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**Abstract** | This study examined 17 threads on a darknet forum for undetected online and contact child sexual offenders (CSOs) to identify key drivers and deterrents of offending and to inform intervention approaches.

CSOs on the forum normalised sexual contact with children while minimising or denying the resulting harm and shifting the responsibility for offending. These cognitive drivers of offending were coupled with access to technology and close engagement with online communities supportive of child sexual abuse.

Acknowledgement of the harm to children, feelings of guilt and shame, and concern about being caught by law enforcement or detected by family and friends acted as deterrents to continued offending.

## Drivers and deterrents of child sexual offending: Analysis of offender interactions on the darknet

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**Warning: this paper contains confronting material.**

Sexual abuse of children is a global problem with devastating impacts. Recently, research into the drivers of offending and opportunities for deterrence among online and contact child sexual offenders (CSOs) has proliferated. For example, viewing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) has been associated with increased risk of approaching children online and perpetrating contact sexual abuse, highlighting the importance of disrupting online activities (Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valkonen 2021). Research has found that offenders network online and teach one another how to abuse children (Huikuri 2022). To inform approaches aimed at disrupting the occurrence and recurrence of child sexual abuse, the current study examined the drivers and deterrents of offending among a group of undetected online and contact CSOs on the darknet.

While many online CSOs do not commit contact sexual offences against children, and some contact offenders never offend online, available literature suggests a level of overlap between online and contact offending (eg Cubitt, Napier & Brown 2022; Teunissen & Napier 2023). For example, several reviews have found that a small

proportion of online sexual offenders will subsequently be detected committing a contact sexual offence (Dowling et al. 2021; Seto & Eke 2015), although this proportion may be higher among offenders who have not yet been detected. Importantly, emerging evidence suggests that viewing CSAM may be an antecedent for contact sexual abuse in some individuals (Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valkonen 2021).

CSOs are responsible for devastating outcomes for victims, including mental illness, substance abuse, revictimisation and offending in adulthood (Cashmore & Shackel 2013; Ogloff et al. 2012). Victims whose abuse is recorded and shared online also experience helplessness, shame, anxiety, grief, betrayal and revictimisation (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017). Preventing the sexual abuse of children is vital, and a key step in prevention is detecting CSOs and applying suitable and effective interventions. However, offenders have increasingly used new technologies, such as the darknet, to avoid detection (Blokland et al. 2024).

### **Child sexual offending on the darknet**

The darknet not only impedes the detection of child sexual offending; it actively enables offending. The darknet is a private network where connections are made using non-standard protocols and ports, creating a space where users can operate with a high level of anonymity and privacy, attracting cybercriminal activities including child sexual offending.

In 2015, there were 900 child sexual abuse forums active on the darknet (Owen & Savage 2015). While these forums made up just two percent of all active darknet sites, they accounted for 80 percent of the daily browsing requests. The darknet enables viewing and trading of CSAM with limited risk of discovery (Huikuri 2022). Further, some online forums boast large international memberships and an overwhelming amount of information, media and contacts (Connolly 2021). These forums offer a sense of community and support, promote pro-offending beliefs and perpetuate justifications for offending (Cantor et al. 2022; O'Halloran & Quayle 2010). Moreover, forums can facilitate sexual violence and offer advice on how to offend and conceal offending against children (Huikuri 2022; van der Bruggen & Blokland 2021).

### **Studying undetected child sexual offenders**

There are several barriers to detecting CSOs, the first of which is reporting. Rates of reporting of sexual violence are low, and under-reporting is more pronounced when the victim is a child (Scurich 2020). Investigation, arrest and prosecution rates for sexual offending are even lower, meaning a large proportion of CSOs go unreported and unidentified. This has implications for how we understand CSOs—if we can only measure the characteristics and behaviours of those who have been detected by authorities, our knowledge will be incomplete as we cannot be sure if those who remain undetected are similar or entirely different.

It is pivotal to better understand CSOs who go undetected and to develop strategies to improve the visibility of this group and subsequent detection and intervention opportunities. We therefore ask one principal research question: among undetected CSOs on the darknet, what are the drivers and deterrents of sexual offending against children?

## Method

### Data source

Data for this research were scraped from a darknet forum for individuals who self-identified as a paedophile and held 'conservative' views of sexual contact with children, which is a key point of difference from other studies examining CSO darknet forums (eg van der Bruggen & Blokland 2021). One forum user described being conservative to mean:

... someone who does not have intimate sexual relations, or engage in "inappropriate touching", with children because of moral and/or ethical reasons (User 88, Thread 3)

In other words, this forum featured individuals who claimed not to engage in contact offences against children but who viewed non-contact child sexual offences as comparatively acceptable. Despite the expressed conservative focus, some forum users admitted to prior contact offences and some believed they would engage in future contact offences. Further, users frequently discussed engaging with CSAM. In this paper, we refer to forum users collectively as CSOs. While this term usually refers to those who have been convicted of a child sexual offence, it is appropriate for this group due to the nature of the forum and the self-reported offending histories of the users.

The data source is unique as it offers insight into CSOs who have largely remained undetected by law enforcement, family or friends. It also allows insight into the thoughts of CSOs when in conversation with one another, in a setting where they feel reasonably comfortable. Users had confidence in their anonymity because the forum was on the darknet. This anonymity and the community that developed on the forum appeared to encourage open discussions between self-identifying CSOs.

### Sample

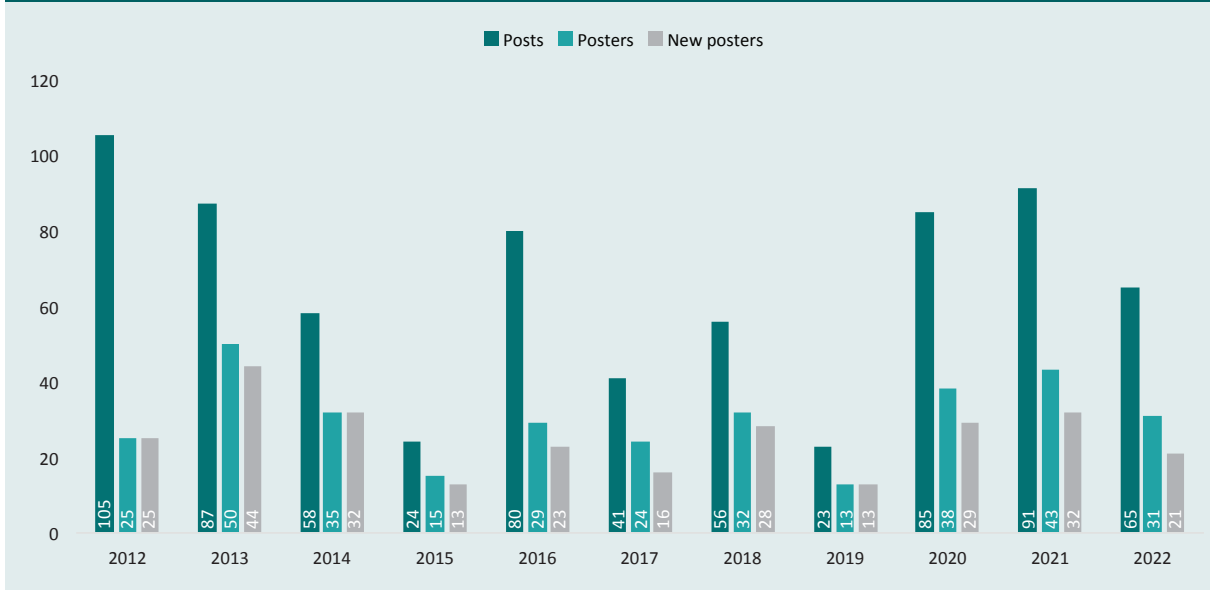
This research focused on posts relating to help-seeking or accessing support, with 17 forum threads identified as thematically relevant (Table 1). To adhere to the conditions of the Human Research Ethics Committee's approval, members of the research team who scraped the forum received guidance from government and law enforcement in relation to the handling of the content. These members identified and removed any content deemed written CSAM, avoiding exposure of the remaining research team. To gain access to the forum, the research team made several posts including an introduction. These were also removed prior to analysis.

**Table 1: Summary of darknet forum threads**

No.	Paraphrased thread topic	Posts
1	Would you take a magic pill to lose sexual attraction to children?	289
2	How do you stop yourself?	69
3	I want to quit my use of CP [child pornography] and I hope you can offer me some support.	48
4	What do you think about the DDlg [daddy dom/little girl] community?	44
5	I would like to share what I have learned from therapy.	33
6	What do you think about 3D animation?	33
7	I have switched to fiction to break my CP habit. Has anyone else tried this?	31
8	Sexual contact with a child may or may not be damaging. Avoid contact for the child's sake.	28
9	I am struggling with temptation. Does anyone have ideas to help?	22
10	Would you take a pill to remove your libido?	21
11	What support is available?	20
12	I feel beyond redemption or forgiveness.	18
13	Conservative pedophile vs not, selfish vs unselfish, evil vs not.	17
14	An obituary for my collection	16
15	What I want clashes with my morals and stops me from developing a strong attraction to adults. Has anyone been in a similar situation and can share their story?	14
16	I'm getting help. What strategies have you learned from professionals?	7
17	I'm terrified to open up to my therapist. What would happen?	5

In total, 715 posts from February 2012 to June 2022 were examined (Figure 1). The annual number of posts on the relevant threads fluctuated over time, with peaks in 2012, 2016, and 2020 to 2022. The latest peak was likely explained by the COVID-19 pandemic, in which there was a suspected increase in online child exploitation (Salter & Wong 2021). While the number of unique forum users between February and July 2012 could not be determined due to archiving (76 posts), there were 276 unique users active between August 2012 and June 2022 (639 posts), most of whom had not previously posted on the threads we examined. These 276 unique users were each assigned a number, while forum users posting before August 2012 are referred to as 'unknown users'. On average, users made 2.3 posts on the examined threads (range: 1–34). Importantly, we could not estimate the number of individuals reading the forum without posting, or the number of individuals on the forum beyond the 17 threads examined; however, estimates of this type could be useful for future research.

**Figure 1: Number of forum posts and users per year**



Note: The number of users and new users in 2012 does not include those prior to August. 'New posters' refers to posters who had not previously posted on the threads we examined.

Users typically did not reveal identifying information about themselves, meaning there was little information on their demographics. However, it was clear that those who posted on the forum were primarily male, with a few females who identified themselves as being in a sexual relationship with, or married to, a CSO. The location of forum users was rarely mentioned, but there were indications that users were from a range of countries and, for several, English was not their first language.

## Analytical approach

The forum posts were coded inductively rather than deductively using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1998). This approach focuses on the views of research participants, allowing themes to be developed from posters' thoughts and opinions. Grounded theory analysis involves three steps:

- open coding—reading the raw data and considering preliminary codes and themes;
- axial coding—identifying relationships, similarities and differences in the preliminary codes and themes; and
- selective coding—reviewing the raw data, codes and themes to identify and consider overarching variables that describe connections and contrasts within the data.

A coding framework was developed independently by two members of the research team, with two segments of data double coded to assess interrater reliability. Early in the coding process, a match rate of 61.3 percent was achieved, and differences in coding were discussed and addressed. The second segment then had an improved match rate of 84.7 percent.

## Limitations

The data were sourced from a single forum on the darknet, meaning findings may not be representative of the wider content or user groups found on other darknet forums. Further, because we examined a subset of threads from the forum, and certain posts were excluded prior to analysis, it is possible that this affected how representative the remaining posts are of the wider forum. As a result of these limitations, we are cautious not to generalise the findings beyond the selected threads and sample of individuals who participated in these threads.

While forum users self-identified as paedophiles, this was a self-imposed label. With the information available, we were not able to verify whether objective diagnostic criteria for paedophilia were met. We can be certain, though, that when forum users referred to children they meant individuals under the age of 18, and we can be confident from the content of their conversations and their use of the darknet that they perceived their behaviour to be illegal. However, the exact age range to which they referred may have differed between users, and this may have influenced the context of their conversations.

## Results

There were a range of overarching themes identified in the data, summarised in Table 2. These themes could broadly be described as drivers and deterrents of child sexual offending. Each of these can be broken down into two categories: those relating to how forum users perceived themselves and their offending, which we refer to as cognitive drivers or deterrents, and social or environmental factors, which we refer to as socio-environmental drivers or deterrents.

**Table 2: Drivers and deterrents of child sexual offending emerging from offender interactions on the darknet**

Drivers of offending	
Cognitive drivers	Normalising sexual offences against children
	Shifting responsibility and denying the impact of offending
	Minimising the harm of child sexual abuse material
	Denying the capacity for self-control
Socio-environmental drivers	Online communities
	Technology
	Adult partners in a sexual relationship with an offender
Deterrents of offending	
Cognitive deterrents	Harm to children and the shame attached to child sexual offences
Socio-environmental deterrents	Detection by friends, family or authorities

## Cognitive drivers of offending

Four cognitive drivers of child sexual offending were identified among the darknet forum posts. These influenced how CSOs viewed their offences and the resulting impacts on children, and alleviated their perceived responsibility for their behaviour.

### *Normalising sexual offences against children*

For some, the pathway towards identifying as a CSO featured a prolonged process of accepting and normalising sexual offences against children. The culture of the forum supported this normalisation, with some users encouraging others to consider it a point of pride. One user describes being a CSO as 'A gift, rather than a curse' (Unknown user, Thread 1).

you must be confident in your self, you need to accept who you are and make this a good thing, if you are a pedophile - it's great! It's your unique and wonderfull path that you need to carefully but surely follow. (User 270, Thread 15)

Some CSOs acknowledged conventional morality, while simultaneously prioritising their identity as a CSO over the potential impact on children.

I spent two decades being anti-pedo, thinking I was a monster, then practically in an instant, became pro-pedo. Life is better now I have stopped hating my own nature. My epiphany wasn't that my moral code changed. It was an intellectual breakthrough: a realization that I had been mis-applying my moral code (User 264, Thread 15)

### *Shifting responsibility and denying the impact of offending*

A common belief shared by forum users was that sexual contact with children was not harmful, that children could consent to and be an equal partner in a sexual interaction with an adult. These discussions elevated the role of the child to that of an offender's equal and, in doing so, minimised the harm to the victim.

I feel as though I can understand the sexual nature of children better than a non-pedophile would. I'm not neglectful of the fact that sexual touches to children can be beneficial and healthy as opposed to detrimental. (User 191, Thread 1)

Many opposed what they considered to be the mainstream view that children were victims and believed their view of children was superior. Rather than being ignorant to the harm of sexual offences against children, they outright denied that sexual offences were the cause of the harm. This view shifted the responsibility for harming children from the offender to society.

Is a child's innocence stolen when they are having mutually enjoyable sexual contact with an adult, or was it stolen when outside parental and/or authority figures tell them it was wrong and evil? (Unknown user, Thread 8)

Shifting responsibility, and reframing the morality of sexual offences against children, was a key cognitive driver among CSOs. Importantly, these views were reinforced by others, creating an environment that alleviated responsibility from offenders, allowing them to rationalise or justify their behaviour.

### *Minimising the harm of child sexual abuse material*

While forum users made efforts to reframe responsibility for and impact of contact offending, the same was true for CSAM. In particular, those who discussed CSAM actively minimised the harm done to children.

I'm just looking at bunch of pixels on my computer. I'm not hurting anybody. (User 39, Thread 2)

Forum users often made distinctions between viewing CSAM and contact offending with the intention of minimising the impacts of viewing CSAM and normalising it as an alternative.

we all know that CP [child pornography] reduces sex offenses with actual children  
(User 8, Thread 6)

Some took this notion a step further, positioning themselves as morally superior among CSOs because they viewed CSAM instead of contact offending.

I somehow justify as long as I only look it is no where near as bad as the person that I have seen pics or vids of touching or more. (User 41, Thread 2)

Forum users minimised the harm of CSAM and its connection to contact offending. This minimisation of harm and the positioning of some child sexual offenders as morally superior to others appeared to be strong cognitive drivers of offending.

### *Denying the capacity for self-control*

While a large proportion of forum users were unwilling to take ownership of the harm associated with their offending, those who did often described what they viewed as an inability to implement self-control. These forum users felt their lack of self-control meant they were not responsible for their behaviour and should not be held accountable for the resulting harm. This acted as a self-serving mechanism supporting their offending.

What I was confused about was why I was sexually attracted to little girls ... For me that desire was overwhelming and uncontrollable. It caused me to make some dangerous decisions and mistakes. (User 267, Thread 15)

At times, a lack of self-control was attributed to hyper-sexual arousal. In settings featuring sexual arousal, they distanced themselves from responsibility for their behaviours.

I wouldn't say that I am especially aroused by "hurtcore fantasies", it is just that in times of arousal I lose most of my moral boundaries. It is not that that kind of stuff gets me going, but I don't mind it at that time until I come back to my senses. (User 46, Thread 9)

When discussing CSAM offending, forum users again denied responsibility, likening their behaviour to an addiction.

it's an addiction that IMO [in my opinion] is as powerful as any drug, and without the side effects of any crash. (User 180, Thread 3)

Cognitive drivers of offending expressed on this forum demonstrated the complex internal justification for offending among CSOs. In particular, forum users attempted to normalise their preferred offending and diminish the harm it caused, shift responsibility and deny their capacity for self-control. However, there were important and connected socio-environmental drivers that also supported offending.

## Socio-environmental drivers of offending

### *Online communities*

Users often referred to the forum as a community of individuals who supported each other, suggesting that, while users self-identified as CSOs, they also identified as a community rather than a disparate group of like-minded individuals.

I'm just glad that you have a place like this to gain advice and guidance at your age. Most of us didn't have that option. I for one am grateful for this community. (User 57, Thread 9)

Online communities and networks appeared to help shape views about and alleviate responsibility for offending. Forum users explained the importance of engaging with this online community in reshaping their view of child sexual offending and, pivotally, increasing their likelihood of continued offending.

While I FEEL committed to this and have tools I've developed to stay so, this place is making me reconsider, insomuch as I'm not really sure how damaging a sexual relationship would be to a 15yo girl. (User 56, Thread 9)

While many forum users engaged in discussions designed to passively alleviate their responsibility for harming children, others directly and explicitly encouraged sexual offences against children.

If you're not harming anyone and yourself, why not? There's no overlord holding rule over your decisions. (User 54, Thread 9)

### *Technology*

At times forum users mentioned using technologies to enable and conceal their offending. Tor networks, secure storage and erasure programs offered increased opportunities to offend and avoid detection, driving continued offending.

I know that obsession, went through it when I first discovered the darknet ... even with TOR, I'm not convinced that seeking out material and then deleting it after use is actually more secure than keeping a small store, well encrypted (in a "plausible deniability" way). (User 54, Thread 14)

Users sought guidance about reliable and covert methods of collecting CSAM. Often, this involved a planning period and gathering technological resources prior to offending.

For many years, I wanted to start [a collection] but did not have the resources to do so. It took great time and planning to see him come to fruition. I sought out the counsel of my peers and took great time and effort to provide him a place to grow and fulfill his potential. (User 24, Thread 4)

Despite the availability of technology to help conceal a CSAM collection, for some the risk was perceived as too great, leading to technology-enabled offending approaches with a smaller online imprint. Many users discussed cycles of downloading or viewing CSAM, then erasing traces of offending. This appeared to be a common pattern used when attempting to avoid detection.

I adhere to “download, fap, purge” pattern using the eraser program ... (User 139, Thread 2)

### *Adult partners in a sexual relationship with an offender*

At times, forum users discussed sexual interactions with other adults that simulated adult–child sexual contact. For example, there was a discussion about a role-play style referred to as ‘daddy dom/little girl’ (DDLG), in which CSOs engaged in sexual activity with an adult role-playing as a child.

I absolutely love DDLG ... I feel doing it keeps my desire to children at bay, as I get my fix when I’m fucking a woman. I love when it becomes rape play too (User 223, Thread 4)

For some users, adult sexual relationships involving this type of role-play were motivated by the need to avoid detection or consequences. However, others were acutely aware of the perception that this type of role-play was associated with CSOs, and viewed it as holding some risk.

The main way I go about indulging fantasies is online roleplays ... I like the back and forth, and the fact that all of those fantasies are being fulfilled in some way with absolutely no consequence. (User 186, Thread 4)

Separate to those who identified as CSOs were self-identifying female forum users. These users described their experiences of a sexual relationship with a partner who they knew to be a CSO.

My first DD was a no-contact pedophile, and I took great pride in being able to help him satisfy his desires in a safe and legal way ... Both my DDs enjoyed looking at pictures of me from my childhood as a more tangible reference for the little girl who still lives inside my heart. (User 228, Thread 4)

These forum users believed that, by supporting their partner, they were reducing the likelihood of contact offending. They went to considerable lengths to divert their partner from contact offending, with one user reporting she had accessed CSAM with her partner.

With my first DD, we would sometimes look at CP together. (User 228, Thread 4)

Forum users considered role-play interactions an alternative to sexual contact with a child and therefore a deterrent of offending. Importantly, these interactions normalised and reinforced the sexualisation of children and child sexual offending, and at times involved accessing CSAM, consequently supporting further offending. However, it must be acknowledged that these women in sexual relationships with CSOs were very unusual in the context of available research. Typically, findings relating to partners show that they experience coercive control and at times physical and sexual violence in their relationships with offenders (Jones, Woodlock & Salter 2021; Salter, Woodlock & Dubler 2022). However, these findings suggest that the partners in our sample accessed a darknet forum for CSOs to discuss attempts to divert their partners’ offending. We must therefore acknowledge that, while some of their behaviours may have supported offending, these individuals are most likely not representative of the majority of partners.

## Cognitive deterrents of offending

### *Harm to children and the shame attached to child sexual offences*

While many users attempted to dissociate themselves from the harm caused by child sexual offences, others acknowledged the harm of these offences, although this perspective was less common among the threads analysed. In particular, awareness of these harms was sometimes discussed as a deterrent to offending.

I refuse to be the monster in another adults life long story of abuse. I refuse to be the selfish one who tricked a kid into doing something they didnt understand and couldnt understand.  
(User 201, Thread 12)

However, there were diverse opinions on the forum. While some users considered the harm experienced by children as unacceptable, others centred their reasons for not offending upon themselves, noting that they experienced guilt and shame.

However much I got off scot-free this time, the fear is that next time it will end up much worse. Not in terms of getting caught and ending up in jail, but actually hurting someone needlessly.  
(User 208, Thread 16)

## Socio-environmental deterrents of offending

### *Detection by friends, family or authorities*

A small number of forum users discussed being detected by family or friends. One user described arousing suspicion among friends, who began questioning their involvement with children. This was an example of detection, even when it is not by authorities, strongly deterring offending behaviour.

I've played my part of pushing the button. At first it went well, but then my friends saw through me. Since I first brought up the idea that pedophiles are just as much humans as the next person, my motivation to be around children has been harshly criticized. (Unknown user, Thread 1)

Another user was detected by their partner, resulting in a confrontation. While this user discussed the shame attached to being detected by their partner, they did not change their behaviour, explaining that detection by family was not sufficient to change their behaviour.

When I was unable to accept myself as the person I am, I came out to my wife. (That magnificent woman forced me into a corner. I had no choice but to be honest with her. There was no courage in my admission to her.) She began in me the process of forcing me to be honest with myself.  
(Unknown user, Thread 1)

For many, concern about being detected by the people in their lives was enough to influence offending behaviour.

The worst thing I could imagine is that I am found out. Nearly all of my friends abandon me. My wife and kids—gone. Forever. My life would be over as I know it ... It really pains me when I think of where I cannot go, what I keep inside, and how I must behave around nearly every other person I contact. (User 10, Thread 1)

While detection by family or friends appeared to have a varying impact on users, CSOs overwhelmingly expressed a fear of being caught by law enforcement. This fear played a strong role in behaviour regulation and the likelihood of offending. For some, the fear of being caught either resulted in either total desistance or prevented certain types of offending deemed too risky.

Even though I have had opportunities with little girls ... I chose not to follow through that could ultimately get me in trouble with the law that will ruin my life. (User 139, Thread 2)

## Discussion

### Drivers of child sexual offending

Consistent with prior research, this study found many of the drivers of child sexual offending involved biased thinking which at times supported ongoing offending (Cantor et al. 2022; Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valkonen 2021; O'Halloran & Quayle 2010). Forum users developed distorted perceptions of the world, victims or themselves, designed to normalise or deny the impact of CSAM and sexual contact with children. Simultaneously, they shifted the responsibility for their offences away from themselves by denying their capacity for self-control and blaming society for the harm done to victims. Forum users supported, workshopped or adopted the perspectives of others, which suggests the darknet forum environment contributed to the development of cognitive drivers for offending. Forum interactions appeared to lead users to find a perspective they considered morally acceptable, limiting perceived responsibility for their own behaviour and consequently driving offending. Child sexual offences were also supported and reinforced by other online and offline communities. For example, forum users described adult sexual relationships involving adult-child role-play, which desensitised CSOs to the sexualisation of children and normalised child sexual abuse.

Prior research suggests contact with other offenders is associated with seriousness of offending, such as escalation from collecting to trading and distributing CSAM (Carr 2007; Merdian et al. 2013). Our findings suggest that the ability to share information on offending and avoiding detection was a key driver of offending among forum users. For example, they discussed ways of using technology to facilitate and conceal offending by enabling the access to, storage and erasure of CSAM while maintaining privacy and anonymity. Pivotal, research suggesting CSOs use few technological measures to avoid detection has typically studied offenders who had been apprehended (Balfe et al. 2015). Our findings, focusing on those who had not yet been detected, highlight the role of technology in avoiding detection. While this finding reinforces the importance of studying undetected CSOs, it also suggests past research may have underestimated the sophistication of technology use among offenders.

### Deterrents of child sexual offending

Fear of being caught by law enforcement was prominent among forum users. While this alone did not completely deter offending, forum users reported changing their behaviour to avoid activity that posed a high risk of attracting law enforcement attention. Similarly, detection by family and friends was a notable concern, motivating CSOs to moderate their behaviour. However, among those who reported being detected by family or friends, the discovery did not appear to trigger sustained desistance.

Finally, while many forum users held distorted views that sexual abuse does not harm children, these views were not universal. Some acknowledged the harm associated with offending and expressed deep shame and guilt. This appeared to meaningfully deter contact offending and, to a lesser extent, CSAM use.

## Implications

Our findings suggest that when CSOs can freely communicate and share information with one another, they may reinforce distorted perceptions of their behaviour and impacts on victims, thereby driving offending. These findings align with those of prior research suggesting that CSOs prefer to justify their behaviour, and deny its harm, rather than excusing it (Durkin & Bryant 1999). Importantly, on forums such as these, there is little resistance to ideas that support offending. Even when forum users raised potential risks (such as detection by law enforcement), the discussion included methods of reducing risk while continuing to offend. These findings support approaches that aim to disrupt information sharing between CSOs and their use of technology. Such approaches could limit the drivers of offending among undetected offenders (Leclerc et al. 2021).

Notably, this research identified several independent but related cognitive drivers of offending. While darknet research into CSOs is emerging, these findings suggest that psychosocial intervention approaches may be useful in helping to limit the development and normalisation of beliefs that support offending. However, the deterrents of offending also offer opportunities to reduce risk among CSOs. For example, fear of detection by law enforcement was a strong regulator of behaviour, highlighting the importance of continued disruption efforts by law enforcement. Forum users demonstrated clear concern about law enforcement detection, resulting in their offending becoming increasingly tech enabled, and interactions moving to the darknet. Evidently, law enforcement has a key role to play in detecting and apprehending CSOs, and collaborating with tech companies and internet service providers to increase the visibility of offenders and limit their ability to interact on the darknet.

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URLs correct as at July 2024

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