

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Lincoln		
Unit of Assessment: 4 – Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience		
Title of case study: OnlinePROTECT: Improving Practitioner Approaches to Online Child Sexual Exploitation Material Offending		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
MERDIAN Hannah Lena	Associate Professor	5 Dec 11 to date
BARTELS Ross	Senior Lecturer	2 Sep 13 to date
BRADSHAW Hannah	Research Assistant	9 Jan 17 - 31 Mar 17
DAWSON David	Research Clinical Psychologist	1 Jun 20 - 25 Feb 21
KETTLEBOROUGH Danielle	Lecturer	22 Jun 09 to date
MOGHADDAM Nima	Research Clinical Psychologist	1 Aug 17 - 31 Jul 18
		19 Sep 11 to date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Offences involving online Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM) increasingly challenge the capacities of law enforcement, child protection, and clinical services. Research led by the University of Lincoln (“onlinePROTECT”) contributed to better understanding of pathways to CSEM offending, and the development of a new treatment planning tool. Professionals using the tool report increased competence working with CSEM offences. OnlinePROTECT’s research has been integrated into staff training within Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Services, which has been rolled out across England and Wales Probation Services. It has also underpinned treatment developments in the UK, USA, and Belgium, and influenced national and international public debate.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Every five minutes, the Internet Watch Foundation (2018 Annual Report) flags a webpage containing Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM). As internet access has greatly expanded, so too has the number of individuals being arrested and managed by law enforcement and probation agencies for CSEM-related offences. Initially conceptualised as an ‘old crime, new technology’ phenomenon, the unique characteristics of these individuals were poorly understood, precluding evidence-based decision-making about effective interventions and the optimal allocation of scarce agency resources. This knowledge gap gave rise to the onlinePROTECT research programme at the University of Lincoln, led by Dr Hannah Merdian (University of Lincoln) and Prof Derek Perkins (Royal Holloway University of London, West London NHS Trust).</p> <p>Our initial research aimed to establish whether those who commit CSEM offences are psychologically and behaviourally distinct from those who commit direct, contact sexual offences against children. Findings from an anonymous survey of individuals enrolled in sex offender treatment [3.1] provided the first empirical differentiation of individuals who reported accessing CSEM material solely to facilitate inappropriate sexual fantasies (fantasy-driven offenders) from those who reported accessing CSEM because of a motivation to have direct sexual contact with</p>		

a child (contact-driven offenders). This is a key distinction for practitioners formulating robust risk management plans and intervention strategies.

Our research also highlighted poor understanding of the fantasy-driven subtype, making it difficult for professionals to comprehensively assess the individual factors that have contributed to, and may prevent, future offending behaviour. In response, we conducted a detailed case study analysis [3.2] to identify the pathways to fantasy-driven offending, the potential risks posed, and the treatment needs of this population. This research identified commonalities in the histories, thinking styles, behavioural patterns, and environmental triggers that appeared to uniquely contribute to this form of offending behaviour.

Drawing on the research in [3.1] and [3.2], we developed a new etiological assessment tool, the onlinePROTECT CSEM Pathways Tool (CPT; see Figure 1). This tool identifies typical pathways to CSEM offending behaviour and supports professionals' assessment of offender behaviour and treatment needs through systematic guidance. Importantly, the tool can also facilitate the client's understanding of their own offence-specific pathway, enabling them to co-develop solutions for relapse prevention, desistance, and social reintegration.

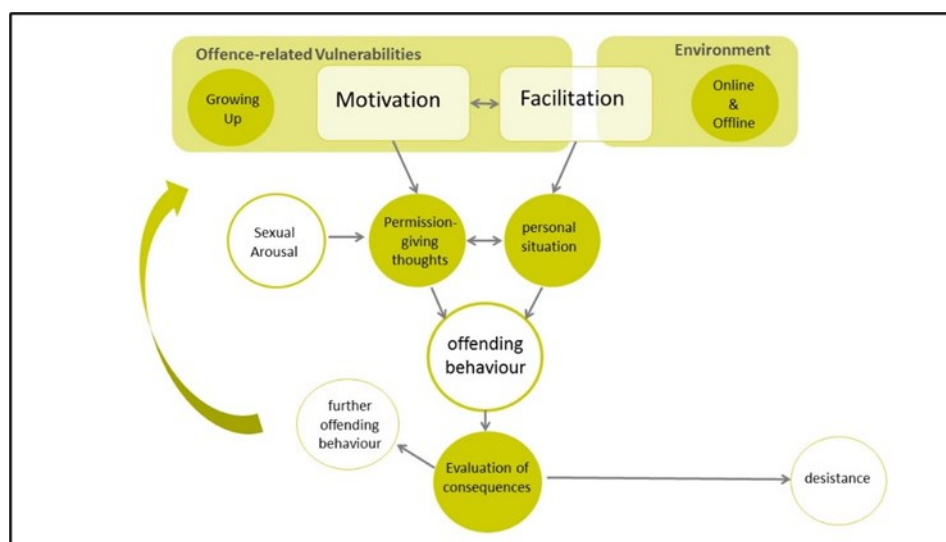


Figure 1: The OnlinePROTECT CSEM Pathways Tool

In recognition of the need to ensure the tool's usability in practice, we subsequently established the feasibility of integrating the CPT as part of group community treatment [3.3]. Further research [3.4] confirmed that non-contact CSEM offenders' thinking patterns ('permission-giving thoughts') differed from those of contact sex offenders. This led to the first conceptualization of implicit theories held by CSEM offenders [3.5], including 'Unhappy World', 'Children as Sexual Objects', 'Nature of Harm (CSEM variant)', 'Self as Uncontrollable', and 'Self as Collector'. A cross-cultural study [3.6] confirmed the presence of these in CSEM offenders in both the UK and Spain.

Overall, OnlinePROTECT research has provided insights into the trajectories of CSEM offending behaviour and psychological factors that underpin it. This information is of critical importance for professionals who need to understand the behaviour in order to develop prevention and intervention strategies.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1 Merdian, H. L., Moghaddam, N., Boer, D. P., Wilson, N., Thakker, J., Cate, C., & Dawson, D. (2016). Fantasy-driven versus contact-driven users of child sexual exploitation material: Offender classification and implications for their risk assessment. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. Published online before print.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1079063216641109>

- 3.2 Merdian, H. L., Perkins, D. E., Dustagheer, E., & Glorney, E. (2018). Development of a case formulation model for users of child sexual exploitation material. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0306624x17748067>
- 3.3 Merdian, H. L., Perkins, D., McCashin, D., & Stevanovic, J. (2020). A Feasibility Study of Integrating Structured Individual Offending Pathway Analysis into Group Treatment for Individuals who have accessed, shared, and/or distributed Child Sexual Exploitation Material. *Psychology, Crime and Law*. doi: 10.1080/1068316X.2020.1849690
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1068316X.2020.1849690?journalCode=gpcl20>
- 3.4 Kettleborough, D. & Merdian, H. L. (2017). Gateway to offending behaviour: permission-giving thoughts of online users of child sexual exploitation material. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 23(1). pp. 19-32.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2016.1231852>
- 3.5 Bartels, R. & Merdian, H. L. (2015). The implicit theories of child sexual exploitation materials users: An initial conceptualization. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 26, 16-25.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2015.11.002>
- 3.6 Soldino, V., Merdian, H. L., Bartels, R., & Bradshaw, H. (2019). Implicit Theories of Child Sexual Exploitation Material offenders: Cross-cultural validation of interview findings. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X19877599>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Online PROTECT research and the CPT has changed CSEM client treatment and case formulation practice and improved staff training and awareness across the offender management sector in the UK and internationally.

Improving CSEM practitioner knowledge, treatment confidence and professional practice

Between August 2013 and February 2020, 20 Online PROTECT workshops were delivered to community treatment providers, social work teams, prisons and probation services both in the UK and internationally (Belgium, Canada, Hungary, New Zealand, Russia, USA). The workshops aimed to fill knowledge gaps around CSEM offending behaviour and professional practice response and were attended by clinical psychologists, therapists, police, youth workers, and legal professions. Of those, 10 were fully evaluated ($n = 384$; pre-post training data). Evaluation data (collated and demonstrated through multiple figures in [5.1]) demonstrates a clear and consistent pattern that the CPT training significantly increased attendees' knowledge about the topic, psychological approach and risk, and confidence to conduct treatment (e.g., 92.4% of respondents reported increased knowledge about CSEMs, [5.1 pdf p.23] . Qualitative comments endorse the benefit of the CPT for practitioners (e.g. "I believe the CPT has great potential to improve the ways in which we work with CSEM offenders." and "Really helpful tool that I can envisage using a great deal.") [5.1, p. 60]. These benefits to knowledge are evidenced further by evaluations of a new CPT-based training within Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service [5.2].

Online PROTECT research has also been integrated into staff training and treatment programmes internationally. The University Forensic Centre Antwerp, a provider of specialised out-patient treatment for sexual offenders in Belgium, have used the *contact-driven vs fantasy-driven offending behaviour* distinction to improve client assessments [5.3]. Counselling and Psychotherapy Centers Inc., a national provider of Sex Offender treatment programmes in the U.S.A, have revised their treatment curriculum to align with the domains identified in the CPT

[5.4]. The research has also influenced training content and professional practice in the assessment and treatment of CSEM offenders in Canada **[5.5].**

Shaping HMPPS Response to CSEM Offending

OnlinePROTECT has enhanced HMPPS staff practice in the management of CSEM offenders. Over 800 offender managers and probation staff have been trained to use the CPT in the North East and Midlands division of HMPPS alone and the CPT has now been integrated into the National Training Programme for staff working with individuals who have committed sexual offences, with training evaluations showing a *“highly significant increase in all domains”*, particularly *“improved understanding of internet based offending”* and *“development of a comprehensive understanding of a service user’s risks and needs”* **[5.6]**. The research was further integrated into the HMPPS’ training workshop for all staff working with perpetrators convicted of CSEM offending, is featured in training videos on the CPT and implicit theories on the HMPPS Staff Learning & Development Platform **[5.2]** and influenced the development of iHorizons, an HMPPS’ treatment programme for men convicted of internet related sexual offences **[5.7]**.

Influencing offender support practice in the Non-statutory/ Charitable Sector

OnlinePROTECT has also improved practice in the non-statutory and charitable sectors. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation, one of the UK’s leading charities working with offenders to prevent child sexual abuse, report that the CSEM Pathways *Tool “assisted clients in their understanding of their offending”* and crucially *“helped structure individual intervention plans by providing a collaborative formulation between the facilitator and the client”* **[5.8]**. In 2020, Circles UK, a national charitable provider who work with sex offenders to support reintegration back into the community, launched *Circles Reboot*, for individuals who have committed CSEM offences. Circles UK cite the importance of OnlinePROTECT in the conceptualisation of the programme design and enabling self-assessment to be placed at the core of the programme **[5.9]**.

Informing Public Debate and Prevention

OnlinePROTECT researchers helped develop a joint campaign by the Home Office, Internet Watch Foundation and Marie Collins Foundation to reduce child sexual exploitation by improving young men’s knowledge of the law around Indecent Images. Now in its fourth delivery phase, evaluation results have shown a year on year increase in young men’s understanding of the law in this area **[5.10a]**. OnlinePROTECT researchers were also commissioned by the Centre for Expertise in Child Sexual Abuse (<https://www.csacentre.org.uk/>) to conduct an analysis of interventions for CSEM offenders. Key findings from the report were included in the Centre for Expertise’s submission to the Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse’s Investigation into Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks. The report, published on the CECSA’s website between Feb 2018 and July 2019 had 6,263-page views from 3,965 users **[5.10b]**

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 Confidential Summary of Training Evaluation Data (2014-2020)
- 5.2 Testimonial Effective Probation Practice Manager HMPPS.
- 5.3 Testimonial Professor Director Universitair Forensisch Centrum, University of Antwerp.
- 5.4 Testimonial CEO and Executive Clinical Director of Counselling and Psychotherapy Centres Inc.
- 5.5 Testimonial Clinical and Forensic Psychologist (Canada)
- 5.6 Testimonial Senior Probation Officers North-East Probation Services
- 5.7 Testimonial Strategic Lead – Sexual Offending HMPPS

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5.8 Testimonial The Lucy Faithfull Foundation

5.9 Testimonial Chief Executive Officer, Circles UK

5.10 **Public Debate and Prevention**

(a) Testimonial Home Office IIOC.

(b) Testimonial Deputy Director – Research and Evaluation Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.