



**ARTICLE KINDLY WRITTEN FOR StopSO**

**Written in 2017. Put online April 2018**

**Deeper into the darkness?**

**From Images to Contact Offending: is it a given?**



**By Michael Sheath**

The discourse in relation to ‘directions of travel’ in respect to online consumers of child sexual abuse material, (CSAM) is often shaped by moral considerations. This is understandable, given the opprobrium which is justifiably attached to CSAM consumers on the grounds that they are complicit, through their consumption of CSAM, in the sexual exploitation of children. However it often blurs necessary considerations of direct risk to children. In crude terms, the sense many observers develop relies on what might be called common sense notions around sexual desire: how could it be possible that a man who views sexual images of children would not develop sexual fantasies and ambitions which will eventually be acted out? Failing that, could it not be the case that men found in possession of CSAM are, in all likelihood, already engaged in the sexual abuse of children?

In essence, two issues can be considered. One is what can be discovered about the criminal histories of men who are arrested for possession of CSAM. The other is what can be discovered about the recidivism of men who have been convicted of possession of CSAM: are they reconvicted for further offences of possession, or are they reconvicted of contact offences?

In relation to the former point, the consensus appears to suggest that most men who are newly discovered as CSAM viewers have no criminal history at all. Seto's (1) consideration of a wide range of studies revealed that around 12% of men who were convicted of viewing CSAM had prior convictions for contact offending; 88% did not. The most recent study of the same matter, by Krone, (2) suggests that 86% of a cohort of Australian men had no prior convictions at the time of their arrest for CSAM possession. Significantly higher rates of previous sexual misconduct have been discovered in studies using self-report, most significantly in Burke and Hernandez 'Butner' study, (3) which ultimately suggested that 84% of their sample of 155 men admitted to molesting large numbers of children, although only 13% of them had prior convictions. However, the Butner study has been widely criticised for its methodology, and is seen as a 'statistical outlier' which cannot be relied upon. (4) An increased level of admission of prior sexual misconduct has also been revealed, in other studies, by the use of a polygraph examination, although in the most cited study the admissions largely related to other internet-based offending rather than direct molestation. (5)

The obvious difficulty in all retrospective studies is that the same methodologies applied to men with no convictions at all may reveal a level of previous sexual misconduct that would surprise the uninitiated. The simple fact that around 80% of all child molestation goes unreported suggests a significant number of undiscovered child molesters must be present in our society. It may, of course, be the case that a sample of men convicted of possessing CSAM would contain a higher than average proportion of unrevealed child molesters: as a matter of social policy, viewers of CSAM should be assessed with some rigour.

The second matter in terms of direction of travel relates to recidivism. Recidivism is not, of course, a measure of reoffending; most child molestation is never reported, very little results in a conviction. Taking that into account, the revealed rate of recidivism of CSAM viewers seems very low, with Seto indicating a recidivism rate of just 2% for contact offences and 3.4% for further CSAM offences, albeit over a relatively short follow up period of between two and six years. Krone's very recent study of Australian men suggests 93.4% of a cohort of 152 men did not generate a new conviction for a sexual offence after a four year follow up.

Compared to 'contact' offenders, who average a recidivism rate of 12% to 13%, 'viewers' appear to desist at a substantially greater rate. (6)

Therefore, the most likely trajectory of CSAM viewers appears to be from a position where they have not, in the main, molested children to one where they do not, in the main, go on to molest children. The substantial difficulty for police forces and safeguarding authorities remains: how to differentiate between those men who pose a direct risk of contact offending and those who, however much they are connected to the sexual exploitation of children, do not. One approach may be to consider explanations of CSAM viewing which do

not rely solely on models developed to explain the conduct of child molesters, which are not solely located in sexual attraction and ambition towards children.

Workers at The Lucy Faithfull Foundation have developed a model for considering the aetiology of CSAM viewers' conduct which utilises theories and perspectives from the 'traditional' sex offender theory school, as well as ideas from what might be termed the 'sex addiction' school. This model suggests a repetitive and potentially escalating series of behaviours based upon the viewing and downloading of both child sexual abuse imagery and 'mainstream' pornography. Our experience in running groups for viewers of CSAM suggests that very few, if any of them, are solely viewers of CSAM, and that all of them 'graduated' to CSAM by way of conventional and legal pornographic sites.

This explanatory text should be used in conjunction with the attached model, below.

The first element, origins, at 12 O' Clock, suggests that the roots of CSAM viewing, as with other sexual drives, are often located in childhood. Early exposure to pornography is particularly common: older men by way of magazines or DVDs, younger men by way of the internet. What men 'learn' from these experiences is important: many develop a relationship with pornography, and use it as a crutch when they feel unhappy. Others develop unrealistic expectations of sex and women, based upon misogynistic or brutal stereotypes. These early adolescent ideas, of the meaning of sex and sexual intimacy, and the presumed roles of men and women, are often dysfunctional and may lead to difficulties in adult life. Dysfunctional schema, about the acceptability of rape, the entitlement of men to sexual release and pleasure, and the rejection of notions of harm caused by sexual offending may be a feature of the personalities of some viewers. In many ways, the types of pornography and CSAM which are freely available online might be said to amplify and 'prove' deviant schema, or begin to create them where they did not previously exist.

Triggers may or may not exist in relation to all offenders, but they are common, and typically consist of events leading to dysphoria. These events may be sudden, such as debt or physical illness, or chronic, such as an unhappy or problematic marriage. Through habit, individuals often seek solace, compensation, or distraction through going online for pornography.

Online sexual behaviours are amplified and made more reckless and impulsive by the issue of anonymity, which reduces or removes shame, by the availability of diverse forms of pornography, and by its affordability, a feature which removes the traditional inhibitor for the consumption of pornography: cost.

The drivers in the model relate to those psychological forces which affect viewers of all forms of pornography. The Coolidge Effect (7) suggests that pornography's effect has diminishing returns in terms of its capacity to maintain the viewer's interest, and that the constant search for novelty and new experiences pulls viewers towards more and more

extreme and deviant subject matter. The Bikini Effect (8) suggests that viewers in a state of sexual arousal are more likely to behave impulsively and without thought for the long-term consequences of their actions. The Skinner Box Effect (9) suggests that viewers become bound up in collecting, as much as they engage with the material itself. Flow theory (10) suggests the viewing and collecting of pornography and CSAM is an activity which allows for immersion and, through this, generates a sense of focus, achievement and attainment, albeit through illegitimate means. Thus, the process becomes an end in itself, as opposed to shaping the viewers's sexuality.

Offence activities include, of course, the searching for, collection and viewing of CSAM, including pictures and videos, as well as other material such as fantasy stories. There may, also, be pleasure taken from online conversations with other offenders. Aside from unambiguously abusive behaviours, offenders may also engage in other online activities: sexual chat with adults, webcam sex, gambling etc, as well as 'offline' activities such as telephone sex lines, drug consumption, alcoholism etc, frequently replacing one addiction or distraction with another. Masturbation provides a reward for deviant thought, further disinhibition, and a drive to repeat behaviours and offences. Over time, thresholds as to the acceptability of material shift and erode, with increasingly abusive and possibly sadistic material being viewed: offenders may surprise themselves as to how far they are prepared to fall, in moral terms, since most will have, offline, conventional views about children and sex which are not matched by their online behaviour. Many will hold on to a position that what they are viewing is 'only pictures', or represents events that have already happened over which they have no control.

Feelings experienced during viewing vary. One, of course, is sexual arousal, but there are many others, including generic excitement, escape, numbness, astonishment, and nausea: each offender's experience will be unique to him. The common thread seems to be that feelings arising from viewing both pornography and CSAM tend to obliterate the feeling that existed prior to viewing: the 'trigger' feeling is subsumed to the feeling arising from the offence.

Consequences of offending, prior to arrest, primarily exist in the offender's mind. Many offenders describe a range of negative emotions emerging as soon as they disconnect from the internet, others as soon as they ejaculate, having masturbated to a range of pornographic images. Feelings of fear of discovery or arrest may intrude; guilt, self-hatred and self-disgust are often experienced. They may, in relationship terms, move away from existing friendships and intimacies because of an inner and corrosive feeling of unease and vulnerability, since having an honest relationship with someone might require them to disclose what they are doing. This retreat from others into the self increases isolation, and causes further dependence on the internet.

Post-offence activities consist of practical efforts to remove the traces of the activity: deletion of images, removal of search history etc, but other mental processes occur as

attempts to return to normality. These might include promises made to the self to desist from further viewing, or self-serving notions around the meaning of the behaviour, that it is 'only looking', that the children involved are enjoying themselves, or that their suffering may not matter because they are unknown or foreign.

Desistance or continuance may depend upon an internal struggle between notions of right and wrong, although if the underlying stresses which are at the core of the offender's behaviour are not resolved, he is very likely to continue to use CSAM as a distraction, crutch, or resource. Most offenders will try and fail to desist, leaving them feeling in thrall to pornography.

The CSAM cycle, as a model of explanation, points to the urgent need for robust, research-based risk assessment of CSAM viewers, so that those who pose a direct risk to children can be differentiated from those who have exploited children indirectly. Neither group, of course, is blameless, and all need to be held to account. No assumptions should be made about either prospective risk or retrospective behaviour.

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(4) The Implications of Recidivism Research and Clinical Experience for Assessing and Treating Federal Child Pornography Offenders: Written Testimony Presented to the U.S. Sentencing Commission. February 15, 2012. Washington, D.C. Richard Wollert, Ph.D. Psychology Department, Washington State University Vancouver

(5) Don Grubin et al. Polygraph testing of 'low risk' offenders arrested for downloading indecent images of children. *Sex Offender Treatment*. Volume 9. (2014) Issue 1.

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(7) Dewsbury D.A. Effects of novelty on copulatory behavior: the Coolidge effect and related phenomena. *Psychol. Bull.* 1981;89:464-482. [doi:10.1037/0033-2909.89.3.464](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.89.3.464) [Ref list]

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(9) Grundner, T.M. 2000. *The Skinner Box Effect: Sexual Addiction and Online Pornography*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press.

(10) Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow*. New York. Harper & Row.

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Michael Sheath qualified as a Probation Officer in the UK in 1988. He has been working with men who use the internet to acquire child abuse imagery since 1995, has undertaken published research on line groomers, and undertook, in 2013/14, a Professional Certificate in Counselling relating to Sex Addiction. He has spoken on these subjects at conferences and training events organised by Interpol and Europol.

