Child sexual abuse and Covid-19: Side effects of changed societies and positive lessons for prevention

The significant global threat that Covid-19 poses to life and health means that we have all been forced to think about how to prevent its harms through public health measures and to treat it when it breaks through the barriers. The changes to our lives that have followed – particularly national lockdowns – require us to consider whether these measures have contributed to unintended or unforeseen harms in other aspects of public health and safety. Children’s health and education may have been adversely impacted by lockdown measures, but what about child maltreatment? What does the evidence tell us?

There is emerging evidence of an increase in one particular form of abuse: sexual exploitation of children online. While most recorded forms of crime fell during lockdowns, recent figures in the United Kingdom show a 17% increase in online sexual crimes against children in the 6 months after the start of the first Covid-19 lockdown. Home Office data show that there were 17,699 online child sex offences recorded by police in England and Wales between April and September 2020, and most of those offences are believed to involve child sexual abuse images (NSPCC, 2021).

Understanding the reasons for the rise in online offending is vital, partly because it helps us to understand sexual abuse and exploitation of children more generally and can give us some insights into how to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation in the future.

Firstly, Covid-19 increased the risk of online and offline harms to some children by increasing vulnerabilities and reducing protection. Most children and young people have been physically and socially isolated from friends and trusted adults outside the home for various periods during the pandemic. The emotional and mental health of many has been compromised, with confinement at home and changes to their routines being common features. Many have experienced anxieties living with high level of stress among parents and carers from illness, job loss and economic uncertainty (Chiesa et al., 2021). Some of these experiences of parental stress have contributed to neglect and other kinds of maltreatment, including children witnessing domestic abuse and coercive control.

These issues create new vulnerabilities and exacerbate existing ones for many children. Protective factors have also been removed, such as chances for adults to notice problem behaviours at school and events. Most child sexual abuse is opportunistic rather than carefully planned, and abuse tends to follow a path of least resistance. When child vulnerabilities increase, child sexual abuse, including online abuse, is also likely to increase (Livingstone & Haddon, 2012).

Secondly, lockdowns resulted in many young people spending more time online, including communicating with peers and others (Hantrais et al., 2021), often when parents and carers have limited capacity to supervise. This can leave children vulnerable to sexual exploitation by peers and adults.

The sexual exploitation of children and young people for the purposes of creating child sexual abuse material for sharing online is an international trade of huge proportions. In 2019, technology companies reported over 45 million photographs and videos of children being sexually abused to the US National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, more than twice the number reported in the previous year (New York Times, 2019). Many images are from abuse within families. Increasingly, however, trade involves images where children have been sexually exploited online by peers and adults or where teenagers have shared an image with a partner, only to have it further shared without...
their knowledge or consent. In 2020, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reported that they had taken down 68,000 cases of self-generated imagery. These images account for nearly half (44%) the imagery IWF took action on last year (IWF, 2021). These insights demonstrate that the nature of exploitation can change quickly. People who exploit young people are taking advantage of the way these young people are increasingly using online spaces to explore their emerging sense of self, relationships and adolescent sexuality.

Thirdly, people who present a risk to children have also been affected by Covid-19. The Stop It Now! UK and Ireland child sexual abuse prevention helpline supports people concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviour towards children or that of another adult or young person. The authors of this article are closely involved with this helpline. It is the largest child sexual abuse prevention helpline in the world and received over 14,000 contacts (calls/emails/chats) from over 7000 people in the 2020/2021 financial year, the highest figures of any year since it launched in 2002. Around half of the people contacting the helpline are troubled by their own sexual thoughts and feelings towards children, often involving worries about viewing sexual images of children online or about having sexualised conversations with children online.

A recent report explored the impact of the pandemic on callers to the helpline during the initial 5 months of the pandemic. Between 1 April and 3 September 2020, 582 calls were logged where people mentioned Covid-19 as having an impact on their circumstances – 10.7% of calls in this period. For some, this meant unwanted sexual thoughts or illegal behaviour that had not previously existed or that had previously been kept in check (Nardett, Simonet & Findlater, 2021).

Many people will use excuses to justify their criminal behaviour, but we need to listen to people who offend, while examining explanations that may involve minimisation or distortion. Some of these individuals identified that their concerning behaviour had escalated during the Covid-19 pandemic with economic stress, feelings of isolation, depression and anxiety all cited as factors. Some described legal, adult pornography and masturbation as a coping mechanism, but a preoccupation ultimately provided a gateway to more transgressive and illegal materials as they became desensitised to the material they look at. It is clear that risk to children, including risk of online sexual exploitation, increases when stresses for adults increase and when adults think that their actions will not lead to adverse consequences for themselves. Recognising this, we can see that one of the first indicators that a growth in online sexual crime was likely during lockdown was an announcement by Pornhub in April 2020 that the number of users of their online platforms had skyrocketed in the first month of lockdown in many countries around the world (Pornhub, 2020). The relatively lawless ‘wild west web’ (as NSPCC have described it) can be a dangerous place for children when adults (and other young people) use it so habitually for sexual risk-taking at a time where most of us have felt increased stress.

While Stop It Now! figures about increased calls from people who pose a risk to children are disturbing, it is encouraging that the growing number of people are aware of their own risk and seek help. Similar Stop It Now! confidential helplines exist in the United States, Netherland and Belgium, with a new project being established in Australia for operation from 2022. The evidence is starting to emerge that if you build accessible, confidential services for people worried about their sexual thoughts and feelings towards children, some of them will use those services and resources to change their behaviour in the short and longer term, leading to the protection of children.

Tackling child sexual abuse after it happens through law enforcement and child protection systems is vital, but not sufficient. We need to get better at preventing abuse in the first place – whether online or offline. We need to ensure that children and parents have the right information and support, particularly targeting vulnerable groups like children with disabilities or those who are particularly isolated. We need to reach out to people who pose a risk to children, deterring, disrupting and supporting them to not offend.

This must be supported by the tech industry which must redouble efforts to make the internet a safer place for children. It was not designed with children’s welfare in mind, but there is no doubt that technology can be harnessed to prevent online harm just as much as it can be used to commit harm. One example is Stop It Now! UK and Ireland’s collaboration with MindGeek so that users of their adult pornography websites, including Pornhub, who search for sexual images of children receive a warning about the illegality of their behaviour and directing them to help and support to
change. It was launched in February 2021, and by August 2021, the initiative has led to tens of thousands of individuals being signposted to the Stop It Now! website as well as to self-directed online interventions specifically designed for adults worried about their online sexual behaviour towards children.

In the middle of a public health crisis, we are reminded that tackling all kinds of child maltreatment requires us to use a public health approach. Covid-19 won’t be controlled just by better care of those who are hospitalised. It needs universal measures such as vaccination programmes and social distancing to stop harm. And where there are those with particular vulnerabilities – such as the elderly or those with health concerns – we need to reduce risks and increase protective factors. These principles hold true in relation to online child sexual exploitation. We need universal measures, such as tech companies removing images when they appear, creating safer online spaces for children and clear messaging to all children, parents and carers about online safety. And we need to target people who pose a risk to children with campaigns and support for them to not offend, and to reduce risks and increase protective factors whenever we can. Doing all of this will ensure that our criminal justice systems are not overloaded and can use their resources for the most risky and persistent of offenders. We also need to make sure that public health approaches do not adversely impact children and society more generally in unforeseen negative ways.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to get us to think about things in a different way. It may be that Covid-19 will give us the impetus to stamp out the problem of child sexual exploitation. But that will only be possible if we pay attention to what data are telling us and recognise that many individuals who exploit children are opportunistic rather than calculating and determined. Child sexual abuse is a preventable public health issue, and there are ways of deterring and providing early support for a proportion of people who present a risk of harm to children if we invest in prevention and scale resources accordingly. Years of research and insights have shown us what works. It is now up to all of us to pay attention.

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No primary data were included.

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