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Abstract | This study analysed posts from a darknet forum to examine approaches to desistance from offending among undetected child sexual offenders.

Forum users discussed a range of approaches, but some were harmful to children, including the use of child sexual abuse material to avoid contact offending. Other less harmful desistance strategies were discussed, which included adjusting lifestyle, reducing internet use, and controlling access to children. Some users had a positive view of psychosocial services, while acknowledging the heightened risk of detection, and shared knowledge on how to remain undetected while seeking treatment.

These findings highlight the need for psychosocial treatment avenues for child sexual offenders in the community that they perceive to have a low risk of leading to law enforcement detection.

Self-reported desistance and help-seeking approaches of child sexual offenders on the darknet

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Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a significant global issue. While it is difficult to estimate its true extent, online consumption of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is known to be substantial. Recent estimates suggest 0.8 percent of Australian adult internet users had intentionally viewed CSAM in the previous year (Brown 2023). The number of reports of CSAM received by the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2024), most of which is detected on popular clearnet platforms, increased from 29.3 million in 2021 to 35.9 million in 2023—and a single report can contain one or numerous images or videos of children being sexually abused. Further, research shows a concerning overlap between CSAM use and attempted contact offences against children (Insoll et al. 2022; Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valkonen 2021).

Many initiatives have been introduced globally to prevent the sexual abuse of children, yet only a minority are aimed at undetected offenders (Gannoni et al. 2023). Because child sexual offenders seek to avoid detection, often using technology such as the darknet, little is known about their behaviours before they are apprehended. To inform prevention and intervention approaches, the current study aims to better understand desistance behaviours among undetected child sexual offenders.

Child sexual offenders on the darknet

The darknet is the segment of the internet that is hidden from the general public, accessible typically through The Onion Router (Tor; Leclerc et al. 2021). The anonymity offered by the darknet lowers the risk of detection, meaning offenders view it as a safer place to access CSAM (Gannon et al. 2023). The darknet also allows offenders to share information on offending methodologies and concealment. These communications can occur on online forums, which act not only as repositories of information but also as a place for pro-offending views to be propagated (Woodhams et al. 2021). A recent survey of 1,546 CSAM users on the darknet found 42 percent had communicated with other CSAM users (Insoll et al. 2022). It is therefore important to understand how child sexual offenders engage with each other on the darknet, as this will help inform detection and intervention.

Several studies have analysed darknet chat forums focused on child sexual offending, finding that users of such forums develop their own culture that can normalise, justify and endorse offending against children (Cantor et al. 2022; Huikuri 2022; van der Bruggen & Blokland 2021). In support of such findings, a survey of individuals in the community ($n=459$) found those who had visited online chat forums that discussed adult–child sex were significantly more likely to report intentional viewing of CSAM after first exposure than those who had not visited these online forums (Napier et al. 2024).

Prevention and intervention

A recent review of initiatives aimed at preventing CSAM offending identified five types of initiatives: helplines, therapeutic treatment and psychoeducation, online self-management courses, education and awareness campaigns, and other forms of support (Gannoni et al. 2023). The review found undetected offenders were most likely to hear about initiatives through social media, internet advertisements and links on blocked websites. Importantly, this review also found a need for more initiatives that can reach undetected offenders. Recent research indicates that anonymous online counselling may be a promising avenue for prevention among these groups (Lätth et al. 2022).

Limited information is available about undetected offenders' opinions of professional treatment and support and the strategies they use to change their offending behaviour. This paper examines interactions between self-identified paedophiles on a darknet forum to better understand views towards desistance among this group. In particular, we ask:

- What are the views and opinions discussed by undetected child sexual offenders regarding desistance from offending?
- What offending desistance strategies do undetected child sexual offenders employ and do they perceive these as effective?

Methodology

Data source

This research examined a darknet forum created for adults with a sexual interest in children, many of whom reported they had sexually offended against children, either online or in person. Importantly, the users of this forum were largely undetected—many stated that they had not been identified by law enforcement.

Sample

While this forum hosted a range of discussion threads, we developed inclusion criteria for the study that focused on approaches to behaviour change, help-seeking or accessing support services. These threads were identified by their titles, which were created by the forum users who began each discussion. To adhere to the conditions of the Australian Institute of Criminology Human Research Ethics Committee's approval (Protocol no. P0314B.A), 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 by the remaining research team. Data scraping did not influence discussions, because forum users were not notified of the forum thread extraction.

In total, 715 forum posts from February 2012 to June 2022 were examined, spanning 17 threads. Archiving rules set by the forum administrators meant usernames were unavailable for posts made prior to the end of July 2012 (76 posts). While the number of unique forum users could not be determined between February and July 2012, there were 276 unique users active between August 2012 and June 2022 (639 posts). We could not estimate the number of individuals who read the examined threads but did not post (see Wolbers et al. 2024 for further detail on the nature and volume of posts on these threads across time).

The nature of the forum, being anonymous and on the darknet, meant users did not reveal identifying information about themselves. However, details included in posts suggested the overwhelming majority of users were male, and they resided in a diverse range of countries. Several noted that English was not their first language.

It is important to note that the threads were extracted from a forum described as 'conservative', which was defined by users as individuals who claimed not to engage in contact sexual offences against children for various reasons. However, some forum users admitted to prior contact sexual offences and some believed they would commit such offences in the future. Further, users frequently admitted to downloading and viewing CSAM.

Analytical approach

The forum posts were coded in MAXQDA (v22.6.1), a qualitative data analysis tool for diverse datasets, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967). This research was not guided by a specific theoretical foundation, or by coding categories developed in other research. Rather, we preferred to allow the data to guide the development of coding categories. This approach was employed because of the particular nature of the data and the importance of allowing the posts to be considered in the unique context of this darknet forum. Because there is limited research on undetected child sexual offenders on the darknet—and even less on the opinions, motivations and actions of those who are attempting to desist—we preferred an inductive approach to coding to a deductive approach. Coding categories were informed by the views, thoughts and opinions of the forum users.

Grounded theory features 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 (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

Two members of the research team read the forum posts, assigned codes and then grouped codes into larger themes. Threads were divided between the two coders, who had regular meetings to discuss codes and themes and to develop a coding framework. Two segments were double-coded to assess interrater reliability. At the first coding interval, the researchers achieved a match rate of 61.3 percent for the codes assigned to each post in that segment. Differences in coding were discussed and addressed. At the second coding interval, the match rate improved to 84.7 percent. At completion of coding, a review was undertaken to ensure agreement on the coding of the data. Quotes in this paper are presented verbatim, as posted on the forum, retaining typographical errors.

Limitations

This study examined threads from only one darknet forum. Our results therefore cannot be generalised. Another limitation is that we were unable to determine the demographic characteristics of individuals in this sample. Further, the analysed threads were selected from the ‘conservative’ section of the darknet forum site, and avoided graphic or detailed discussions of child sexual offending. It is possible that excluding graphic posts influenced the analysis. It is important to note that other sections of the darknet forum were dominated by views in favour of sexual offending against children.

Results

By analysing interactions between child sexual offenders on the darknet, we identified several approaches offenders used to support desistance, focusing on engagement with psychosocial treatment and other strategies. However, views regarding desistance were not always healthy and at times promoted harm to children—for example, some believed consuming CSAM was a harmless alternative to contact sexual offending.

Formal help-seeking and engagement with community support services

Forum users discussed engagement with community services to support desistance from offending, typically focusing on behaviour change through psychosocial treatment. However, users also warned of the complexity of remaining undetected by law enforcement while engaging with these services. Offenders discussed methods of seeking support that included risk mitigation strategies.

Psychological treatment and mitigating the risk of detection

When psychosocial treatment was discussed, posts often highlighted that seeking treatment heightened the risk of detection.

To me, consulting a therapist about my pedophilia is like playing Russian roulette (User 183)

I would no longer recommend that anyone consider therapy for ‘pedophilia’. It is no longer safe. (User 24)

A person sincerely wanting help cannot get it without taking life altering risks. (User 243)

Other forum users who had engaged with psychological treatment and counselling discussed the positive impact of this approach on desistance. However, this was often accompanied by tips to avoid mandatory reporting while doing so.

I sought out a professional therapist about a year ago now, and I have been going to them ever since to talk about what I’m dealing with. I had to do a bit of research to find the correct therapist to go to, where I felt that I could disclose this type of information about myself. There are therapists out there that deal with sexuality or fantasy type of sexuality “issues,” which my therapist is one of them. I feel extremely lucky to have found the one that I am currently talking to, because they are extremely knowledgeable about this type of situation, having talked with many pedophiles, and is completely non-judgemental. Although there are obviously some things that you cannot disclose to a professional therapist due to mandatory reporting laws. (User 97)

I have seen two therapists ... With both, before talking to them, I asked them exactly what would trigger a need to report ... I was then very open with them. (User 103)

The most common risk mitigation strategy was disguising the reason for seeking behaviour change, instead discussing with their therapist an issue that users perceived would not trigger mandatory reporting obligations.

At most, I would pick some other aspect of your life you need help with and discuss that with a professional. Hopefully you'll pick up some advice that will transfer to the issues you have on-topic. (User 8)

I think it's possible to go to a therapist for help, without even mentioning the fact that you're attracted to children. Just say you have a hard time showing restraint with your female coworkers and so on. Not bringing up the pedophilia may seem like a trivial distinction, but I think it can make a difference when it comes to staying safe. (User 183)

For those of us who have broken the law the rule is to never admit that you have been active with a child or that you download CP [child pornography]. You can discuss fantasies about these things. (User 275)

Therapy is a valid process. I recommend discussing sex addiction and some less stigmatized desire, rather than pedophilia. (User 14)

However, one user felt that even engaging in hypothetical discussions with service providers would not avoid mandatory reporting.

I wouldn't touch therapy if you paid me - too risky. Even if you found the one therapist who was happy to keep it as a theoretical discussion, how could you ever be sure you were safe? And that's without the receptionist coming in with the post at the wrong moment. (User 95)

While some were comfortable attending individual counselling, others suggested seeking group therapy or online services, again suggesting ways of avoiding detection such as lying or employing features of online platforms to ensure anonymity.

Did you think about the online therapy? There are therapists who give advices online (even on instant messengers, you don't have to use camera or mic) and you pay them by money transfer. It might be easier to stay anonymous this way (using tor and having some way of anonymous money transfer, there are plenty of ways to do it safely). I didn't tried it though. (User 94)

If you do not feel comfortable with a therapist, might I suggest attending a Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting online. It is possible to attend IRC [Internet Relay Chat] meetings through TOR and protect your anonymity ... I also attended Sex Addicts Anonymous meetings though of course I lied about why I was there. (User 24)

Many forum users supported seeking help provided the risk of detection was deemed low enough, but some users denied the benefits of therapeutic approaches.

I have come to think that 90% of the value of therapy of any kind is simply the satisfaction one gets in sharing something that has been bothering them with another human face-to-face. Everything else is mostly window dressing ... in terms of corrective actions, beyond some simple things to reduce impulsivity or habitual behavior, the rest starts to diffuse into an increasingly wide array of, well, bullcrap, depending on the practitioner. (User 8)

Further, forum users at times positioned psychosocial treatment as being at odds with the group identity. These users viewed those who engaged with therapy, even when it was mandated, as inferior to those who did not, suggesting that they had conformed to a societal norm rather than their own identity. These users adopted cognitive distortions to deny responsibility for offending and changing their behaviours.

The psychologist believed that my desire for children, harmed children. Though I continued to ask him to support that claim, with studies or anecdotal evidence, he was evasive and never answered me as to how this could be the case. (User 24)

I have been watching some interviews with convicted pedos who were forced to take therapy. These were the guys in “civil commitment” (endless prison). The only way to get out of the “hospital” alive was to play along with the therapy for many years and then convince the usually female therapist that they were “cured”. I think these guys are pathetic. (User 232)

Among those who discussed psychosocial services, either positively or negatively, there was a considerable and nuanced focus on the likelihood of detection by authorities and possible strategies to mitigate this. It is an important finding that, among a group of self-identifying child sexual offenders who were largely undetected by law enforcement, psychological treatment was viewed by many as a core source of support, despite the possibility it could lead to a mandatory report.

Other desistance strategies

Other desistance strategies discussed by forum users included specific environmental changes such as restricting online activities, limiting (or sometimes increasing) access to children, and medication. However, the most common strategy involved viewing CSAM to avoid contact offending, or synthetic forms of CSAM to avoid ‘real’ CSAM. Such strategies were often framed within cognitive distortions that CSAM is a morally acceptable and less risky (for the offender) alternative to contact sexual offending, with little acknowledgement of the harms CSAM causes to children.

Consuming child sexual abuse material

Many forum users believed that, if they focused only on CSAM offending, they may reduce their risk of contact sexual offending. On the forum it was uncommon for users to express guilt or shame in relation to viewing CSAM. Rather, viewing CSAM was often perceived as a substitute for contact sexual offending that can reduce the risk of being detected by police.

I also do not wish to physically do anything to a little girl, even though I am a pedo.
So I masturbate to sexy pics and/or vids of [little girls]. (User 29)

CP also helps me cope with my enforced conservative pedophilia, to prevent myself from sexual interaction with certain children. This is in order to protect myself from the nasty legal percussion imaginable. (User 139)

we all know that CP reduces sex offenses with actual children (User 8)

Further, alternative forms of CSAM such as 3D animation, literary erotica, roleplay and computer-generated materials were considered by some to be suitable alternatives to aid in desistance from viewing 'real' CSAM. There was no acknowledgement on the forum of potential harm done to children by viewing these forms of CSAM, even when the images were created by altering pictures of real children.

Computer generated material is getting to the point it is becoming viable as a replacement. From a moral standpoint I have no issue with it as it does not involve real children and thus negates the risk of children getting hurt as a consequence of producing the cp. Im sure there will be a few that will claim to act because of that cp, but more will find it a suitable outlet and find it helpful in refraining from acting. (User 104)

i cant stop downloading them and i am even learning to produce my own 3d models of the kids i find attractive in real life so that i can play with them virtually So yes 3d animation is like the non alcoholic substitute to bear for alcoholics....i find it morally ok since as nobody is being hurt ... (User 141)

virtual CP could be an improvement in many ways over real CP, not just for the moral reasons but also in terms of plot and visual quality. (User 75)

this sort of play doesn't result in me wanting to seek out CP. I feel like the fantasy mostly fulfills the desire. (User 221)

Environmental changes

Forum users discussed implementing offline strategies not only to support their attempts to desist from contact sexual offending against children but also to avoid viewing CSAM and to reduce their sexual thoughts and fantasies about children. Some felt their actions could be restrained by physical activities, creative outlets, or spending time with friends or other adults. This suggested that not all forum users perceived viewing CSAM as a healthy behaviour for themselves.

You just need to do something to "find yourself". Try to learn what makes you a human being first. For me with was martial arts/physical fitness. Yours may be writing, or playing music, or even dancing. (User 63)

You could also think of something to do when you're tempted, something productive that will take some of your time and concentration, and that you'll feel great about. That way it's not just a sacrifice but also a reward. You can tell yourself: "If I had been watching CP right now, I wouldn't have done x and y." (User 183)

I mean, if you aren't sure about how you'll behave with kids or you think you could hurt them, a good idea should be meditate daily so the lust doesn't consume your brain, it helps a lot and people doesn't talk about it! (User 268)

Forum users had diverse views on whether access to children would support or hinder desistance from offending. Some stated that limiting access to children was an important step in resisting offending, while others felt increased exposure to children helped to humanise children and reduce sexual urges.

I avoid being around [children] all together and this includes family members ... it is to protect the children (User 5)

I think that there is a way of stopping, that it is distancing of children, get a job that far way of children (User 101)

when it comes to contact with children I try to have as much contact as possible. I find that it is when I am not around children for long periods of time that I start to develop unrealistic expectations or indulge in fantasy (User 24)

Maintaining friendships with boys and their families has allowed me to really appreciate and understand these kids for the people that they are ... The deeper the friendship grows, the more protective of the boy I become, to the point where physical attraction becomes less and less relevant. (User 62)

For a small group of users, behaviour change took the form of abstaining from the internet or certain devices entirely. These discussions were associated with the belief that they were not capable of self-control, and instead it was only possible to limit opportunity.

I did quit at different times in the last several years and I did it by disconnecting the internet connection in my home. There is no other way for me. (User 24)

It's about leading the double life, but it's possible to overcome the addictions with some way out, with the resolution, such as removing computer from home to sell as the first step to going cold turkey, with the plan to use the Internet "lawfully" at the local Internet cafe or library. (User 139)

Similarly, some forum users reported restricting their online behaviours, such as by avoiding the darknet, communities or forums that encourage offending against children.

I'd made some connections with seemingly like minded people, but I don't want any part of those forums anymore. I'd much rather talk in a place like this where there are no pictures or videos or anything that could tempt me to do something I know in my heart I don't want to do. (User 273)

In my experience it is best to avoid places on darknet that encourage you to act out and engage in a sexual relationship with a child. (User 24)

Finally, forum users discussed the use of medication (ie anti-androgen or anti-depressants) to reduce libido, aid self-control and support desistance. While no users shared their experience with using medication to limit offending, some expressed interest in this approach.

I was already thinking about medical castration some time ago, due to my frustration with my high libido, so to get rid of that problem would be great. (User 226)

I think I would take [libido diminishing medication]. It would certainly make me much more objective in my thoughts to not be ruled by lust. (User 193)

Others, however, were opposed to the use of such medication, arguing it may change one's identity or that it was a quick fix that would not address the overall problem.

I know I would never take such a pill, first and foremost because I'm sure I would wind up losing myself and my personality completely. I am what I am and I definitely prefer to deal with that the hard way. (User 260)

I believe that one of our greatest challenges as humans is learning to tame those parts of ourselves which cause problems, and to elevate those things which are positive. The battle must be fought in our own conscious mind ... any sort of pharmacological intervention would serve only to reduce our opportunity to improve ourselves—the hard, but necessary way. (User 241)

Masking feelings is not treatment. It is a band-aid. Masked feelings are more dangerous than expressed and felt ones - always. (User 144)

While forum users discussed a diverse range of offending, they often sought advice from other users and shared approaches for behaviour change that they believed would be beneficial. However, it was unclear whether forum users perceived environmental changes as supporting long-term desistance from offending.

Discussion

This study explored the strategies child sexual offenders used to desist from offending, by analysing posts from a darknet forum. Forum users discussed desistance approaches that they considered morally acceptable with low risk of detection, which included both environmental and formal help-seeking strategies. Importantly, this was a qualitative study that explored offenders' subjective views; we were not able to evaluate whether the desistance strategies discussed were effective in reducing harm to children. Furthermore, some desistance strategies involved viewing CSAM, which research shows is harmful to victim-survivors. However, the insights drawn from the study can help inform interventions for undetected child sexual offenders in the community, particularly in understanding how these offenders view and engage with treatment and desistance.

Formal help-seeking by undetected child sexual offenders

Forum users commonly suggested community services such as counselling and psychological treatment to desist from offending. While some warned against engagement with such services due to the risk of detection associated with mandatory reporting, others felt that risk was worth taking to reduce their offending. This was an important finding as it suggested that some self-identified child sexual offenders view psychosocial services as effective approaches to reduce their offending. A survey by Salter et al. (2023) similarly found that some self-confessed pedophiles are amenable to treatment and support; specifically, that 29.6 percent of Australian men who reported having sexual feelings towards children under 18 years said they were concerned about these feelings and wanted information and support. Forum users recommended strategies to reduce the risk of triggering a mandatory report to law enforcement while seeking help. This included choosing an appropriate provider they felt safe with, disguising the true reason for seeking treatment, discussing hypothetical scenarios with service providers rather than actual offending, or engaging with anonymous online services to hide their identity. A review of internet-based treatment suggested that some child sexual offenders may be more comfortable with accessing online services than in-person services (Wild et al. 2019), and the present findings support this.

Other desistance strategies

Offenders discussed several other strategies they had adopted to desist from sexual offending against children. CSAM use was widely discussed on the forum, including as an approach to avoid sexual contact with children. Posts by many users reflected a cognitive distortion in which viewing CSAM did not harm children and was a morally acceptable alternative to contact sexual offending. On the contrary, research has found CSAM offending can have significant and lasting negative impacts on victim-survivors (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017; Salter et al. 2021) and that it may encourage, rather than prevent, contact sexual offending (Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valkonen 2021).

Forum users also discussed environmental strategies they adopted to desist from online and offline offending, such as engagement in social activities or hobbies, restricting internet use, and controlling their access to children. While some forum users felt that avoiding children helped prevent them from child sexual offending, others believed that more contact with children helped reduce their offending behaviours as it allowed them to humanise children and reduce sexual fantasies. The use of medication to control sexual urges was of interest to some but was not widely adopted or supported among the darknet forum.

Implications

These findings suggest that, to support desistance from offending against children, it is important to improve and promote evidence-based psychosocial interventions considered by those seeking help to have a low risk of law enforcement detection, while also disrupting the use of ineffective and harmful strategies by offenders. A systematic review of eight studies found that cognitive behavioural based psychological treatment reduced sexual recidivism among sex offenders (Rocha & Valença 2023). Yet in the present study fear of detection underpinned much of the discussion about desistance attempts and was identified as a key barrier to formal help-seeking among undetected child sexual offenders.

As such, it is important to develop appropriate avenues for help-seeking that offenders perceive to have a low risk of leading to police detection, and to evaluate these for effectiveness in reducing harm to children.

Messages encouraging formal help-seeking among undetected offenders should consider common motivations for desistance. Concern over the harms to children caused by sexual offending behaviour was infrequently reported in the forum and is unlikely a key driver of help-seeking. Rather, difficulties in life and fear of detection are likely the key drivers of a desire for behaviour change. In a survey of 4,493 darknet CSAM users asking about motivations for change, those who reported difficulties with mental health issues that related to their use of CSAM were the most likely to want to stop using CSAM (Insoll et al. 2024). These motivations can be leveraged in awareness campaigns by focusing on the risk of arrest and jail, similar to the Stop it Now! campaign in the United Kingdom (<https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/our-impact/deterrence-campaign/>).

As shown in prior research (Cantor et al. 2022; Huikuri 2022; van der Bruggen & Blokland 2021), online forums where users discuss sexual attraction to children can encourage cognitive distortions that normalise offending against children, including CSAM offending. An important step in challenging the normalisation of pro-offending beliefs is disrupting the formation and proliferation of online communities run and used by child sexual offenders. Formal interventions for reducing offending against children should discourage networking with offenders online, while promoting effective desistance strategies.

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