

## Policing online child sexual abuse

### Aims

This research is based on an analysis of the covert investigation strategies adopted by the Metropolitan Police Hi-Tech Crime Unit, aiming to (i) assess the legislative and operational challenges and developments that shape the policing of online child sexual abuse; (ii) advance understanding of online child sexual abuse with respect to the downloading, production and distribution of indecent images of children; (iii) advance understanding of the grooming process; (iv) explore the reactive and proactive strategies for policing online child sexual abuse; (v) explore the online interaction between undercover police officers and sex offenders; and (vi) generate evidence-led policy recommendations for combating the problem of child sexual abuse online. This research is based on tactics used by the Metropolitan Hi-Tech Crime Unit, and is not representative of UK policing as a whole.

### Key Findings

#### Officer's daily activities

- Child sexual abuse online is difficult to police as the Internet is constantly developing and the behaviours of children and offenders are constantly evolving
- Undercover investigators need to respect child protection principles and should never incite the commission of a crime, e.g. distribute indecent images
- Online behaviour and the risk that a suspect may pose to a child can only be understood and analysed through individual online interaction, and on a case by case basis

#### Covert operations

- Undercover online investigations are very labour intensive and officers need to learn as much as possible about the person they are portraying to be, whether it is a child or an adult
- Sex offenders' behaviour varies enormously from case to case; some offenders spend long periods of time grooming young people, others try to initiate a sexual contact immediately with no grooming process
- The majority of police practitioners acknowledged that it would be difficult to identify a 'typical online groomer' using a 'typical profile'
- All practitioners supported the notion that regardless of levels of confidence and despite the fluidity of grooming behaviours, it is possible to distinguish certain characteristics that are common to all groomers explored in this study

#### Grooming

- The majority of groomers sent undercover officers some type of adult pornography or child abuse images during the grooming process
- Offenders clearly demonstrated a tendency to minimise their intention to sexually abuse a child
- Several subjects claimed the communication was all just fantasy and that they thought they were talking to an adult
- Respondents had a tendency to deny their interest in children and blame either their personal circumstance, boredom or the easy access provided by the Internet

- Assuming that the majority believed the undercover officer to be a compliant child, it appeared that they enjoyed her innocence and took responsibility to teach her about sex, either for psychological or physical gratification

## Policy Context

Child sex offenders increasingly target vulnerable children in online environments. 'Grooming' refers to a process of manipulation where offenders engage children online, forming a relationship and gaining their trust before sexualising interactions with the intention of perpetrating contact sexual abuse. It is important that the online environment is effectively policed to protect children from sexual predators.

## Methodology

This small scale, qualitative study adopted an ethnographic approach. This is the first time that an ethnographic analysis of this nature has been conducted in the UK. It is also the first time that data produced covertly by UK law enforcement agencies in the open forums of social networking sites have been available for analysis. The data were collected over a four-year period (2005-2009) at the Metropolitan Police High Tech Crime Unit. Findings were derived through the analysis of observational notes, recorded live-online communications between offenders and undercover police officers, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 21 police officers. Findings on sex offenders' accounts of their behaviour were drawn from interviews conducted by police officers after their arrest. Although 23 suspects had been arrested for grooming offences and prosecuted during the research period, only twelve in depth interview scripts were available for analysis, as the remaining offenders refused to talk during the interview.

## Background

Online child sexual abuse necessitates an appropriate law enforcement response. Tactics adopted by the police must be suited to protecting children and apprehending offenders. Limited law enforcement resources must be effectively targeted on the most high risk offenders. This research explores a spectrum of grooming behaviours from online fantasists who groom for immediate sexual gratification in the virtual world, to persistent predators who groom online to lay the foundations for CSA in the physical world. This research was undertaken to identify offender behaviours and the tactics adopted by online investigators.

**Source** Martellozzo, E. (2011) "Online Child Sexual Abuse: Grooming, Policing and Child Protection in a Multi-Media World" (Routledge)

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