

What are the impacts of exposure to the illegal images of children on those who are required as part of their role to identify and categorise such imagery?

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1 Abstract

Electronic devices are now an integral part of society and offer a number of opportunities for both ethical and unethical purposes. One particularly unethical purpose is for the sexual exploitation of children by way of electronically creating, possessing and sharing indecent/illegal images of children (IIOC). Whilst the law in many countries criminalises such behaviours when the images or videos involve someone under the age of 18, this does not prevent people globally from using devices for such purposes. This is an international issue and cannot reasonably be resolved by any single agency or group, however there are many who will be involved in identifying, and in some cases, legally categorising the content of an image or video in order to enforce the law or protect those subject to the behaviours within the electronic content. Within the United Kingdom, there is a degree of manual interaction required whereby individuals need to review content in order to identify (a) if they involve a child and (b) if they are illegal. This study's aim was to understand some of the impacts of exposure to the IIOC on law enforcement professionals who are required to identify and/or categorise IIOC as part of their roles, as the viewing of such graphic content is likely to impact on individuals in some way. One researcher completed individual interviews with three police staff professionals from within a police force in the East Midlands Region of the United Kingdom. Professionals selected worked within a specialist Digital Forensics Unit (DFU) within the force and examined content from electronic devices seized by the police for any lawful purpose. Interviewees were questioned on thematic areas in order to understand their opinions on any resulting impacts.

2 Background

Within the UK it is an offence to possess or distribute an illegal image of a child who is any person who is under the age of 18 (Protection of Children Act 1978., Criminal Justice Act 1998., Sexual Offences Act 2003). Outside of the UK the UN convention on the rights of a child (UNCRC 1990) also identifies a child as being under 18 years of age with article 19 ensuring that measures should be taken to prevent a child suffering sexual abuse. Gillespie (2010) identifies some of the challenges with the identification of a human being under the age of 18, for example 16-year olds can vary visually in terms of their physical development. Along with the challenges of identifying an illegal image of a child, there then come the difficulties of assessing the severity of the content. A scale was created in Ireland called the Combating Paedophile Information Networks in Europe (COPINE) scale in 1994. This is still used by many to categorise IIOC and allows a standard scale of severity (Meridian., et al. 2011., Taylor, Holland and Quayle 2001). Within the UK however in 2014, the COPINE scale was replaced by three sentencing advisory panel categories (A,B,C) in an effort to keep the guidance and legislation in the UK up to date with changing demands on the justice system (Sentencing Council 2014). Identification and categorising IIOC will continue to be a challenge to those seeking to enforce the law in relation to IIOC offending, as there is a wealth of evidence on the changes internet technology quickly brings about, and on a global scale (Weiser 2001., Virjan 2013). With the volume of prosecutions for the possession of IIOC in the UK being seen to be increasing (McManus and Almond 2014) and sexual predators seeking to use computer-based communications tools to seduce young adolescents (Wolak., et al. 2008), the use of tools such as the dark web, which enable a degree of anonymity and freedom from surveillance (Gehl 2014) mean that a complex digital space exists where IIOC can be shared, and communities of other like-minded individuals identified. Quayle, and Taylor (2002) did provide some insights into the reasons why paedophiles may use the internet, but what is clear is that no single agency or group alone can hope to globally prevent all IIOC from being created or shared (OHCHR 2009). It is therefore understandable that the UK government created a tool such as the Child Abuse Image Database (CAID) to tackle the millions of IIOC in circulation (Home office CAID 2015). Whilst the CAID identifies known images of child abuse via unique hashes, it does require an image to have been categorised to be of use to the database. Categorisation is currently a manual task to determine what constitutes IIOC according to UK legislation, and this human process can be challenging and result in divided opinions, particularly when the matter of age is in question (Kloess., et al. 2017). With the tasks of identification and categorisation involving the viewing of the sexual exploitation or abuse of children from birth age to 17, this graphic and unpleasant task can involve a wide range of activities being viewed (Sentencing Guidance 2014). The viewing of the

content itself is likely to constitute a traumatic stress factor (Reyes, Elhai and Ford 2008), and could be equally traumatic when re telling an exposure an individual has had, in a similar way that parole officers who supervised sex offenders and suffered secondary traumatization saw by Severson and Pettus-Davis (2011). Another risk is that those performing the roles could go on to suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as the task itself is a possible criterion for someone going on to develop PTSD (Rosen., et al. 2010). Edleman (2010) did review the possible implications exposure could have, however there is still little evidence specifically in relation to the impacts on those who are required to identify or categorise such imagery as part of their profession. As it is an offence to possess IIOC (Sexual Offences Act 2003) this in itself could have implications on the recruitment or retention of people into roles required to complete the tasks, limiting their ability to prepare for such graphic exposure. This set of circumstances is likely to encourage some form of team or organisational silo (Cilliers and Greyvenstein 2012) post recruitment, and may be one reason that research in this field is currently lacking.

3 Method

3.1 Context

The author of this article is a serving Police Officer with line management responsibility for DFU staff from within a force in the East Midlands Region in the UK. Research was completed as a pilot research project, as part of a fellowship programme in collaboration with Nottingham Trent University (NTU). The subject was chosen as a topic of interest to the researcher and ethics approval sought via NTU. Within the force involved in the study, the tasks of identification and categorisation of the IIOC for court purposes were only completed by specially trained police staff who worked within the organisations DFU. Within the DFU there were three distinct roles, grouped as Mobile Device Examiner, Hi-Tech Crime Technician and Hi-Tech Crime Investigator, any of which may be required to identify and/or potentially categorise IIOC (the tasks). Any lawfully seized electronic device could be submitted, and if the examination might include the possession of IIOC, the staff were required to identify and possibly categorise IIOC which could be supported via the use of the CAID. Due to the differing roles and size of the unit, the functions of identification and categorisation may be separated for various practical reasons such as the scale of the job, or immediate safeguarding concerns involving a child or children.

3.2 Participants

Current staff who had a responsibility for the tasks were identified, and there were 13 police staff who were eligible to take part in the study, 4 Male and 9 Female. All eligible staff were over the age of 30. All were emailed a participation information sheet, which detailed the aims of the research and separation from the usual line management responsibilities. Staff were informed that the study was by way of a semi-structured interview and would be supplied questions at the point of selection. None of the staff could see the list of possible participants, and all had two weeks to confirm their willingness to participate by way of a signature. Within the information pack there were instructions not to discuss willingness to participate in order to ensure there could be anonymous participation. Four staff responded within the two-week window in order to participate and one responded after the closing date (some two weeks later). An anonymous random selection process took place, and three participants were chosen. All three selected were Female and had been in a role where they had been required to identify and / or potentially categorise IIOC for more the 2 years.

3.3 Data collection and processing

Arrangements were made for each candidate to be able to take part in the interviews without their colleagues being made aware of their absence. Interviews were arranged outside the usual place of work, where the candidates would not come into contact with anyone whom they knew, or would have been aware of the study. All interviews were audio recorded with the researcher completing notes throughout the question set. Interviews lasted no longer than 40 minutes and included a set of 19 pre-defined questions. After the interviews were completed the audio files were manually transcribed by the researcher. Once the interviews were completed, similar responses were collated into thematic areas, and responses identifiable to an individual by using Respondent one (R1), Respondent two (R2) etc.

4 Findings

4.1 Motivation

There are likely many reasons why someone may wish to commence a role where they are exposed to IIOC. Exploring the positive impacts will be as valuable as exploring the negative, and these could themselves be wide ranging as seen by therapists who worked with child victims of sexual abuse (Wheeler and McElvaney 2017). It could be that the emotional uplift as a result of doing something about the abuse, could outweigh the concerns of any negative effects of exposure in a similar way as police officers reported when investigating child abuse (Hart, Wearing and Headley 1993). When asked, two participants had thought about teaching:

Probably before this role where I, I was thinking about what to do next in my career, you got teaching was one of the things I thought about. (R1)

I wanted to be a teacher, but decided I didn't want to be a teacher so thought what else can I do, and then saw that digital forensics course and it sounded like something I would enjoy. (R3)

When respondent three was asked why they ended up working for the police the participant responded:

I just thought it would be more rewarding than defence. erm like more better job satisfaction seeing criminals convicted rather than sticking up for them and trying to get them off. (R3)

Job security was one motivation:

Because I had to apply for my own, I had to apply for my own job. And, and I applied for two jobs and was successful in them both but I believed that the phone examining job would be a erm what, how do I say, it would be more, a more secure role because the force were getting rid of people so I thought digital forensics was the way forward. (R2)

Finally, the technical nature of the role was also appealing to one participant:

I was aware I, IIOC was involved but I think I was just more interested in the actual technical side an' erm, I did speak to other members of the department just to be aware of how much IIOC they came across. I was made aware probably the majority of the jobs are IIOC, but there's also the side of like trying to locate it and proving it, which is quite a big chunk of it as well, rather than just looking at the images day in day out. (R1)

These responses show that the motivation for commencing their respective roles were based on individual personal reasons.

4.2 Preparation

Participants were asked about their preparedness for taking up a role involving exposure to IIOC. As mentioned earlier the law is a limiting factor here, as the possession and distribution of IIOC can constitute offences meaning lawful exposure is also limited (protection of children act., 1978., criminal justice act., 1998). Perhaps of relevance is the medical study which discusses the importance of support for a student while they are completing a dissection course which is another work-related task that is difficult to prepare for (Boeckers., Et al., 2010).

I think that little bit of exposure in the voluntary placement helped so it wasn't such a shock. (R3)

I felt prepared as I could erm being aware what the job entails, speaking to other members of staff erm, because I felt as prepared as I could coz I didn't know how I would react if I did, well when I did come across the images. Erm I guess in my previous roles I have seen distressing images; murder scenes, post mortems. (R1)

So I didn't prepare myself, but I, I don't think I needed to have.

Yea I suppose what I'm saying is I, at 16/17/18 I was facing for the first-time things that other people wouldn't face, and it, and I've always coped with it, so I didn't think that this would be any different. Accepting that you don't know until you've seen it. (R2)

4.3 Volume of exposure

Due to the differing roles and tasks required in any investigation, there are likely to be differing levels of exposure to IIOC. When asked about the volume of exposure the staff were facing, the responses indicated fluctuations, though it should be borne in mind that each participant had worked at least 2 years in a role where they are exposed to IIOC and so should understand what expected exposure for their role should be.

Up to a couple of times a month maybe. (R1)

I see indecent images on a weekly basis. (R2)

On a daily basis well, some days you might not even identify anything, but other days once you find the stash or some of the stash erm yea that, that could take a long time as well, I don't know for identify I can't put a time on it and the same with categorising it depends on how many images there are and how, how big the stash is. (R3)

4.4 Traumatization

Participants were asked to comment on any particularly demanding elements of their role. This did not exclusively draw out a response in relation to the IIOC content, however gave them the opportunity to identify the most stressful elements of their work.

I, my personal views erm well with this role I, I think I'm coping better than I thought I would being exposed but then I'm not, I don't think I'm overly exposed to illegal images. I know there are other roles where they're more expose, they're exposed more freq, frequently in the volume that they see.

It is upsetting to see. (R1)

I find the workload is demanding not what I'm, not what I'm seeing. Yea, I fin, yea I find, the, for me the difficulty is, is, it's not dealing with, with the images it's dealing with what I need to produce because of the images.

I probably, the more indecent images you see the, I don't mean more tolerant you become of them become, coz I'm not tolerant of them at all, but to use the example when I first saw a naturist picture image I might have thought that was indecent, but now I don't. But that's also because I've been told it isn't so you take it on board. So maybe yea what, what might have been indecent three years ago you might be a little bit more, I don't mean tolerant of it but, erm yea your opinions change don't they, or mine does, mine has.

I wouldn't say yea I've been looking at indecent images of children today, I think that would've been used when I first took the job on when I, when I was first saying this is what I'm going to be doing, but I don't use that term on a daily basis or weekly or a monthly basis I might just say, like yea now I might just say not been, I've been looking at things that aren't very nice or that kind of thing. (R2)

Yea like the, I think sometimes when you have hands on abuse, it can sometimes be demanding in the emotional sense, erm especially if you get involved in all the nitty gritty about the case and the suspe, sorry the victim being like a little child and then if you find evidence with video's and the sound that's much harder, but yea once you get past it and get over the shock of it then it's not so bad. (R3)

When asked if they will likely be staying in a role being exposed to IIOC, none of the responses indicated a desire to leave as a result of their exposure.

I, I enjoy the role I'm in, erm part of me does want to expand further into it in the future, so then I probably see myself doing this kind of role for a long time

yet erm but I don't, I don't think I'll be doing it up 'til retirement date coz that's way off yet for me. (R1)

I don't know how long it will be. I don't intend to get another job, I intend to stay with this job until I don't have to work anymore. (R2)

Yea for a long time, I've got no plans for leaving it unless I get booted out, but erm no, well yea the foreseeable future really, I've got no plans on leaving. Unless something happens, but no, a long time. (R3)

4.5 Power

In terms of the ability to do something about the stressful elements, one participant made several comments in relation to their feelings of empowerment.

Just the amount of media devices being seized, and also the capacity of each device is getting bigger and bigger. Which then means it takes longer to image and then longer to process. And we can find erm if you've got quite a large, large device as in volume, as in how many gig, you can find it takes almost a day to image and then all, almost a couple of weeks for it to process, which means those machines can't be in use for any other things. And as other teams are getting bigger, we're not getting any bigger ourselves, so we have to just cope with a big workload and then there's also an urgent job that always like comes in.

It just creates a bigger backlog.

Having to explain that, and then people thinking that we're just being difficult.

just think it's just the workload, I just wanna, want to be able to get people a result.

It is sometimes frustrating where we as the, as a team, like both the people who do the phones, imaging, the investigating with the hi-tech side, side of it where we can work at a job for months, and not hear anything from the officer in charge and then read in the paper or read on force, the force intranet about the sentences. And not, an you, also not being mentioned when it comes to force awards like officers getting commendations for jobs that we worked on. Even though a big volume of the job involved cybercrime. We do get some officers who do ring us up and give us updates, so there are some of them who are very well at recognising our work. (R1)

In response to the negative feelings, the strategy employed by respondent one appeared to be a personal coping mechanism.

It's just get, get into the frame of mind I'm working by risk level. And I think you can just do erm, do what I can really.

I think it probably helps with people in the office who have, also have the same frame of mind whereas other people can get stressed and kind of stay on and want to take their work home. There are a few of us who do what we can do and then go home at home time.

I have a busy home life, so I can't take it home with me. (R1)

4.6 Rewards

Rewards could be a very important element when you take the content into consideration. All candidates provided aspects of the roles they found rewarding.

I like seeing like a job beginning to end where, where it comes in, we kind of work as a team, and seeing the final sort of like, sentence at the end or the safeguarding come into place. You kind of feel like your, you are doing something. (R1)

If I know that I've helped an officer get some of their work done, that's my reward. I don't seek out the result of a case, I don't feel I've got a reward if someone gets a conviction. (R2)

Yea when you get a, when you get someone convicted especially when they were pleading their innocence all the way through and had every defence under the sun, and then yea they, they get convicted its very rewarding. Or when the, it's like a hands on case and they're saying they never did it and you find, find evidence that he has done something that's also rewarding. Erm yea I think they're the big ones. (R3)

4.7 Support

For the purposes of this study, the term support was taken to mean support as a direct result of having exposure to IIOC, with a focus of organisational, team and social support mechanisms available to the participants. All candidates received six month monthly mandatory support meetings with an independent counsellor. On top of this the organisation allows each individual to request 6 support sessions in a year before they are required to formally request further sessions which would incur some kind of financial cost to the organisation, if they were required.

For me personally I think its sufficient, erm for me I don't, I don't know if the mandatory support does anything extra to be honest I, I get more support from my colleagues. Coz they know what job you're doing day in day out they're there

if you have a bad day rather than having to call, well contact C.I.C. and wait for a call back interview, wait for them to make an appointment, where as you can just turn around and speak to your colleague's coz they know what you are doing, they do similar roles. (R1)

I personally find the six-monthly talk to the lady is a waste of time, I say lady, it's been a man once, the person. That's provided, they're nice enough but I, cynically I think it's just a ticky box exercise.

Every time we, we start at the same, I tell her how long I've been there, what I do, whether I've got any issues and, and that's not the, if I've really got issues that's not the, that's in my opinion that's not the way to deal with it, it's not to wait until you've got a meeting with her to vent any problems you need to sort it out when you've got the problem.

And maybe for some people it's just what they need to, to highlight an issue they've got, so I'm not suggesting it shouldn't happen, but I just don't think it's much use for me. (R2)

Yes I think it is, erm yea when we get the appointments I feel that's enough support, I never really had much to say, I'm not really a talky person but erm yea I think the help's there if you need it, there's erm things in place if the appointments not for a while and you feel like you need help so yea I think its sufficient. (R3)

Other factors such as informal team, colleague, family and social support were explored and what appears shows how silo working can easily be encouraged as a direct result of the IIOC exposure.

My mum and dad they're only aware that I do stuff with computers.

I don't think it's made any impact, on friends or family I, I do, I don't over, I don't tell many friends about what I do. Coz normally it, they normally come back with I couldn't do that, that's disturbing, don't you get upset. I, I never really go into detail of what, what I've seen. Coz my husband and my sisters, even though they're aware that I'm exposed to it, I'd never detail the pictures or video's I've viewed.

It is upsetting to see and I don't want to expose them to it. They don't need to know. (R1)

You know they might say how, have you had a bad day at work today and I might say yea I've been looking at some nasty images I wouldn't use the, I wouldn't say yea I've been looking at indecent images of children today, I think that would've been used when I first took the job on when I, when I was first saying this is what I'm going to be doing, but I don't use that term on a daily basis or weekly

or a monthly basis I might just say, like yea now I might just say not been, I've been looking at things that aren't very nice or that kind of thing.

But I've never said what a child is or what is happening on images (R2)

My husband knows exactly what I do, but I think my, think parents and siblings don't really know the full ins and outs of how gory it can be at times, just know I work examining computers and sometimes I see indecent images but not sure they realise how often I see them. (R3)

4.8 Unconscious impact

During the interviews comments were made by all three participants which identify a similar unconscious impact of exposure in the way of flashbacks. Whilst the personal impact of this particular issue was not fully explored in the questioning, this is a clear direct impact as a result of exposure to IIOC by those who are regularly professionally exposed. Two of the responses are recorded below:

I was always aware there is, there was IIOC, before this role, but I think I am probably a bit more paranoid about it now. Just working jobs where they're teachers, erm so yea I get, get quite paranoid when my children go to school and nursery. Y'know if I feel a bit bad saying, it's like also like family members. There's times where just that split second like, what if? (R1)

Yea I think sometimes I get a bit, well since becoming a parent as well I think you get a bit over protective, you see a child in a nappy and you think oh my goodness should I be looking, or a child in a bath that's not your own erm because yea historically a child in a bath used to be classed as indecent, so I think I've still got that in my head erm and then yea if you see like a child run around naked you sometimes think oh I hope no one's taking a picture, could be some paedophile in the room. Just like generally more cautious I think. (R3)

5 Feedback

At the end of the interviews the candidates were offered an anonymous feedback opportunity, to capture any comments which may benefit any future research in this area. Whilst all three candidates responded, one comment suggested a benefit to the approach:

Pondering the questions beforehand was a good idea, as I was able to prepare what I wanted to say and cover the points required.

6 Conclusions

This study was to identify what the impacts of exposure to the illegal images of children were, on those who are required as part of their role to identify and categorise such imagery. The responses show a complex set of impacts as a result of regular exposure to IIOC, which are primarily consistent with other studies into workplace behaviours (Brown and Campbell 1990., Andrews, Brewin and Rose 2003., Cilliers, and Greyvenstein 2012., Hart, Wearing and Headley 1995., Moulden and Firestone 2007). Reasons for joining the roles from this study, show that the reasons may be considered standard reasons for joining any profession. This is perhaps different to the findings of a survey of 1,754 clinicians in the US (573 of whom responded), who supported sexual offenders or survivors of some form of sexual abuse which identified that 75.8% of those who responded, reported that they had suffered some kind of childhood abuse (Way., et al. 2004). Preparing for the tasks is difficult for legal and practical reasons (sexual offences act 2003), and the concept of silo working (Cilliers and Greyvenstein 2012), may mean that new staff are not initially provided a social support network to act as that buffer to prevent psychological implications such as PTSD (Andrews, Brewin and Rose 2003). Responses in this study state that preparation for exposure to the tasks was helpful, and this may also link to an ability to go on and manage the tasks. Current professional support was not effective for the individuals in this study, though consideration could be given to having a consistent support worker to allow more open discussion during the mandatory support sessions. Social support was in fact more important to the respondents, and has encouraged a strong bond with colleagues in similar roles. Others outside of the immediate team, including family and professional counselling services are spared the full details of the work tasks undertaken. This makes the staff support key, and interesting as none of the respondents reported being traumatized by the material they have viewed. This does not mean they will not become traumatized in the future, as the repeated exposure could at some point lead to the staff becoming traumatized (Rothschild 2000). Existing staff could be susceptible to trauma if their social support is unavailable for any reason (Andrews, Brewin and Rose 2003). Organisational changes could heighten the risks of staff suffering stress, as organisational changes could be more stressful than the tasks (Brown and Campbell 1990), especially if staff feel that their coping mechanism is the subject of the change. If for example working to risk level is the element which is changed (R1), does this have a significant impact on the individual? Unconsciously the exposure is causing staff to question what they are seeing when off duty, and whilst there are rewards (R1, R2, R3), there was no exploration of any link between them and the unconscious or conscious impacts of the exposure.

Recommendations

To the researcher's knowledge this was the first study of this type, however there are many others outside of the force studied who deal with the IIOC. As a pilot study, the sample size was small and so further study may be of use to understand if the interdependencies between support and traumatization exist elsewhere, as they did for Andrews, Brewin and Rose (2003). Understanding What support works could enable more inclusive recruitment, and prevent the risks of traumatization of those who are newly appointed and have had limited or no exposure to graphic or unpleasant material. It could also identify if the support is only required whilst someone is routinely exposed to traumatic material, or if there are risks once someone has left such a role.

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