



Deterrence and help-seeking

Learning Brief: February 2024

Deterrence and help-seeking

Learning Brief: February 2024

What is deterrence & help-seeking?	1
What is the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research funding?	2
What have we learnt so far about people that view CSAM & their practices?	4
What have we learnt so far about interest and drivers of CSAM online?	6
What is deterrence & help-seeking?	7
What tools might be developed in the future?	9
Sources	10

What is deterrence & help-seeking?

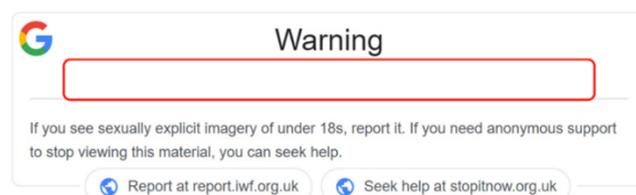
There are a range of approaches and strategies to deter potential and current offenders from engaging or further engaging with child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online and seeking help to stop them doing this in the future.

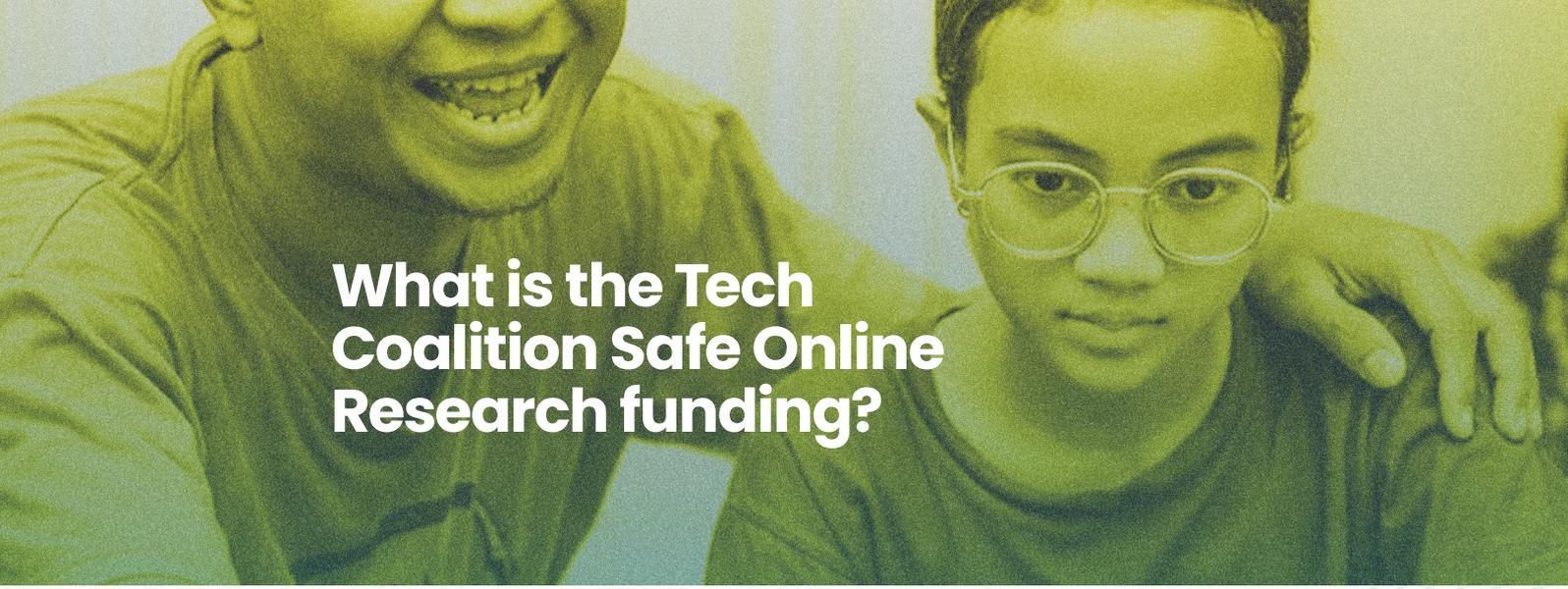
Deterrence messages come in a number of forms: from splash pages to search engine warning messages to helpline campaigns, and are a key strategy and are used to change or influence online user behaviours around searching for CSAM. Platforms are often legally obliged to generate search engine warning messages when users enter problematic terms when using them. This offers an efficient and potentially effective entry point, not only to deter people from searching for CSAM online, but also to seek help to stop them doing so in the future. However, little is understood about the effectiveness of these approaches.

Messages are often universally aimed at people with a paedophilic sexual interest, whereas there is evidence that a significant number of viewers of CSAM have other motivations, meaning that current deterrence messages may not be

effective at deterring use among these groups. Messages also largely focus on the illegality of viewing materials and the negative consequences to the lives of viewers and there is little understanding of whether this leads to help seeking behaviour.

Help-seeking, in parallel to deterrence messaging, is not just focused on stopping the offender in that moment from further searching for CSAM online but actively seeking out support to stop them doing so in the future. Some work is being done to promote help seeking through deterrence messaging, such as the example here, however little is understood about the drivers and barriers to people who actively engage, or have potential to engage with CSAM, seeking help.





What is the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research funding?

Over the last few years, Safe Online has supported research to address evidence gaps in relation to deterrence and help seeking through several research projects. Projects are focused on:

- Understanding the risk factors of people engaging with CSAM and identifying early warning signs
- Testing different types of deterrence messaging to support behaviour change and help seeking behaviours
- Understanding barriers to help seeking behaviour and signposting to help seeking resources

Grantees are at different stages of their research cycles, more details on the research in these areas is below.



Medical School Berlin (MSB)

MSB's research is focused on understanding risk factors and identifying early warning signs for people potentially transitioning from viewing legal to illegal materials online. They will test for unique risk factors across key demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity), and examine the cross-cultural applicability of identified risk factors and learn more about pathways to problematic online sexual behaviours. Following this, they will test and identify deterrence messages on active users of porn who have searched problematic terms linked with CSAM and identify the deterrence message format that is most effective at reducing problematic searches and increasing help seeking behaviour.

University of
Kent

University
of Kent

Like MSB, Kent's research aims to identify the factors that might lead people to view CSAM online and ways to increase the effectiveness of deterrence messages in encouraging people at risk of online sexual harm to access help resources. What evidence currently exists in this space has mainly looked at deterring further searches/online behaviour in the moment, rather than diverting people at risk of engaging with CSAM or other sexually harmful online behaviour to seek professional help. Kent has tested different deterrence message formats: from illegality focused, to harms focused to distress focused across differing contexts to develop this understanding.



Suojellaan
Lapsia (Protect
Children)

Protect Children focuses on two research areas: tech pathways of CSAM users to CSAM in the dark web, and barriers and enablers in help-seeking behaviour of CSAM users. The research reaches out to anonymous, often non-convicted CSAM users, collecting data about their activity in the dark web and on the surface web. It also examines the difference between CSAM users who have help-seeking motivations, those who do not have help-seeking motivations and those who already seek help.



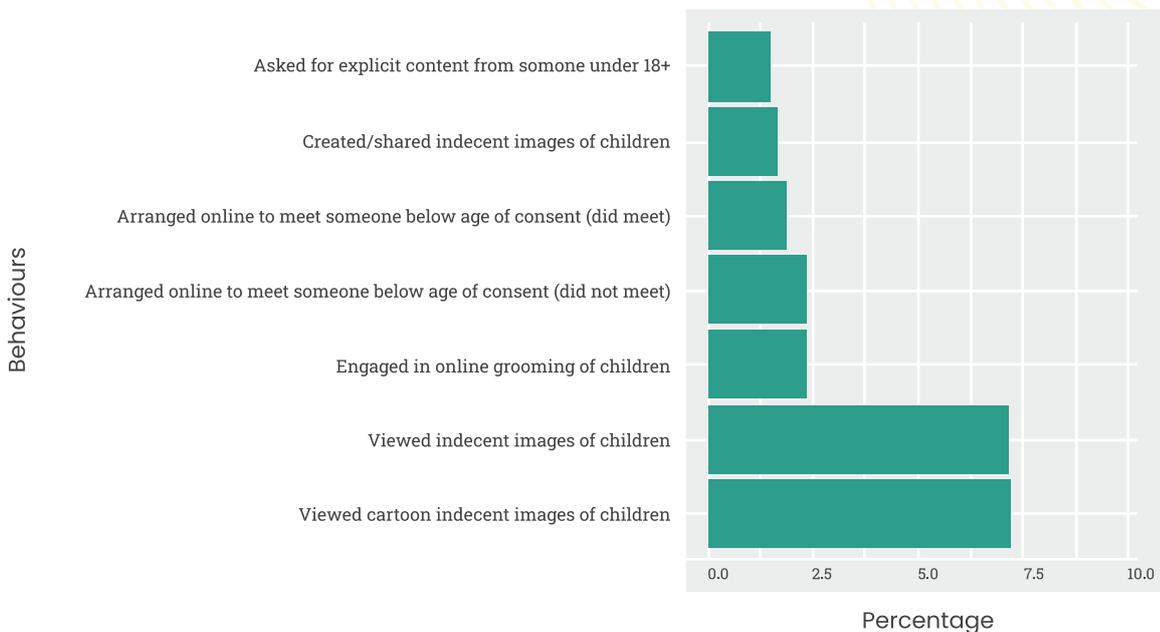
Universidad de
los Andes

This research project aims to test and improve an Artificial Intelligence (AI) alert system for the detection of criminal patterns and dynamics related to the live streaming of abuses in Latin America. The work analyses the language, interactions, and patterns of conversations related to CSEA live streaming between abusers in dark web forums. The aim is to use this analysis to develop a Large Language Model to automatically detect topics, modus operandi, frequency, mechanisms, regularity, sources, and risk factors socialised by perpetrators on the complete dark web, providing an invaluable resource to relevant authorities and government agencies for deterring CSEA live-streaming.

What have we learnt so far about people that view CSAM & their practices?

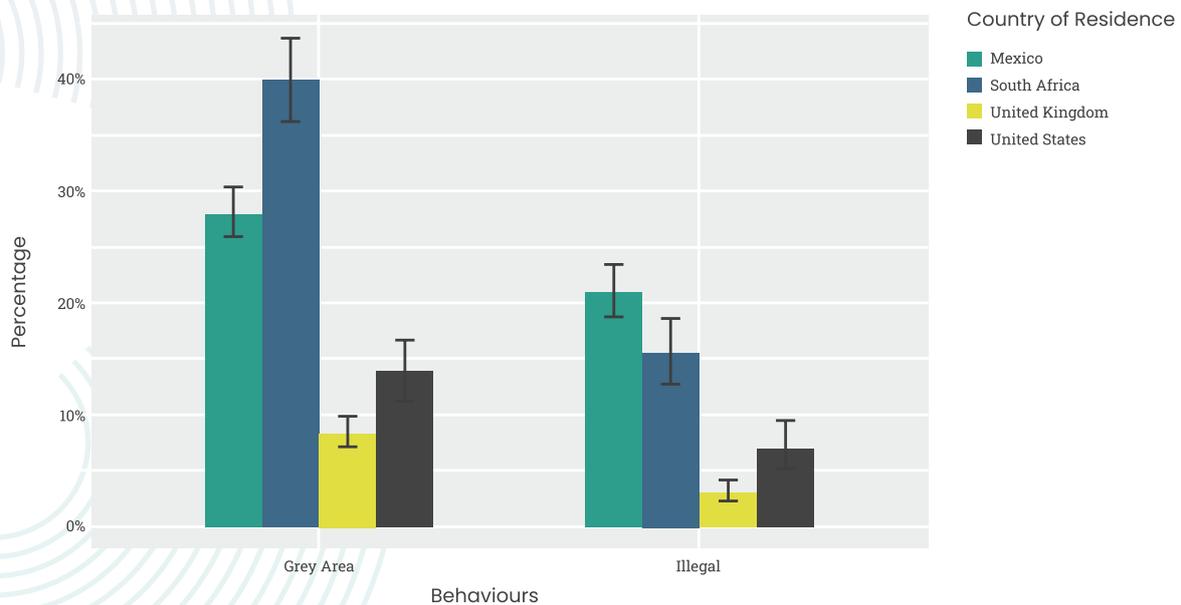
More men offend but women do too. Both Kent and MSB asked people what their current problematic (including illegal) practices regarding CSAM were, and while men across every type of behaviour tested in both studies reported higher online CSAM practices than women, a significant amount of women did too in each study.

Substantial numbers practise viewing CSAM online: with nearly 7500 responding to questions regarding illegal CSAM behaviours, Kent's multi-country study covering UK, US, Mexico and South Africa highlights a significant online CSAM problem. The data suggests approximately 15% of survey respondents self-reported at least one behavioural or attraction indicator of a possible higher risk of perpetrating online sexual harm. A more detailed breakdown is given below.



Aggressors use the deep web to connect with each other. Universidad de los Andes found that perpetrators share strategies, and teach each other how to capture children, evade the authorities, and use technological tools to avoid being detected. They also use certain patterns of behaviour and code words when doing so to avoid detection.

Variations in reported behaviours across geographies: using Kent data, there are clear differing self reported practices across contexts. Substantial numbers of participants self-reported behaviours as adults indicative of risky or illegal online sexual behaviour relating to children or reported some degree of attraction to OCSEA. Typically, approximately 14% of Kent's sample across contexts were classed as risky or higher need, though the Kent team observed substantially higher rates in two non-representative studies in Mexico and South Africa. While this is important to identify, why this is the case is not clear.



Interest in pornography focused on young people is higher than that focused on children. Not only does the type / seriousness of the CSAM being viewed impact on self reporting viewing rates, but the age of the children being viewed also plays a role. In MSB's work, 2% reported an interest in viewing CSAM. However, rates of CSAM interest were 5 to 15 times higher if respondents were asked about their CSAM interests in young people rather than children across various behaviours (e.g., engaging in sexual behaviour, viewing pornography, etc.).

Perpetrators who view CSAM are likely to seek direct contact with a child afterwards: Protect Children found that 37% of their 25,000 respondents say that they have sought contact with a child, and most of those using platforms on the open web to do so. 39% of those who have contacted a child say that they have done so via social media, 30% via a messaging application, and 25% through online gaming.

What have we learnt so far about interest and drivers of CSAM online?

Deterrence messaging and help seeking can be linked when trying to respond to CSAM but what are the drivers and interests of those who are at risk of or have already undertaken CSAM online?

People are more likely to break laws when they feel they won't get caught.

In the just completed MSB pilot (n = 2764), when asked what they might be interested in doing if they knew they would not be caught rates included: offending against adults (10%), having a sexual conversation with a child (2%) and offending against a child (1%).

Loneliness and boredom as well as a sexual interest in children factors in viewing CSAM online: it is not just people with pedophilic interests that view CSAM online, MSB's work has identified that loneliness and boredom play a key role too. In its next study, MSB will now look to study the impacts of childhood, self regulation (i.e. risk taking) and more on sexual domains to see what also impacts on this.

Distress but also perceiving less stigma impacts on seeking help.

Psychological drivers behind help seeking behaviour highlighted in Kent's research include not only feeling distress, anxiety and worry but also perceiving less stigma around seeking help, thinking that the people around you would seek help and feeling personal control over accessing help. Kent identified four key determinants of inclination to seek help:

- Experiencing anxiety-type symptoms regarding online sexual behaviour
- Believing that the people around them would get help if they had the same problem
- Feeling the internal capacity/self-efficacy to engage with getting help
- Perceiving less stigma around needing to seek help

What is deterrence & help-seeking?

Kent used a psychological model to analyse drivers behind help seeking behaviour to develop and test different deterrence messages. They have tested them across multiple studies, countries, and methodologies. They found that:

- **Industry-typical warning messages** focusing on the illegality of CSAM, or the harm caused by it, are perceived as most effective for deterring further searches for CSAM and for encouraging reporting. But these messages are perceived as weaker than other messages in encouraging help seeking.
- **Messages focused on how getting help** can allow people to keep their freedom or break the cycle of harm to children were seen as more likely to prompt people to seek help
- **Messages focused on reducing psychological distress** and increasing individual control over seeking help are consistently perceived as the most effective messages

Optimised messages are likely to be those that are framed around: avoiding legal consequences; reducing distress and increasing control. The following gain-focused message was consistently highly ranked as promoting help-seeking:

Accessing professional help is a good way to stop searching for child sexual abuse imagery and end feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety.

This is aligned to the findings from Protect Children that developed deterrence messages focused on the availability of anonymous, confidential, online, and free help resources, and the possibility to change behaviour, instead of focusing on the illegality of the behaviour. This has shown positive results; the messages have been viewed by hundreds of thousands of individuals. Over 110,000 individuals have clicked on these deterrence campaigns into help resources, and over 460,000 individuals have clicked on the surveys.

G **Warning**

If you see sexually explicit imagery of under 18s, report it. If you need anonymous support to stop viewing this material, you can seek help.

Report at report.iwf.org.uk | Seek help at stopitnow.org.uk

Legality	Child sexual abuse imagery is illegal. Getting professional help may reduce the risk of arrest and help you keep your relationships, your job, your freedom.
Harm	Viewing sexual abuse imagery causes ongoing harm to children. Searching for professional help is one way to stop that cycle of harm.
Attitudes	If you're worried about accessing child abuse imagery, getting professional help is a good thing and is shown by research to be effective.
Norms	Thousands of people who have searched for child sexual abuse imagery have chosen to access professional help instead.
Control	It's easier than you think to access professional help for people attracted to child sexual abuse imagery. Many help resources are free, anonymous, and confidential.
Distress	Accessing professional help is a good way to stop searching for child sexual abuse imagery and end feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety.
Stigma	Searching for child sexual abuse imagery is more common than you might think. You are not alone and not a monster. Compassionate professional help is available.

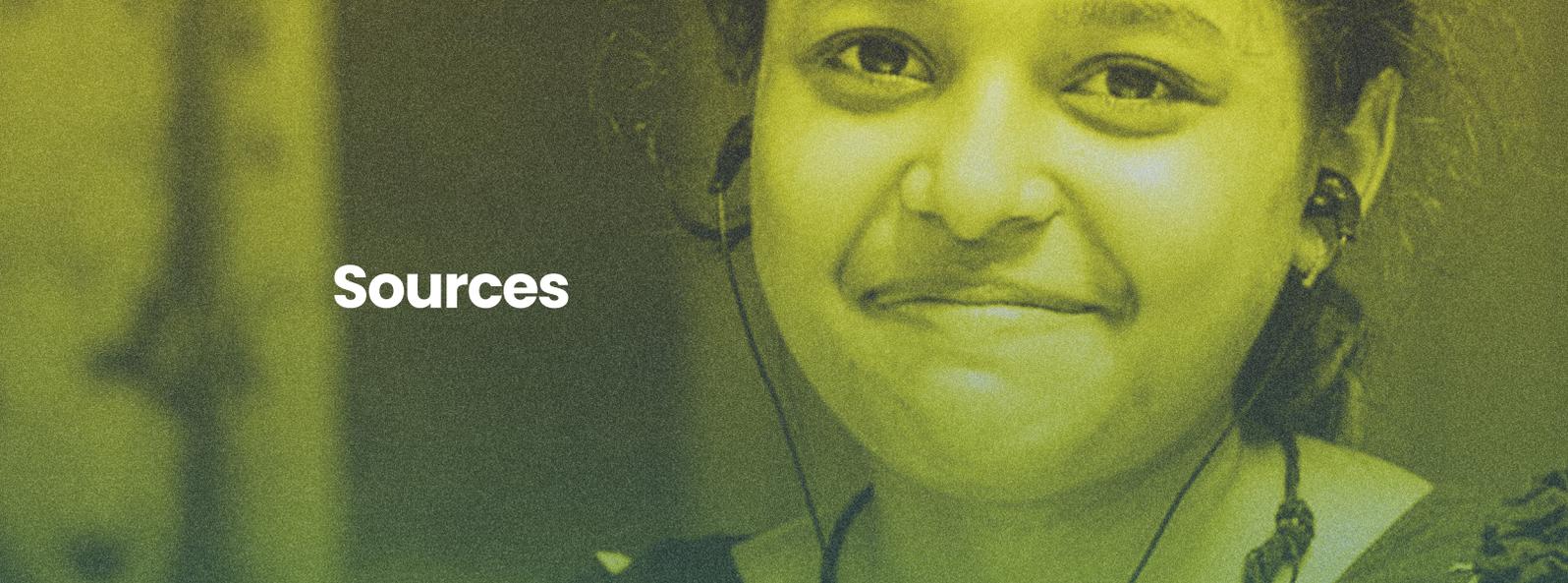
In studies 7-10 participants were asked to rank hypothetical Google OneBox messages in terms of which would be most effective in encouraging deterrence, help-seeking, and reporting. The figure shows messages used for studies 9 & 10.



What tools might be developed in the future?

A number of potential tools are planned to emerge from the supported research:

- **MSB** - Following its pilot study, MSB will identify risk factors for transitioning from legal to illegal materials to enable technology industry to prevent and deter online sexual offences. They will translate findings from this research into a practical, easy to implement method at reducing online sexual offences via deterrence messages. They will generate deterrence messages based on the user profile (top-down approach) and test the efficiencies of these messages.
- **Protect Children** - Research and evidence-based recommendations on how to enhance child protection on social media platforms and messengers on the surface web and how to disrupt tech pathways of CSAM users, preventing further offending, and how to enhance help-seeking motivations of CSAM users and increase the uptake of intervention resources.
- **Universidad de los Andes** - the focus of the work is to develop an AI alert system for the detection and deterrence of CSEA live-streaming, particularly within the Latin American context. The tool will use language analysis to predict interactions between offenders and possible criminal activity.
- **Kent** - Alternative deterrence messages to support deterrence and promote users and potential users to seek help.



Sources

This learning brief is based on emerging evidence from across the four research projects highlighted. Specific documents drawn from include:

- **Get Help! The impact of warning messages on perceived effectiveness** - interim summary, April (University of Kent)
- **Deterrence: Offender Profiles and Effective Messaging Presentation** (University of Kent)
- **The Help-seeking for Online Sexual Harm (HOSH) Project Progress Report**, April 2023 (University of Kent)
- **Alarming Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse Material on Social Media and Instant Messengers**, December 2023 (Protect Children)
- **Encrypted platforms are quickly becoming a safe haven for child sexual abuse**, December 2023 (Protect Children)

The Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund is investing in knowledge and research to end online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). The Tech Coalition and Safe Online joined hands in 2020 to collectively work to support knowledge and research towards ending digital harms against children. The Fund is continuing its focus on innovative research that produces actionable insights to impact product and policy development, with a priority given to research that can help inform the technology industry's approach to combating online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

