Using survey data from offenders on the Dark Web to combat online child sexual abuse and exploitation

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Abstract ([9])

A 2024 report by the Childlight Global Child Safety Institute reveals that over 300 million children are victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation annually, indicating a hidden global pandemic. As a form of cybercrime, child sexual exploitation is one of the EU's priorities in the fight against serious and organised crime, and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation has recognised Dark Web networks as one of the key threats in child sexual exploitation. Most child sexual abuse material (CSAM) offenders remain undetected, limiting our knowledge of their motivations and behaviours. Existing research has largely relied on samples of convicted offenders, potentially overlooking important nuances within the broader offending population. This paper presents a model to collect data from CSAM offenders on the Dark Web and summarises results from a study on the data, focusing on differences between charged and uncharged CSAM users. Data includes responses from 3 782 anonymous offenders actively searching for CSAM or seeking help for their use of CSAM on the Dark Web. We compare three groups of CSAM searchers: (1) those admitting charges of sexual crimes against children; (2) those admitting charges of sexual crimes against adults; and (3) those admitting no charges. Additionally, we discuss the implications of the research for practitioners and how to use this information to target prevention strategies more effectively.

Keywords: CSAM offenders, Dark Web, sexual offending against children, data collection, hidden crimes.

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Introduction

The recently published European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) report titled *EU Serious Organised Crime Threat Assessment* (Europol, 2025) identified child sexual exploitation as one of the key threats to the EU's internal security and a priority for the EU in combating serious and organised cybercrime under the 2022–2025 European multidisciplinary platform against criminal threats (Empact). Europol (n.d.) has identified Dark Web networks as a major threat contributing to this form of exploitation. Worryingly, evidence of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) linked to human trafficking is also emerging (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2024).

One of the key challenges in combating sexual crimes against children is that they frequently go undetected by authorities (Lahtinen, 2022; Priebe and Svedin, 2008), and this is particularly true for victims of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA). These victims seldom report their experiences to authorities (Colburn et al., 2023; Gemara et al., 2023), even when they have evidence such as photos, videos and messages. In OCSEA cases, reluctance to disclose and even denial of the events, despite evidence, pose significant challenges in criminal investigations, especially when human trafficking is involved (e.g. Lavoie et al., 2019). Consequently, few CSAM offenders are detected by law enforcement.

Most of the research on CSAM offenders has focused on forensic, clinical or community samples. The problem with these samples is that they are unrepresentative of child sex offenders (Salter et al., 2023a). Recently, research using online forums to collect data has increased. However, as Roche et al. (2025) showed, samples in these studies consist mostly of white men, between the ages of 18 and 35, living in North America or Europe. Thus, generalising findings from these studies to all CSAM offenders is problematic and more diversified recruitment methods are needed. Also, as recent research indicates, the types of CSAM crimes reported to police may differ from the types of crimes reported by victims in victim surveys (Finkelhor et al., 2023; Quayle et al., 2018). Therefore, research involving offenders undetected by law enforcement, based on more diverse samples, is needed to develop more effective measures to reveal, investigate and prevent these crimes.

A recent nationally representative study by Salter *et al.* (2023b) examined the prevalence of child sexual offending behaviours and attitudes among men in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. The study found that men who self-report online sexual offences are more likely to seek sexual contact with children if they are certain that no one would find out. In line with this finding, Insoll et al. (2022) indicated that 42 % of CSAM searchers on the Dark Web had tried to directly contact children online after viewing CSAM, and even more (58 %) reported feeling afraid that viewing CSAM might lead to sexual acts with a child or an adult. The study was based on a large sample of CSAM searchers on the Dark Web. These findings contrast with several previous studies, mainly based on forensic and clinical samples (see, for example, Babchishin et al., 2018, for a review), which estimate a relatively low risk for contact sexual abuse among CSAM users. Research (Napier et al., 2024; von Franqué et al., 2023) also indicates that CSAM use often persists after initial exposure, significantly increasing the risk of escalating to direct contact and endangering more children. These findings again underline the urgent need for studies that include larger samples of CSAM users outside of the criminal justice system and anonymous clinical services.

Multiple factors have been associated with sexual offending based on previous studies with samples of convicted offenders (e.g. Ward and Beech, 2006), yet a comprehensive understanding of what differentiates child sexual

abusers from non-abusing individuals remains elusive (Seto, 2019). While sexual interest in children is a known risk factor, not all individuals with paedophilia engage in offending behaviour (Finkelhor, 1984; Seto, 2019), highlighting the complexity of the issue. To account for these nuances, Seto (2019) proposed the motivation–facilitation model, which identifies paraphilic interests, high sex drive and intense mating effort as core motivations. Facilitators include trait factors (e.g. antisocial personality) and state factors (e.g. alcohol use), while situational elements – such as victim accessibility and lack of guardianship – interact with personal traits to influence offending risk.

The volume of reported CSAM has increased tremendously during the last decade. For example, a recent report by the Childlight Global Child Safety Institute (2024) revealed that over 300 million children are victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation annually. Furthermore, according to the *Global Threat Assessment 2023* (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023), the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has reported analysing 32 million reports in 2022 (an 87 % increase compared with 2019), and the Internet Watch Foundation (2024) has observed that material is more extreme and violent compared with its earlier findings. Along with social media and the Surface Web, the Dark Web is one of the key forums where CSAM is shared. Nurmi et al. (2024) recently showed that the availability of CSAM on the Dark Web is alarming: one fifth of the onion domains on the Tor network share CSAM, it is easily available by using 21 out of 26 most-used Tor search engines, and 11.1 % of the search sessions using one of the Dark Web search engines – Ahmia.fi – were seeking CSAM despite the removal of CSAM websites from its search results and the blocking of CSAM queries. These findings collectively highlight the alarming extent of CSAM and justify prioritising child sexual exploitation in the fight against serious and organised crime, as part of the 2022–2025 Empact programme (Empact, n.d.).

To develop effective interventions to stop the sharing and using of CSAM, we need more knowledge from the offenders, including those undetected by law enforcement and those operating on the Dark Web. In this paper, we first present a model to collect data from CSAM offenders on the Dark Web. We aimed to develop a sustainable and replicable data collection model on OCSEA for national and international data collection. Through the model we aimed to gain a broader understanding of common patterns and trends of OCSEA. We specifically highlight the potential that the model has in collecting data from anonymous perpetrators on the Dark Web. Second, we illustrate the kind of information it can provide and how it can be used in the fight against CSAM crimes by presenting some of the key findings from a scientific study on the data (Lahtinen et al., 2025). We were interested in analysing the number of both legally charged and uncharged CSAM searchers and whether they differed in their individual, motivational and behavioural characteristics. To investigate this, we compared three groups of anonymous CSAM searchers on the Dark Web based on their self-reports: (1) those admitting charges of sexual crimes against children; (2) those admitting charges of sexual crimes against adults; and (3) those admitting no charges. This paper builds on a study previously published in the *Child Abuse and Neglect* journal. While the original paper presented the full research findings, the current paper focuses on the data collection model used in the study and highlights key results with direct relevance to law enforcement professionals. The aim is to support practitioners in identifying and responding to cases more effectively by translating research insights into actionable knowledge.

Methodology

The data collection model

We created an anonymous online 'Help us to know' survey that is shared via a Dark Web search engine – Ahmia.fi. According to Winter et al. (2018, p. 420), one of the most popular ways in which almost half of Tor users discover onion sites was through search engines such as Ahmia.fi. Ahmia.fi not only filters these websites, but also blocks the searches indicating sexual violence against children. Individuals who search for CSAM with the search engine get an invitation to participate in the survey instead of the search results they were looking for. They can choose to respond to the survey or not. They are also offered links to relevant online and offline help resources, including the ReDirection Self-Help Program (n.d.), for example. The programme is designed to support behavioural change and reduce the consumption of CSAM with the help of techniques based on cognitive behavioural therapy.

The survey includes 37 mandatory questions (available in 15 languages), with an option to select 'Prefer not to say' for any question. We collected both quantitative and qualitative data, including basic demographic information such as age (categorised) and gender. The survey combines validated measures (the Sexual Child Molestation Risk Assessment A and B to measure the self-reported frequency of sexually abusive behaviour in the past week (Landgren et al., 2020)) and custom-developed questions tailored to the study's purposes. The questions encourage respondents to reflect on their use of CSAM to understand the pathways and motivations behind their behaviour. Topics include known risk factors from previous research, such as child sexual abuse and CSAM perpetration, sexual interest in children, offender preferences for victim age and gender, CSAM use behaviour, adult pornography use and criminal behaviour. Situational factors and facilitators are also explored.

The survey also examines contact-seeking behaviour, specifics of contact with children and acts of sexual violence, whether physical or remote. Prior criminal behaviour is explored by asking respondents whether they have ever been legally charged with a violent offence or sexual offence (separate questions), with options for 'Yes, against an adult', 'Yes, against a child', 'No' and 'Prefer not to say'. An honesty check question at the end assesses how truthful participants were and their perception of others' honesty in the survey. For a more detailed description of the data collection model and the survey, see Insoll et al. (2024) and Lahtinen et al. (2025).

Ethical considerations

One of the key principles of research ethics is to avoid causing harm to participants. When collecting sensitive data on potential offences against children, the risk of psychological distress – including self-harm or suicidal thoughts – must be considered. Therefore, participants should be provided with information on accessing mental health support (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2023). This model enabled us to provide the links to support resources both before the respondent even decided to respond to the survey and after they had finished answering questions.

To ensure respect for participants' rights, it is crucial that they voluntarily consent to participating and are clearly informed about the study's purpose and risks (informed consent). For sensitive data, maintaining strict confidentiality and preserving participants' anonymity is essential. Any personally identifiable information must be collected in accordance with relevant data protection laws (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2023). For this reason,

the survey contained only a few questions on demographic information, and conducting the survey on the Dark Web virtually guarantees the anonymity of respondents.

When conducting online surveys, it is important to ensure that data is collected only from adults, as different ethical standards apply to children. Age can be verified through screening questions or consent forms. We decided to use a screening question asking respondents to confirm that they were at least 18 years old. The ethical aspects of this data collection model and research done based on it were evaluated and approved by the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics.

Research methodology

In the first study we conducted based on the data (Lahtinen et al., 2025), we analysed the responses from the 3 782 anonymous offenders who were actively searching for CSAM or seeking help for their use of CSAM on the Dark Web and chose to respond to the English-language version of the 'Help us to know' survey between 1 July 2023 and 1 March 2024. Participants who indicated in the honesty check that they had not been honest in answering the questions (n = 627) were excluded from the analyses, along with those who did not to respond to the question on charges for sexual offences (n = 771). The final sample consisted of 2 384 respondents (63.0 % of the total sample).

To investigate the individual, motivational and behavioural characteristics predicting charges for sexual crimes against children or adults, we formed three groups based on responses to the question: 'Have you ever been charged with a sexual offence (e.g. indecent exposure, sexual coercion, rape, sexual abuse, child sexual abuse material offences, sexual harassment, grooming)?' Participants who answered 'Yes, against a child' (n = 474; 19.9 %) were assigned to the child sexual abuse offenders (CS) group. Those who answered 'Yes, against an adult' (n = 620; 26.0 %) were assigned to the adult sexual abuse offenders (AS) group. Respondents who selected 'No' (n = 1 290; 54.1 %) were placed in the no charges (NC) group. Additionally, 87 participants who reported charges for offences against both children and adults were included in the CS group.

Results

Characteristics of the sample

Among the final sample of participants, which totalled 2 384 individuals, 77.5 % identified as men. Meanwhile, 10.4 % identified as women, 4.6 % identified as non-binary and 7.6 % preferred not to disclose their gender. Most respondents (76 %) were young adults (18–34 years old) (see details in Figure 4.1 and Lahtinen et al., 2025). A little over half (54.1 %) reported having no charges for sexual offences. Additionally, 17.3 % of all respondents reported charges for other violent crimes against children, and 25.8 % reported charges for other violent crimes against adults.

Age group	n	Percent
18-24 years old	1210	51
25-34 years old	600	25
35-44 years old	249	10
45-54 years old	125	5
Over 55 years old	65	3
Prefer not to say	135	6

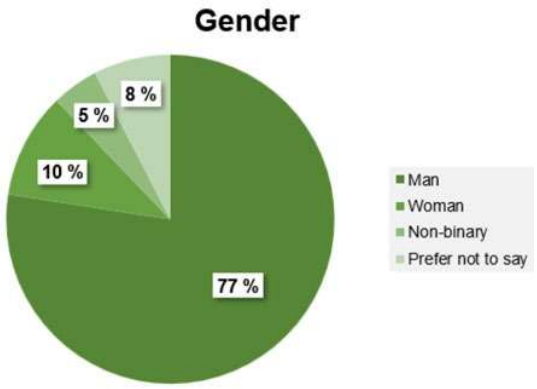

Figure 4.1. Age and gender of the participants

Recent analyses of the data by Insoll et al. (2024), based on a larger sample of 4 549 respondents, showed that 35 % of them found the survey when looking for help to stop using CSAM, and 41 % of respondents believe that it is possible to stop using CSAM. Many participants responded to the question about their feelings after answering the survey that simply completing the survey made them stop and reflect upon their own behaviour.

Summary of findings from the bivariate and multivariate analyses

First, we tested which variables in the data were associated with being charged for a sexual crime against a child (CS group) or an adult (AS group) with chi-square tests. Some of the key differences observed are described in Figures 4.2 and 4.3. All groups were most interested in the material depicting girls. However, we found significant differences in age preferences between the groups. The AS offender group reported most often that they were interested in the youngest category (infants and toddlers) (see details in Figure 4.2).

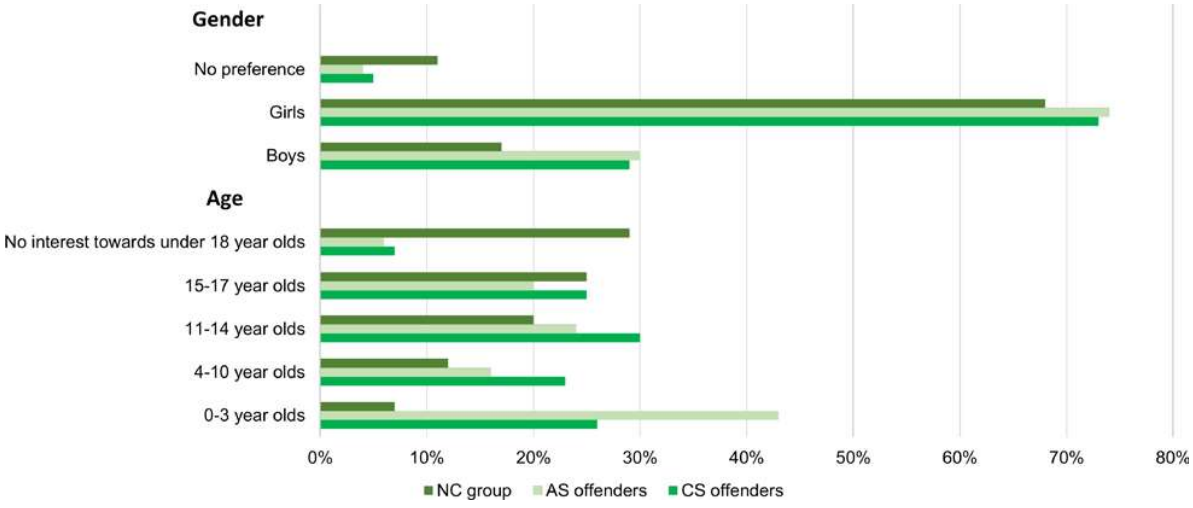

Figure 4.2. Victim preferences related to gender and age

From the motivational factors tested, sexual interest in children and desensitisation to adult pornography were associated with belonging to either the AS or the CS group. The AS group reported the highest percentage of sexual interest in children (78.9 %, with corresponding proportions of 52.5 % in the CS group and 34.1 % in the NC group). Desensitisation to adult pornography was most common in the NC group (20.2 %, with corresponding proportions

of 8.4 % in the CS group and 12.6 % in the AS group). Several behavioural factors – such as habitual viewing of adult pornography, watching CSAM for sexual arousal, grooming children and seeking physical contact or direct remote contact with a child – were associated with belonging to groups of sexual abuse offenders (AS or CS groups). Figure 4.3 describes that most respondents had neither groomed nor contacted children for sexual pleasure recently. CS offenders groomed and contacted children most often (see Figure 4.3).

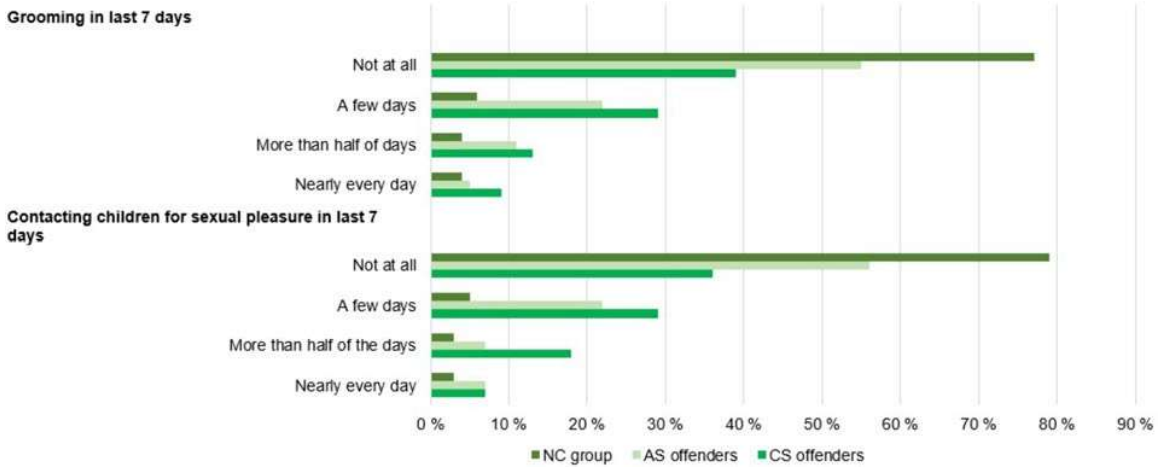

Figure 4.3. Frequency of grooming and contacting children

Second, we performed logistic regression on the variables significantly associated with belonging to either the AS or the CS group in bivariate analyses, to examine whether each variable indicated a greater likelihood of belonging to AS or CS offender groups than the NC group when the influence of other variables was controlled. These final analyses showed that four key factors predicted most of the differences between the groups: being charged with a violent offence against a child or an adult, searching for material depicting the sexual abuse of infants and toddlers, grooming children and having physical contact with children significantly increased the risk of belonging to the AS or CS group compared with the group that reported no charges (see more details in Lahtinen et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This paper emphasises the importance of using multiple data sources, including the Dark Web, for CSAM user research. Due to the hidden nature and volume of these crimes, innovative methods like using anonymous surveys of CSAM users outside of the criminal justice system are essential to complementing clinical and forensic data (see also Roche et al., 2025). The study demonstrates that engaging participants via a Dark Web search engine to reflect on their behaviour is an effective method for collecting large datasets from hard-to-reach populations. The resulting data can inform the development of both preventive strategies targeting CSAM use and tailored interventions for individuals at risk of offending. However, ethical considerations such as confidentiality and participant safety are crucial. Such studies also have their limitations. For example, participants often portray themselves positively in self-report surveys. Some respondents may have lied or exaggerated despite an honesty check at the end of the survey. It is also important to recognise that individuals accessing CSAM via the Dark Web may differ significantly from other user populations, which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Initial findings from the anonymous Dark Web survey reveal significant differences in individual, behavioural and motivational characteristics between CSAM offenders who admitted being charged for a crime of sexual violence against a child or an adult and those who asserted no such charges. Factors like facing charges for other violent offences, searching for material depicting infant abuse, and grooming and initiating physical contact with children increased the risk of sexual crime charges. Notably, a group of adult offenders with antisocial backgrounds showed a sexual interest in children, often seeking CSAM depicting infants and toddlers and engaging in grooming or contact with children. Many of them had violent offence charges in addition to charges for sexual crimes, highlighting the need to investigate CSAM-related offences also during adult sexual crime investigations. Given that other police investigations often identify these high-risk individuals, the findings support Seto and Eke's (2024) recommendation to search for CSAM during such investigations. This approach may contribute to deterring high-risk individuals and enhancing the likelihood of detection.

Our findings also have significant implications for assessing, treating and managing the risk of individuals committing sexual offences. Adult sexual offenders with antisocial backgrounds likely require different interventions compared with those who commit sexual violence against children or use CSAM without criminal charges (see also Soldino et al., 2024). Additionally, it is crucial to assess their recidivism risk, sexual interests and potential for committing sexual crimes against children. However, it is important to remember that, although we found a population of CSAM users on the Dark Web with antisocial tendencies who might be resistant to preventive measures, a larger population lacked such tendencies and was thus likely to be more receptive to prevention. Finally, the finding that 41 % of respondents believed that it is possible to stop using CSAM is encouraging. Preventive efforts should be strategically directed towards this population. Based on our findings, it appears that Dark Web search engines – and potentially Surface Web search engines as well – could play a role in prevention by redirecting users to support services rather than providing access to harmful content. Notably, some respondents reported that completing the survey prompted reflection on their behaviour. This finding supports the continued use of the data collection model described in this article, particularly as a tool that may contribute to the early disruption of offending trajectories.

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