

Risk Management Authority Briefing

Current Practice and Research into Internet Sex offending



This is the first briefing paper issued by the RMA. It discusses a research project on internet sex offending carried out by Dr Julia Davidson of University of Westminster.



Rapid growth of the internet and advances in technology mean huge benefits to society. Children should be able to enjoy the benefits which the internet offers in safety.

Some 65% of children are now able to access the internet and 76% spend long periods online unsupervised. However, it is also necessary to recognise that with the growth of the internet comes the growth in the possibility of the system being abused by sex offenders; making contact with children with intent to 'groom' the youngsters through chat rooms and social internet sites.

The RMA was asked by stakeholders to provide advice in this field. We commissioned Dr Julia Davidson, Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Research Methods at the University of Westminster to undertake this work by reviewing current practice and research into internet offending. Dr Davidson has conducted a considerable amount of research on sexual abuse with both perpetrators and victims and retains a strong interest in government policy and legislative provision for child victims.

The review focuses on how detected offenders are assessed and what works in managing and treating them rather than on prevention or victim support issues. It includes a literature review, documentary analysis of key legislation, policy and practice documents, and interviews. It found that work with

internet sex offenders fell into three broad areas which included different categories of offender: those who use the internet to 'groom' children for the purposes of sexual abuse; those who produce and/or download indecent, illegal images of children for the internet; and those who produce, distribute and possess 'extreme' pornographic material depicting the violent sexual abuse of adults.

The concept of 'grooming' is now recognised in Scottish legislation. The Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005 includes Section 1, 'meeting a child following certain preliminary contact'. This offence strengthens the law by creating a specific offence to deal with those who groom children (a person under 16) for the purposes of carrying out unlawful sexual activity. Similar legislation applies to England and Wales and many other countries are beginning to follow suit. Proposed legislation in Scotland, England and Wales will make the production and possession of extreme pornographic material depicting adults an offence.

The RMA strives to be a centre of excellence and has an ongoing commitment to commission work to develop the evidence base necessary to drive forward risk assessment and risk management of serious violent and sexual offenders in Scotland, sharing best practice and encouraging multi-agency collaboration.



The Review

Main Aims

Since its inception, the RMA has undertaken reviews identifying and categorising assessment tools and risk management approaches for use with serious violent and sexual offenders. In this case the RMA was of the view that there was a need to explore further approaches to the risk assessment and management of offenders who make use of the internet to perpetrate sexual offences.

This study considered how such offenders target and groom children online; the possession, production and distribution of indecent child images and the possession of 'extreme' sexual images depicting adults. It explored the UK and international legislative and policy context of internet sex offending, asking how current legislation seeks to regulate this type of offending. It sought to identify the key issues from research literature on the risk assessment and management of sex offenders using the internet to offend. Finally it looked into establishing what projects and practical initiatives including risk assessment and offender management tools and approaches, are currently in use by government in Scotland, England and Wales and internationally by organisations and agencies working with sex offenders convicted for internet related sexual offences and asked what the outcomes of any evaluations of such practice are.

The project included a literature review covering academic and government publications on the risk assessment and management of internet sex offenders. It included examining projects and initiatives and gathering data and policy information that agencies use in dealing with the assessment and management of internet offenders, including how these bodies and agencies work together.

Interviews were carried out with a number of academics, key agency representatives and practitioners, all with an expertise in sexual offending. Contact was also made with senior police practitioners working with internet sex offenders.

The Findings

It is clear that sex offenders use the internet not only to access indecent images of children, but to select children for abuse and to communicate with other sex offenders. Key steps have been taken by some governments in attempting to legislate against online

sexual abuse. Significant efforts to protect children have been made by organisations such as the Internet Watch Foundation, the Virtual Global Taskforce and the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) which also works with the IT industry. National and local police High Technology Crime Units officers have visited chat rooms posing as children in order to detect any grooming behaviour. False websites will be set up to attract sex offenders seeking to groom children and the G8 countries have agreed a strategy to protect children from internet sexual abuse.

Despite these positive moves it has been suggested that the scale of the problem is considerable and continues to get worse. The NSPCC estimate that approximately 20,000 indecent images of children are placed on the internet every week and the police and CEOP are attempting to identify victims. The Internet Watch Foundation has reported a rise in the number of websites containing images of children from over 3,400 in 2004 to 6,000 in 2006. Many of the sites are hosted outside of the UK making it extremely difficult to control and police.

There is evidence of planned, developmental work in risk assessment, management and treatment of internet sex offenders in the UK, Canada, Amsterdam and Switzerland. In Scotland, England and Wales internet sex offenders are currently risk assessed using Risk Matrix 2000 (RM2000), OASyS and Risk of Sexual Violence Protocol (RSVP). Internationally no risk assessment tools appear to have been developed specifically for this group of offenders. Research is underway by Professor Beech from Birmingham University to adapt RM2000 for use in this group. The RMA compiled a comprehensive directory of risk assessment tools in 2006 (RATED) to inform practice in Scotland. RATED is available to download from the RMA's website at www.RMAScotland.gov.uk.

Pioneering work has been undertaken to address risk assessment with those who target and groom children online. Offenders convicted for indecent image related offences who may be assessed as 'low risk' under current risk assessment tools may constitute a higher risk in terms of their propensity for contact abuse. Any attempt to risk assess internet sex offenders must also take into account the diversity of this offending group and the potential for contact abuse.



It has been suggested that offenders situation (access to children, lifestyle, home environment) and individual risk factors should be taken into account both at the social enquiry report/pre-sentence report stage and into the sentence, and that effective assessment can only occur with inter-agency collaboration. This is also important during sentence and post release. There is clearly a need for organisations to attempt to control and manage internet offenders through Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), but police, social work and probation have the difficult task of attempting to make assessment work at an individual level.

The Combating Paedophile Information Networks in Europe (COPINE) typology for categorising internet sex offenders using indecent images of children has been developed by Taylor, Holland and Quayle¹ and this forms the basis of the risk categorisation advice issued by the Sentencing Advisory Panel (England and Wales). Seto and Eke² in Canada have also conducted research into offenders using indecent images of children and the results have implications for risk assessment practice with internet offenders. Further large scale research is ongoing and will inform risk assessment approaches.

It was also suggested that criminal justice social workers and probation officers should be using screening questions regarding computer/internet use when compiling social enquiry reports or pre-

sentence reports on all registered sex offenders.

It could be possible to monitor sex offenders effectively under MAPPA through regular inspections of home computers. Software in use in the United States could be introduced in England and Wales to monitor the computer use of offenders on the Sex Offenders Register.

The treatment of internet sex offenders is largely based upon the cognitive behavioural model which underpins the prison and probation Sex Offender Treatment Programme in Scotland, England and Wales. Some innovative approaches based upon this model are under development. In England and Wales the Internet Sex Offenders Treatment Programme (i-SOTP) was introduced to the National Probation Service in July 2006. These initiatives are recent and there is currently no research information regarding their effectiveness.

In Scotland, England and Wales, internet sex offenders will be subject to restrictions placed on other sex offenders under MAPPA including multi agency collaboration to monitor risk. MAPPA will be introduced in Scotland in April 2007 and legislation which amends the Sexual Offences Act 2003 has recently come into force. The arrangements address several areas of good practice including ongoing risk assessment and risk management plans that focus on public protection.

¹ Taylor, M., Holland, G. & Quayle, E (2001) 'Typology of Paedophile Picture Collections' The Police Journal. 74: 97-107

² Seto, M. C., & Eke, A.W., (2005a) 'The criminal histories and later offending of child pornography offenders' Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, Vol 17, No 2: Seto, M. C., & Eke, A.W., (2005b) 'Extending the follow up of child pornography offenders' Unpublished paper.



Recommendations

Key Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been suggested in the report and the RMA is examining these in detail.

Further Research

Further research is needed to explore the behaviour of online groomers who target children; the link/boundary between non-contact online sexual abuse of children and internet offenders' propensity for contact abuse. Research is also needed to investigate the behaviour and motivations of those using 'extreme pornographic images' depicting adults.

Inter-Agency Collaboration

Criminal justice social workers in Scotland and probation officers in England and Wales should work more directly with specialist police units such as police high technology crime units and MAPPA officers, in assessing the risk of internet sex offenders pre and post sentence.

Risk Assessing Internet Sex Offenders

A number of key factors should be taken into account by practitioners in assessing the risk presented by internet sex offenders. These could usefully inform the production of screening questions and risk assessment tools in future. Factors include: the nature of any collection of indecent child images and the nature of the collecting behaviour; offenders' internet access, nature of computer use and degree of IT knowledge; previous history of allegations and contact sexual abuse; and access to children.

Managing Internet Sex Offenders

Respondents interviewed suggested that effective management of internet sex offenders in the community, according to respondents, should include higher agency priority; the screening of all registered sex offenders for computer or internet use; and the regular monitoring of computer use.

International Research and Collaboration - Sharing Knowledge and Experience

There is an urgent need for criminal justice agencies and academics to share good practice and research information. The review suggests that a research/information repository should be facilitated by an organisation such as the National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers (NOTA) at national level and the International Association for the Treatment of Sexual Offenders (IATSO) at international level.

The RMA welcomes the review, which underlines the significant problem presented by online sexual abuse of children.

The commissioning of research to provide an evidence base for the development of best practice in risk assessment and management is one of the RMA's key responsibilities. We have a full research agenda and current priorities reflect the need for standardised forms of risk assessment. The RMA has consulted widely on its initial research strategy and welcomes suggestions and proposals for new work from all those working in the field of criminal justice and the academic community.

Collaborative working is recognised by the RMA as fundamental to risk assessment and management and we promote this approach in all our publications, standards, guidelines and guidance. In Scotland, close liaison is being developed between responsible authorities and criminal justice agencies and community justice social work, the police and other agencies are collaborating closely to plan the implementation of MAPPA in April 2007.

The assessment of internet sex offenders is a highly specialist area of sex offender assessment. The RMA commends the pioneering work which is being carried out by Ethel Quayle and other researchers from the COPINE project and the research which is being carried out by Seto and his team in Canada, along with the initiatives in this area being undertaken by the Probation Service in England and Wales.

The full report and short summary can be downloaded from the RMA website at www.RMAScotland.gov.uk