

Child pornography in the age of the internet

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This report, undertaken for the Film and Publications Board of South Africa and was prompted by the new Film and Publications Act which criminalises the production, distribution and possession of child sexual abuse images – commonly referred to as ‘child pornography.’ The study is also prompted by increasing concerns regarding the multiplication of child abuse images on the internet and the potential for abuse of children through this medium and also cell phones.

The study investigated the extent of manufacturing and distribution of child pornography in South Africa, the number of criminal cases in which child pornography played a role, and whether it is possible to establish profiles of perpetrators and children who are vulnerable to this form of exploitation.

As the phenomenon of internet child abuse is recent, research data is limited. No prior studies have been conducted in South Africa. For this reason, desk reviews were undertaken and these were complemented by key informant interviews with the South African Police, the National Prosecuting Authority, internet service providers and child protection organisations. A consultation was also held with specialists from the UK including child protection police and academics

The extent of the problem in South Africa is not known, and it is important to stress that the full reality will never be known, given the clandestine nature of the crime. However, some estimates claim that there are more than 1 million child sexual abuse images available on the internet. This figure is escalating, not least because the average person now has private access to the internet. The internet has made it much easier to distribute these images and for ‘communities’ of users to form. It has also made it possible for perpetrators to enter child chat rooms to groom children for abusive acts.

The number of reported child pornography cases in South Africa is unknown because sexual offence data is not disaggregated. The study estimated that fewer than 20 cases of

persons possessing, manufacturing or distributing images have been investigated in SA over the past 5 years.

There is no profile of children who are vulnerable to this form of abuse. However, there is some indication that those most likely to be involved in the production of images are children who have an established relationship with the abuser and who do not have adequate supervision. Children with internet and high end cell phones are vulnerable to abuse with this technology (e.g. requests from adults to produce pornographic images of themselves or to meet the perpetrator). Children may be vulnerable when relations with their parents are strained, if they have low self-esteem and if internet use is unsupervised. As the technology is expensive, far more children are vulnerable to sexual abuse *without* the use of electronic media. However, as schools obtain greater access to the internet, this is likely to change.

Offender profiles are not reliable. In some cases they may fit the criteria for paedophilia (a small minority of perpetrators). Even these may mask their offending behaviour as they are likely to have appropriate adult sexual relationships, hold jobs and otherwise blend into society. One characteristic is that they often take a great interest in children – but so do many others who are not perpetrators!

Among the key recommendations were the following:

1. Policing and prosecutorial teams need specialised technological skills to investigate offences; They need ongoing training;
2. Sexual offence statistics must be disaggregated to determine the extent of possession and production of child pornography;
3. Computers and cellphones must have filtering software and parents must be aware of potential dangers;
4. ISP's should be obliged to report clients who download and/or distribute child abuse images.