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Introduction to the special issue

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Sexual offending against children has been an issue of major public and scientific concern over the last 50 years, and strategies and methods for managing risk and treating such offenders have gradually been developed and utilised across the world (Marshall & Hollin, 2015 Marshall, W. L., & Hollin, C. (2015). Historical developments in sex offender treatment. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 21(2), 125–135. doi:10.1080/13552600.2014.980339). Whilst there has been a marked and consistent decline in child sexual abuse over the last 20 years (see Finkelhor & Jones, 2004 Finkelhor, D. & Jones, L. M. (2004). Explanations for the decline in child sexual abuse cases. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/199298.pdf>), the production and online accessing of Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) – in visual and written form – has dramatically increased in parallel with the growth and accessibility of the Internet (e.g. Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014 Kloess, J. A., Beech, A. R., & Harkins, L. (2014). Online child sexual exploitation: Prevalence, process, and offender characteristics. *Trauma Violence Abuse*, 15(2), 126–139. doi:10.1177/1524838013511543). Further worrying developments include children being abused live online and the online grooming of children for contact sexual abuse.

Online child sexual exploitation has escalated to a level that is challenging for conventional law enforcement, criminal justice policy, and offender management and treatment services. The ever-increasing scope and sophistication of the Internet has led to rapidly changing patterns of this type of offending behaviour. Some such offending is not just facilitated by, but arguably shaped by the Internet (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006 Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2006). Applying situational principles to sexual offences against children. In R. Wortley, & S. Smallbone (Eds.), *Situational prevention of child sexual abuse. Crime prevention studies* (Vol. 19, pp. 7–36). Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.). The so-called “Triple-A-Engine” of the Internet, namely accessibility, affordability, and (apparent) anonymity (Cooper, 1998 Cooper, A. (1998). *Sexuality and the Internet: Surfing into the new millennium. CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 1, 181–187. doi: 10.1089/cpb.1998.1.187) has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the contingencies for engaging in this type of offending.

It is now becoming accepted that novel methods to manage and control online sex offending need to be explored. This includes investigative and child rescue techniques, such as the indexing of all child abuse images on the Internet. Similarly, the development of bespoke risk management and

intervention methods is a key research area; the finding that the actuarial risk of CSEM reoffending is in single figures (e.g., Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011; 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. doi:10.1177/1079063210369013) raises concerns as to whether conventional treatment approaches are appropriate, proportionate, and cost-effective for CSEM offenders. A growing body of research on Internet sex offenders is providing a gradually developing knowledge base regarding their aetiology, assessment, and treatment. However, the existing research is still limited and fragmented, both in terms of types of study, its accessibility to frontline practitioners, and its applicability to different jurisdictions.

Countries vary in their legal, policing, and offender management strategies to combat online child sexual exploitation, with limited exchange between researchers and practitioners, nationally and internationally. Efforts to combat online child sexual abuse have maintained an emphasis on the development of joint tools and initiatives to police and prosecute offenders, control the flow of CSEM, and educate young Internet users in online safety. However, notably absent in these efforts is a focus on the prevention of Internet-based sexual offending, and the development of strategies to effectively assess, treat, and manage this group of offenders.

The idea for this Special Issue arose at the first onlinePROTECT conference in 2014; in the two and a half years since then, research knowledge, focus, and public discussion have continued to evolve. We have edited this Special Issue in the hope to further enhance (and critically discuss) current knowledge and professional practice and provide an international and multidisciplinary perspective on online child sexual exploitation. All papers in this issue focus on assessment and intervention approaches for online sex offenders, either directly (e.g. the role of sexual preferences and dynamic risk factors in online sex offending; Kuhle et al., 2016; Kuhle, L. F., Schlinzig, E., Kaiser, G., Amelung, T., Konrad, A., & Röhle, R. (2016). The association of sexual preference and dynamic risk factors with undetected child pornography offending. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/13552600.2016.1201157) or indirectly (e.g. the development of a typology of solicitation offenders; DeHart et al., 2016; DeHart, D., Dwyer, G., Seto, M. C., Moran, R., Letourneau, E., & Schwarz-Watts, D. (2016). Internet sexual solicitation of children: A proposed typology of offenders based on their chats, e-mails, and social network posts. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/13552600.2016.1241309).

In linking directly to clinical assessment, Laura Kuhle and her colleagues from the Prevention Project Dunkelfeld describe the role of sexual preferences and dynamic risk factors in their assessments of undetected CSEM users. Danielle Kettleborough further enhances our understanding of offending propensities, through her exploration of permission-giving thoughts as a potential mediator to CSEM offending behaviour. In the wider context of the exploration of individual factors sits Jonah Rimer's anthropological approach to CSEM offending, considering the impact of the online environment (or the perception thereof) on individuals' decision-making and behaviour. Finally, Rebekah Dervley and her colleagues from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation provide a unique insight into "what works" in a risk reduction programme for CSEM offenders, drawing on the attendees' feedback along with that from their relatives and the programme facilitators.

The second key theme of this Special Issue is the exploration of “cross-over” behaviour through the grooming/solicitation of minors. Georgia Winters and her colleagues investigated the online “chat transcripts” of adults sexually grooming decoy victims and their link to offline contact (such as phone calls or meetings). In a further enhancement of this research theme, Dana DeHart and her colleagues present a typology of online solicitation offenders, based on the analysis of their online communications with undercover officers. Maggie Brennan and Sean Hammond conclude this emerging research area, through a proof-of-concept approach to how paedophilic interest can be identified in the search behaviour of online “peer-to-peer” networks.

Michael Seto’s impact on the research and professional practice in the area of online sex offending is unprecedented, and his name will be intrinsically linked to the field. We are especially grateful that Michael accepted our invitation to comment on and provide an invaluable critical reflection and conclusion to this Special Issue. We hope that you, the reader, will feel engaged with this Special Issue and that it will help to further advance the field through your practice, research, challenges, and contributions to “what works”.

Disclosure statement

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