

Examining the sexual offending patterns of registered sexual offenders in Greater Manchester, to understand risk and recidivism between online and contact offenders.

This report provides an overview of the findings of an N8 Policing Research Partnership funded project conducted by Dr Sandra Flynn, Lily Hill, Dr Verity Wainwright, Dr Polly Turner, DCI Katie-Louise Allen. University of Manchester & Greater Manchester Police. The aims of the project were to understand offending patterns of people suspected of committing Indecent Image of Children (IIOC) offences; to examine their history of offending; and to provide an analytical profile. The sample consisted of 188 individuals recorded as committing offences involving the taking, making, possessing, or distributing an indecent image of a child/children, *referred to as the target offence* between 1st January 2013 and 31st December 2022.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

KEY FINDINGS

We analysed 188 criminal cases involving Indecent Images of Children (IIOC).

- 126 cases (67%) involved the possession of physical or digital indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs of a child.
- Suspects were charged with an offence in 52% of the cases.
- In 54% of the cases (n=102), the offenders were required to register their details with the police (i.e., were added to the sex offender register), while 86 were subject to a Sexual Harm Prevention Order.
- Of those who were placed on the sex offender register after the target offence, 56 (55%) went on to commit further sexual offences (IIOC and/or contact offences).
- 47% (n=89) had a further offence recorded on the PNC after their target offence, of which most committed a further sexual offence.
- 38 (20%) had no previous or post offending history, the target offence was a 'one-time' offence.

Recent figures from Greater Manchester Police (GMP) report that there are over 5,000 Registered Sexual Offenders (RSO), with at least 3,000 requiring community supervision from the Sexual Offender Management Team (SOMU). These figures have continued to rise yearly, creating significant demand on the SOMU staff and police resources. However, the heterogeneity of sexual offenders contrasts with the homogeneous approach to management, which can lead to ineffective strategies to reduce the risk of reoffending.

The risk of recidivism in online-only offenders (i.e., those charged with possessing, making, taking, and distributing indecent images of children [IIOC]), are likely to differ from physical contact offenders and dual offenders (online and contact). Published research suggests low recidivism rates for IIOC offences, with studies reporting less than 5% reoffending rates over four years and even fewer cases of online offenders escalating to contact offending (Faust et al., 2015; Seto et al., 2011). However, offender management teams who monitor people who commit sexual offences in the community report that reoffending is high, and police database figures indicate that IIOC offending recidivism

rates differ from those reported in academic papers (Giles & Alison, 2021). For example, the National Crime Agency has seen a significant increase in arrests and prosecution for these offences and expressed that the internet and advances in technology is facilitating a rapid increase of online child sexual abuse crimes (DeMarco et al., 2018).

Therefore, this project aimed to provide a detailed understanding of IIOC offending patterns and risk of reoffending. Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. Examine the profiles of those arrested for online sexual offences in a ten-year period, and to determine how many of this group are online only offenders.
2. Examine pre- and post-offending patterns of the non-contact online offender cohort.
3. Provide an initial analytical profile of individuals who commit non-contact online offences to understand the range of the crime incidents recorded.
4. Investigate the feasibility of linking this information to other data sources to inform risk management and help target resources more effectively.

METHODOLOGY

The research team were granted permission to obtain a sample of cases from the Integrated Operational Policing System (iOPS) at Greater Manchester Police. Crime Analysts assisted the research team in selecting a random sample of 188 individuals recorded as committing offences involving the taking, making, possessing, or distributing an indecent image of a child/children, under the Protection of children Act (1978) section 1, Criminal Justice Act (1988) section 160; and Coroners & Justice Act 2009 (section 62). The crimes (*referred to as the target offence*) were committed between 1st January 2013 and 31st December 2022.

The sample was linked to another local GMP database, 'PoliceWorks', which enabled additional variables to be extracted on each case including demographic characteristics, details of the target offence, and monitoring and supervision violations. Offending history before and after the target offence was obtained by matching the sample with data held on the Police National Computer (PNC).

Data analysis was undertaken using descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, and chi square analysis. The variables were mostly categorical.

FINDINGS

There were 9,783 crimes involving IIOC and Extreme Pornography recorded by Greater Manchester Police between 1st January 2013 and 31st December 2022. A random sample of 188 individuals and their offences were selected for further analysis.

- The mean age of offenders at the time of the target offence was 42 years ($SD=14.74$; range 18-80). Most were male ($n=181$, 96%), and the majority were White ($n=151$, 80%). Almost half were employed ($n=86$, 46%) when the offence was recorded.

- The majority of crimes (n=126, 67%) involved the possession of physical or digital indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs of a child, 25 cases (13%) involved taking images, 29 cases (15%) involved the making of indecent images that were downloaded, 8 (4%) were involved in the distribution of images (e.g. by social media, email, in a chat room or file sharing programme).
- While half were charged with an offence (n=98, 52%), in almost a third of cases (n=51, 27%) charges were not made due to insufficient evidence.
- In total, 102 perpetrators (54%) were required to register their details with the police (i.e., were added to the sex offender register), of which 86 (84%) were subject to a Sexual Harm Prevention Order. Of those on a Sexual Harm Prevention Order, 34 (40%) breached the conditions of the order.
- Of those who were placed on the sex offender register after the target offence, 56 (55%) went on to commit further sexual offences (IIOC and/or contact offences).
- Overall, 89 (47%) reoffended after their target offence, of which most committed a further sexual offence (81%), either physical contact/non-contact or online offence.
- Thirty-eight (20%) had no previous or post offending history, the target offence was a 'one-time' offence.

Based on this analysis, it appears that being on the sex offender register and being subject to monitoring, did not prevent a substantial number of people from reoffending, breaches of sexual harm prevention orders were also commonplace. It therefore seems valuable to consider alternative management interventions for this group.

This study has attempted to examine the sexual offending patterns of those suspected of committing a crime and those who were charged and managed by the SOMU. Data held on local systems alone is not sufficient to understand the psychological and motivational patterns in offending behaviour. If alternative offender management programmes are to be developed, it is imperative that we understand the specific risk factors for online sexual offending involving IIOC. To fully understand the differences in risk between online and contact offenders, future researchers would need to be granted access to the national database ViSOR (Violent and Sex Offender Register) to identify how people who commit online sexual offences are risk-assessed and managed, and how their needs may differ from other sexual offenders.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Access to robust data across all forces is needed to enable valid and reliable research in this area. HMICFRS [‘Police Performance: Getting a grip’](#) (2023) reported safe management of sexual offenders was being undermined by problems with recorded data and information analysis. Research is urgently needed to inform decision making around effective risk management strategies for this heterogeneous group.

We still have much to learn about the motivations of people who create, possess, or distribute IIOC (Seto, 2017). Within our sample we have identified several patterns of offending behaviour. Firstly, ‘one-off’ offences where individuals have been shown to desist from further offending after being investigated/cautioned or charged by the police. The stress and stigma attached to being under investigation for sexual offending can have a detrimental impact on an individual’s mental health. While individuals may desist from further offending, a recent systematic review has shown suicidal behaviour in perpetrators of Child Sex Abuse and IIOC to be over 100 times that of the general population (Key et al. 2021). Research into mental stress experienced (compared to other people under investigation) could help identify support needs. Secondly, we identified a group where no further action was taken, due to insufficient evidence to prosecute. Research could be undertaken into how to increase the numbers of cases that proceed to a charge. Thirdly, given the high recidivism rates in this group, it seems evident that rehabilitative and preventative initiatives (such as those offered by organisations like the [Safer Living Foundation, the Lucy Faithful Foundation, and Stop it now](#)) could be used to reduce further sexual re-offending. Finally, we identified a group of ‘high-harm’ online sexual offenders who proceeded to commit further IIOC and contact offences. Conducting an in-depth analysis of high-harm IIOC offenders would improve knowledge around the trajectories of sexual offending and current risk management strategies for offender management teams. This will enable the development of innovative and practical evidence-based interventions to reduce recidivism in people being managed by the SOMU.

SHORT CONCLUSION

Offenders were charged, summoned, or cautioned in half of the crimes recorded. Evidential difficulties, ever-evolving technology, and the use of sophisticated strategies in avoiding detection, make it challenging for the police to pursue a charge. The implications of this are three-fold. Firstly, there is a substantial number of people known to the police as a potential risk, but they are not prosecuted and managed by the SOMU. Secondly, this has an impact on victims. The permanence and unknown extent of the distribution of images can have profound re-traumatising effects on victims. Thirdly, as many suspects are not charged, the proportion of people who reportedly reoffend is also likely to be significantly underestimated. Therefore, recidivism rates will inevitably be substantially higher than shown in this study and the wider evidence base. Consequently, as the volume of offending continues to increase, the strain on police resources becomes more acute. Investment in finding alternative management solutions is warranted to reduce the impact caused by sexual offending across communities, and also to reduce the burden on SOMU officers and police resources.

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