, the transposition of this EU Directive will not only bring more offences to light, but may well also have an impact on capacity worldwide.

4.2 Internet Adoption

At the time of writing just over one third of the world is connected to the Internet¹¹³. High levels of Internet penetration in North America, Oceania/Australasia and the European Union (an average of 73.2%) are in stark contrast to those of Africa and Asia, where Internet penetration currently stands at 15.6% and 27.5% respectively. Considerable growth is anticipated in these regions in the next few years: by analogy with the experiences of regions such as Latin America and the Middle East who have seen massive increases in Internet adoption in recent years, this growth is likely to bring new victims, new offenders and new criminal methods to light. In particular a dynamic interaction is envisaged with travelling sex offending and online storage and broadcast technology.

4.3 Law Enforcement Concerns

The greatest concern for the future expressed by respondents relates to law enforcement capacity. While this is perhaps not unexpected, especially in the context of the current economic climate, respondents felt that increasing amounts of identified online CSE and pressures to secure convictions may be preventing investigators from fully understanding offending behaviours – thereby hampering efforts at more effective assessment of the risk of offenders to children and young people.

More specifically, lack of adequate resources to conduct detailed analysis of CAM suspects' collections and online activities may result in an approach to investigation which prioritises counting the number of images in an offender's possession to prove the extent of an offence, at the expense of victim identification and understanding of depth of involvement in offending via offender networking and online solicitation of children and young people.

Recent research has questioned the nature of the link between online and offline offending, challenging the notion that possession of a certain amount or severity level of CAM is a valid indicator of the risk posed to children. The experiences of the respondents also tell against this: amongst the opinions expressed were concerns that the quantitative approach to investigation does not detect female offenders, who may offend and engage with victims differently, underestimates the risk posed by individuals who derive sexual gratification from non-indecent representations of children, and may overestimate the risk posed by some offenders who would never have accessed CAM without the affordance cues of the Internet. Investigative teams need time and resources to fully explore offender collections and online activities, and to conduct thorough debriefs in order to be able to provide accurate risk assessments.

In countries where prosecutors have an important role in determining the choice and direction of investigations, more work may need to be done to convince the judiciary of the merit of targeting more sophisticated offenders rather than pursuing easy convictions. Prosecutors and law enforcement will also need to work together to ensure that they have a

¹¹² Directive 2011/92/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, Article 6

¹¹³ Internet World Stats, June 2012 figures

common understanding of the required standards for the provision of digital evidence. International standards would go a long way to achieving consensus in this regard.



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5. Concluding Remarks and Opportunities

Analysis of the recent research literature and law enforcement experience reveals remarkable similarity in their assessments of some aspects of online child sexual exploitation, including the justifications used by offenders, the role of online networking in legitimising and facilitating offending, and *modi operandi* for the online solicitation of children. At the same time, evident differences in findings from analysis of open and closed forums – the former accessible to academic researchers, the latter to law enforcement alone – highlights an opportunity to obtain greater insight by making anonymised data from investigations of closed forum activity available to non-law enforcement researchers for detailed analysis. This may be particularly important in light of the identified role of closed forums in stimulating the production of new CAM, and therefore the contact sexual abuse of children.

Debate concerning the links between online and offline CSE continues. In order to fully explore these relationships further comparative research and comprehensive assessment of online offending behaviours are now required. This means going beyond an approach which seeks to equate the extent of offending with the amount of CAM in an offender's possession, to more extensive analysis of contacts, networks and Internet usage, including by means of offender debriefs. Such an approach would also greatly assist in the assessment of risk posed to children and young people by an individual offender. It is also highly resource intensive, and it is clear that some law enforcement agencies will either need to make greater investments in personnel or outsource more of their research.

It may well be possible to prevent some offences by engaging with potential offenders. There may, for instance, be some benefit in developing international support networks for clinically diagnosed paedophiles who do not want to act on their urges, and helplines for individuals who have recently come into contact with CAM online. This approach is culturally sensitive, and may not be accepted or practical in all countries, but it is nevertheless deserving of consideration as an alternative approach to detection and judicial outcomes. Equally, the clear discrepancy between offender perceptions of CAM distribution as a victimless crime and the experiences of continued victimisation on the part of the children and young people depicted suggests that more can be done to make those at risk of accessing CAM aware of the impact of their offending on victims.

With regard to the online solicitation of children and young people, efforts at prevention should be focused on raising awareness of the consequences of sexualised behaviour online, on skilling young people to remain in control of their interactions, and on equipping them to respond appropriately to approaches of a sexual nature from adults. In addition, further research is required to distinguish problematic behaviours involving mass or frequent distribution of self-generated indecent material from production of content which, while risky, is arguably now a part of adolescent development. This will enable agencies to achieve a certain level of consensus on how such cases are handled in the future.

The logo for the Virtual Global Taskforce features a large, stylized blue letter 'A' in the background. Below the 'A', the words 'VIRTUAL GLOBAL' and 'TASKFORCE' are written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font, stacked on two lines.

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