



Research report

**The impact of COVID-19 on the risk of
online child sexual exploitation and the
implications for child protection and
policing**

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Executive summary

This report examines the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the risk of online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) from the perspectives of specialist frontline professionals. The report is based on a global survey of specialist law enforcement and OCSE agencies with follow-up interviews. The findings of the study relate to the global OCSE response and are not specific to any one jurisdiction. The study identified that:

- **There were significant changes and disruptions to OCSE professional practice as a result of COVID-19.** Working from home and other COVID-19 safety measures were particularly challenging for professionals engaged in investigations work, managing sensitive or illegal content, undertaking case management, and for those reliant upon multi-agency collaboration.
- **Major increases in reports and investigations into OCSE were not matched by increased victim identification and victim support efforts.** Participant responses indicated that they experienced an influx of OCSE reports, resulting in increased investigations work, however OCSE victim identification and support efforts remained at pre-pandemic levels.
- **OCSE education and prevention initiatives decreased during the pandemic.** Although online risks to children increased during the pandemic, agencies found it difficult to maintain their existing outreach and prevention efforts.
- **The majority of professionals identified increased OCSE offending and risk behaviour as a result of the pandemic** including increases related to: child sexual abuse material, online grooming, activity in online abuse communities, online risk taking by minors, and live streaming of abuse material.
- **OCSE professionals reported a lack of robust statistical measures of OCSE offender behaviour and child risk** as a key constraint when assessing the impact of COVID-19 on online child safety and offender behaviour.

When asked about the **lessons of the pandemic** for online child protection and safety, OCSE professionals called for:

- Increased education and outreach to children, parents and the community about child safety strategies and the risks of OCSE,
- An adaptive and crisis-prepared child protection system,
- Technology industry transparency and accountability to ensure a timely and proportionate response to OCSE,
- Preventative platform and service design to reduce the opportunities for offenders to target children and to improve reporting and safety measures,
- Enhanced support for OCSE victims and survivors, including holistic case management,
- Recognition of the adaptiveness of OCSE offender communities and a commitment to a similarly adaptive counter-responses, and
- A strengths-based approach that acknowledges the strength and resiliency of children and young people.

Key recommendations from the report:

- To integrate OCSE professional stakeholders into the planning of child protection responses to crises and pandemics,
- To diversify outreach approaches for the delivery of OCSE prevention and education initiatives,
- To increase transparency and accountability measures for technology companies in the prevention, moderation, and reporting of OCSE, including a safety by design approach,
- To develop accessible specialised support options for victims and survivors of OCSE, and
- To develop robust measures of offender and child behaviour online.

Introduction

In 2020, the health crisis produced by COVID-19 prompted governments around the world to issue directives and public health orders to control its spread and impact. These measures varied between jurisdictions and included increased spatial distance between individuals (“social distancing”), discontinuation of non-essential gatherings, “lockdowns” requiring citizens to remain at home except under exceptional circumstances, and various quarantine and isolation measures. Under these conditions, information and communications technology took an even more central role in everyday life. The impact on children was considerable. After the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that most countries around the world had closed their schools by the end of March 2020 (UNESCO, 2021), driving children online to continue learning and socialising. Adults were increasingly dependent on the internet for communication, recreation and as part of “working from home” arrangements. The expanded online presence of children and adults prompted concern about potential increases in online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) (Europol, 2020).

For the purpose of this report, OCSE refers to incidents where “an individual (adult, or another child) or group uses technology or the internet to facilitate the sexual abuse of a child, including the production and sharing of child sexual abuse material online” (ACCCE, 2020, p.1). An early view was that the pandemic “has exacerbated existing drivers of online child sexual exploitation, providing new opportunities for abusers”, and thus “it is highly probable that numbers of online child sexual abuse cases will increase” (WePROTECT Global Alliance, 2020, p.2). These concerns have been born out over the course of the last twelve months. WePROTECT Global Alliance (2020) reported that, between February and March 2020, there has been an increase of over 200% in posts on known child sexual abuse exploitation forums that are connected to downloadable images and videos. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) identified a 97.5% increase in online enticement reports from 2019 to 2020 (NCMEC, 2021). Furthermore, the NCMEC

CyberTipline, which receives OCSE reports from the public and electronic service providers, experienced an overall 28% increase in reports from 2019 to 2020 (NCMEC, 2021). The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation reported that, between April and June 2020, a period at the height of pandemic restrictions, there was a 122% increase in public reports of OCSE when compared with the same period in 2019 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021).

Since the mid-to-late 1990s, a global network of “hotlines” or “tiplines” have been established in order to take reports of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and other online harms from the public and from the technology industry (Williams, 1999). The tiplines may be run by charities, police, non-government organisations, government agencies or the private sector, and they respond to OCSE reports in a number of ways, including referring cases to law enforcement, and sending removal notifications to internet service providers. Tiplines and police working in the OCSE field have faced, for many years, escalating reports of CSAM and OCSE in the order of 50% annual increases (Bursztein et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic saw these figures rise even further, and during a period in which many law enforcement and child protection mechanisms were experiencing unprecedented disruptions. Police investigations and home visits by social workers were complicated by the risk of infection, while professionals charged with the responsibility of detecting and reporting incidents of possible child sexual abuse and exploitation no longer had the opportunity to observe children in lockdown. The full impact and consequences of the pandemic for child safety, offline and online, will not be clear for some time. Drawing on the views and experiences of professionals (specifically, tiplines workers and law enforcement) working in the OCSE field, this report adds to the accumulating evidence about the ways in which the pandemic has shaped OCSE risk and existing professional practice.

The research study

This report presents the findings of a study that aimed to document shifts in OCSE offender behaviour and the responses of tiplines and specialist law enforcement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was guided by three research questions:

- What are the experiences of frontline professionals in responding to changes in online offender behaviour and child risk during the pandemic?
- How do OCSE offenders adapt to increases in the online presence of children associated with major crises?
- What policy and practice recommendations could be made to improve online child protection and safety during crisis periods?

This was a mixed-method study involving 1) a global survey of tiplines and specialist law enforcement, 2) interviews with tipline workers and police and 3) analysis of “dark web” offender conversations about COVID-19 and OCSE. This research report presents the findings of the survey and follow-up interviews. The findings of the “dark web” study will be the subject of subsequent publications.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design using an online survey and individual semi-structured interviews to examine the impact and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on OCSE practice, and the views of tipline workers and law enforcement professionals on the behaviour of OCSE offenders during this period. Ethics approval was received from the UNSW Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (#HC200509).

Survey and interviews

An online survey was developed to collect information on the effects of the pandemic on OCSE activities from the perspective of tipline workers and specialist law enforcement professionals (see Appendix – Survey). The survey was developed in consultation with key agencies in the OCSE field who provided feedback on areas of inquiry and the framing of questions. The link to the online survey was circulated to tiplines, specialist law enforcement agencies, and OCSE specific organisations for distribution. The online survey was active for two months in August and September 2020, a period where unprecedented measures were being taken by governments around the world to reduce person-to-person COVID-19 transmission were implemented. Survey participants were tipline workers and specialist law enforcement professionals whose roles were to take and investigate reports of OCSE.

Survey participants were invited to take part in an online semi-structured interview by providing their email contact details at the close of the survey. The interview aimed to further explore their experience of working in the field of OCSE during the pandemic, the effects that the pandemic had on the work and practices, and potential improvements to OCSE responses during times of crisis. Participants who provided their email contact details were sent information about the interview, and those who agreed to participate were asked to provide their written consent. Each interview was between 30 and 60 minutes, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and transcripts were de-identified.

Survey participants

There were 87 people who started the survey, but 10 people did not proceed to the first question. This left the study with 77 survey participants, and 15 of these participants taking part in an individual interview. All survey questions were optional, which enabled respondents to answer all or some of the questions. Survey and interview participant demographics are presented in Table 1. Survey and interview respondents included participants from the Australasian region, North America, Europe, the United Kingdom, Africa and the Middle East.

Table 1. Survey participant demographics

Characteristics		Survey (n=77)	Interview (n=15)
Sex	Female	40 (51.9%)	11 (73.3%)
	Male	37 (48.1%)	4 (26.7%)
Age	25-34	17 (22.1%)	4 (26.7%)
	35-44	33 (42.9%)	4 (26.7%)
	45-54	21 (27.2%)	5 (33.3%)
	55-64	6 (7.8%)	2 (13.3%)
Organisation type*	Non-government organisation or charity	16 (21.3%)	7 (46.7%)
	Government agency	11 (14.7%)	2 (13.3%)
	Law Enforcement	47 (62.7%)	5 (33.3%)
	Industry organisations	1 (1.3%)	1 (6.7%)
Length of time working in OCSE*	Less than 1 year	7 (9.4%)	-
	1 – 5 years	28 (37.3%)	2 (13.3%)
	6 – 10 years	24 (32.0%)	8 (53.4%)
	More than 10 years	16 (21.3%)	5 (33.3%)

* Only 75 survey participants provided information

More specific to participants' work roles, over half (43/75, 57.3%) were in a management role in which they either manage an organisation or a unit (13/75, 17.3%), a team of people (20/75, 26.7%) or had delegated decision-making authority (10/75, 13.3%). The remaining

participants (32/75, 42.7%) had no staff reporting to them and worked in a range of roles such as investigators, analysts, and senior advisors.

When asked about tasks performed as part of their work roles, 60 of the 75 participants who answered this question indicated that they perform more than one task reflecting the multifaceted structure of their work (Table 2).

Table 2. Tasks performed by survey participants

Tasks (participants can perform multiple tasks)	n=75
I investigate cases of online child sexual abuse and exploitation	50 (66.7%)
I take reports about child sexual abuse and exploitation from the public	49 (65.3%)
I categorise images and/or videos of child sexual abuse	42 (56.0%)
I take reports about child sexual abuse and exploitation from technology companies	37 (49.3%)
I try to identify the victims in images and videos of child sexual abuse	32 (42.7%)
I provide support to victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation	17 (22.7%)
I work in prevention, education, or outreach programs	15 (20.0%)
I monitor paedophile dark web activity	13 (17.3%)
I conduct forensic examination of devices seized during investigations	8 (10.7%)

Other tasks performed by the survey participants include supervising investigators, notifying websites of child sexual exploitation materials, and research of complaints received and intelligence gathering.

Interview participants

15 participants opted to be interviewed – two investigations managers (based in strategic roles overseeing OCSE investigations), four tipline managers (responsible for teams of tipline analysts), four law enforcement officers working in the OCSE field, and five tipline analysts who were taking public and industry reports of OCSE.

Analysis

The survey was a mix of multiple choice and short open-ended questions. Quantitative data is reported in simple frequencies and percentages. The survey asked questions about a wide range of professional activities and participants had the option of selecting “not relevant to me” where they were asked questions about activities outside their role. Hence, response rates to many questions are lower than the overall sample. Questions about changes to participants’ professional experiences and activities during the pandemic were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (major decrease, some decrease, no change, some increase, major increase).

Consensus on decrease, no change or increase above 50% has been coded in yellow, and consensus above 75% is presented in this report coded in orange. Open text survey responses were imported into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. Anonymised interview transcripts were also imported into NVivo. All qualitative data was subject to thematic analysis in which text was coded to identify common themes. The report presents a synthesis of survey and interview data, in which interview quotes have been used to illustrate and elaborate on survey findings, and to provide important context to survey findings and conclusions.

Limitations of the study

This is an exploratory study of professional views and experiences in the OCSE field during critical periods of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Survey and interview participants were based in multiple agencies across a range of countries and the findings of the study are not generalisable to all professionals or agencies working this area, nor are they specific to any particular jurisdiction. Instead, the study presents a broad picture of the international OCSE response system. The research study was undertaken during a period of significant demand on OCSE agencies, which may have limited the time and capacity of some agencies to participate in the study. Furthermore, as the child protection impacts of the pandemic

continue to unfold at the time of writing, it is possible that tiplines and law enforcement agencies have developed new initiatives that have not been documented here. The study identifies general patterns and issues that emerged for research participants during the first six months of COVID-19, with the aim of informing the crisis preparedness and strategic direction of the OCSE field.

Results

Changes in work conditions and practices

The pandemic changed work conditions and practices for many workers in the OCSE field. As detailed in Table 3, half of the participants (36/72, 50%) who provided information about changes to their work conditions during the pandemic indicated that they were working from home. 29 participants (40.3%) indicated that there were no changes to their work conditions. Some participants reported that they had to work more hours while some worked less hours, but no participant stated that their workplace had closed or that they had to stop work during the pandemic.

Table 3. Changed work conditions

Work conditions (participants can select multiple conditions)	n=72
I worked from home	36 (50.0%)
There was no change to my working conditions	29 (40.3%)
I worked fewer hours per week	8 (11.1%)
I worked more hours per week	7 (9.7%)
My agency closed and I did not work during some period/s of COVID-19	0

Open-ended survey responses and interviewees suggested that working from home arrangements could be complicated for those in the OCSE field. Undertaking core tasks outside of the office environment, such as analysing CSAM or law enforcement data, raised significant technical, privacy and security issues. Workplace safety measures in the office, including social distancing, could disrupt communication and the everyday comradery that is an important component of a resilient workplace culture for trauma-exposed professionals. In the field, infection prevention measures impacted on police work such as investigations and arrests. Nonetheless, participants had a number of positive observations to make about the changes to their working conditions during COVID-19. The following section draws from

written survey responses and interviewees to explore key themes in pandemic-related workplace change in the OCSE field.

Working from home

As mentioned, half of survey respondents reported working from home as a result of the pandemic. Their time was often divided between shifts at home and in the office. Some survey participants commented on their increased productivity at home, as they felt they were able to “organize [their] time better ... and be more productive working from home”. A law enforcement interviewee felt that it took her “much longer to relax” after a day in the office, but at home “it’s just instant”.

Nonetheless, survey participants emphasised that working from home required them “to find innovative ways to deal with [their] world of work” because “the team is more separated [with] less face-to-face interaction”, and they had to rely on “remote technical solutions to previously in-person interactions”. In interview, a police officer commented on the significant investments in technology that was necessary to enable OCSE investigations to continue at home, including the management of sensitive data (to be discussed in more detail shortly):

They [police unit] had to make some pretty big purchases, computer, laptop purchases. Everybody that left the office pretty much left the office with a laptop that you’re able to access our information from ... [I]t’s taken them a long time to move to the cloud, just because of the security of data, right, and they’re terrified of data breaches, which is understandable. We have a lot of serious information in our database. So for them, really, I think that was a big hurdle for our service to get over, is to allow people to have that information accessible at home. They had to create quickly some new policies in place, just for the people bringing laptops home so they could access our internal network. (Law enforcement officer #4)

In interview, law enforcement and tipline managers described the difficulties of leadership with staff working from home. They commented on the importance of face-to-face communication and the spontaneous, organic interaction enabled by physical proximity as key facilitators of effective operational work as well as a positive and healthy workplace culture. They found staff anxieties around COVID-19 difficult to assuage with a geographically dispersed team. A tipline manager commented:

For me as a manager, it's really hard to manage people via telephone or not being able to see each other face-to-face because the details got lost in communication. And there's been more irritation amongst each other. And in the beginning, it was really hard for people at the tipline because there was a lot of insecurity, fear. There was fear that they would get COVID-19 [in the office] and transfer to their families. (Tipline manager #2)

Working in shifts

It was common for police and tipline workers to report that their office had implemented a shift work policy, in which only a set number of staff could work in the office for a given period of time due to social distancing requirements. Interviewees described the changes to communication and collegiality linked to shift work. A tipline analyst commented:

So our team is really impacted in that way as well because now we're split up into teams. We're spread out. We're not all in the tipline so you don't have the opportunity to bounce ideas off each other or keep an eye on each other as closely as possible as before. (Tipline analyst #2)

Shift work could limit the amount of time that professionals had to manage complex cases. For instance, it could be challenging to resolve a difficult inquiry in the time allotted to a shift, whereupon the worker might be obliged to hand-over to a colleague on the next shift, or had to pick up the case the following day. Nonetheless, professionals identified some benefits to

shift work. In the account of this tipline worker, shift work was a positive experience that enabled her to work more closely with other team members:

For myself, I actually found that the team that I was split up with, it allowed me to kind of grow my relationship with them, because there were people that I might not necessarily have spent as much time with or talked to as much, or we didn't have or knew common interests, but now that we're our own team on our own shift together you really have to rely on those people. So we learned more about each other and that allowed the smaller teams to kind of grow together too. (Tipline analyst #2)

Managing illegal or sensitive content

Tipline worker participants unanimously reported that they were required to come to the office in order to analyse or work with CSAM. One tipline analyst said:

We can't do our work from home so like our system, like internet wouldn't be fast enough from home and security issues, like the information that were dealing with is confidential and often times illegal right, so we can't be looking at that at home. (Tipline analyst #3)

It was generally the case that law enforcement agencies had protocols requiring that CSAM be analysed in the office. However, some law enforcement agencies permitted investigators to manage illegal content in the home environment. One police officer said: "We're looking at the child sexual abuse material and so to take it home with you and have people viewing it in their homes was a little bit controversial." For this police officer, undertaking analysis work at home was a beneficial development:

So we were lucky that we were able to move what we did in the office to our homes ... We were set up with privacy and security in our homes and so we've been able to just continue our duties as is and actually it was much

more productive, incredibly more productive ... Analysts need time to sit and think and need quiet when you write reports. When you're working in a busy unit and people are constantly coming in, it's difficult to focus and to concentrate and get tasks done on time. So bringing that work home has been fantastic. (Law enforcement #2)

Impact on policing

The pandemic posed significant challenges to the policing of OCSE, disrupting usual lines of communication between stakeholders and interrupting criminal justice processes. One tipline analyst commented: "I think communicating with law enforcement - they have been working from home - so it can be tricky to get in touch with them if they're not at the office". Police participants felt that the extra work imposed during the pandemic "took time away from [our] usual investigations" and was "reducing the capacity to respond to investigations". Some police agencies ceased carrying out investigations and arrests for a period of time, except in circumstances of immediate threat to a child. One law enforcement officer explained that infection risk and social distancing was a constant concern in the field:

We're just taking more precautions in terms of when we go into somebody's house, in terms of wearing protective equipment, in terms of trying to keep our social distancing from people, when we're interviewing our suspects. We're trying to keep that social distance or wear masks during the interview. We're sanitising all the devices that we are seizing from people's houses so that when their devices are brought back to our computer labs, they're all sterilised and things like that. (Law enforcement officer #3)

Some law enforcement participants reported that courts closed for a period during the pandemic. Further arrests during this time risked creating a backlog of cases and compromising the chance of prosecution. One police officer said: "I think the biggest limitation for us was not being able to continue to do search warrants and arrest offenders.

That just came to a complete halt”. Another officer described “probably 150 cases that were unresolved that we had kind of sitting in the bank that we couldn’t do anything with”. This detective explained further:

Essentially, they stopped court. There was none unless it was an emergency situation. So, we had to be cognisant about ... our files are going up. We want to go and arrest all these people but then it just gets backlogged at the court process. So, we had to be cognisant about doing search warrants and arresting people, because we're now going to cause a clog at that court level. The result of that is that they're going to start determining which files they may not even prosecute and they'll just toss them. So, we had to really evaluate and try to prioritise the files that we were going to action in terms of taking it to a search warrant and taking it to the point of having an arrest. (Law enforcement officer #3)

Increased workload and complexity

While less than 10% of survey participants reported working more hours per week during COVID-19 (and about 11% reported working less hours), survey findings suggested that agencies experienced significant increases in OCSE reports, particularly in relation to CSAM. One participant noted “the volume of reports into [our] tipline increased dramatically [and] policing agencies across the country were being inundated with new reports”, which meant that “the intake at [our] unit had doubled over the first months of COVID-19”. A tipline manager stated:

Well, we saw a definite rise at the reports from the helpline for people who encounter child sexual abuse ... It was a huge, huge rise. At the moment we had a lockdown we almost had all our reports doubled. (Tipline manager #2)

Some tipline participants noted that their workload increased because reporting agencies and triage units “were limited in their ability to triage reports being sent to [them] as they

were working from home and unable to view CAM [child abuse material]”. As a result, tiplines “spent increased time in working with partner agencies to establish ways to facilitate reporting” and “had to spend more time filtering reports” received during the pandemic. One tipline analyst noted that “cuts to public safety/moderator teams on [major electronic service providers during the pandemic] has increased removal/response times [that] impacted resource issues to [their] tipline”.

In interview, it was common for participants to describe a significant uptick in their workload which was exacerbated by pandemic-related restrictions to working conditions. This tipline analyst explained:

So at first, it seemed like we were getting a lot of reports and we weren't able to keep up, just because of the analysts being in the office for fewer hours. But then, when we resumed our full hours like, everyone was working the same amount of hours as they previously had. The increase was still there and we still weren't able to really keep up with all the reports. That's when I noticed it, it was when we started to come back to the office full time, and there still was an increase in reports that we couldn't keep up with. (Tipline analyst #1)

For those agencies reporting a large increase in OCSE reports and working hours, occupational wellbeing and safety were major concerns. This investigations manager felt that his agency’s existing protocols around self-care were potentially insufficient in light of the demands on his staff:

So right across our teams ... there is a real sense of fatigue and a sense of being just bombarded. I was having a conversation with the tipline staff the other day and they just looked exhausted. They're having to deal with several hundred more complaints than they would do ordinarily ... It's a lot more difficult to manage your own self-care when you feel an obligation to support

your teammates like responding to reports and being available to respond to reports. (Investigations manager #2)

Changes in OCSE-related work activities

In the survey, participants were asked about whether specific OCSE-related work activities had decreased or increased during the pandemic (Table 4). Not all work activities listed in Table 4 were performed by all participants. The number of responses to each work activity shows the number of participants who indicated that the activity was part of their work role.

Tasks relating to taking and investigating reports of online child abuse were the most common work activities performed by the participants responding to questions about changes in their work during the pandemic. As Table 4 shows, over 50% of respondents agreed that there had been “some” or a “major” increase in reports of online child abuse (59.3%) as well as an increase in investigations (61%). Close to 50% agreed that they were spending more time monitoring dark web activity (45.2%) and categorising images of CSAM (44.2%).

Table 4. Changed work activities

	No. of responses	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase
Taking reports of online child abuse	59	4 (6.8%)	5 (8.5%)	15 (25.4%)	15 (25.4%)	20 (33.9%)
Investigating reports of online child abuse	59	2 (3.4%)	4 (6.8%)	17 (28.8%)	24 (40.7%)	12 (20.3%)
Categorising images and videos of child abuse	52	2 (3.8%)	7 (13.5%)	20 (38.5%)	15 (28.8%)	8 (15.4%)
Victim identification	41	1 (2.4%)	1 (2.4%)	24 (58.6%)	13 (31.7%)	2 (4.9%)
Monitoring dark web activity	31	2 (6.4%)	1 (3.2%)	14 (45.2%)	7 (22.6%)	7 (22.6%)
Supporting victims	29	-	3 (10.3%)	19 (65.6%)	4 (13.8%)	3 (10.3%)
Delivering prevention and education programs	31	13 (41.9%)	5 (16.1%)	6 (19.4%)	4 (12.9%)	3 (9.7%)
Conducting forensic examination of devices	19	2 (10.5%)	3 (15.8%)	9 (47.4%)	4 (21.0%)	1 (5.3%)

These increases in OCSE work activities were directly linked by some participants to the pandemic, for they noticed “more viral CAM [child abuse material] files were being shared” and “an increase in [tipline] tips”. However, other participants were more circumspect about the observed increase, noting that apparent increases in reports during the pandemic occurred against the backdrop of year-on-year increases that had been sustained over many years. One participant noted that “the amount of reports received has increased this year, however how much is caused by COVID is hard to assess”, and another indicated that “there was a strong trend of reports increasing already over the years”. The ambiguities of OCSE data will be explored in more detail later in the report.

Over 50% of participants agreed that there had been “no change” in their work identifying victims (24/41, 58.6%) or supporting victims (19/29, 65.6%) and that there had been a decrease in the delivery of education and prevention programs (18/31, 58.0%). While the sample size of the survey is low and the generalisability of the findings is therefore limited, these findings tell an unsettling story in which participants largely agreed that they were

taking and investigating abuse reports at higher rates, but that victim identification and support had not kept pace while the delivery of education and prevention had declined.

Changes in online child sexual exploitation activities

Participants were asked a series of questions about whether or not particular types of OCSE offender behaviour had decreased, remained stable or increased during the pandemic. As Table 5 shows, respondents reported that online activities relating to the viewing, searching, producing, and distributing of child sexual abuse materials during the pandemic had increased in a number of respects.

Table 5. Reported changes in activities relating to child sexual abuse material

	No. of responses	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase
Adults viewing child sexual abuse material	56	-	1 (1.8%)	9 (16.1%)	29 (51.8%)	17 (30.3%)
Adults producing child sexual abuse material	43	-	-	20 (46.5%)	18 (41.9%)	5 (11.6%)
Adults sharing/distributing child sexual abuse material	57	1 (1.7%)	-	9 (15.8%)	24 (42.1%)	23 (40.4%)
Adults seeking more severe or extreme child sexual abuse material	42	-	-	23 (54.8%)	11 (26.2%)	8 (19.0%)
Users conducting more searches online for child sexual abuse material	39	-	-	8 (20.5%)	17 (43.6%)	14 (35.9%)
Total number of participant responses	237	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)	69 (29.1%)	99 (41.8%)	67 (28.3%)

Of all activities outlined, there was strong (over 75%) consensus that there had been increases in the searching (31/39, 79.5%), viewing (46/56, 82.1%), and distributing (47/57, 82.5%) of child sexual abuse material. Over half of responding participants (23/43, 53.5%) indicated that there was an increase in the production of CSAM, and over half of responding participants (23/42, 54.8%) indicated that there was no change in adults seeking more extreme or severe CSAM.

Table 6. Reported changes in online grooming behaviour

	No. of responses	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase
Adults grooming minors online	51	-	-	10 (19.6%)	31 (60.8%)	10 (19.6%)
Adults blackmailing or threatening minors into online sexual activity	43	-	-	13 (30.2%)	23 (53.5%)	7 (16.3%)
Adults pretending to be minors online for a sexual purpose	44	-	-	14 (31.8%)	24 (54.6%)	6 (13.6%)
Adults trying to meet minors offline for sexual activity	40	1 (2.5%)	7 (17.5%)	16 (40.0%)	14 (35.0%)	2 (5.0%)
Total number of participant responses	178	1 (0.6%)	7 (3.9%)	53 (29.8%)	92 (51.7%)	25 (14.0%)

In the area of online grooming behaviour (Table 6), there was strong consensus that there had been an increase in adults grooming minors online (41/51, 80.4%), and consensus on an increase of adults blackmailing or threatening minors (30/43, 69.8%), and adults pretending to be minors for sexual purpose (30/44, 68.2%). Blackmail and extortion were key concerns reported by interview participants. One tipline manager suggested that “about 50 percent of the reports that we get are people being sextorted”, and commented that “[b]oys are financially sextorted and the girls are sextorted for more images or for sex”. The only behaviour where there was no consensus on an increase, with 40% reporting no change and 20% reporting a decrease, was in relation to adults trying to meet minors offline for sexual activity, which might be explained by lockdown restrictions.

Table 7. Reported changes in activities in online abuse communities

	No. of responses	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase
Social media activity by people interested in child sexual abuse	47	1 (2.1%)	-	11 (23.4%)	22 (46.8%)	13 (27.7%)
Dark web activity by people interested in child sexual abuse	27	-	-	7 (25.9%)	13 (48.2%)	7 (25.9%)
Child abusers sharing strategies with each other	29	-	-	9 (31.0%)	16 (55.2%)	4 (13.8%)
Total number of participant responses	103	1 (0.9%)	-	27 (26.2%)	51 (49.5%)	24 (23.4%)

When asked about changes in activities in online abuse communities (Table 7), there was consensus amongst responding participants that there had been increases in social media activity (35/47, 74.5%) and dark web activity (20/27, 74.1%) by people interested in child sexual abuse. Over two-thirds of participants (20/29, 69.0%) indicated that there was an increase in activities where offenders were sharing strategies with each other to perpetrate child abuse. In interview, an investigations manager described changes in online abuse communities on the dark web over the course of the pandemic:

[W]e saw that there were increases in certain dark net forums in the way that they were acting there and the type of material that they were making available to one another particularly video captures. So whether they were captured in activity where the children knew that it was happening or whether it was the case that they were captured surreptitiously. So they didn't know what was going on. But those sort of images and videos were being posted to a greater degree. More files were being made available online. (Investigations manager #1)

Table 8. Reported changes in online risk-taking activities by minors

	No. of responses	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase
Minors voluntarily sharing nude or sexual images/video of themselves	51	-	-	12 (23.5%)	32 (62.8%)	7 (13.7%)
Minors being forced, coerced or blackmailed into sharing nude or sexual images/video of themselves	47	-	1 (2.1%)	16 (34.1%)	23 (48.9%)	7 (14.9%)
Minors sharing their nude or sexual images/video with adults who they thought were minors	43	-	-	17 (39.5%)	22 (51.2%)	4 (9.3%)
Minors distributing nude or sexual images/videos of other minors without their consent	42	-	1 (2.4%)	20 (47.6%)	17 (40.5%)	4 (9.5%)
Minors disclosing personal information online such as their name or address	44	1 (2.3%)	-	22 (50.0%)	17 (38.6%)	4 (9.1%)
Total number of participant responses	227	1 (0.4%)	2 (0.9%)	87 (38.3%)	111 (48.9%)	26 (11.5%)

As shown in Table 8, there was strong consensus amongst responding participants that there had been an increase in minors sharing nude or sexual material of themselves voluntarily (39/51, 76.5%). Over half of responding participants agreed that there had been an increase in situations where minors were forced, coerced or blackmailed into sharing these images or videos (30/47, 63.8%), where minors shared these images or videos with others whom they thought were also minors (26/43, 60.5%), and in situations where minors shared these types of images and videos of other minors without their consent (21/42, 50.0%). Half of the responding participants (22/44, 50.0%) indicated there was no change in minors disclosing personal information about themselves. In interview, when asked why children and young people might engage in online risk-taking behaviour, one tipline analyst explained:

Kids are searching for those types of platforms because they're looking to explore. You know, maybe push the limits a little bit, not knowing the people that are on the other end are the ones that are seeking to harm them ... It is almost like [children are seeking] validation even of people that they don't

know, you know, liking their pictures or calling them sexy or cute. And then it just kind of progresses from there. (Tipline worker #2)

Table 9. Reported changes in live streaming related activities

	No. of responses	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase
Minors voluntarily self-producing live streamed material (e.g., for other minors such as boyfriends or girlfriends)	37	-	-	16 (43.3%)	18 (48.6%)	3 (8.1%)
Minors engaging in sexual activity on live streams or webcams	43	-	-	15 (34.9%)	24 (55.8%)	4 (9.3%)
Minors being induced or coerced into producing live streamed material by an adult	35	-	-	14 (40.0%)	19 (54.3%)	2 (5.7%)
Adult offenders abusing a child on live streams for other offenders	26	-	-	15 (57.7%)	10 (38.5%)	1 (3.8%)
Adult offenders paying money for live streamed abuse	25	-	-	12 (48.0%)	12 (48.0%)	1 (4.0%)
Total number of participant responses	166	-	-	72 (43.4%)	83 (50.0%)	11 (6.6%)

Overall, as shown in Table 9, there was consensus of over 50% that live streaming abuse had increased across almost all domains, including minors voluntarily self-producing live streamed material (21/37, 56.7%), minors engaging in sexual activity on live stream or webcam (28/43, 65.1%), minors being induced or coerced into live streaming (21/35, 60.0%) and adult offenders paying for live stream abuse (13/25, 52.0%). Over half of responding participants (15/26, 57.7%) agreed there had been no change in relation to adults abusing children on live stream for other offenders. In the following quote, a tipline analyst commented on the significant interest in live streaming-related offences in online abuse communities:

[T]he live streaming services are pretty popular right now and honestly, I think that's sort of an easy way or an easy in for offenders to get connected to children because they know that they're doing – or that they're using those services. So you know, we saw an increase in sites like Omegal or other sort of anonymous chat services but certainly we also see this sort of process of

grooming or exploitation where an adult might – or an offender may connect with a child on one platform and move them to a different platform for the purpose of exploiting them. (Tipline worker #2)

Interpreting increases in OCSE reports

Across the survey and interviews, participants generally agreed that the pandemic had resulted in an increase in OCSE reports to authorities, and observed an increase in OCSE activities in their professional experience. Table 10 presents a summary of responses to the five domains of OCSE activity that were measured in the survey. Across all five domains, there was a consensus of over 50% that an increase had occurred during the pandemic period. The largest observed increase is in relation to changes in activities in online abuse communities (75/103, 72.8%).

Table 10. Summary of reported changes to OCSE activities

	No. of responses	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase
Child sexual abuse material	237	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)	69 (29.1%)	99 (41.8%)	67 (28.3%)
Online grooming behaviour	178	1 (0.6%)	7 (3.9%)	53 (29.8%)	92 (51.7%)	25 (14.0%)
Online abuse communities	103	1 (1.0%)	-	27 (26.2%)	51 (49.5%)	24 (23.3%)
Online risk taking by minors	227	1 (0.4%)	2 (0.9%)	87 (38.3%)	111 (48.9%)	26 (11.5%)
Live streaming	166	-	-	72 (43.4%)	83 (50%)	11 (6.6%)

Some participants cautioned against interpreting these observed increases as direct evidence that rates of OCSE offending had increased during the pandemic. Survey responses recognised that the information offered by participants were “observations based on reports received from the public”, and that they “don’t have official statistics” and therefore “cannot make a clear statement about whether the behaviour of children or perpetrators has changed during the pandemic”. One survey participant emphasised that “the information provided corresponds to [my] personal opinions”.

The lack of shared indicators and robust data on OCSE behaviour is a longstanding challenge in the field (ECPAT & INTERPOL, 2018) that has only become more pressing with the advent of the pandemic. This problem was emphasised in interview by a senior law enforcement officer who commented:

What [the pandemic] revealed was something that we were already kind of aware of and that was that the ability of organisations, law enforcement organisations and NGOs to gather and to generate that sort of information quickly was limited basically. It was quite limited. So when we were asking them for information, they were finding it very difficult to collate it and to produce it so that we could inform the public better.

... So when different agencies say different things about what they've seen during this time, it is maybe because they're using [different] indicators. It maybe because they don't have the systems in place to generate that information, it maybe genuinely because they're not seeing any difference.

(Investigations manager #1)

Some participants felt that it was difficult to determine whether the OCSE increases in 2020 were attributable to the pandemic, or were part of an ongoing trend, or both. In interview, a police officer recognised that reports of OCSE had increased to his unit during the pandemic, however he could not definitively attribute the rise to COVID-19, noting that reports had been increasing for many years due to the online accessibility of CSAM.

I don't even know necessarily if it's just due to COVID in a sense, because we see probably ... probably I think our stats are about a 30% increase every year in the number of files that we get, and I think just generally speaking, it's a multitude of things. One is accessibility to the material because it's so easily obtained. (Law enforcement #3)

Participants recognised that the pandemic could be impacting reporting behaviour *rather than* or *as well as* offending behaviour. A tipline analyst commented: “I’ve noticed a lot of parents also reporting situations that involved their child and I don’t know if that’s maybe because of all the media that’s been circulating about the issue, but it could be”. In interview, a tipline manager suggested that the pandemic had increased generalised anxiety amongst children and young people who, in lockdown, were ruminating on experiences *prior to* the pandemic. She suggested that much of the increase in reports to her tipline could be driven by worried young people unable to assuage their concerns through their normal day-to-day activities:

Some people might then draw the conclusion that there was more abuse out there and I'm not quite sure about that. What we found was first of all that a lot of young people started worrying about things that had happened to them before. So the fact that they were at home not being able to talk to their peers, or have distractions of school, concerts, night's going out, a lot of people came back with questions like "There was a time that I was being sextorted for money. I haven't heard from them since but do you think something can still happen?" Or "A long time ago I sent somebody a nude image. Do you think it will leak?" So they started worrying much more. Now the remarkable thing is that, when schools reopened, reports declined like that. Just dived down. And I don't believe that the abuse would have dived down. So I really think that there's a correlation between the fact that young people did have to stay in, did not talk to their friends and the fact that they were worrying. (Tipline manager #2)

While most participants felt that OCSE offending had increased during the pandemic, the quotes above illustrate the multiple factors that impact on OCSE reporting and shape the data available to OCSE professionals. More broadly, these responses signal the importance of developing indicators of OCSE that provides a more accurate picture of OCSE offending

beyond public reports or information gathered in the process of agency activity. It is also possible that divergent interpretations of the impact of the pandemic on OCSE may reflect service or regional differences, as discussed below.

Accounting for regional and service differences

A small group of participants reported that their agency did not experience an increase in OCSE reports during the pandemic. This variance may be explained by differences across regions and/or service models. The research study engaged professionals located in countries with diverse responses to the pandemic and OCSE. At the time of the survey and interviews, some participants were experiencing comprehensive lockdowns and public health orders, others were facing different kinds of restrictions on their family and work life, whereas some participants were in jurisdictions where compliance with public health advice was not mandatory. Tipline participants described a range of service models, with some engaged in proactive community education and outreach efforts that promoted reporting to their agency, while others were focused largely on managing reports to their agency with limited or no community engagement. These varied jurisdictional responses and service frameworks could account for the different experiences of OCSE agencies during the pandemic.

For instance, a tipline worker who reported no increase in OCSE reports to her agency was based in a country that had not (at the time) experienced lockdowns or school closures. The government had instead made its public health measures voluntarily and kept schools open. Without lockdowns and school closures, it is possible that children were at less risk of OCSE and/or that they were no more likely to report such experiences. The tipline analyst noted:

We haven't seen an increase in reports ... We have seen on TOR forums and TOR chats we have seen increased dialogues between offenders talking about how to best use this new situation. But that's anecdotal, it's someone talking here and someone talking there. So no real increase that we've seen.

We believe that have been an increase in exploitation. We believe that we'll most likely see that when we look back a year from now or so. But nothing that we can say right now. (Tipline analyst #5)

In another jurisdiction, a tipline manager also reported no increase in reports to her agency. However, she was based in a middle-income country with a significant number of poor rural and regional families whose awareness of OCSE was low. She suggested that many children and young people in her country did not recognise online abuse and exploitation when it occurred; to the contrary, “posting very, very half naked kind of things on Twitter” may be seen as a way to “gain more likes and they think it's a means for an income”. As she explained, reports from young people in her country are driven by her agency’s proactive education and engagement efforts. The pandemic blocked many of her agency’s outreach efforts which, in turn, may have suppressed reports:

[N]o marked changes in reporting on the hotline, on our hotline right ... [O]ne of the interesting things that I pick up is when we do a lot of outreach where we can reach learners, young learners, you'll see a bit of a rise in the number of reported cases coming from those areas. So now, my outreach team were not able to get out at all ... I think it's a factor of, for us, of not being able to get out there and do our outreach work which helps to educate young people to understand that it's wrong. (Tipline manager #4)

These responses highlight the importance of local context and service differences in assessing the impacts of COVID-19 on OCSE and responses to it. Divergent public health measures, shifting levels of public awareness, different service models and the social and cultural effects of the pandemic may all be intersecting at the regional level in a dynamic way.

Lessons of the pandemic

All participants were asked “What lessons have you learnt from the pandemic?” and many reflected, in interview, on key insights that they gained into OCSE and the online child protection system in the course of the pandemic. The major themes in their responses are presented below.

Increased education and outreach to children, parents and the community

A key challenge posed by the pandemic was that police and tipline agencies had to suspend their typical outreach and community education efforts at a time of increased risk to children.

A police officer commented:

We used to do a lot of community presentations. We would go out and do education meetings with foster parent groups and child family service groups so that they could understand who we were and how we investigate. We have virtually pretty much stopped. (Law enforcement officer #3)

One tipline manager described the extraordinary efforts of her team to continue their education efforts in the wake of lockdowns and school closures:

[W]e were unable to get to schools. We were unable to get to the general public [due to COVID-19] ... [We] had to jump through hoops to get billboard, street pole outreach and education awareness stuff going. We did radio adverts and that was great ... I mean we are in the digital age and we had to resort to old, old multi-channel, or what we call omni channel methods of trying to reach the public. (Tipline manager #4)

Participants made a number of recommendations for potential education initiatives. An investigations manager discussed the far-reaching implications of online image-sharing and information-sharing for children in light of the willingness of offenders to use personal

material to threaten and blackmail minors, sometimes years after the event. He commented: “I think what we need to emphasise in education is that it [online safety] goes across all the different aspects of life that they are now experiencing and that they will experience in the future”. A tipline analyst described a number of cases in which children had been coerced into recording themselves by an offender, even with a protective parent in the home. She identified a number of areas of parental education that could be strengthened:

I speak to parents on the phone and I give them some tips on things that they can do to sort of reduce or prevent these things from happening. Like turning off the Wi-Fi at night, not allowing their devices to be taken to the bathrooms or their bedrooms and parents go “oh I never even thought of that” ... I definitely think that education is a big piece and just reinforcing the need for supervision, the need for conversation with children about appropriate behaviours online, setting boundaries that sort of thing. (Tipline analyst #4)

The need for an adaptive and crisis-prepared child protection system

Tiplines and law enforcement work closely with child protection agencies and observed that the pandemic challenged the premises of existing child protection practice. Child protection services were, in many cases, no longer conducting home visits or engaged in other routine child welfare activities. Although child protection workers implemented alternative safeguarding and protecting practices (such as "virtual" home visits, see Cook & Zschomler, 2020), many countries experienced a disruption to services relating to child abuse and violence (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, End Violence Against Children, UNICEF, & WHO, 2020), linked to a reduction in notifications to child protection service (e.g., AIHW, 2021). A police detective commented:

We didn't have social workers going out and visiting homes and seeing maybe children at risk. If we have families that are at risk, these appointments are over the phone and I don't think they're as effective as being in person where

you have your eyes on a situation and you can read someone's body language. (Law enforcement officer #3)

In interview, participants flagged the need for a new approach to child protection that could accommodate the crisis conditions of the pandemic. A tipline analyst commented sympathetically “[I]t’s understandable that organisations weren’t really prepared, but now that it has happened, and I’ve heard different experts say that it might happen again ... we need to have a plan for what happens if we have to shut down”.

Industry transparency and accountability

A number of interviewees reported that they were receiving high levels of OCSE reports from major technology and social media companies, but they felt that those companies were not responding to increased OCSE in a timely and proportionate fashion. A police officer commented:

We probably saw double the increase in international cases, so for us that would be, you know, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, all the big social media giants sending cases to us ... Like there were days where I would get four or five cases a day where previously I would get maybe two or three a month.
(Law enforcement officer #4)

An investigations manager expressed significant frustration with the efforts of major technology companies to proactively prevent OCSE offending on their platforms. He said:

I think the conversations that we've had [social media platform] have been pretty underwhelming overall ... Honestly, I walked away from our meeting with [social media platform] really doubtful that they had the capacity to detect even the basics. (Investigations manager #2)

A number of tipline analysts indicated that some of the increase in calls to their service during the pandemic were attributable to the failure of social media companies to respond to complaints appropriately and in a timely fashion. A tipline manager said:

A lot of people that are coming in and reporting to us have said or have claimed that they've reported directly to the platform on numerous occasions and the platform is either not responsive or they get that sort of auto generated message saying you know, because of COVID-19, their moderator team has decreased or there's not the same amount of staff and so it will take longer to get a response. (Tipline manager #1)

She went on to detail the delayed response of social media companies to take-down notifications and escalated complaints from her agency. She questioned why technology companies were not immediately acting on referrals from tiplines and instead engaged in “back and forth” on whether an image met the threshold for removal.

Another tipline analyst worked in a jurisdiction with laissez-faire online regulation. He observed that there were few consequences in his country for the “smaller fringe” hosting providers who were willing to host illegal content.

[My country] is quite a difficult environment with industry because we have a lot of hosting providers that are - you know, they're shining knights of internet freedom. Just hosting stuff that no one else wants to host. They know every legal corner on what they can and can't host. And they're switching the materials from servers in, you know, from one country to next, to wherever - just circulating. So it's always pretty difficult to have a good talk with the hosting provider side of industry ... [!]f you want to host illegal material here, you probably know where you host it. (Tipline analyst #5)

Discussion of the technology “industry” often brings to mind major and well-known companies, however this quote emphasises that smaller companies have a key role to play

in the CSAM trade, often by exploiting lax legal or policing arrangements in particular jurisdictions (Salter & Richardson, 2021).

The need for preventative platform and service design

In the face of increased reports from social media companies and users, some interviewees commented on the specific design features and deficits of social media platforms that enabled OCSE to occur at such high rates. The lack of what is often called “safety by design” (in which safety is built into the architecture of platforms and services, see eSafety Commissioner, 2019) was a recurrent feature of interviewee concern.

For example, this investigations manager questioned why social media platforms had been designed in such a way that companies were unable to easily distinguish between legitimate users and OCSE offenders:

They've been under-calibrating their automated processes to such an extent that [platforms] have almost become safe spaces for those with a sexual interest in children to congregate ... I mean, it's incredible to think that you can have this huge landscape and community of legitimate business owners and models and individual citizens and the usage looks identical to that of those sexually exploiting children. (Investigations manager #2)

A tipline analyst offered wide-ranging comment on the design features of social media platforms that facilitated sexual exploitation – lack of age verification, inadequate moderation, failure to block hashtags associated with child abuse, and a lack of reporting options for OCSE:

I think one thing could be like proper age verification to access certain platforms. I mean we see 9-year-olds accessing services or programs or platforms that you know aren't meant for children that age. Moderating chat rooms I mean I often go into chat rooms where I'm stunned at what is being

said and nobody is, there's nothing there to, there's nobody there to moderate what's being said.

Even things like removing certain hashtags that lead to child sexual abuse material where it's been known to being used if they could just block a certain hashtag, I'm sure that would reduce the amount of child sexual abuse material that's available out there. Things like that I think it could be improved. Also, like I said creating or making it easier for people to report directly those services as well so that immediate action can be taken. (Tipline analyst #4)

The lack of clear, accessible and consistent reporting mechanisms for OCSE has been the subject of recent scrutiny, with one report highlighting user difficulties in reporting OCSE across a range of platforms (C3P, 2020). A tipline analyst suggested that a lack of “obvious” reporting options had become particularly burdensome in the context of the pandemic, as it require her to spend additional time trying to find how to report OCSE to a platform.

So, sometimes it's overwhelming just trying to weed out where on this site is the appropriate report form or something where they don't have what you would think would be an obvious - you would expect services would have a policy against child exploitation or an easy way to report ... You're working on that three-hour window [shift work due to COVID-19] and now you're spending 20 minutes looking up something that should really be quick - I should be able to just search how to report this and it should [be easy] - so that was something. Lesson learned. (Tipline analyst #2)

As these quotes show, participants identified a number of mechanisms by which social media companies and platforms contributed to the increase in caseload and complexity over the course of the pandemic. Their responses foreground potential areas of action that could increase child safety and reduce the demand on tiplines and law enforcement.

Enhanced support for OCSE victims and survivors

In the survey, the majority of respondents reported that victim support efforts did not increase amongst tiplines and police during COVID-19 despite increases in OCSE reports and cases. Nonetheless, in interview, some tipline workers emphasised the significant ongoing and frequently unmet needs of children, young people and adults victimised through OCSE. A tipline manager described significant contact with OCSE victims and survivors through their phone line during the pandemic, and she suggested that the health and safety needs of this group were going largely unmet:

I think more resources need to go into better supporting these survivors and ensuring that they have the proper services and safety planning in place so that they are able to focus on, not only healing, that they're not being overburdened with this idea that they need to self-police content of themselves. But also that they have the opportunity to focus on going to school or getting a career, building a family and that they don't need to be worrying about all of these external stressors and factors that are going on. When in the reality, at this very moment, it is something that they need to worry about because there are often times, there's personal safety considerations. (Tipline manager #1)

Holistic case management is a key gap in current responses to OCSE victims and survivors who often have several intersecting support needs, and require multi-agency collaboration across jurisdictions.

Adaptiveness of the offender community

A key point made by a number of interviewees was that offenders proved to be highly adaptable and found new ways to exploit children despite the disruptions of the pandemic.

An investigations manager commented:

The other thing very much highlighted during this time is the prevalence of this threat within society and the way that offenders are able to not only adapt but they're able to continue to operate in the way that they already have despite the challenges that the rest of us are facing in the pandemic ... [OCSE] doesn't go away at any particular time and it is not very affected by other issues within the world. (Investigations manager #1)

A tipline manager discussed the significant increase in dark web activity that she observed during pandemic, which included offenders “coaching each other on how to be successful in exploiting kids” as well as forums “dedicated to posting personal information about a [CSAM] victim or a survivor”. She went on to describe the online offender community as “relentless” during the pandemic “like nothing we’ve ever seen before”.

Resilience of children and young people

In the face of the many challenges and obstacles posed by the pandemic, as well as the serious threat posed by online offenders, it is important to recognise the strengths of children and young people. When asked about the key lessons she had learnt from the pandemic, a tipline analyst was impressed by the courage of the children and young people she was in contact with. She said:

It's a really challenging time, especially for kids, I think. The isolation and not being able to go to school or go to camp or do their regular activities or their planned activities. But when we talk to youth, they're still just as strong as they always were and just as resilient and able to cope with what would be really difficult to cope with, but they're still able to do it. And even though there's limited resources, they're still able to find someone to talk to, whether that's us or someone else. And they're still, they still want to take charge of their own future, especially when they feel victimised. (Tipline analyst #1)

Conclusion and recommendations

Increase in OCSE reports, work and complexity

The majority of research participants indicated that OCSE reports and related work had increased as a result of the pandemic. This increase was noted by at least 50% of survey respondents across all five areas of OCSE activity measured by the survey (child sexual abuse material, online grooming, online abuse communities, online risk taking by minors, live streaming). Participants felt that OCSE work became increasingly complex and taxing during the pandemic, even if they weren't working longer hours for the most part. The increase in OCSE reports occurred alongside major changes to workplace arrangements and disruptions to lines of communication to other stakeholders, while OCSE professionals were managing their own stress and anxiety related to COVID-19. Unsurprisingly, law enforcement and tipline managers expressed concern in interview about the wellbeing of their staff, and frustration at those factors outside of their control – such as the responsiveness of the technology sector to OCSE – that impacted on their workforce.

Strong consensus that CSAM consumption, grooming and online child risk-taking have increased

Amongst survey respondents, there was strong consensus (over 75% of responses) that there was an increase in adults were viewing, sharing and searching for CSAM, grooming minors, and that minors were voluntarily sharing nude or sexual images/videos of themselves. There was consensus (over 50% of responses) of an increase across almost all other activities mentioned by the survey, including adult offenders producing CSAM, blackmailing/threatening minors into online sexual activity, pretending to be minors online for a sexual purpose, engaging in social media and dark web activity, paying money or otherwise inducing minors for live-streamed abuse, and forcing/coercing/blackmailing minors into sharing nude or sexual images/videos. Over half of respondents identified that minors were engaging in more risky online activities during COVID-19, such as sharing nude or

sexual images/videos of themselves, distributing nude or sexual images/videos of other minors without their consent and engaging in sexual activity on live streams or webcams.

Challenges to investigation and prosecution

Law enforcement participants suggested that the impact of the pandemic on their OCSE investigations work was considerable. The pandemic generated additional policing work that could detract from investigations. In addition, some law enforcement respondents indicated that in-person investigations and arrests ceased for a period of time in some jurisdictions. In other jurisdictions, such activities continued, and infection control and prevention practices were implemented during investigations and interviews to ensure the safety of officers and persons of interest. The closure of courts due to the pandemic was a significant obstacle to undertaking search warrants and arrests for fear of creating a “backlog” of cases. It is unclear at this point whether such disruptions will have a measurable impact on overall rates of OCSE-related prosecutions during the pandemic period.

Victim-focused work remained stable while prevention and education activities declined

When asked about their work activities during the pandemic, over half of survey responses indicated that there had been increases in taking and investigating reports of online child abuse, no increase in victim identification or victim support work, and reductions in the delivery of prevention and education programs. These survey findings suggest areas for further development within the OCSE response framework, particularly in relation to victim-focused work, and the development of outreach strategies that are less reliant on face-to-face interactions and can be delivered in a crisis context. It is concerning that victim-focused work remained stable, and prevention and education work declined, during a period of increased reports and risk.

The lack of robust, localised measurements of offender and child behaviour online

A number of survey respondents and interviewees recognised that the OCSE data available to them was based on public and industry reports and the activities of their agency, and could therefore be skewed by a range of factors other than the behaviour of offenders or children. As a result, they were cautious in their interpretation of OCSE during the pandemic. Some participants did not report an increase in OCSE reports to their agency, which may be attributed to specific factors in their jurisdiction or service. At present, it is not possible to rigorously test the impact that local factors may have had on OCSE reporting since there is no routine gathering of robust data on offender and child behaviour that is sensitised to jurisdictional or agency variations.

Recommendations

- To integrate OCSE stakeholders into the planning of child protection responses to crises and pandemics,
- To diversify outreach approaches for the delivery of OCSE prevention and education initiatives,
- To increase transparency and accountability measures for technology companies in the prevention, moderation, and reporting of OCSE, including a safety by design approach,
- To develop accessible specialised support options for victims and survivors of OCSE, and
- To develop robust measures of offender and child behaviour online.

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Appendix – Survey

Demographics

1. What is your gender?

- Male
 - Female
 - Not listed (please specify) _____
-

2. What is your age?

- 18-24 years old
 - 25-34 years old
 - 35-44 years old
 - 45-54 years old
 - 55-64 years old
 - 65-74 years old
 - 75 years old or older
-

3. What best describes the type of organisation you work for?

- Non-government organisation or charity
 - Government agency
 - Law enforcement
 - Industry organisation
 - Other (please specify) _____
-

4. What kinds of tasks do you perform in your job?

- I take reports about child sexual abuse and exploitation from the public
 - I take reports about child sexual abuse and exploitation from technology companies
 - I investigate cases of online child sexual abuse and exploitation
 - I categorise images and/or videos of child sexual abuse
 - I try to identify the victims in images and videos of child sexual abuse
 - I provide support to victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation
 - I monitor paedophile dark web activity
 - I work in prevention, education, or outreach programs
 - I conduct forensic examination of devices seized during investigations
 - Other (please specify) _____
-

5. What is your level of seniority?

- I run an organisation or unit
 - I manage a team of people
 - I have delegated decision-making authority
 - I do not have staff who report to me
 - Other (please specify) _____
-

6. How long have you worked in the area of online child sexual abuse and exploitation?

- Less than 1 year
 - 1 – 5 years
 - 5 – 10 years
 - More than 10 years
-

Impact of COVID-19 on your agency

7. How did your working conditions change during the COVID-19 pandemic? (tick all that apply)

- I worked from home
 - I worked fewer hours per week
 - I worked more hours per week
 - There was no change to my working conditions
 - My agency closed and I did not work during some period/s of COVID-19
 - Other (please specify) _____
-

8a. How did your work activities change during COVID-19?

	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase	Not relevant to me
Taking reports of online abuse	<input type="radio"/>					
Investigating reports of online child abuse	<input type="radio"/>					
Categorising images and videos of child abuse	<input type="radio"/>					
Victim identification	<input type="radio"/>					
Monitoring dark web activity	<input type="radio"/>					
Supporting victims	<input type="radio"/>					
Delivering prevention and education programs	<input type="radio"/>					
Conducting forensic examination of devices	<input type="radio"/>					

8b. My work activities changed in other ways (please explain)

Impact of COVID-19 on online child sexual exploitation

9. In your professional role, what changes did you observe to the following issues during the COVID-19 pandemic?

a. Child sexual abuse material

	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase	Don't know
Adults viewing child sexual abuse material	<input type="radio"/>					
Adults producing child sexual abuse material	<input type="radio"/>					
Adults sharing/distributing child sexual abuse material	<input type="radio"/>					
Adults seeking more severe or extreme child sexual abuse material	<input type="radio"/>					
Users conducting more searches online for child sexual abuse material	<input type="radio"/>					

b. Online grooming behaviour

	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase	Don't know
Adults grooming minors online	<input type="radio"/>					
Adults pretending to be minors online for a sexual purpose	<input type="radio"/>					
Adults blackmailing or threatening minors into online sexual activity	<input type="radio"/>					
Adults trying to meet minors offline for sexual activity	<input type="radio"/>					

c. Online abuse communities

	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase	Don't know
Social media activity by people interested in child sexual abuse	<input type="radio"/>					
Dark web activity by people interested in child sexual abuse	<input type="radio"/>					
Child abusers sharing strategies with each other	<input type="radio"/>					

d. Online risk taking by minors

	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase	Don't know
Minors disclosing personal information online such as their name or address	<input type="radio"/>					
Minors voluntarily sharing nude or sexual images/video of themselves	<input type="radio"/>					
Minors being forced, coerced or blackmailed into sharing nude or sexual images/video of themselves	<input type="radio"/>					
Minors distributing nude or sexual images/videos of other minors without their consent	<input type="radio"/>					
Minors sharing their nude or sexual images/video with adults who they thought were minors	<input type="radio"/>					
Minors engaging in sexual activity on live stream or webcams	<input type="radio"/>					

e. Live streaming

	Major decrease	Some decrease	No change	Some increase	Major increase	Don't know
Minors voluntarily self-producing live streamed material (e.g., for other minors such as boyfriends or girlfriends)	<input type="radio"/>					
Minors being induced or coerced into producing live streamed material by an adult	<input type="radio"/>					
Adult offenders abusing a child on live stream for other offenders	<input type="radio"/>					
Adult offenders paying money for live streamed abuse	<input type="radio"/>					

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Online Interview

We would like to speak to you about your professional experiences of online child sexual exploitation during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you would like to take part in an online interview, please provide your email address below.

Your email address will only be stored for the purpose of contacting you to arrange a suitable date and time for interview, and will be deleted within a fortnight.
