



Children Count:

Using Policing Data to Inform
Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual
Exploitation and Abuse Protection
and Prevention



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**HUMAN
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SiPR

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Executive Summary

Summary: Child abuse, whether in-person (offline) or technology-facilitated, is not only a crime and a matter for the police, but rather it is a shared, societal, global, and persistent problem. However, to date there has been little evidence on the scale and nature of this issue which makes it hard to develop responses. We first worked with population-based estimates of both victimisation and perpetration as well as the scale and nature of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and were able to apply those estimates to the Scottish population and reflect on these findings in a national context. All of this data points to the key issue that technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA) should be a public health concern; and neither academia, research, big tech, NGOs nor statutory bodies such as the police, the justice system, social care, education or health, can address it alone.

The second part of our research highlights promising practice and how collaborative partnerships and information, data and knowledge-sharing between academics and police on this issue are crucial to understanding, responding to, and preventing the abuse of children. To better understand this, we conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders working across sectors to find out how they have attempted to use evidence to tackle TF-CSEA *in partnership* and what lessons learned we can cascade across Scotland, the UK and globally on supporting these partnerships.

KEY FINDINGS

- Due to the scale in Scotland, TF-CSEA should be **treated like a public health emergency**. We cannot police our way out of this issue – the scale of the threat is much too large for our frontline response capabilities to address. Instead, we require a whole-of-society approach focused on stopping the abuse before it ever starts.
- There is increased recognition of the need for a police response that is not only focused on bringing perpetrators to justice, but also on public health and primary prevention. This can be achieved through the creation of education programmes,

safe environments and disruption of cycles of violence, and supported by an increased focus on safeguarding. This requires the appropriate capacity and financial support to respond to the scale of the crisis.

- The future requires stronger accountability from technology companies accountability – TF-CSEA exists because it is allowed to exist. **Supporting the mechanisms of the UK Online Safety Act are key.**
- This research identified a model - called PROVED – that can enhance policing-academic partnerships to strengthen the evidence base in this area, learning from best practice across. **The PROVED model should be adopted as an approach across the public sector and within organisations like SIPR.**
- Finally, **greater investment is needed in joining data together to look across the threat in Scotland.** Much of the data in this field is siloed. Breaking down these siloes requires enhanced coordination and information-sharing among police, child protective services, healthcare professionals and social workers, among others.

Introduction

Data matters because it forms the foundation of a robust child protection sector – without which we cannot keep children safe or prevent violence from first occurring. Detecting and safeguarding against child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) both online and offline is a key priority for Police Scotland. There is also a timely impetus to invest in building better capabilities, policing systems and data partnerships in this area – with the adoption of the UK Online Safety Act.



Childlight – Global Child Safety Institute is an independent, data-driven organisation based in the University of Edinburgh, dedicated to preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) worldwide. Funded by the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR), this data brief is the first in a series of collaborative academic-policing initiatives between Childlight and police partners globally. Working in collaboration with Police Scotland, we have applied representative global prevalence estimates of technology-facilitated CSEA (TF-CSEA) to the Scottish population. Data for this comes from Childlight's 2024 edition of the Into the Light Index on Global CSEA. Specifically, the representative data from this index is applied to the Scottish population across three areas of TF-CSEA:

- **Victimisation prevalence estimates**
- **Perpetrator prevalence estimates**
- **Magnitude and nature of child sex abuse material (CSAM)**

Globally, one in every eight children face online sexual harms. One report about child sex abuse material (CSAM) is made every second globally. Prevalence data highlights that there are almost two million UK offenders – which is enough to fill the O2 arena 90 times over.

Whilst Scotland has no specific national prevalence study of its own, the statistical meta-analysis of data from all the studies globally allows us to apply those findings to the population of Scotland. This gives an indication of what we would expect the prevalence of TF-CSEA to be across several different sub-types of CSEA in Scotland.

Moreover, we have conducted interviews with police (current and former) and academics in order to understand what works in academic-policing partnerships in the area of TF-CSEA and what does not. The goal of the research was to analyse themes arising from interviews with police and academics in order to identify and mobilise good practice that can be embedded in both new and existing policing-academic partnerships globally.

Applying Global Technology- facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Prevalence Data to Scotland

Data for this brief came from Childlight's 2024 edition of the Into the Light Index on Global CSEA¹ on the prevalence and nature of TF-CSEA globally. Specifically, the representative and scale data from this index is applied to the Scottish population across three areas of TF-CSEA:

- 1. The magnitude and nature of TF-CSEA victimisation in Scotland.**
- 2. The prevalence of male perpetrators of TF-CSEA in Scotland.**
- 3. The nature of CSAM in Scotland.**

This data analysis is intended to highlight the scale and nature of TF-CSEA in Scotland, inform Scottish policing strategic aims, and direct appropriate resources for both prevention and response.

TF-CSEA VICTIMISATION IN SCOTLAND

This data comes from Childlight's comprehensive global systematic review of nationally or sub-nationally representative victimisation surveys conducted in six official UN languages and a meta-analysis of the findings. This comprehensive systematic

review provides crucial evidence that can complement the current knowledge of TF-CSEA by highlighting what is and what is not, known currently, to inform TS-CSEA prevention and intervention. Although this original research was global, findings have been extrapolated to apply to the Scottish population.

When applying prevalence estimates of child victims who have experienced TF-CSEA to Scotland, where there are 755,914 children (5-17 years old);² we estimate that:

- 90,000 children or 11.8% of children have experienced online solicitation³ in the past year.
- Nearly one in every five children, or just over 150,000 children (19.9%), have been victims of non-consensual taking, sharing or exposure to sexual images and videos in the past year.
- One in twenty children have experienced sexual exploitation⁴ in the past year, and over one in 10 (11%) have experienced this at some point during their childhood.
- 47% of children have experienced sexual extortion⁵ in their lifetime.

1. See the 2024 Into the Light Global Index here: <https://www.childlight.org/intothelight/>

2. Based on Scotland's Census 2022 data.

3. Online solicitation is a term that includes (for the purposes of the research) a variety of sub-types: online grooming, online solicitation, online sexual harassment, pressure to obtain images, voluntarily provided images in a statutorily impermissible relationship, unwanted/non-consensual/ pressured sexting, unwanted sexual talk (sub-type informed by Finkelhor et al., 2022)

4. Sexual exploitation is where sex acts are exchanged for the child or young person's unmet needs, via the provision of monetary or non-monetary resources (e.g., food, clothes, shelter, affection, protection, belonging, gifts and/or anything else of perceived value to the young person or child) on or offline (sub-type informed by Laird et al., 2022 and Finkelhor et al., 2022)

5. Sexual extortion is a form of blackmail that involves threatening to share an individual's intimate image or video online unless they comply with certain demands such as to obtain money or gift cards/other items of monetary worth, additional pictures, or other sexual activities (sub-type informed by E-Safety Commissioner, 2021).

MALE PERPETRATOR PREVALENCE OF TF-CSEA IN SCOTLAND

The perpetrator prevalence data is based on a new, multi-country survey of men representative of the Australia, UK and US adult male populations.⁶ It was designed to better understand the prevalence and nature of TF-CSEA perpetration by men over the age of 18. By extrapolating the findings for the Scottish population from the wider UK representative survey we found that:

- The prevalence of men committing TF-CSEA against children in Scotland is estimated as one in every fourteen men.
- Over 76,000 men in Scotland have deliberately viewed child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online during adulthood.
- Nearly 100,000 men in Scotland have flirted or had sexual conversations with a child under eighteen online.
- Nearly 37,000 men in Scotland have engaged in sexually explicit webcamming with a child under the age of eighteen.
- One in every 50 men in Scotland have paid for online sexual interactions, images or videos involving children under the age of eighteen.

To date, most research on the prevalence of TF-CSEA is based on the number of victims. Research on the prevalence of actual or potential perpetrators outside of non-representative clinical samples or administrative policing data is sparse. Prevalence estimates from samples representative of the general population are necessary for understanding the number of perpetrators who have not yet been, and may never be, detected by forensic and criminal justice agencies, as well as the factors that may increase the risk of perpetration among those in the community.

MAGNITUDE AND NATURE OF CSAM IN SCOTLAND

Online child sexual abuse material or CSAM includes images, image collections, and videos that are shared online globally. Our compilation of this data⁷ globally measures different aspects of the nature of CSAM, such as where across the world content is hosted, what we know about victim-survivors from the analysis of CSAM and how long detected CSAM remains online after removal has been requested. This data is based on data from five publicly available reports on CSAM published between 2018 and 2022 by organisations dedicated to detecting and removing CSAM, including the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF); the National Center for Missing and Exploited

Children (NCMEC); the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) and INHOPE; as well as a report presenting an analysis of data from INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database⁸.

Based on four global reports from organisations that track and report CSAM there is a CSAM rate of 4.88 (CSAM reports/notices per 1000 people) for countries including Scotland in the UK. This means that in Scotland, it is estimated that in 2022 alone, over 265,000 CSAM reports/notices of CSAM were related to the UK. **That is more than one report every two minutes in Scotland.** Each report/notice could represent multiple images/files. It is not possible to identify the number of victims from the reports/notices as some reports have multiple victims and some contain multiple instances of the same victim.

The numbers are huge. But behind every number is a child. Children across families, communities and schools, online and in-person in Scotland.



6. See findings here: <https://www.childlight.org/intothelight/indicator-2.html>

7. See findings here: <https://www.childlight.org/intothelight/indicator-3.html>

8. It is important to note that Scotland data is presented within wider UK data across these reporting bodies.

Policing and Academic Partnerships in TF-CSEA

This data brief outlines what works in academic-policing partnerships in the area of technology-facilitated child abuse, and what does not. The goal of the research was to analyse themes arising from interviews with police and academics in order to identify and mobilise good practice and embed these in partnerships nationally and internationally for the good of children.

WHY POLICING PARTNERSHIPS?

The Joint Strategy for Policing (Police Scotland & Scottish Police Authority, 2020) in Scotland highlights the reality that cybercrime continues to grow but with an impetus to keep people safe in both a physical and digital world. There is an unprecedented growth in online child sexual abuse material (CSAM) as evidenced by Childlight's *Into the Light* Global Index (Childlight, 2024). Part of the Joint Strategy for Policing and Scottish Government Strategic Police Priorities is to "keep people safe in the digital age by developing partnerships" including with academia and to "support policing through proactive prevention" (Police Scotland & Scottish Police Authority, 2020). Due to the scale and nature of CSEA – both online and offline – a focus on response services is not enough. We cannot police our way out of TF-CSEA – collaborative partnerships are required across sectors. This data brief brings together examples of where academic-policing partnerships have worked well and where there have been challenges to success. This information, has the aim of contributing to the Joint Strategy for Policing and Scottish Government Strategic Police Priorities.

DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Police officer (former and current, academics and policing-academic coordinators) were interviewed for this study. These interviews took a critical incident approach, where specific questions were asked which detailed the life cycle of research partnerships between police and academics. Interviews were conducted via Teams where the conversations were transcribed; and the transcripts were analysed using NVivo software. The following findings are comprised of this analysis.

SHARED VALUES

Interview participants were emphatic that collaborations required shared values from each partner. Police officer: *"the creation of a shared vision and mission...Shared endeavour."*

DUAL BENEFITS = BUY-IN FROM LEADERSHIP

Buy-in and approval from leadership within a police force is a must; without this, partnerships tend to fail as impetus and momentum are lost. A former police officer remarked that receiving a senior officer's buy-in, *"just makes life so much smoother for...the police officers...I think of me knowing that I had a chief constable who was supportive...Makes a huge difference. You're not constantly facing battles for being allowed to go and do a day with them [the academics]... it's already been signed off by at the top level."*

Thus, convincing the senior level that a partnership with academics will produce tangible results in combatting TF-CSEA, is key.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Connected to shared values and dual benefits, are tangible and practicable outcomes/impact which will benefit the police and academia. These outcomes/outputs may be different for each party, but an upfront and honest conversation is to be had at the beginning of the partnership detailing what the expected/required outcomes will be.

In order to receive buy-in and approval from police forces, academics must validate the benefits to both parties. For police, these benefits must be demonstrable impact e.g. outcomes which help officers identify perpetrators more quickly with fewer resources.

Police officer: *"Until...someone shows them change and they're like...this is saving us money and time."*

These outcomes will only be useful to police if police are included in the co-creation of knowledge with academics. The outcomes will be applied to the real-world context of tackling (TF) child abuse, thus involving the police as practitioners is non-negotiable. Both police and academics must negotiate the resource cost for this collaboration.



RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Police officer: *"In personal relationships in my experience, have been the driving force behind every successful partnership."*

The interviewees note that relationships are built upon in-person contact and in the informal spaces – not necessarily around the conference table but in the in-between spaces – waiting in line for lunch, or getting coffee. Due to Covid-19 and the need to move communication solely online, plus the global nature of partnerships, this in-person, informal relationship-building is lost. Interviewees talked about how once a relationship has been built, then communication via email/Teams/Zoom/Webex is fine. But the beginning of a partnership must be built on relationships and these relationships are more easily built in-person.

Police officer: *"I think originally it [the research plan] would have come from a either a networking event... We don't really do this as much now do with post-Covid because everything is online, but it was probably a conversation around a cup of coffee."*

Police officer: *"It's the conversations by the coffee pot or by the...washing up bowl... That's where so much of that magic happens. Because you then start to talk about your kids and your parents and your grandparents and what's going on. And...the uniform that you wear it disappears and all of a sudden you just then become somebody that's as equally committed to this work as I am."*

COMMUNICATION

Communication is related to the investment in in-person relationship building. Goodwill alone is not enough to sustain communication. Effective partnerships are built upon the development of communication protocols that delineate the regularity and style of communication (Hodgkinson et al., 2023, p. 199). Police officer: *"In agreed framework around how you'll communicate not just at the beginning, not just during it but afterwards as well."*

Again, communication is connected to relationships. Police officer: the *"informal arrangement, that trust, and that ability to pick up the phone, send an e-mail and get a response back because you know the person behind the name."* Participants mentioned having a direct point of contact and speaking directly to the same person with whom they had a relationship; and who had existing knowledge of the research partnership. This made the flow of information much quicker.

STAFF TURNOVER

Most interviewees mentioned how frequent staff turnover resulted in relationships being lost, partnerships broken and research halted. As noted earlier, in-person relationship-building is crucial to creating a strong partnership. This takes a lot of energy, time and money (especially where travel is involved). When a particular person leaves the organisation or is promoted, the rapport and the impetus for the partnership is lost.

Police officer: *"It only needs an incoming leader to not agree with somebody that's already there or wants to do it their own way, and then it's so easily lost"*

There may be reluctance to put time, money and energy into cultivating a relationship when academia and the police are so prone to the churn of staff.

Academic: the partnership was *"very difficult obviously because people changed jobs every two seconds"*.

The solution may be to build relationships at different levels within the police and academia (Worden et al., 2014, pp. 286–287), and/or with the position as well as the person (Hodgkinson et al., 2023, p. 199).

Academic: *"I was trying to build relationships between academics and police practitioners at the institutional level rather than the individual level"*.

POLITICAL CLIMATE

The political climate is influential in partnerships – as this colours the prioritisation of the police. Thus, projects which meet a strategic need, are more likely to be initiated. Additionally, a political leader may have one priority, and if this person is not re-elected, then a new person may have their own (different) priorities.

Police officer: *"what's the political environment like? What are the optics...in terms of...is this one of my...priorities? What are the other demands I've got going on? Do I have the...bandwidth? Where does it fit into my change programme?...It's dependent upon where you are in the electoral cycle, where you are on the fiscal cycle, where you are in your...own programme of change cycle, where you are with your...IT programmes."*

Academics must make sure that research partnerships answer a specific strategic need for the police, which fits with the political climate in order to achieve buy-in and approval.

DATA-SHARING AGREEMENTS

A terms of reference (ToR) and memorandum of understanding (MoU) are essential for delineating both parties' expectations concerning how the project will be executed and its outputs (Rudes et al., 2014, p. 257) and around the sharing of data and information. Frustrations around data-sharing are common as policing is a risk-adverse environment.

Academic: *"But approval then when you get into the nitty gritty of what you're sharing, that's when it gets tricky."*

Police officers remarked that they were reticent to share data in case it resulted in a breach which could cause them to be dismissed.

Police officer: *"communications from senior leadership needs to be very clear and very succinct in bullet point form...because the barrier to information sharing is often, 'if I get this wrong, I'll lose my job.' So...the need to be clear what information you'll be sharing [in] what circumstances. And that will free things up."*

Participants spoke of legal contracts and how they must be drawn up outlining the data-sharing agreement. This is where a transparent conversation is required which details what will and what will not be shared with academics. However, participants expressed frustration with the legal stage due to the lengthy process.

Police officer: *"this is...where the lawyers become...the evil of...good."*

The solution is that a pre-existing template is used which has been pre-approved.

Police officer: *"So the internal legal [person] was using a previous template that was designed...from a previous research project...and then me going back to the same lawyer each time and him being...the link within legal for research projects."*

The sensitivity of data-sharing agreements relates not only to potential data breaches, but the dissemination of sensitive or

unflattering information. The independence of academics is valued because it is objective and unbiased - and external to the police: "[p]olice practitioners reported that research conducted by external partners was beneficial because it was viewed to be valid and objective by a variety of stakeholder audiences" (Hansen et al., 2014, p. 7).

Participants spoke about negotiating the balance between maintaining independence and protecting the public e.g. the police reviewing findings for accuracy, but not vetoing findings unless they compromise an active investigation or someone's safety.

Police officer: *"You can't commission...research and then do the academic legs at the end...You're transparent from the outset to say, look, I need the research done here. But look, you'll also appreciate the sensitivity of it. This can never go in the public domain"*

Police must make peace with the reality that research may uncover something that does not show the force in a good light. Partnerships between policing and academia are not about making the police look bad or good, ultimately, they are about improving policing response to crime (in this case the sexual abuse and exploitation of children). The benefit to academics of partnering with the police is to ensure that research is evidence-based, usable and useful for practitioners; not detached theoretical approaches.

Police officer: *"And...that's got to be clear from the from the start you're engaging [in] this [research partnership] but it might not be good news. But...ultimately, that's for the good of the communities you serve, not the good of the force...that actually builds public trust or should build public trust...even though it harms the reputation of the force...And by engaging in it [the research partnership], you're demonstrating that actually...we are a learning organisation. We do want to improve and we do want to provide a better service and...some of that might make us look bad in the short term, but ultimately we're about getting better."*

PREPARE FOR IMPACT

A former police officer reflected on a successful research partnership between police and academia, which produced a specific output. The output was so successful that the particular force was overwhelmed and was not able to deal with the extra workload.

Police officer: *"Instigating a system that you haven't had before that does work much more quickly and efficiently. The obvious knock on is you're gonna get more at the other end... What's the foreseeable outcomes? And then consider your planning for those foreseeable outcomes."*

Planning for impact is vital in order to action the outcomes from the research. Without the resources, the impact cannot be actualised.

MEASURE IMPACT

Part of the ToR/MoU is planning for a follow-up evaluation, whereby the outcome of the research partnership is measured. For example, if new training were introduced, a survey should be taken before and after the training in order to gauge the impact of this training. This measurement of success appeared to be missing from the all the participants' experiences.

Police officer: *"We haven't got any performance measurement around... the research and the evidence base however."*

PROVED: A MODEL FOR SUCCESS

The PROVED model, developed as part of this SIPR supported work, provides much-needed guidance for developing data partnerships around violence research. PROVED is an acronym, with each letter representing a key question accompanied by activities and outputs that create the foundations for successful partnerships. Working together, we can ensure that high-value policing data is helping to inform our understanding of the scale and nature of CSEA to better safeguard children globally – because children can't wait.



PROVED

Purpose | Roles | Outputs | Values | Expectations | Data

P

PURPOSE

WHY WE ARE WORKING TOGETHER.

Activities:

- Joint scoping meetings - including one in-person to build rapport.
- Seek and incorporate input from people/groups that are expected to use or benefit from the project such as victim-survivors.
- Understand the political context.

Output:

- Purpose statement which covers the motivation and grounds for the research partnership and dual benefits.

R

ROLES

WHO IS NEEDED FOR THE PROJECT.

Activities:

- Resource planning - funding, skills, time, duration and abstraction from other duties.
- Identify key actors, leaders, and sponsors - on police and academic sides.
- Obtain demonstrable buy-in from senior leadership.
- Put measures in place to deal with inevitable staff turnover (e.g promotions, parental leave, etc.), such as fostering relationships with other team members, not just the project lead.
- Build external advisory committee to be a critical friend to the project.

Output:

- Roles and responsibilities document.

O

OUTPUTS

WHAT WILL WE PRODUCE AS THE OUTPUT OF THE PROJECT.

Activities:

- An upfront, explicit and transparent conversation about the outputs of the project - for both sides.
- Set expectations and impact required of the partnership.
- Identify stakeholders who have an interest in the outputs.

Output:

- Expected impact and output document (e.g. revised training for police; journal articles for academics).
- Stakeholder map.

V VALUES

HOW WE WILL DO THE WORK.

Activities:

- Identify shared values - based on purpose and impact.

Output:

- Values statement.

E EXPECTATIONS

WHERE AND WHEN THINGS WILL HAPPEN.

Activities:

- Develop a project management plan (timescales, Gantt chart, tasks, deliverables and deadlines).
- Decide upon a preferred method of communication and number of meetings.
- Designate a project manager.
- Designate a time (and provide resources) to review the project and measure impact.

Output:

- A plan, with a RACI framework (list of who is responsible, accountable, consulted and informed for each activity) and timelines/milestones/deliverables.

D DATA

THE DATA THAT WILL BE ACCESSED AND/OR SHARED.

Activities:

- Agreements and contracts around data-sharing, storage, ethics, and usage, including what information will and will not be shared (ToR, MoU).
- Agreement on who will do data collection, analysis, writing of results and dissemination.
- Agreement on how data will be collected, analysed (methodology), written up and disseminated.
- Agreements around what will be published in the public domain. Police will be allowed to review findings for accuracy, but may not veto findings unless they compromise an active investigation or compromise someone's safety.

Output:

- Data management plan (including methodology and analysis).
- Data sharing agreements (ToR, MoU).
- Ethics application and approval from the university.
- Protocol which will be published publicly on the Open Science Framework (OSF)

Summary

Partnerships between academia and police allow for the diversity of skillsets and the capitalisation of unique knowledge which either side may lack (Hodgkinson et al., 2023, p. 197; Rudes et al., 2014, p. 252). The aim of academic and policing partnerships is to exploit "the knowledge and expertise of the higher education sector in order to strengthen the evidence base on which police policy, practice and training are developed and so support innovation and the professionalization of policing" (Davies, 2021, p. 236).

Additionally, partnerships are about practice-based knowledge-exchange, not merely knowledge transfer. Partnerships are not about research being done to the police, but with the police (Goode & Lumsden, 2016). Academic-policing partnerships are vital to co-create knowledge that is evidence-based (Crawford, 2020; Hilton & Jung, 2023) and that has relevance for police who will gain from the research outputs. This minimises knowledge that is theoretical with no grounding in practice. Ultimately these partnerships are about creating approaches to help police respond to new challenges in a more informed and cost-effective way; and ensuring that academics are measuring what matters (College of Policing, 2024; Teers et al., 2018, p. 7).

Conclusion

Due to the scale of TF-CSEA, Childlight believes that child abuse should be treated as a global public health emergency. We cannot police our way out of this issue – the scale of the threat is much too large for our frontline response capabilities to address.

Instead, we require a whole-of-society approach focused on stopping the abuse before it ever starts. Other key frontline actors include social welfare, health, child helplines, schools and other child protection system actors. This approach relies on collaborative partnerships such as between academia and police. However, police remains one of the main first responders particularly for technology-facilitated child sexual abuse, as the police are often the recipient of the relevant referrals. Here, there is increased recognition of the need for a police response that is not only focused on bringing perpetrators to justice, but also on public health and primary prevention through the creation of safe environments and disruption of cycles of violence through an increased focus on safeguarding (Fry, 2024). This requires the associated capacity and financial support to respond to the scale of the crisis.

This is supported by the passage in 2023 of the UK Online Safety Act, which represents a significant advancement in the UK response. This legislation followed in the footsteps of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act – both are global firsts and important for prevention, setting the tone for what is acceptable behaviour and who should be held accountable (Fry, 2024).

The Online Safety Act aims to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. Notably, it recognises the fact that increased regulation is key to making online environments less conducive to the activities of offenders – and supports a preventative approach that seeks to address several of the main drivers of online child sexual abuse, including the impunity of perpetrators.

Recommendations

We know that technology will continue to advance; and along with it will come new and different types of harms that children may experience. For example, AI-generated child sexual abuse images and videos.

- The future requires stronger tech company accountability as TF-CSEA exists because it is allowed to exist (Fry, 2024).
- The government must urgently identify options to hold tech companies accountable, such as strengthening regulatory frameworks, metrics and gold standards for detection and responses to abuse, safety by design, and the means to measure adherence to these standards. Beyond this, the Scottish government must continue to expand existing data collection and prevention and education programmes to target not only children but also parents, caregivers, educators, those concerned about their own behaviour, and members of wider communities.
- The PROVED model is a useful tool for enhancing the evidence base and partnership working between academia and policing for violence prevention issues like TF-CSEA. This should be adopted by the Scottish public sector and organisations like SIPR to support partnership working in this area.
- Finally, greater investment is needed in joining data together to look across the threat in Scotland. Much of the data in this field is siloed. Only by addressing these key areas can we ensure that the next decade sees a dramatic reduction in child sexual abuse and a safe, future-proofed environment for children to grow up in Scotland.

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