

Information on the effect on victims of child sexual exploitation



Government
of South Australia

Victims of Crime SA

Child sexual exploitation offending involves child victims who are often difficult to identify and frequently do not have the ability to be personally heard in such criminal proceedings. Serious offending of this kind has a significant adverse effect upon the community generally. This kind of offending involves use of the internet, the world wide web, and therefore both national and international communities are affected.

Offending has included online platforms to find vulnerable children before employing different identities and communication techniques to groom children and ultimately gain their cooperation to produce sexually explicit material. The child victims were deceived into believing they were in a mutually consenting and caring relationship.

Crimes of this kind have significant, devastating, and lifelong impacts for victims. It may, however, take considerable time before victims fully comprehend the impact and consequences of their abuse.¹ This is also true where victims may have perceived the offender to be a 'romantic partner.'² Only when they discover they have been deceived does the true extent of the abuse and trauma emerge. Victims then often experience a sense of repulsion when they think back to "what they had been incited to engage in".³

Child sexual abuse, including abuse that occurs online, is a global public health and safety issue associated with a wide range of adverse outcomes.⁴

¹Malin Joleby, Carolina Lunde, Sara Landstrom & Linda S. Jonsson "All of Me is Completely Different": Experiences and Consequences Among Victims of Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse(2020) Volume 11 Frontiers in Psychology

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⁴ Helen P Hailes MSc and Ronggin Yu, PhD 'Long-term outcomes of childhood sexual abuse: an umbrella review' 2019 Oct 1; 6(10); Lancet Psychiatry 830-839 <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7015702/>>

Sonya Ryan OAM, Founder and CEO of the Carly Ryan Foundation states “the exploitation profoundly impacts the lives and health of victims, in both the short and long term.”⁵

Research indicates that survivors of child sexual abuse are sick more often; have surgery more often; and are at an increased risk of chronic health conditions including heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, gynaecologic problems, hepatitis, irritable bowel syndrome, and fibromyalgia.⁶

There is also significant psychological trauma to a victim with increased risks of mental health disorders (such as PTSD), substance abuse and dependence, trust issues, impaired relationships, self-harm and thoughts or completion of suicide.⁷ In addition, victims experience a pervasive and profound sense of shame. Blame is often wrongly misdirected to victims rather than the offender who groomed them. Indeed, many victims also blame themselves and struggle to accept themselves post-abuse.

Conrad Townson, Principal Advisor – Child Sexual Exploitation, Project Paradigm states the mental health impact follows survivors of child sexual exploitation “far into the future, in many cases disrupting their ability to function normally in daily life”.⁸

The existence of pictures or videos of the abuse or the possibility these may exist is a major source of anxiety for victims. Victims constantly fear an offender will share the child abuse material and when they do, they traumatise a victim in ways that move beyond the damage already inflicted by the physical abuse.

When offenders access child exploitation material, they are accessing the physical pain and emotional trauma of children. The impact of child sexual abuse cannot be overlooked or regarded as an issue separate to child exploitation material.

⁵ Sonya Ryan, Founder and CEO of the Carly Ryan Foundation

⁶ Judy Cashmore and Rita Shackel, ‘The Long-term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse’ (Research Paper, Child Family Community Australia No 11, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Australian Government, January 2013) < <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/long-term-effects-child-sexual-abuse>>.

⁷ B Molnar, S Buka & R Kessler ‘Child Sexual Abuse and Subsequent Psychopathology: Results From the National Comorbidity Survey’ (2001) 91(5) American Journal of Public Health 753.

⁸ Conrad Townson, Principal Advisor-Child Sexual Exploitation, Project Paradigm, (2023) Quote provided for this statement

It is a common misconception that offenders share and distribute child exploitation material for financial gain. Rather, the images or videos are themselves, the currency that are traded. Material with the greatest value is material considered rare or new, material with highly specific content or material that may complete an individual's collection.⁹ Further, those who distribute rare or highly valued material often achieve significant social status within online child exploitation networks.¹⁰

These horrendous crimes against children create insidious ripples that move through the victim, their families, their social networks and extend to the wider justice community.

Law enforcement investigating online child sexual exploitation are also impacted by this crime type. Police in specialised units here and around the world willingly expose themselves to this content in the hope that somewhere amongst the images and videos, there will be a clue that will aid in identifying the child and rescuing them from further harm. They too suffer harm.

The social and economic cost of these crimes is extensive. Where a victim's ability to work is impacted, the cost to society is two-fold: the removal of a potentially productive citizen, and then the responsibility of the state in providing services, support, and income so that a victim can hopefully become productive.

In addition, there is considerable expenditure on policing and prosecuting these crimes and investment in prevention strategies, support services and education.

Online sexual exploitation of children is a crime driven by demand from sex offenders and maintained by those who create child exploitation material whether they be images, videos or stories. It is a violation of human rights resulting in serious life-long physical and psychological harm for victims.

⁹ Internet Censorship Offending : a Preliminary Analysis of the Social and Behavioural Patterns of Offenders. Carr, A. (Author). 3 Feb 2007 Student thesis: Doctoral Thesis
<https://pure.bond.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/28915491/Carr_Thesis.pdf>

¹⁰ Internet Censorship Offending : a Preliminary Analysis of the Social and Behavioural Patterns of Offenders. Carr, A. (Author). 3 Feb 2007 Student thesis: Doctoral Thesis
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Offenders destroy innocence and leave countless child victims to make sense of their identity and their place in the world through a damaged lens.

These crimes are not victimless, rather they are crimes that have ongoing effects on victims, who do not have a voice in these proceedings. In addition, the economic and social effects of the crime to the community are wide reaching and ongoing.

Online resources

There are resources available to help guide children in the safe use of social media and being online.

[ThinkUKnow](#)

[ACCCE - Australian Centre To Counter Child Exploitation](#)