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

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Executive Summary

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (TF-CSEA) is a growing global challenge. Digital technologies have created new opportunities for offenders to contact, exploit and harm children, often across borders and at scale.

This briefing summarises findings from the Children Count report, which explores how policing data can be used alongside global prevalence estimates to better understand the scale of online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Scotland.

Applying international prevalence estimates to the Scottish population suggests that the scale of victimisation may be considerably higher than is reflected in police-recorded crime statistics.

The report highlights the importance of stronger collaboration between researchers and law enforcement in order to improve the use of data, strengthen the evidence base and inform prevention strategies.

It also introduces the PROVED framework, designed to support partnerships between academia and policing and improve the generation and use of evidence.

What Works

- Partnerships between researchers and policing organisations that support evidence-informed responses to emerging threats.
- Using administrative and policing data to identify patterns of offending and victimisation and support earlier intervention.
- Drawing on international evidence and comparative research to better understand the scale of abuse and identify gaps between reported and actual harm.

Key Findings

- Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is likely to be substantially under-reported in official statistics.
- Applying global prevalence estimates to Scotland suggests that tens of thousands of children may experience forms of online sexual harm each year.
- Police-recorded crime data alone cannot capture the full extent of victimisation.
- Digital technologies are increasingly used to facilitate abuse, including online solicitation, image-based abuse and the sharing of sexual images without consent.
- Improved collaboration between researchers and policing organisations can support better data analysis, inform policy decisions and strengthen prevention efforts.

Key Suggestions for Next Steps

- Improve the use of administrative and policing data to better understand trends and patterns of technology-facilitated abuse.
- Strengthen collaboration between academics and law enforcement to support evidence-based policing.
- Develop coordinated prevention strategies involving policing, policymakers, technology companies and communities.
- Invest in international research collaboration to address the global nature of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Further Information

The full Children Count report and additional information about the project are available via the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR).