

# Research briefing



This briefing gives details of the early findings of a qualitative research project aimed at developing a greater understanding of sex offenders' internet habits when viewing online child sexual abuse material.

The qualitative research involved hearing from Internet Offenders in their own words about what prompted them to begin viewing indecent images of children; how their illegal behaviour developed over time; methods used to find and view images; potential strategies for desisting; and how they are managing this behaviour at present. It is hoped the research findings will lead to the development and implementation of new strategies to tackle the global problem of indecent images of children, in particular to prevent the first viewing of child sexual abuse images.

**Based on early findings (over page) recommended areas for government, industry, law enforcement and the not for profit sectors to consider are:**

**Preventing incidental viewing and first time access.** Warning users of adult legal pornography of the dangers of straying into illegal materials when sexually aroused.

**Warnings for risky key word searches.** A warning about the dangers of risky searches and the potential to find illegal indecent images could help some offenders think twice about their actions.

**Warnings about seeking access to sites assessed by IWF as containing child sexual abuse images.** A warning that a website is no longer accessible as it contains images that are illegal could help some offenders re-consider their actions.

**Better management of legal pornographic websites.** Many offenders used progressive links on legal websites to access child sexual abuse images for the first time. Better scrutiny of such links by the host website could reduce this progression.

**Increased awareness of how to report child sexual abuse images.** The IWF takes reports of potentially illegal images and works with the online industry to remove them at source. Incidental viewers need to be more aware of the IWF and develop confidence in reporting.

**Increased availability of resources for those who develop risky sexual thoughts and behaviours.** The Stop it Now! Helpline can offer confidential advice to people concerned about their thoughts and feelings towards children and help them to manage them.

**Making monitoring software available.** As well as filtering and blocking software monitoring software is available to help individuals avoid taking risks online involving illegal sexual material.

**Educating both young people and adults about the criminal law in this area.** Informing them that all sexual images of people who are, or appear to be, below 18 years of age are likely to be illegal.

The research involved qualitative one to one interviews with 10 men who had committed online offences relating to child sexual abuse images and who had completed *Inform Plus*, Lucy Faithfull Foundation's 10- week educative course for preventing reoffending. Supported by police forces across the country, the programme is for those arrested, cautioned or convicted for offences involving indecent images of children. Alongside an exploration of past offending behaviour, sessions support offenders and their families to ensure responsible and legal online behaviour in the present and future. Participants were diverse in terms of their age, relationship and family status, number of times convicted. All participants admitted having accessed indecent images of children, had been cautioned, charged or sentenced. All participants gave their written informed consent to take part. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview developed by the researchers from LFF and the IWF. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Transcripts were analysed using a technique known as Thematic Analysis; this technique allowed the researchers to identify important themes from the transcripts.

# Initial findings



**Negative emotional states were frequently evident immediately prior to first viewing indecent images.**

Many offenders reported feeling socially isolated with unfulfilled needs for intimacy. They described the internet as an 'escape', a way to resolve interpersonal inadequacies and a way of fulfilling fantasy.

*... Sometimes when I'd just come out of bad relationships and felt quite vulnerable that's often when I'd turn to the internet ... so I'd say loneliness and a state of mind if I was feeling particularly depressed. What I see now as depression did have a big impact...*

**Offenders commonly reported not having an initial desire to find sexual images of children, but rather first viewings were described as incidental to their consumption of adult legal adult pornography.** Nine out of ten offenders said they did not intentionally seek child sexual abuse images, but found them via pop-ups and progressive links while looking at adult material. Offenders reported entrenched adult pornography use.

*...I think I would describe it as falling into it rather than choosing to...*

*...When you're looking at adult images, the occasional child image would come along...*

**Having started 'incidentally', subsequent methods of finding child sexual abuse images are rarely sophisticated.** Offenders report using search engines, initially using obvious search terms.

*...When looking at mainstream pornographic sites and you click on the web links, or the 'pop-ups' and things like that, I do remember once something illegal did pop up and being interested in it and then wanting to clicking on it that then took you to advertising and then, that's oh too complicated and went away from it...*

**Offenders were not initially conscious of risk and did not take security measures.** Offenders were initially not concerned about security measures and did not go to any great lengths to protect their identities. They showed little regard for risk of detection.

*...my profile, it had pictures of me, it had my first name, it had where I lived. MSN had my full name, it had the last two digits of my year of birth, so no, I took no real effort to, to sort of cover up my identity...*

**Some offenders experienced negative reactions to viewing child sexual abuse images.**

*...I would feel absolutely terrible...beating myself up...*

*...These are real children, they're not made up whatever...*

**Negative reactions led to some offenders attempting self-help methods to address their behaviour.** Some reported deleting collections of images, avoiding the use of the internet and also abstaining from using adult pornography.

*...There'd been times when I felt so sickened by my own behaviour I've got rid of any images on my computer. I know when I first started doing it. I did something stupidly ceremonial by burning all the images to a CD and cracking the CD into as many pieces as possible and burying it in the forest...*

*...As soon as I could I'd go back and delete all the images because I felt so sickened by them 'cos I hated it so much this was a way of trying to clean...*

*... At this stage I went to counselling and I remember even at one stage went...I saw an advert for help with addictions...*

*... I switched the computer off, turned it off thought, 'no I'm not going on it today'. Next day but something always drags you back to it...*

Quotes used in this briefing have been edited to ensure they are succinct and understandable.