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Abstract | This rapid evidence review examined 17 studies on pathways to the onset of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) offending. Eight factors were identified that contribute to the onset of CSAM offending, spanning three categories: developmental (negative childhood experiences), motivational (sexual interest in children, desire for sexual gratification) and situational or facilitating factors (accidental first exposure to CSAM, pornography use and the online environment, sexual arousal, offence-supportive cognitions, psychosocial issues and maladaptive coping). Evidence in this area is limited, and further research on the factors leading to CSAM offending is required. Nevertheless, this review highlights the importance of technological interventions on pornography sites and early psychological intervention for individuals at risk of viewing CSAM.

Pathways to onset of child sexual abuse material offending: A rapid evidence review

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Introduction

The quantity and severity of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) detected on online platforms has increased dramatically in recent years (Internet Watch Foundation 2023; National Center for Missing & Exploited Children 2024). With the accessibility of high-speed internet and affordability of devices such as smartphones, offenders can create and share CSAM with increasing ease (Cullen et al. 2020; Wortley et al. 2024).

The sheer volume of CSAM being produced, distributed and accessed, and the anonymity afforded to online offenders, pose significant challenges for law enforcement (Eggins et al. 2021; Wortley & Prichard 2023). CSAM also has significant and lasting negative impacts on the victim-survivors featured in the material (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan et al. 2018) and may encourage contact (in-person) sexual offending among some CSAM viewers (Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen-Valkonen 2021). Experts are therefore calling for more concerted efforts to prevent initial exposure to CSAM and subsequent progression along the offending pathway (Brown 2022; Wortley & Prichard 2023).

To prevent individuals from first viewing CSAM, it is important to understand who is at risk of offending and the pathways to their first offence. Steely and colleagues (2018) found that the factors contributing to CSAM offending change over time, with pathways to first use differing from the factors leading to subsequent use. To the authors' knowledge, no reviews to date have collated the research on pathways to the onset of CSAM offending. A recent review focused more broadly on risk factors for online and mixed (ie both online and contact) sexual offending, such as criminal history and sociodemographic characteristics of offenders (Reichel et al. 2025). However, such reviews have not distinguished between risks for onset and risks for CSAM offending in general.

Study aim

This study aims to build the evidence on pathways to the onset of CSAM offending, through a review of existing empirical research. A rapid evidence review was conducted to address the following research question: what factors contribute to the onset of CSAM offending?

Method

Search strategy

Rapid evidence reviews are a type of systematic review undertaken in an accelerated timeframe, with restricted search methods (Ganann, Ciliska & Thomas 2010). To be eligible for inclusion, studies had to be published in English between January 2010 and June 2025; there was little research conducted on CSAM offending prior to 2010. Studies were excluded if they:

- did not focus on pathways to the onset of CSAM offending;
- did not include primary data (eg reviews or conceptual papers);
- did not describe the study's methodology in sufficient detail to assess eligibility; or
- were published in a predatory journal (see Elmore & Weston 2020).

We decided to only include peer-reviewed sources, which have undergone quality checks to ensure the evidence presented is rigorous and reliable; thus, grey literature was excluded. Case studies were also excluded, as they offer limited generalisability and have an increased risk of bias.

The Australian Institute of Criminology's JV Barry Library searched five databases and relevant websites: the JV Barry Library catalogue, the Australian Institute of Criminology, EBSCO, DeepDyve and Google Scholar. Once the initial search of databases was completed, a cited reference search was conducted on all papers included in the sample.

Studies were identified using search terms from two categories, focused on CSAM offending and the onset of or pathways to CSAM offending:

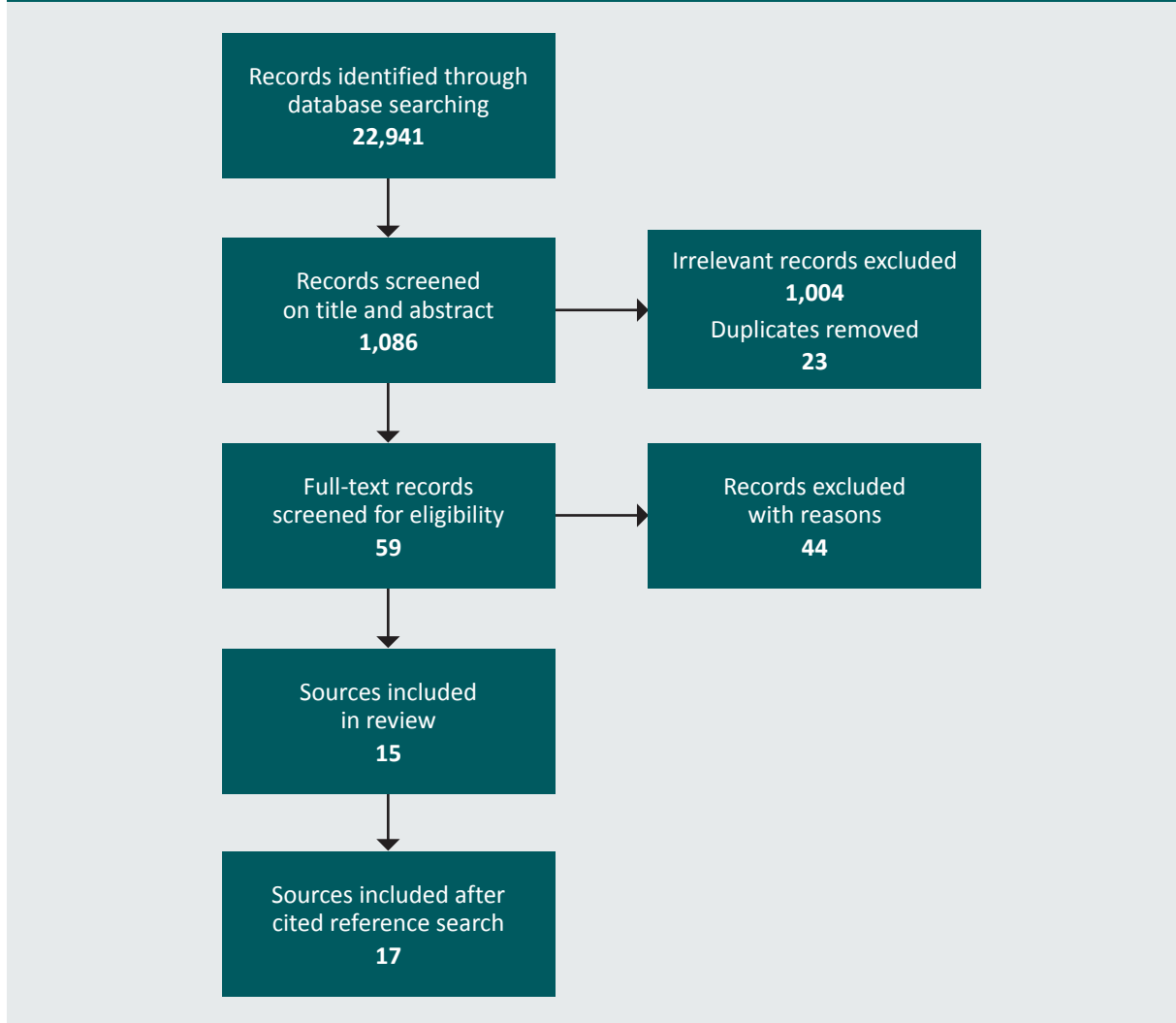
- *CSAM* (child sex* abuse material, child exploitation material, child sexual exploitation material, child porn*, indecent images of child*, CSAM, CSEM, CEM, online child sex offen*, SEM-c, sexually explicit material involving children, child sexual exploitation and abuse, live-streaming of child sexual abuse, webcam child prostitution, webcam child sex abuse)
- *Onset of offending* (onset, initiation, pathway, early stage, first time, first-time, early indicator, emergence, risk factor, precursor, predictors, trajectory, pattern, modus operandi, circumstance, transition, influence, environment, social, childhood, ACE [adverse childhood experiences], peer, situation, opportunity, profile, psychological, emotional, cognitive, escalation, development, progression, internet addiction, sex addiction, pornography addiction).

We included search terms relating to pornography use, given that prior research has found this to be a key feature in the pathway to CSAM offending for some individuals (Rimer & Holt 2025).

Screening process

The search initially identified 22,941 records. Databases that returned a large number of hits were not screened in full—specifically, Google Scholar (550 screened of 10,340 hits) and EBSCO (454 screened of 12,519 hits). Instead, these databases were reviewed until several pages returned no relevant results. Titles and abstracts for 1,086 records were screened to remove irrelevant studies ($n=1,004$). Eighty-two relevant records were identified and 23 duplicates were removed. Following this, 59 records underwent full-text screening and were assessed against the eligibility criteria. Forty-four papers were excluded during this step, leaving 15 papers that underwent a cited reference search (ie identifying records that cited these 15 papers). This produced a further 302 hits. After title and abstract screening, 28 records were selected for full-text review, of which 17 were duplicates and therefore removed. The remaining 11 records underwent a full-text screening and were assessed against the eligibility criteria. Two records were included from the cited reference search, leaving a final sample of 17 records (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Literature screening process



Limitations

Rapid evidence reviews do not capture the depth or detail of a full systematic review and can miss sources or introduce bias (Ganann, Ciliska & Thomas 2010). For example, in this review, Google Scholar and EBSCO produced a large number of records and only the first several hundred records were screened. In both databases, results are presented in order of relevance, so it is unlikely that relevant sources were missed. Both databases produced a large number of irrelevant hits. Further, as the rapid evidence review was designed to be completed in a reduced time frame, we decided to forgo methodological quality measures. The level of bias in each study, and the whole sample of studies, is therefore unknown.

We excluded several papers that did not clearly specify whether the factors examined occurred prior to or after the onset of CSAM offending. For example, some studies examined links between the mental health of offenders and CSAM offending, but it was not clear whether or not the mental health issues were present prior to the onset of offending. Further, several papers included in the final sample examined factors that occurred after onset or did not clearly indicate whether the factors preceded onset. As such, these factors were not reported in this review.

Papers that focused on online grooming rather than CSAM offending were also excluded, which may have impacted the scope of factors identified as contributing to onset. Finally, while there is emerging and robust research from various not-for-profit organisations, this rapid review excluded grey literature and such reports have not been captured in this analysis.

Quality of evidence

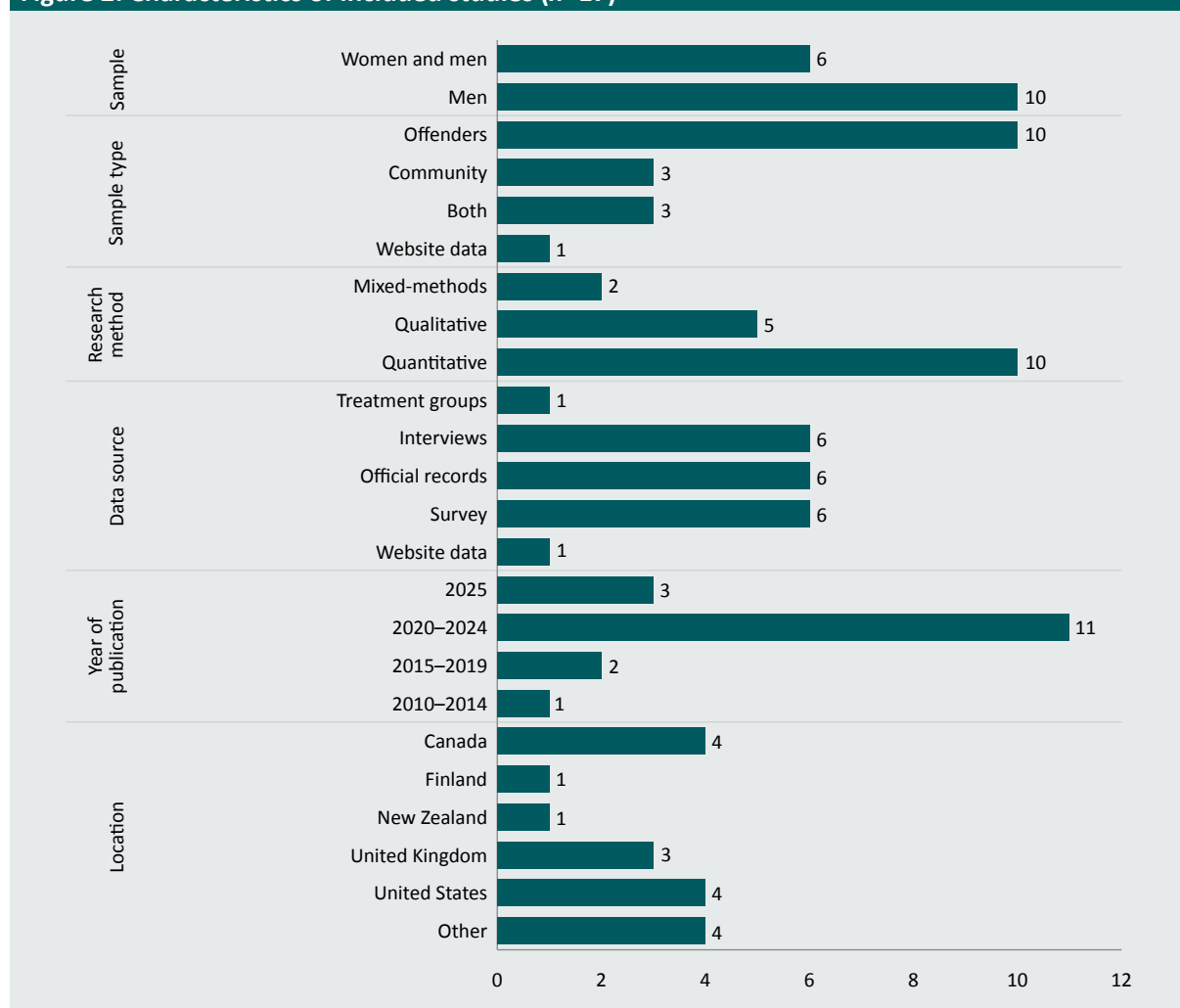
There was an overall dearth of research focused on the onset of CSAM viewing specifically. Of the studies that did narrow their focus to onset, many relied on populations of detected offenders to understand the factors leading to the first viewing or first offence. Such an overreliance on criminal justice based populations may mean we miss critical insights into early pathways to offending, as detected offenders may be more likely to disclose experiences relating to their first detected offence rather than their first time viewing CSAM. The reliance on detected offender populations may also limit generalisability to undetected offenders or at-risk populations. As all included studies took place in high-income, English-speaking countries, significant populations of potential offenders and associated socio-cultural risk factors may not be reflected in this review. The absence of a clear and consistent definition of onset across studies should also be noted.

Results

Study characteristics

The final sample included 17 papers, most of which were published within the five years prior to June 2025 ($n=14$). Studies were mostly conducted in North America (United States and Canada $n=4$ each), with the remainder coming from the United Kingdom ($n=3$), New Zealand ($n=1$) and Finland ($n=1$). Three studies took place across several of these countries ($n=3$) and one was a global website scraping study ($n=1$). Most studies used quantitative research methods ($n=10$), followed by qualitative ($n=5$), and mixed methods ($n=2$). The studies analysed data from a range of sources including surveys ($n=6$), official records (ie police files or medical records; $n=6$), interviews ($n=6$), clinical observations ($n=1$), website data ($n=1$), and neuropsychological tests ($n=1$). The samples were predominantly either men ($n=10$) or both men and women ($n=6$). Samples were drawn from offender populations ($n=10$), community surveys (which may have included undetected offenders; $n=3$), or both ($n=3$). One study examined data from a mainstream pornography website and therefore did not include any human participants.

Figure 2: Characteristics of included studies ($n=17$)



Factors associated with the onset of CSAM offending

The most prominent factors identified in the literature on pathways to the onset of CSAM offending are summarised in Table 1. We identified eight factors, grouped into three categories: developmental factors, motivating factors and situational or facilitating factors. It is important to reiterate that these are not the only factors that contribute to the onset of CSAM offending. Rather, they are the overarching factors identified in the literature analysed which were clearly present prior to the onset of CSAM offending.

Table 1: Summary of factors associated with onset of CSAM offending

Developmental factors
Negative childhood experiences ($n=7$) ^{3,6,7,8,9,11,12}
Motivating factors ^{2,5,6,7,8,9,11,12,13,16,17}
Sexual interest in children ($n=7$) ^{2,5,6,7,9,16,17}
Desire for sexual gratification ($n=9$) ^{2,5,6,7,8,11,12,13,16}
Situational and facilitating factors ^{2,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,13,14,15,16,17}
Accidental first exposure to CSAM ($n=6$) ^{2,7,9,10,16,17}
Pornography use and the online environment ($n=13$) ^{2,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,13,14,15,16,17}
Sexual arousal ($n=4$) ^{2,5,7,16}
Offence-supportive cognitions ($n=4$) ^{2,5,7,16}
Psychosocial issues and maladaptive coping ($n=6$) ^{1,5,7,8,13,16}

Note: 1—Babchishin et al. 2022; 2—Bailey et al. 2022; 3—Elbert, Drury & DeLisi 2022; 4—Gane et al. 2024; 5—Knack, Holmes & Fedoroff 2020; 6—Lahtinen et al. 2025; 7—Merdian et al. 2020; 8—Morgan & Lambie 2019; 9—Napier et al. 2024; 10—Napier et al. 2025; 11—Paquette, Chopin & Fortin 2025; 12—Paquette, Chopin & Fortin 2022; 13—Rimer & Holt 2023; 14—Seigfried-Spellar & Rogers 2013; 15—Steel et al. 2022; 16—Steely et al. 2018; 17—Wortley et al. 2024. Four samples are likely impacted by overlapping samples: Napier et al. 2024 examines a subset of the Napier et al. 2025 sample; Paquette, Chopin & Fortin 2022 and 2025 samples include offenders from the same jurisdiction within the same time frame

Developmental factors

In this review, developmental factors refer to incidents or experiences that people had during their childhood and developing years. The literature focuses on negative childhood experiences and the impact they can have on an individual's social and emotional development, which can in turn lead to difficulties in later life (Merdian et al. 2020; Morgan & Lambie 2019).

Negative childhood experiences

Seven studies explored negative childhood experiences among CSAM offenders. Three studies examined official records of offenders, two of which found the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse in detected CSAM offenders ranged from 20.4 percent ($n=20$) to 26.2 percent ($n=28$; Paquette, Chopin & Fortin 2025, 2022). Without a comparison group, it is difficult to determine from these studies if childhood sexual abuse is more prevalent among CSAM offenders than other populations. However, another study found that detected CSAM offenders were more likely than offenders who committed contact sexual offences (against adults or children) to report more severe or prolonged experiences of childhood sexual abuse (Elbert, Drury & DeLisi 2022). However, Napier et al. (2024) found that experiencing childhood abuse (sexual and non-sexual) did not predict subsequent intentional viewing of CSAM after first exposure in a sample of internet users.

Two qualitative studies based on interviews with CSAM offenders described a pattern of negative childhood experiences among these individuals. Experiences included sexual abuse and coercive or inappropriate relationships (Merdian et al. 2020), and early family and schooling difficulties (Morgan & Lambie 2019). These experiences impacted offenders' emotional and social development and contributed to the onset of CSAM offending in several ways. First, many offenders in both studies described engaging in habitual (ie compulsive, high-frequency) pornography use to cope with their adverse experiences and emotionally self-regulate, and progressing from legal material to CSAM (Merdian et al. 2020; Morgan & Lambie 2019). Two CSAM offenders also felt their sexual development was impacted by early sexual experiences with peers, and admitted the content they engaged with later as adults featured children of an age similar to the age they were at the time of these experiences (Morgan & Lambie 2019). A minority of CSAM consumers, both detected and undetected in quantitative (5.9–14.2%; Lahtinen et al. 2025) and qualitative studies (Merdian et al. 2020), reported viewing CSAM to understand or relive their own abuse, whether they perceived it as a positive or negative experience.

Motivating factors

Many of the papers in this review drew on prior work that conceptualised CSAM offender motivation, including Seto's (2019) motivation-facilitation model. In this context, 'motivation' refers to the psychological processes that guide behaviour and shape an individual's perceptions and intention to consume CSAM (Paquette, Chopin & Fortin 2025). The studies identified two primary motivators that appear to drive the onset of CSAM consumption: sexual interest in children and desire for sexual gratification.

Sexual interest in children

Seven papers included in this review examined the contribution of sexual interest in children to the onset of CSAM viewing, yielding mixed findings. In Knack, Holmes and Fedoroff's (2020) analyses of hospital records and interviews with 20 CSAM offenders, roughly half reported a sexual interest in children, and two of these offenders claimed they started viewing CSAM to prevent themselves from contact offending against children. Only a small subgroup of Merdian et al.'s (2020) participants (CSAM offenders in treatment programs) admitted to a sexual interest in children. Yet in Napier et al.'s (2024) analysis of an anonymous survey of 5,512 internet users, having a sexual interest in children was a strong predictor of ever viewing CSAM, and of viewing CSAM again intentionally after first exposure. Given the taboo nature of sexual interest in children, it is likely that the reported levels of such an interest vary widely depending on the study methods (ie wording of questions, perceptions of anonymity) and sample (ie offenders in treatment, incarcerated or still in the community).

Offenders who were found to have a sexual interest in children self-reported in surveys (Lahtinen et al. 2025) and interviews (Bailey et al. 2022; Knack, Holmes & Fedoroff 2020; Merdian et al. 2020; Steely et al. 2018) that this interest was a primary driver of starting to view CSAM. Offenders with a sexual interest in children more often reported positive emotions (such as excitement or curiosity) on first exposure to CSAM than those who did not report a sexual interest in children (Bailey et al. 2022). Similarly, in Lahtinen et al.'s (2025) study large proportions (34.1–78.9%) of CSAM offenders reported that their sexual interest in children was their primary motivation for viewing CSAM.

Some evidence was also present in the literature that sexual interest in children developed with time spent viewing CSAM. In Wortley et al.'s (2024) survey of CSAM offenders in treatment, only a small minority (9%) reported having a sexual interest in children prior to offending, but over half of the sample (55%) reported that their interest in children increased over time. According to Knack and colleagues, several CSAM consumers in their study who reported no pre-existing sexual interest in children (prior to viewing CSAM) believed that repeated exposure to CSAM 'essentially "conditioned" them to develop a sexual interest in children' (Knack, Holmes & Fedoroff 2020: 111).

Desire for sexual gratification

Nine papers reported offenders' desire for sexual gratification, or a sexual preoccupation, as a motivator for viewing CSAM (Bailey et al. 2022; Knack, Holmes & Fedoroff 2020; Lahtinen et al. 2025; Merdian et al. 2020; Morgan & Lambie 2019; Paquette, Chopin & Fortin 2025, 2022; Rimer & Holt 2023; Steely et al. 2018). Those who did not have an inherent sexual interest in children often first sought sexual gratification by viewing pornography, which then escalated to viewing CSAM (Bailey et al. 2022; Knack, Holmes & Fedoroff 2020; Lahtinen et al. 2025; Morgan & Lambie 2019; Steely et al. 2018). Rimer and Holt (2023) found that some CSAM offenders had a sexual preoccupation with pornography and masturbation that motivated them to seek out novel content of increasing depravity to obtain arousal. Other studies reported that CSAM viewers sought sexual gratification from pornography and CSAM when they were unable to obtain sexual gratification with an adult, either from a lack of intimacy in existing relationships or through a lack of sexual relationships (Bailey et al. 2022; Knack, Holmes & Fedoroff 2020; Merdian et al. 2020).

Situational or facilitating factors

A range of situational and facilitating factors were identified in the literature as contributing to the onset of CSAM offending. As Paquette, Chopin and Fortin (2025) explained, although the presence of sexual motivations is important, it is not sufficient to enable a crime to be committed, and other factors must also be present. Facilitating factors are traits that vary between individuals (eg poor self-regulation, hostile masculinity) or states that vary within an individual (eg depressed mood, alcohol use; Seto 2019). Situational factors are aspects of a person's environment that make offending easier (decreased risk and effort; Brown 2022; Wortley & Smallbone 2012), such as high availability of CSAM or a lack of witnesses. If these factors change (ie low availability of CSAM or people present), offending will be harder (increased risk and effort). Seto's (2019) motivation-facilitation model suggests that the combination of motivating, facilitating and situational factors influences the risk of sexual offending against children.

Accidental first exposure to CSAM

Six papers examined the circumstances surrounding an individual's first viewing of CSAM (Bailey et al. 2022; Merdian et al. 2020; Napier et al. 2024, 2025; Steely et al. 2018; Wortley et al. 2024). Three quantitative studies suggest that most CSAM viewers are first exposed to CSAM accidentally, with estimates ranging from 40 percent of detected CSAM offenders (Wortley et al. 2024) to 83 percent (Napier et al. 2024) and 86 percent of CSAM viewers surveyed in the community (Napier et al. 2025). Qualitative studies have found similarly low levels of intentional first exposure to CSAM. Two studies involving interviews with offenders found only three of 20 offenders (Bailey et al. 2022) and eight of 25 offenders (Steely et al. 2018) described their initial viewing of CSAM as deliberate.

Three studies examined whether and how people progressed from accidental exposure to intentional CSAM use (Bailey et al. 2022; Merdian et al. 2020; Napier et al. 2024). Napier et al. (2024) found that two in five (44.0%) anonymous survey respondents who first viewed CSAM by accident reported subsequently viewing CSAM intentionally. Offender interviews suggest that how people react to their first exposure to CSAM has little impact on whether or not they go on to intentionally view CSAM (Bailey et al. 2022; Merdian et al. 2020). For example, Bailey et al. (2022) found that just under half of their offender sample reported a negative emotional response the first time they saw CSAM but nevertheless went on to view CSAM again. Similarly, the offenders in Merdian et al.'s (2020) study described being repulsed initially but becoming increasingly desensitised to CSAM the more they continued to view it.

Pornography use and the online environment

Thirteen papers examined the role of pornography use and the online environment in the onset of CSAM offending. Both qualitative and quantitative studies found that many CSAM consumers, from criminal justice and community samples, were first exposed to CSAM while viewing or searching for pornography (Bailey et al. 2022; Knack, Holmes & Fedoroff 2020; Merdian et al. 2020; Morgan & Lambie 2019; Napier et al. 2025; Rimer & Holt 2023; Steely et al. 2018), including 'barely legal' content (ie young-looking individuals or adults pretending to be children; Wortley et al. 2024).

Offenders reported, via participant narratives (ie personal storytelling) and interviews, that easy access to online pornography facilitated their trajectory towards viewing increasingly depraved material and ultimately CSAM (Bailey et al. 2022; Merdian et al. 2020; Rimer & Holt 2023). These findings were supported by a survey of CSAM offenders, in which over half (51.0%) reported that they progressed from viewing pornography to viewing CSAM (Wortley et al. 2024). This progression was sometimes facilitated by the accessibility of pseudo-CSAM or barely legal content on mainstream pornography sites, with two in five CSAM offenders (43%) reporting that they progressed from this type of material to CSAM (Wortley et al. 2024). Further, in an examination of popular tags on a large mainstream pornography site, 15 of the most popular tags were categorised as possible CSAM or 'barely legal' content (Gane et al. 2024).

In one study a large proportion (95%) of registered sex offenders reported consuming pornography before ever viewing CSAM (Steel et al. 2022). However, it should be noted that pornography use is common among men generally, with one review finding 80 percent prevalence (Miller, Raggatt & McBain 2020) and a more recent study finding 87.5 percent prevalence (Dowling & Doherty 2025). In another study reviewed, high proportions of individuals charged with sexual offences against children, those charged with sexual offences against adults, and CSAM viewers with no charges reported habitual pornography use prior to intentional CSAM viewing (70.0%, 81.5% and 50.2% respectively; Lahtinen et al. 2025). At least one offender cited a pornography addiction as contributing to their progression from pornography to CSAM (Steely et al. 2018). Such findings may indicate a broader underlying issue of reliance on sexual stimulation and gratification for coping; in this sense compulsive pornography use leading to CSAM viewing can also be categorised as a psychosocial or maladaptive coping factor.

Early exposure to pornography or consumption of atypical or abusive material among CSAM users was another prominent theme in the literature reviewed. In Napier et al.'s (2024) study, respondents who started viewing pornography at an early age (under 14 years) were significantly more likely to have viewed CSAM than those who first viewed pornography at a later age. Similarly, Siegfried-Speller and Rogers (2013) found that respondents who first viewed pornography at a younger age (12–18 years) were more likely to have viewed CSAM and bestiality content than those who had a later age of onset. Napier et al. (2024) also found that the strongest predictor of having ever viewed CSAM was having ever viewed bestiality content featuring adults (78.5% vs 21.5% who had not viewed bestiality). In a separate study of the same sample, respondents exposed to material featuring bestiality and BDSM (sexual practices involving bondage, domination and sadomasochism, or giving and receiving pain) before the age of 14 were, respectively, three and six times more likely than other respondents to have viewed CSAM at a similarly early age (Napier et al. 2025).

In addition to engagement with pornography, the online environment generally was revealed to be a facilitating factor. As Steel et al.'s (2022) survey found, convicted CSAM offenders first viewed CSAM in a range of forums including peer-to-peer file sharing networks (46%), followed by other clearnet websites (30%) then darknet sites (7%) and non-digital media (eg print magazines; 7%). Bailey et al. (2022) and Merdian et al.'s (2020) study also frame the online environment itself as a facilitator, as it offers easy access to an abundance of pornography and other material, creating opportunities for viewing CSAM.

Sexual arousal

Two studies found that sexual arousal immediately prior to offending facilitates offenders' consumption of CSAM. Several of Knack, Holmes and Fedoroff's (2020) participants described experiencing hyper-focused sexual arousal that led them to disregard the consequences of viewing illegal materials (including bestiality and CSAM). Similarly, offenders in Bailey et al.'s (2022) study said they overcame their guilt and morality due to their arousal and excitement.

Offence-supportive cognitions

Two studies examined offence-supportive cognitions, thoughts that are present immediately prior to offending that support engaging in the offending behaviour. Steely et al. (2018) found that some respondents claimed they did not know that viewing some forms of CSAM, such as images where children were not in sexual poses or engaged in sexual acts, were illegal. Noting that while this was classed as an offence-supportive cognition, some individuals in the community, particularly young people, may be genuinely ignorant over the laws regarding CSAM. Other offenders perceived viewing CSAM as a victimless crime given they had not engaged in contact sexual abuse of a child, which reduced their guilt over viewing this material. Merdian et al. (2020) found that CSAM viewers in their study perceived the internet as a separate world, so they could rationalise engaging in behaviour that did not align with their morals in the offline world. The authors suggested that such cognitions make it easier for people to justify their CSAM consumption (Merdian et al. 2020).

Psychosocial issues and maladaptive coping

Six studies examined psychosocial issues and maladaptive coping strategies as facilitators of the onset of CSAM offending. One quantitative study modelled the criminal offending trajectories of 387 CSAM offenders and compared these across different groups using area under the curve analysis (Babchishin et al. 2022). The study found that offenders who were known to have started CSAM offending before the age of 23 years were more likely than those who began CSAM offending later in life to have a personality disorder (AUC=0.96, 95% CI [0.91, 1.00]). However, it should be noted there were only eight early onset offenders in the sample compared to 379 with later onset, and even fewer from both samples were able to be compared based on their psychological characteristics.

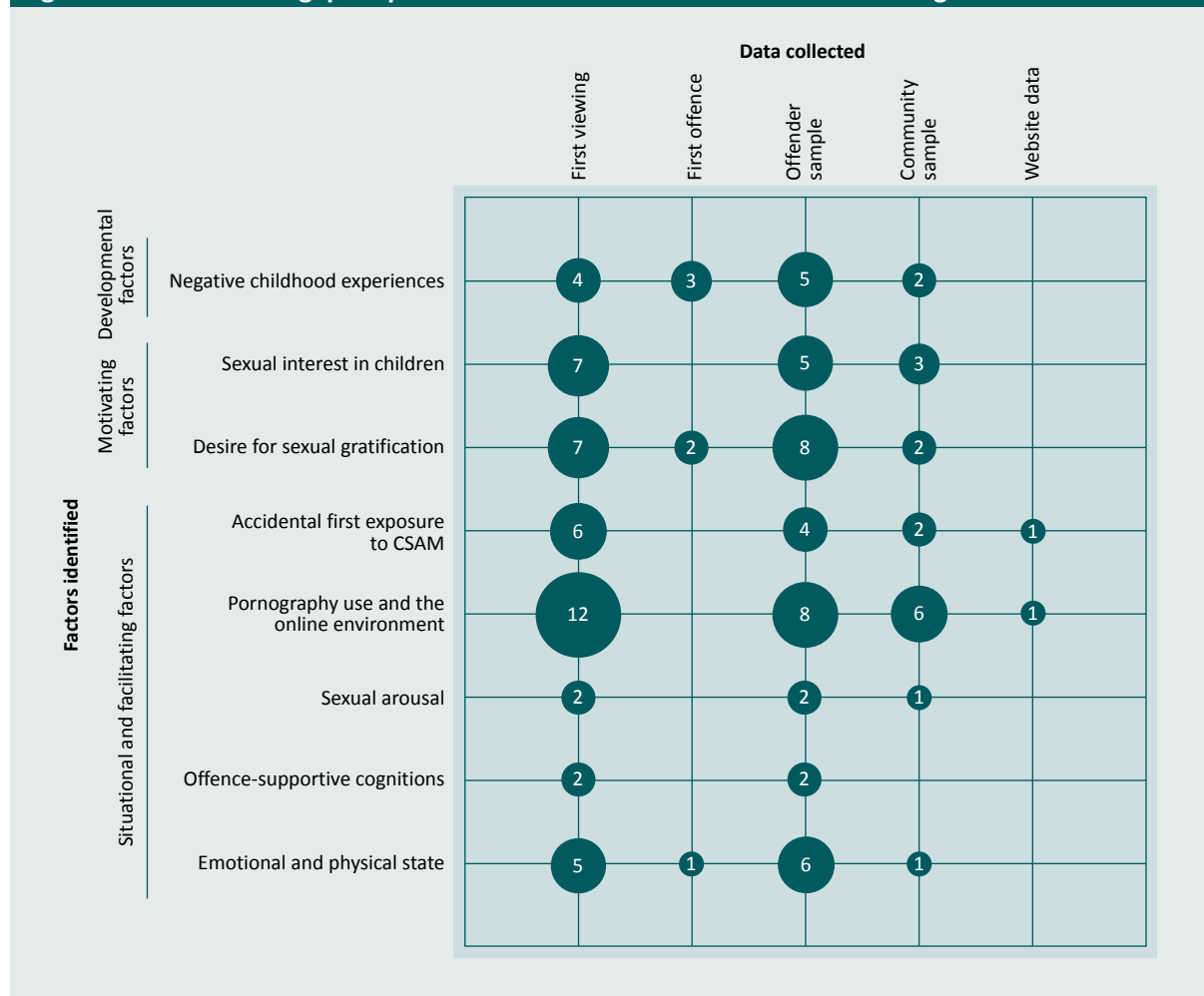
Five studies found that interpersonal issues and/or life stressors contributed to the onset of viewing CSAM. Knack, Holmes and Fedoroff (2020) and Bailey et al. (2022) found that interpersonal problems prior to offending resulted in unmet needs and led to feelings of loneliness and isolation. In one qualitative (Rimer & Holt 2023) and one quantitative (Steely et al. 2018) study, CSAM viewers said that isolation and loneliness, frustration, boredom and curiosity contributed to their onset of CSAM viewing. In addition, Napier et al. (2024) found that those who intentionally viewed CSAM were significantly more likely to have experienced loneliness than those who did not.

Rimer and Holt (2023) suggested that their study participants' CSAM use was an attempt to exercise control or power over their life, which offenders otherwise felt was meaningless or out of control. Many other offenders described using pornography for emotional self-regulation (Knack, Holmes & Fedoroff 2020; Lahtinen et al. 2025; Meridian et al. 2020). This use often led to increased pornography consumption (up to 16 hours a day), habituation and desensitisation to legal adult content, followed by the onset of CSAM viewing. Similarly, participants in Morgan and Lambie's (2019) study described experiencing stress in intimate relationships and other aspects of their life, which led to seeking sexual gratification and comfort from pornography, immediately prior to CSAM offending.

Evidence and gap map

This rapid review identified only a small number of relevant peer-reviewed studies, demonstrating the dearth of evidence on the factors contributing to the onset of CSAM offending and the need for greater understanding of this topic. The review identified several qualitative studies that provided rich data on pathways to CSAM offending, from offenders' perspectives. While some findings were supported by quantitative studies with larger samples, future research should seek to validate or correct these offender narratives with further quantitative methods incorporating non-offending comparison groups. Further, many papers intentionally excluded from this review examined factors that could be relevant to the onset of CSAM offending, such as higher frequency use of the internet. However, the methodologies used often made it difficult to assess whether these factors were present prior to offending or contributed to onset. Therefore, future research should aim to further establish contributors to the onset of CSAM offending by asking relevant questions of community samples. Figure 3 maps the evidence and gaps for further work in this space.

Figure 3: Evidence and gap map for research on the onset of CSAM offending



Note: First viewing refers to studies that have specifically examined CSAM viewers' first exposure to CSAM. First offence refers to studies that have examined first arrest or prosecution identified by law enforcement

Discussion

This rapid review identified 17 studies with varying methodologies that contribute to understanding pathways to the onset of CSAM offending. Key findings were grouped into three overarching categories: developmental factors, motivating factors, and situational or facilitating factors.

Developmental factors

Due to mixed findings and an absence of comparison groups, it was difficult to conclude whether childhood sexual abuse plays an important role in the onset of CSAM offending. However, research suggests that negative childhood experiences can lead to loneliness and a lack of connection to others in adulthood; some individuals cope with this by seeking comfort in pornography and later CSAM (Knack, Holmes & Fedoroff 2020; Morgan & Lambie 2019).

Motivating factors

Two motivating factors that contribute to the onset of CSAM offending were identified in the literature: a sexual interest in children and a desire for sexual gratification. Findings were mixed on the prevalence of sexual interest in children prior to the onset of CSAM offending; however, those with a sexual interest in children had increased likelihood of viewing CSAM (Napier et al. 2024). Some individuals appeared motivated to seek out CSAM due to their sexual interest in children. Others did not possess such an interest at onset and were motivated to view CSAM by a broader desire to seek sexual gratification, which began with mainstream pornography and escalated. However, the research suggested that, for many offenders, including those without a prior sexual interest in children, this interest grew over time through repeated exposure to CSAM (Wortley et al. 2024).

Situational or facilitating factors

Several situational and facilitating factors were identified that contribute to the onset of CSAM offending: accidental first exposure to CSAM, pornography use and the online environment, sexual arousal, offence-supportive cognitions, and psychosocial issues and maladaptive coping. This review found that use of pornography and engagement with the online environment was a pathway to viewing CSAM in two ways:

- individuals can be exposed to CSAM unintentionally, through pop-ups or 'tags' indicative of CSAM on mainstream pornography websites, or via general searches for pornography; and
- individuals whose use of pornography is driven by psychosocial issues or maladaptive coping can become desensitised through habitual consumption of, and/or early exposure to, pornography and seek out more taboo or extreme content, leading to the viewing of CSAM.

Sexual arousal and offence-supportive cognitions further facilitated the onset of CSAM viewing.

Importantly, previous research has noted that it is only when situational factors interact with motivating and facilitating factors that the risk of sexual offending (including CSAM offending) increases (Seto 2019). Thus, most people in the community who view pornography will not move on to viewing CSAM intentionally. However, in the presence of the developmental, motivating and facilitating factors identified in this review, the risk of CSAM offending increases with early exposure and desensitisation to pornography, or accidental exposure to CSAM when searching for pornography.

Implications

The factors identified in this review reveal several avenues to bolster CSAM offending prevention efforts. Given the large number of offenders who are initially exposed to CSAM accidentally, reducing the accessibility of CSAM may prevent individuals from developing a pattern of CSAM offending (Brown 2022; Napier et al. 2024; Wortley & Smallbone 2012). Mainstream pornography websites appear to be the primary platforms able to reduce instances of accidental exposure. Technological interventions and warning messages have been found to successfully deter intentional CSAM consumers (Prichard et al. 2024). Such initiatives should be widely implemented on pornography platforms, as they are currently underused in prevention approaches (Bailey et al. 2022). Other options involve blocking content on search engines (Brown 2022; Steel 2015) and increased use of artificial intelligence tools that search the internet and identify CSAM (eg Project Arachnid 2020).

Given the pornography desensitisation and habituation pathways identified, early intervention and education focused on the harms of high-volume pornography use, and early exposure to pornography, may help prevent the onset of CSAM offending. For those already engaged in habitual pornography use, increased support programs could help address problematic pornography consumption and prevent escalation to CSAM. Interventions should also focus on psychosocial issues, maladaptive coping, loneliness/isolation and offence-supportive cognitions, in combination with a desire for sexual gratification, each of which was identified as contributing to the onset of CSAM offending.

Finally, as negative childhood experiences were identified as an important factor in the pathway to CSAM offending, increasing interventions to prevent child maltreatment and improving supports for victim-survivors may reduce the number of people engaging with CSAM in future generations.

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