

ATSA Position Statement on Internet-Facilitated Sexual Offending



This position statement by the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers on Internet-facilitated sexual offending was approved in April 2021

Internet-facilitated sexual offending includes a range of different crimes:

- Viewing, trading, or producing child sexual exploitation materials (CSEM; child pornography in legal language¹) to be traded or posted online;
- Making contact with a child, adolescent or other vulnerable person for sexual chats (electronic correspondence) or exploitation such as convincing a child to view or produce pornographic images (e.g., having children take and email a nude photo of themselves);
- Arranging face-to-face meetings to commit sexual offenses (sometimes referred to as “luring” or “traveler” offending);
- Non-consensual sharing of images (sometimes referred to as “revenge pornography”)²; and
- Sextortion (use of sexual chats or images to coerce someone to engage in unwanted behavior).

Both criminal justice and clinical data suggest there have been steady increases in the number of cases prosecuted and, consequently, the number of clinical referrals for these behaviors.^[i] This has resulted in increasing research and clinical attention to this phenomenon.

A primary concern for professionals who evaluate and treat individuals who have committed Internet-facilitated sexual offenses is the risk these individuals may pose for direct contact offenses with victim(s), or future Internet-facilitated sexual offenses such as accessing and/or distributing child sexual exploitation material. Accurate risk assessment is critical to decisions involving prioritizing cases by law enforcement and making appropriate recommendations for sentencing, treatment, and level of supervision. Most of what is known about those who

¹ The term “child pornography” has been criticized as failing to accurately convey the abusive and exploitative nature of such material. Hence, there has been movement toward terms such as child sexual exploitation material (CSEM), child sexual abuse image offences (CSAI) and indecent images of children (IIOC). The term child sexual exploitation material is used here.

² The legal status of the above behaviors may vary by jurisdiction. In Canada, nonconsensual sharing of adult sexual images is illegal and sextortion can be prosecuted as a form of extortion.

commit Internet-facilitated sexual offences involves men who have engaged in such acts. There is no research on women and very limited research on juveniles.

Across studies of CSEM offending³ men, approximately one in 10 has an officially known history of contact sexual offending, and therefore, can be assessed using one of the established actuarial or structured professional judgment (SPJ) risk scales.^[ii] However, the majority of Internet-facilitated CSEM offending men have no known history of contact sexual offenses, although self-report evidence suggests approximately half have committed undetected contact offenses. For CSEM offending men with no official history of any other type of sexual offense, the only validated static risk measure to date is the Child Pornography Offender Risk Tool (CPORT).^[iii] When assessing dynamic risk factors, there is preliminary data regarding the ability of the Stable 2007 to predict future risk for CSEM offending men. This finding supports cautious use of the instrument for treatment and supervision planning but more research is needed.^[iv] SPJ measures are sometimes used to assess the risk of CSEM-exclusive cases but, to date, there are no empirical studies supporting the use of these measures in such cases. Assessing future risk in cases of nonconsensual sharing of sexually explicit images and sextortion has yet to be researched.

Several follow-up studies of CSEM offending men, and specifically CSEM offending men with no known history of contact sexual offending (CSEM-exclusive cases), suggest these individuals present less risk for future contact sexual offenses, on average, than undifferentiated contact offending samples.^[v] A recent British study found that 2.6% of CSEM-exclusive offending men were convicted of a subsequent contact offence over an average 13-year follow up. In contrast, 9.4% of those with both CSEM and contact sexual offenses were subsequently convicted for a contact sexual offense. Of the CSEM-exclusive men who did reoffend, roughly 73% committed another CSEM offense. As such, the base rate of reoffending for CSEM-exclusive cases is low in absolute terms and low compared to men who have committed contact sexual offenses. Should a CSEM-exclusive man reoffend, it is most likely to be for another CSEM offense. The preliminary results of follow-up research suggest criminal history and particularly concurrent or past contact sexual offences, self-reported sexual interest in children, and unstable lifestyle (e.g., substance use problems) factors identify which CSEM offending men are more likely to commit a contact sexual offense in the future.^[vi] It is very likely that these same factors would also predict recidivism among so-called “luring” or “traveler” cases. With regard to risk management, approximately a quarter of CSEM offending men breached a condition of bail, probation, or parole; a majority of these failures were for prohibited proximity or contact with a child or for using computers, usually to contact children or download more CSEM.^[vii]

³Most CSEM offending occurs online, though some CSEM offenses involve physical photographs and other non-digital objects.

A nationwide American study of “luring” offending adults revealed that, contrary to the belief that young children are tricked by “sexual predators” into revealing personal information or meeting in person, all cases reported to police involved teenagers, approximately half of whom were ages 13 and 14, and the majority being female.^[viii] In most cases, the teenagers were aware the perpetrator was an adult and was interested in a sexual relationship. Also, in most cases, the teenagers willingly met with the adult perpetrators (sometimes on more than one occasion) and described the interactions in romantic terms. This research suggests Internet “luring” is more similar to statutory rape type offenses than contact offenses involving physical coercion and/or young children.

Studies that have compared Internet-facilitated and contact offending cases have found consistent differences.^[viii] These studies suggest Internet-facilitated cases are less antisocial and are therefore at less of a risk to commit a new offense or a probation violation than contact offending cases. These studies also suggest Internet-facilitated cases are similar to, or score lower than, contact cases on measures of clinical needs including offense-supportive attitudes and beliefs, intimacy deficits, and emotional problems. At the same time, CSEM offending men are more likely to show sexual arousal to prepubescent or pubescent children than contact offending men.^[x]

Although researchers have suggested several typologies of Internet-facilitated offending, we currently know very little about the treatment and supervision needs of men who engage in Internet-facilitated offending. These typologies include individuals who are sexually interested in children, those who are more sexually indiscriminate, those who are curious, and those who opportunistically engage in Internet-facilitated offending (e.g., an adult male who uses the Internet to gain sexual access to adolescents). Distinctions between what are termed “fantasy driven” and “contact driven” offences have also been discussed in the literature.^[xi]

Effective intervention will need to be tailored to the type of offending and the risk the person poses. For example, an individual who viewed CSEM out of curiosity and is a low risk to offend in the future might require little or no treatment and minimal supervision, while a pedophilic individual who opportunistically used the Internet to gain access to victims and who is a higher risk to offend in the future would require more intensive treatment and supervision. Regulation of access to the Internet and, ultimately, the development of healthy internet usage would be expected to be a central consideration in treatment and supervision. This treatment target is largely unique to this population. Methodologically sound evaluation research is needed to develop effective treatment programs for Internet-facilitated sexual offending. To date, treatment outcome studies suggest treatment can have a beneficial impact on socio-affective functioning.^[xii] However, the impact of treatment on recidivism has not been extensively studied. The research that does exist, highlights the need for careful consideration of the potential benefits and costs of treatment and potential contraindications.^[xiii]

[i] Department of Justice Canada: Research and Statistics Division, March 2019; U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2012

[ii] Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011

[iii] Eke, Helmus, & Seto, 2019

[iv] Brankley, Babchishin, Hanson, 2021

[v] Seto & Eke, 2005; Seto, 2009; Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011; Elliot, Mandeville-Norden, Rakestrow-Dickens, & Beech, 2019 [vi] Seto, 2013

[vii] Eke, Seto, & Williams, 2010

[viii] Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008

[ix] e.g., Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; Neutze, Seto, Schaefer, Mundt, & Beier, 2011; Webb, Crassaiti, & Keen, 2007; and Babchishin, Hanson, and Hermann, 2011; Babchishin Hanson & VanZuylen, 2015

[x] Seto, Cantor & Blanchard, 2006; and Babchishin, Hanson, and Hermann, 2011;

[xi] Merdian, Moghaddam, Boer, Wilson, Thakker, Curtis & Dawson, 2018

[xii] Beier, Grundman, Kuhle, Scherner, Konrad & Amelung, 2015; Gillespie, Bailey, Squire, Carey, Eldridge & Beech, 2018; Middleton, Mandeville-Norden and Hays, 2009

[xiii] Beier, Grundman, Kuhle, Scherner, Konrad & Amelung, 2015; Mews, Bella, & Purver, 2017

References

Babchishin, K.M., Hanson, R.K., & Hermann, C.A. (2011). The characteristics of online sex offenders: A meta-analysis. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 23*, 92-123.

Babshishin, K.M., Hanson, R. K., &VanZuylen, H. (2015). Online child pornography offenders are different: A meta-analysis of the characteristics of online and offline sex offenders against children. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 44*, 45-66.

Beier, K.M, Grundman, D., Kuhle, L. F., Scherner, G., Konrad, A., &Amelung, T. (2015). The German Dunkelfeld Project: A pilot study to prevent child sexual abuse and the use of child abusive images. *Journal of Sexual Medicine, 12*, 529-542.

Brankley, A. E., Babchishin, K. M., & Hanson, R. K. (2021). Stable-2007 demonstrates predictive and incremental validity in assessing risk-relevant propensities for sexual offending: A meta-analysis. *Sexual Abuse, 33*(1), 34-62.

Department of Justice Canada: Research and Statistics Division (March 2019). *Sexual violations against children and child pornography*. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/jf-pf/2019/docs/mar02.pdf>

Eke, A. W., Helmus, M. L., & Seto, M. C. (2019). A validation study of the child pornography offender risk tool (CPORT). *Sexual Abuse, 31*, 456-476.

Eke, A. W., Seto, M. C., & Williams, J. (2010). Examining the criminal history and future offending of child pornography offenders: An extended prospective follow-up study. *Law and Human Behavior, 35*(6), 466-478.

Elliott, I. A., Beech, A. R., Mandeville-Norden, R., & Hayes, E. (2009). Psychological profiles of Internet sexual offenders: Comparisons with contact sexual offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 21*, 76-92.

Elliott, I. A., Mandeville-Norden, R., Rakestrow-Dickens, J., & Beech, A. R. (2019). Reoffending rates in a U.K. community sample of individuals with convictions of indecent images of children. *Law and Human Behavior, 43*(4), 369-382.

Gillespie, S. M., Bailey, A., Squire, T., Carey, M. L., Eldridge, H. J., & Beech, A. R. (2018). An evaluation of a community-based psycho-educational program for users of child sexual exploitation material. *Sexual Abuse, 30*(2), 169-191.

Merdian, H.L., Moghaddam, N., Boer, D. P., Wilson, N., Thakker, J., Curtis, C., & Dawson, D. (2018). Fantasy-driven versus contact-driven users of child sexual exploitation material: Offender classification and implications for their risk assessment. *Sexual Abuse, 30*(3), 230-253.

Mews, A., Bella, L. B., & Purver, M. (2017). *Impact evaluation of the prison-based core sex offender treatment programme* (Ministry of Justice Analytical Series). London, England.

Retrieved

from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/623876/sotp-report-web-.pdf

Middleton, D., Mandeville-Norden, R., & Hays, E. (2009). Does treatment work with internet sex offenders? Emerging findings from the internet sex offender treatment program (i-SOTP). *Journal of Sexual Aggression, 15*(1), 5-19.

Neutze, J., Seto, M. C., Schaefer, G. A., Mundt, I. A., & Beier, K. M. (2011). Predictors of child pornography offenses and child sexual abuse in a community sample of pedophiles and hebephiles. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 23*, 212-242.

Seto, M. C. (2013). *Internet Sex Offenders*. American Psychological Association.

Seto, M. C., Cantor, J. M., & Blanchard, R. (2006). Child pornography offenses are a valid diagnostic indicator of pedophilia. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 115*, 610-615.

Seto, M. C., & Eke, A. W. (2005). The future offending of child pornography offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 17*, 201-210.

Seto, M.C., Hanson, R.K., & Babchishin, K.M. (2011). Contact Sexual Offending By Men with Online Sexual Offenses. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 23*(1), 124-145.

U.S. Sentencing Commission. (2012). *Report to the Congress: Federal child pornography offenses*. Retrieved from https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/news/congressional-testimony-and-reports/sex-offense-topics/201212-federal-child-pornography-offenses/Full_Report_to_Congress.pdf

Webb, L., Craissati, J., & Keen, S. (2007). Characteristics of internet child pornography offenders: A comparison with child molesters. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 19*, 249-265.

Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K. J., & Ybarra, M. L. (2008). Online “predators” and their victims: Myths, realities, and implications for prevention and treatment. *American Psychologist, 63*, 111-128.