

CHILD PORNOGRAPHY: IMAGES OF THE ABUSE OF CHILDREN

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Key Points

- Children suffer knowing that a record of their abuse is being endlessly re-circulated among people with a sexual interest in children.
- The Internet has become the main medium for the distribution and consumption of child pornography. It has allowed those individuals with a sexual interest in children to form 'virtual communities' of like-minded people who regard the sexual abuse of children as normal and acceptable.
- Little is known about the full and long term impact of being used in pornography upon children and their families, their coping strategies and the support they do or do not receive.

Summary of key research findings

Ever since human beings could write and draw, they have been communicating their sexual fantasies. These have included the abuse of children and young people by adults. Tate (1990) has described the history of child pornography and child erotica from the paintings of the ancient Greeks through England's Libertine movement of the 1600s to the advent of the printing press, the camera and the case of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (better known as Lewis Carroll). By the late 1800s child pornography was widely available in Victorian England (Edwards, 1994; O'Connell, 2000).

The production, distribution and possession of child pornography remained an illicit activity until the late 1960s and early 1970s when it became a worldwide commercial industry (Healy, 1996). This followed the relaxation of laws against the production of all pornography, including child pornography, in a number of European countries, though not in the U.K. The widespread availability of magazines featuring child pornography throughout the US and Europe led to governments introducing legislation against it. This resulted in a significant decline in its commercial distribution.

From the late 1970s to the late 1990s the production and distribution of child pornography switched from a commercial to an amateur 'cottage industry' involving the swapping and sharing of images among paedophiles and other adults with a sexual interest in children. The development of computer technologies, and the Internet in particular, has blurred boundaries between commercial and amateur collectors and

formed what has been called a new global cottage industry (Akdeniz, 1997). The Internet allows images of the sexual abuse of children to be distributed all over the world either as a gift, an exchange, or an item of commercial trade.

What is child pornography?

Child pornography is now seen as '*the visual record of the sexual abuse of a child, either by adults, other children or which involves bestiality*'. The two World Congresses against Commercial Exploitation of Children (held in Stockholm in 1996 and Yokohama in 2001; Carr, 2002) stressed that child pornography was part of a cycle of child sexual abuse and exploitation and not a separate genre of its own. Over 120 countries in the world have legislation on child prostitution and general obscenity that can include child pornography, but few have legislation specifically designed to combat child pornography.

In the U.K. there is no specific law on the content and classification of a pornographic image. Section 1 (1) (a) of The Protection of Children Act 1978 states "*It is an offence to take, or permit to be taken, any indecent photograph of a child.*" However what counts as 'indecent' is not legally defined and is open to interpretation. Explicit pictures of actual child sexual abuse, children engaging in sexual activities or children's genitals can be readily classified as indecent and pornographic. Images of naked children are less easily definable. These may well provide sexual gratification to a paedophile but are also present in most family albums.

Legal definitions of '*child*', '*child pornography*' and '*age of consent*' differ between and within countries. This makes international attempts to enforce Article 34 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) problematic. Article 34 seeks to prevent all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse of children, including their use in child pornography. The UK Protection of Children Act 1978 has been amended to tackle other aspects of child sexual exploitation. Section 160 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 made the possession of indecent photographs of children a serious offence and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 added the '*taking and distribution of pseudo-images of a child*' to the legislation.

The University of Cork COPINE (Combating Paedophile Information Networks in Europe) project has established a database of pictures of child pornography collected from the Internet (Taylor et al., 2001a). Over half of these were of girls. Among the newer pictures of children involved in explicit sexual activity around half were aged between 9 and 12 years with the rest being younger. The overwhelming majority of the children were white Caucasian.

Incidence and prevalence of child pornography

It is important to distinguish between the number of images of child pornography and the number of children abused to produce them when looking at incidence and prevalence. The advent of digital and video cameras means that many thousands of images can be produced from one child sexual abuse incident. The number of individuals proceeded against, or found guilty of possessing or distributing child pornography provides an alternative measure.

The police have been at the forefront of the fight against child pornography so evidence (the number of images) and suspects (the number of individuals) have featured prominently. For example, in April 2003 Nicholas Ferry admitted possessing 250,000 indecent images and 495 obscene videos of youngsters. The recent Operation Ore has led to the police investigating some 6,000 people in the U.K. who had subscribed to a website in the US featuring child pornography. By June 2003 over 1,600 of them had been arrested. The latest Criminal Statistics from the Home Office show that in 2001 some 51 defendants were convicted of '*possession of an indecent photograph, or pseudo-photograph of a child*' and 289 for '*take or make indecent photographs, or pseudo-photographs of children*' (Home Office, 2003).

An earlier police operation in 1998, Operation Cathedral, against a paedophile ring known as the Wonderland (after Alice in Wonderland) Club had seized 750,000 child pornography images. Over 1200 different children were identified among these images, only 18 of whom had been discovered, three in the U.K. (Downey, 2002). It should be stressed that these are the cases that come to light and have been recorded and not the true incidence. The COPINE project at the University of Cork has been conducting research on the volume and characteristics of child pornography on the Internet. During a six-week period in 2002 they came across 140,000 child abuse images, of which 35,000 were completely new. Twenty previously unseen children were identified among these 35,000 images (Taylor 2004).

Prevalence studies of child sexual abuse have usually included pornography in the sense of 'looking at it' rather than being involved in it (Kelly et al., 1991; Ghate and Spencer, 1995). Cawson et al.'s (2000) prevalence study of child maltreatment in the U.K. asked their 18 – 25 year olds on their actual involvement. Less than 1% of the sample of 2,869 reported having pornographic photos or videos taken of them when they were less than 16 years of age.

Consumers

The evidence from the police operations showed that the overwhelming majority of consumers of child pornography were male (Renold and Creighton, 2003). The youngest so far to be convicted of possessing indecent images of children was a 13-year old boy. Representatives of most professions, particularly computer consultants, have been charged with possession offences.

The police have been assisted in their investigations by the way consumers amass 'collections' of child pornography. Lanning (1984) has described how important these collections are in the life of the paedophile. He will spend considerable time, trouble and money on acquiring and organizing his collection. He will rarely throw anything away and is always on the lookout for new material. Research from the COPINE group (Taylor et al. 2001b; Taylor and Quayle, 2003) has developed a typology of paedophile picture collections downloaded from the Internet. They found that the obsessive nature of the collecting and the narrative or thematic links for collections, led to the building of social communities on the Internet dedicated to extending these collections. Through these 'virtual communities' collectors are able to downgrade the content and abusive nature of the collections, see the children

involved as objects rather than people and their own behaviour as normal. *'It is an expression of 'love' for children rather than abuse' (p.807) (Quayle & Taylor, 2002).*

Adults with a sexual interest in children collect child pornography for a number of reasons. These include sexual stimulation (Wyre, 1996; Quayle & Taylor, 2002) and to keep a permanent record of the sexual abuse of a child at the age of sexual preference (Tyler & Stone, 1985). They are also used to groom and entrap other children into copying the sexual activity depicted ((Tyler & Stone, 1985) and then as a method of blackmail to encourage further activity and to maintain silence. The use of child pornography for barter and straight commercial dealing has increased with the advent of the Internet. Taylor and Quayle (2003) have documented how the desire for new pictures can lead some consumers to abuse their own, or neighbouring children, in order to supply fresh images for barter or sale. The commercial sale of child pornography on the Internet has been increasing. The recent Operation Ore in the U.K. grew out of Operation Avalanche in the US. This operation acquired the credit card details of Internet subscribers to child pornography websites run by a Texan company, Landslide Productions run by Tomas and Janice Reedy. At the time of their arrest in 1999 they were making \$1.4 million a month from Internet subscribers to Landslide. With this demand for child pornography commercial suppliers are bound to exploit the market.

That there should be such a demand for child pornography is perhaps not so surprising in the wider context of the selling properties of sex and youth in the media. Adler (2001), Higdonnet (1998), Kelly (1992) and Walkerdine (1996) among others have drawn attention to the sexualisation of youth and eroticisation of children in the media. This can create the paradox of making the sexual exploitation of children both abhorrent and desirable.

Impact on the children involved

Renold and Creighton (2003) observed that this was an under-researched and neglected area. Such information as is available is from small scale clinical and survivor studies. The impact of a child's involvement in child pornography is difficult to distinguish from that of the other forms of sexual exploitation they were undergoing when the pictures were taken. Studies have looked at children involved in sex rings, prostitution and intra and extra-familial sexual and ritual abuse. Whilst many of the short and long-term symptoms are similar to those associated with other forms of sexual exploitation some seem to be exacerbated by involvement in child pornography. Feelings of powerlessness, shame and fear of disclosure were all heightened (Silbert, 1989; Itzin, 1996; Hunt & Baird, 1990).

Knowing that there is a permanent record of their abuse being circulated and that there is nothing that they can do about it induces a strong sense of powerlessness. Concern over how they are portrayed i.e. that they seemed to have been 'enjoying' it or the abuse they were forced to inflict on other children (Scott, 2001), or that their image may be used to entrap other children increases the feelings of shame. Children whose abuse has been recorded find it especially difficult to disclose their abuse. The images may have been used by their abusers to blackmail them into more illegal activity and keeping quiet. They will also have been used to show the child that they

were complicit in the abuse, increasing their sense of shame and humiliation. Disclosure is also more likely to come to the child in the form of a police investigation into a particular image rather than the child seeking help from a child protection professional. Future treatment is likely to be compromised.

More knowledge is needed on how best to treat these children and provide them with long-term support.

What is being done to tackle child pornography

Given the '*complex, anarchic and multi-national environment*' of the internet (Akdeniz, 1997 p.8) self-regulation has been adopted as the primary means of control and surveillance. In the UK the Internet Watch Foundation provides a hotline for users to report illegal material, most of which has been child pornography. Similar hotlines have been set up in other countries. Reports are investigated and, if found to be illegal, passed to the police, the National Criminal Intelligence Service (who liaise with Interpol), and to the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to remove the material. Most ISPs attempt to block easy access to child abuse newsgroups. There is also a growing range of protective software programmes, such as Cyber Patrol and Net Nanny, which screen out unwanted or undesirable material.

There have been public awareness campaigns, the Internet Task Force on Child Protection was set up in March 2001 and the National Hi-Tech Crime Unit (NHTCU), a national centre of police excellence, in April 2001. There has also been increased UK legislation for internet crimes. Further research on both consumers and victims of child pornography is needed.

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Organisations fighting child pornography on the Internet

Childnet International <<http://www.childnet-int.org>>

Provides information on how children can benefit from and be protected when using the Internet

Cyber-Rights & Cyber-Liberties <<http://www.cyber-rights.org>>

This Leeds based site provides information on the regulation of child pornography on the Internet. Updating and commenting upon new legislation and cases both nationally and internationally, it also provides many useful links to other websites fighting child pornography on the net.

Movement Against Paedophilia on the Internet (MAPI)

<<http://www.info.fundp.ac.be/~mapi-fr.html>>

MAPI is a research group working on paedophilia and child pornography on the Internet. It also provides an information and advice service for on-line users.

<p>This Information Briefing is based on a review of research and literature. It reports the findings and views of a range of authors. These views are not necessarily the views of the NSPCC.</p>
