The Social Harm of Self-Generated Indecent Images of Children – Is it a problem for Law Enforcement?
PaCCS Research Snapshot Conference abstract

In 2015, the Strategic Policing Requirements (Home Office, 2015) introduced Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) as a national threat, and the Government re-affirmed its commitment with the release of the Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy in January 2021. The strategy highlights the need for a whole system response, through which a concerted effort will be made to identify CSA offences and bring more offenders to justice, whilst also improving the quality of support for survivors and improving prevention efforts (TCSA, 2021). This pledge was supported by continuing the 2019/20 funding uplift of £30 million to tackle CSA into 2021.

The enormity of this task was emphasised by the estimated scale of CSA offending, as reported by the National Crime Agency (NCA) in the National Strategic Assessment 2021. Utilising an innovative methodology, the NCA assessed that there are between 550,00 and 850,000 UK based individuals posing varying degrees of sexual risk to children (NCA, 2021). This scale estimate covered a spectrum of CSA offences however, it is noted in the limitations that the final figure may be skewed towards online offending. It was also noted that online offending increased, particularly following exacerbated internet usage by victims and offenders through-out the pandemic and resulting lockdowns (NCA, 2021).

Some argue the internet is a mirror image of society, with all the diversity, human expression and deviance however, more compelling is the argument that the internet has resulted in new and increasingly challenging social harms (Henry & Powell, 2015). The Internet and associated technologies have revolutionised the production, distribution and viewing of indecent images of children (IIOC) and have exacerbated the problem by increasing the volume and accessibility (Wortley & Smallbone, 2012).

The Child Abuse Image Database (CAID) which holds data relating to IIoC encountered by the Police, National Crime Agency, and approved industry bodies, had 2.1 million unique images recorded in 2019, in comparison 450,000 in 2015 (Elkin, 2020). Additionally, the NCA (2020) reported a 164% increase in referrals of IIoC material from the National Centre of Missing and Exploited Children, between 2016 (43,072) and 2018

(113,948). These figures emphasise the challenge faced by policing and the justification for continued investment by the Government.

Previously, the focus has been on tackling the most dangerous and sophisticated offenders, and mostly those operating on the dark web (Home Office, 2019). However, it is essential that all elements of online child sexual abuse offending are considered, and the operational response implemented accordingly (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2015). Indecent images of children take many forms, and all are a pervasive problem requiring concerted efforts to tackle them. However, there is not, and cannot be, a one size fits all approach to IIoC offences. Previous research has failed to acknowledge the different types and categorisations of IIoC and the varying levels of harm associated with them. One such sub-category of IIoC, is Self-Generated Indecent Images of Children (SGII), which will be the focus of this research, aiming to explore what harms are implicit in SGII and how this knowledge can inform law enforcement operating procedure.

Self-generated images, 'youth produced sexual imagery' or 'sexting' are all terms used interchangeably in the literature to describe images or videos that an individual has taken of themselves and shared with a person or a platform (Hales, 2018; National Police Chief's Council, 2017). The images are defined as being of a sexual nature or indecent however certain definitions also include the sending of explicit texts or messages (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). This interpersonal exchange of inappropriate material onto the internet is an increasing phenomenon for many children and adolescents (Curnutt, 2012). It is associated in the literature, to an increase in the societal acceptance of technology and the decreasing age at which children are allowed unsupervised access (Smith et al, 2014).

It is widely believed that society is increasingly more sexualised and there is a growing acceptance of this (Rodriguez et al., 2019). The sexualised nature of music videos (Ey, 2016); TV programmes (Bigler et al., 2019) and the easy access to pornographic content (Massey et al., 2020) are exposing children to adult content at a much younger age. It is argued that such exposure is adversely impacting their social attitudes, behaviours, and psychological well-being (Pacilli et al., 2019). These harms are directly applicable to discussions of SGII and even more so after the initial 2020 COVID-19 lockdown.

The boredom posed by the restrictions, lack of physical peer interaction and ease of internet access has led to an increase in self-generated imagery being circulated online (Internet Watch Foundation, 2020). Existing concerns have been exacerbated, with pornographic subscription services such as 'Only Fans' reporting a 75% increase in sign-

ups since the pandemic began in March 2020 (Internet Matters, 2020). An unknown proportion of these are thought to be children under the age of 18, using the platform to sell sexually explicit images of themselves (Moore, 2020). SGII is traditionally thought to be the result of coercion or grooming, however this is increasingly being shown to be a conscious choice by young people to engage in the behaviour (Bond & Phippen, 2019; HMIC, 2015).

The distribution of SGII of children is providing offenders with easy to access to IIoC images, especially as these are readily available on the easily accessed and public clear web. However, what is not clear, is how much demand this imagery is creating for law enforcement and other public bodies; the new social harms that are emerging as a result and how these can be managed. This thesis will contribute to answering these questions and filling existing gaps in the literature, by exploring the impact that self-generated indecent images have on law enforcement and the harms that are implicit to them.

This field of research aligns with the researcher's position, as a Senior Manager with the National Crime Agency, whose professional responsibilities include leading the development of the national strategic intelligence picture for child sexual abuse (CSA), which provides unique insight and access into this hard-to-reach area. The experiences, beliefs and passion of the researcher are a driving factor for this thesis.

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