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# Internet Sexual Offending

Michael L. Bourke

Sex offenders surely must be at the top of the list of our most destructive criminal populations. Within society they attempt to worm their way into our healthiest institutions—youth-serving organizations, churches and temples, schools, and youth athletics, to name but a few settings—for the sole purpose of committing acts of harm against children. When they succeed, the consequences can be devastating to their victims. Adverse childhood experiences such as sexual victimization have been linked to a variety of issues, including behavioral and psychological problems (e.g., suicide attempts, depression), medical conditions, social and cognitive impairment, and substance use disorders (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network [RAINN], n.d.; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2017).

For detectives and agents who work on sex crimes squads and multiagency Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task forces, the investigation of sex offenses can be quite difficult.

Challenges include keeping up with technology to better detect, identify, and apprehend child abusers; attempting to identify victims portrayed in the abuse material; and combating the secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma that can result from repeated exposure to child exploitation images and videos.

Unfortunately, the problems sex offenders create do not end with the identification and arrest of the offenders. Significant issues continue to plague those who prosecute, assess, treat, and manage these men and women in the community. These professionals are also at risk for vicarious traumatization, and comprehensive efforts to safeguard them are lacking. In addition, myths about sex offenders and sex offending are often brought into the courtroom; these misunderstandings interfere with appropriate risk assessment and the administration of justice. A few examples are discussed later in this chapter.

Outside the legal system, researchers have struggled to produce consistent findings on some of the key questions relating to the so-called “online offenders” (e.g., risk assessment, dangerousness). Interestingly, researchers who have worked directly with sex offenders in treatment settings seem more likely to view the labels of “hands-on” and “hands-off” as a false dichotomy. They realize an offender’s sexual interest in children can manifest as a hands-on crime against a child (e.g., child molestation) on one evening and as an online offense (e.g., receipt of child

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M.L. Bourke (✉)  
Behavioral Analysis Unit, Investigative Operations  
Division, United States Marshals Service,  
Washington, DC 20530, USA  
e-mail: [Michael.Bourke@usdoj.gov](mailto:Michael.Bourke@usdoj.gov)

pornography) on the following evening. This conceptualization is entirely consistent with other forms of human sexuality—a “normal” person might very well engage in sexual activity with their partner the day before or the day after they viewed adult pornography. Just as it would be foolish to place those people into categories of “adult pornographers” and “people who have sex,” it is equally illogical to assume the sexual behaviors of individuals who are sexually interested in children are circumscribed or occur in a vacuum. The behaviors, at a minimum, are adjunctive; for some they are likely also additive or could serve as mutual reinforcers.

The issue is not simply a conceptual one, although understanding how pedophiles “tick” is a good starting place. Experienced interviewers are aware that many of those who are apprehended for possession of Child Exploitation Material<sup>1</sup> (CEM) following online operations have hands-on victims who never told anyone what he or she did to them. This information is not anecdotal; their reports are in alignment with large-scale sociological surveys such as those conducted by David Finkelhor and his colleagues. In other words, the number of undetected victims offenders say they kept in the shadows (via threats, grooming, manipulation, shame, etc.) match the number of victims who self-identify as having suffered silently in the shadows. Note that our academic colleagues cannot be faulted for not taking this information into account; it is usually disclosed in psychotherapy, during assessment interviews, on treatment paperwork (e.g., “victim lists,” psychosexual history questionnaires), and while undergoing polygraph examination. Since the crimes have gone undetected outside the therapeutic setting, the disclosures recorded in clinical notes are not observable in the “official records” often used by researchers.

<sup>1</sup>Terminology varies from country to country; most professionals in the field suggest using the terms “Child Sexual Abuse Material” (CSAM) or “Child Exploitation Material” (CEM) rather than “child pornography.” In this chapter, the latter term is used only when referring to the legal statute in the United States.

Conversely, researchers who work closely with law enforcement are aware that when child sexual assault victims make an outcry, their perpetrators often have CEM on their computers when their hard drives are seized and searched. This material may have been shown to the victim to desensitize him or her to the abusive acts, it may have been produced by the offender with his current or previous victims, or it may be material he downloaded from the Internet for masturbatory purposes. In any case, the presence of CEM typically does not surprise investigators, prosecutors, or most clinicians who work with offenders since child sexual abuse and the collection of CEM are manifestations of the same motivational pathway: *a sexual interest in children*.

It would be inaccurate to suggest everyone who downloads CEM has assaulted a child; there are certainly individuals who have not had access or opportunity to fulfill their fantasies, and/or who have sufficient internal or external inhibitions that (thus far) have kept them from succumbing to any deviant urges. Conversely, not all child molesters download CEM, just as not all rapists view rape-themed adult pornography. A better question, however, has to do with the *risk* CEM possessors pose to youth. An analogy often used in the field may make this question easier to answer: How many people who collect baseball cards have also played the game (or would play, if given the opportunity)? In other words, do the things we collect reflect our fantasies and interests? An answer in the affirmative seems obvious.

A similar analogy addresses online collecting behavior and involves people who download images and videos about trout fishing. How many have spent time in the water with a rod and reel? Perhaps not all, but surely most. Equally important, how many of the people who watch fishing videos engage in fantasy while watching them? And this is a key point: When they view fish being pulled from scenic mountain streams, are they fantasizing about the next time they will be able to watch a fishing video, or the next time they will have the opportunity to hook a trout? It seems clear we view and collect things that reinforce our fantasies, and we fantasize about things we would like to do.

I wonder how much faster our research would advance if we ceased trying to find differences between pedophiles who are caught online (fishermen watching fishing videos) and those who are caught offline (fishermen fishing), and instead started examining (a) what makes offenders more likely to hurt a child, (b) how to identify the most dangerous offenders, and (c) how to prevent either crime from occurring in the first place?

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## A Brief History of Pornography

Humans have created pornographic material throughout the course of history, and those who produce explicit material seemingly adapt to new media just as fast as technology allows. *Venus of Willendorf*, one of the earliest manmade depictions of the female form (complete with exaggerated sexual organs) is estimated to be more than 25,000 years old. In addition to crumbling temples, the Greeks and Romans left behind countless depictions of heterosexual sex, homosexual sex, oral sex, orgies and more (Weisman, 2015). Uncovered from the ashes of the ancient city of Pompeii were hundreds of sexually explicit images, sculptures and frescoes lining the walls of brothels, bathhouses, and common households (Weisman, 2015). One of the most famous items recovered was a sculpture of the god Pan having sexual intercourse with a goat.

When the Gutenberg Press was established in 1440, it did not take long for pornographic engravings to be published—sexually explicit engravings were created in 1524. In 1749, John Cleland wrote the first erotic novel that covered highly controversial themes (for the times) including bisexuality, voyeurism, group sex, and masochism (Weisman, 2015). Other early books and writings covered topics such as incest, bisexuality, and sexual activity between adults and children. Most of these writings were illegal under obscenity statutes and were banned. Today, child pornography is unequivocally illegal in most countries.

As technology advanced, so did the sophistication of sexual media. Slade (2006) indicates

the first pornographic daguerreotype (a type of photograph) surfaced in 1846, and production of erotic films commenced almost immediately after the invention of the motion picture in the 1880s. In fact, the videocamera's ability to record sexual activity created a flurry of pornography production; the Kinsey Institute has approximately 2000 "stag" films in their collection that were produced between 1915 and 1968 (Rosen, 2010). The films were primarily distributed in underground markets until the 1970s, at which time people began to purchase home videocassette recorders (VCRs) and pornography entered its "Golden Age." In 1978, fewer than 1% of American homes had VCRs, but 75% of VHS tapes sold were pornographic (Weisman, 2015).

The next technological leap occurred when the Internet became available and easily accessible. Although more rudimentary forms of the Internet have existed since the late 1960s, the world-wide web as we know it today emerged in the early 1990s, and it was a game-changer for producers, distributors, and consumers of pornography. People quickly found ways to use the Internet to acquire audiovisual stimuli to enhance their sexual fantasies; the first pornography site was established online in 1994, and today pornography sites are some of the most popular sites in the world (Weisman, 2015).

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## Why People Download Child Exploitation Material

As one might imagine, the desire for material to enhance sexual fantasy is not constrained to those with normative sexual interests. Individuals with aberrant desires are similarly motivated to produce and view stimuli to satisfy their deviant predilections. The Internet allows them to explore their prurient and paraphilic interests with relative anonymity. Further, it provides an opportunity for them to interact with other like-minded people in the privacy of their home.

The Internet has become ubiquitous, and one can find almost anything online. Search engines have taken the place of the Yellow Pages, dictionaries, and encyclopedias. The three "engines"

(Access, Affordability, and Anonymity) identified by Cooper (2009) appear as valid today as they were 10 years ago. Smartphones allow information to be retrieved from nearly any location, and quickly—one can easily indulge a need for immediate gratification. Internet access is very inexpensive in developed countries—Wi-Fi access is often free in coffee shops and hotels, and computers can be found in nearly every library in America. Also, Internet browsing can be done in an atmosphere of relative anonymity—no one needs to know what interests anyone else has, and there is no risk of running into one’s neighbor or boss in the local “adult” bookstore.

### **Sexual Interest in Children**

I am often asked why bright, successful, and otherwise upstanding members of society choose to possess, produce, and distribute CEM. There have been numerous theories advanced to explain the potential motivations of these offenders (Beech, Elliott, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008; Lanning, 1992; Quayle & Taylor, 2002; Seto, Reeves, & Jung, 2010). The most robust finding from studies, however, is the explanation that coincides best with my clinical experience and is the explanation most consistent with our knowledge of human sexuality. That is, the overwhelming majority of offenders view CEM for the same reason as those who view the so-called “adult” pornography do—because they find the images and videos sexually arousing and sexually satisfying. As Malesky, Ennis, & Gress (2009) note, “Although individuals manufacture, collect, and disseminate child pornography over the Internet for a variety of reasons, sexual interest appears to be the primary reason for engaging in these activities” (p. 308).

Put simply, sexually explicit material enhances sexual fantasies. People who download and view pornographic material online seek stimuli that they find interesting and arousing, and ignore or avoid images and videos they find boring or that makes them uncomfortable. Individuals who find males sexually attractive seek videos involving

men; those interested in women seek stimuli involving women. Those aroused by persons of a specific race or body type, or interested in specific sexual acts, may download and save to their hard drives material depicting those people and involving those acts. If the books on our bookshelves reflect things that interest us (or the things we are okay with others knowing interest us), then the contents of our computers’ “downloads” folders also represent our interests, including our more private predilections.

Individuals who are sexually interested in children seek, view, and download content that depicts the sexual exploitation of children in their preferred age group. They often save material involving children with certain characteristics such as age, gender, a particular build or body type, and hair color. They may also seek and save material depicting certain acts (e.g., those that involve a fetish or paraphilia). Because people “choose the kind of pornography that corresponds to their sexual interests” (Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006, p. 613), non-pedophilic men and women not only have no reason to download CEM, but if they did, the material would probably make them angry and sad.

### **Other Motivational Pathways**

Of the other motivational pathways that have been proposed to explain why offenders download CEM, some may be valid but others are merely excuses offenders make up to justify or minimize their behavior. It can be difficult for researchers to separate valid motivations from self-reported stories, including cognitive distortions and outright lies, and as a result there are some assumptions and myths that continue to clutter the conceptual field. It is noteworthy that even the valid motivations for downloading CEM typically are adjunctive to the primary motivation (i.e., a sexual interest in children). These secondary motivations may influence the behavior, but they do not cause it or necessarily play a significant role in maintaining it. Some of the motivations hypothesized in the literature include the following:

## Profit

A very small percentage of offenders claim they distributed CEM as a way to earn money (e.g., by creating “pay” websites). Although this has happened in years past, it was never a common occurrence. Further, it is becoming increasingly less frequent because the material is available for free, and locating and accessing CEM is not difficult for any motivated offender. A variation of this activity—making money from live streaming child abuse—remains problematic. However, in both cases (pay websites and live streaming) I have not encountered a case where an offender attempted to make money by distributing CEM but was not sexually aroused by CEM, himself.

## History of Abuse

One of the most common excuses offenders tell mental health professionals is that they were sexually abused as children, and that their online activity is somehow a result of the abuse. Although the extant research indicates less than 20% of sex offenders were sexually abused in childhood, during pretrial evaluations as many as 60% of offenders claim they were victims of molestation (Hindman & Peters, 2001). The authors note:

In the early years of sex offender research and treatment, clinicians typically asked offenders to report on their own early histories. In staggering numbers, they reported that they had been sexually abused as children. Society—even the normally-skeptical mental health community—readily accepted such claims, in part at least because they offered a comforting explanation for the otherwise inexplicable behavior of child molesters. Some very reputable and good people began to believe that “bad” people must have been treated “badly,” without ever considering how many abused people (although perhaps psychologically impaired) do not become sex offenders. Almost overnight, the sex-offender-as-victim paradigm became a pearl of conventional wisdom, a staple of television talk shows and popular print media. (p. 9)

Hindman and Peters collected a sample of offenders who were entering an outpatient treatment program and subjected them to polygraph confirmatory testing and treatment. Following the polygraph their self-reported histories of abuse fell from 61% to 30%. This finding is consistent

with that of Hanson and Bussiere (1998), whose highly regarded meta-analysis of 61 treatment outcome reports published between 1943 and 1995 and covering 28,972 sex offenders found that childhood victimization is *not* a predictor of whether the person will commit another sexual offense. These results are also consistent with a recent longitudinal study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* by Widom and Massey (2015). The researchers tracked a sample of 908 children who had been abused and neglected between 1967 and 1971 and a compared them to a matched control sample of non-abused children. They followed them until 2013 to determine if various types of abuse were correlated with future criminal behavior. They looked at correlates for committing a later sexual offense and discovered histories of sexual abuse did not reach clinical significance. They concluded, “[T]he widespread belief that sexually abused children are uniquely at risk for becoming sex offenders was not supported by prospective empirical evidence” (p. 1).

Unfortunately, this seems to be the myth most likely to be accepted by professionals, and their naïveté can be dangerous. Many accept without question (or without the *right* questions) the offender’s story about being sexually abused. Usually he indicates his alleged perpetrator is deceased, or was a stranger or a person now long gone from his life—this prevents corroboration or verification. Sadly, according to offenders, some treatment providers are so sure the offenders have been abused, they practically direct their story for them. As one offender once told me, “I said I was abused because everyone was ‘pulling’ for it. No matter who [sic] I talked to—the psychologist, my attorney, the judge—everyone was like, ‘Well, were you abused?’ I finally just agreed with them.”

It is possible therapists “pull for” sexual abuse histories for the same reason people in the public believe the myth—they want an explanation for why otherwise seemingly “normal” people commit acts of evil. Salter (2008) calls the tendency for therapists to see their offenders as victims “strangely comforting,” and adds, “If offenders are just victims, then no one has to face the reality



of malevolence, the fact that there are people out there who prey on others for reasons we simply don't understand" (p. 74).

### Collecting

Some offenders try to say the reason that they downloaded CEM was because of the satisfaction they obtained from collecting an entire set of images in a child pornography "series." While many offenders described a feeling of accomplishment when they were able to find and download an entire series, none ever suggested to me this desire to collect something was the reason they went online and began searching for CEM in the first place. It seems improbable that someone with an urge (or even a compulsion) to "collect something" would choose CEM—morally repugnant, illegal material—as the best material to satisfy this urge. Further, it does not seem to apply to any other criminal endeavors; burglars and robbers do not indicate that they simply wanted to "collect" other people's possessions, for example.

### Therapy

One of the most interesting excuses offenders give to investigators, evaluators, treatment providers, and researchers is that they collected CEM as a form of "therapy" for dealing with their problems (Quayle & Taylor, 2002). This explanation usually takes one of two forms: (1) the offenders admit that they are aroused by CEM and indicate the process of downloading and masturbating to CEM was stress-relieving, and/or (2) they deny that they are aroused by CEM and claim that they downloaded the material merely to help them "work through" their own personal histories of childhood abuse. These versions are obviously quite different and will be addressed in turn.

### Coping Strategy (Stress Relief)

This first explanation is plausible. Many offenders whom I have interviewed or treated indicated they used masturbation to online pornography as their primary coping strategy for handling stress and negative affective states. When they had a stressful day, they would masturbate to child

pornography. When they were frustrated or angry, they would do the same. When they were sad? The same. As a coping strategy the behaviors were powerful because they allowed the offender to both "escape" from his troubles through fantasy, as well as experience pleasurable sensations and the release of oxytocin from masturbation (Behnia et al., 2014; Carmichael et al., 1987; Love, 2014). Note that the stress relief they obtained from engaging in this behavior was not the primary reason they viewed or downloaded CEM; the primary motivation (and what made this activity pleasurable instead of aversive) was their sexual interest in children.

### "Processing Past Abuse"

People who download CEM sometimes claim their behavior was an attempt to "work through" their own childhood abuse (a variation on this theme is that they were conducting "research" to help them process their early childhood experiences). Unfortunately, there are misguided mental health professionals who have latched onto this explanation. The following is a hypothetical case illustration:

Dr. Eve Nye has been asked to evaluate "Don" at the request of his attorney, and she appreciates and notes in her evaluation that he has arrived on time. She finds him to be friendly, bright, and engaging. He doesn't give her the "impression" he is pedophilic. His explanation—that he was abused as a boy and was always too ashamed to tell anyone—seems genuine. In fact, her heart went out to him when he broke down in the session and had to take a few moments to compose himself. Dr. Nye did not see any of the signs of deception she learned in the three-hour continuing education course she took last year, and she was proud of herself for quickly building rapport with Don. If he was lying, she felt sure she would know it. As a matter of fact, when he denied he was sexually interested in children, he looked her straight in the eye. Despite her relative lack of experience dealing with sex offenders, she remembered hearing somewhere—a conference, maybe—that most of these men were abused when they were children. She figures Don must have experienced horrible things based on all that emotional pain he was showing. After she told him it was okay to cry, he really let out all that repressed pain. Healing had already begun for this misunderstood survivor. And if there is one group she is comfortable treating, it's survivors ....

That paragraph is full of clinical errors that convince clinicians like Dr. Nye to testify in court that defendants are simply conflicted and confused. The professionals explain how their client began downloading child abuse material to better understand his own childhood abuse, or perhaps to clarify fuzzy “repressed” memories of possible abuse that were just beginning to surface.

The problem with this defense, and it is a significant one, is that this is not how humans process trauma. Although the pseudo-conceptualization sounds legitimate to laypeople, individuals do not, in fact, download CEM to “work through” abuse or “process” memories of traumatic events. Service members who have returned from war do not download photographs of wounded comrades in arms. People burned in house fires do not view photographs of severely burned patients. Following automobile accidents, patients do not download photographs of other maimed or bloody accident victims. And people who were physically abused as children do not download videos of children being beaten. In fact, the diagnostic features for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) include the following:

Stimuli associated with the trauma are persistently (e.g., always or nearly always) *avoided* [emphasis added]. The individual commonly makes deliberate efforts to avoid thoughts, memories, feelings, or talking about the traumatic event. ... and to avoid activities, objects, situations, or people who arouse recollections of it.” (p. 275)

In short, people do not download CEM to work through their own abuse. This author has even seen cases where men were downloading material depicting teenaged girls and claiming they were using the material to work through their own abuse! As Salter (2008) notes, “Being victimized as a child has become a ready excuse for perpetrating child molestation. The offender who claims he himself was victimized gets seen as less of a ‘monster’ than one who wasn’t a victim, and he gains much more empathy and support. It is hard to trust self-reports of sex offenders about abuse in their past when such reports are in their best interest. Only a few studies on this

topic have used objective measures, and they have found very different results” (p. 73).

### Addiction

At the time of this writing there is little consensus on whether someone can become “addicted” to the Internet. Some researchers (e.g., van Rooij & Prause, 2014) have analyzed the extant evidence and concluded there is insufficient research to justify an Internet addiction disorder. Van Rooij and Prause found it more useful to look at how individual differences combined with environmental factors to lead to problematic Internet use (p. 204). Others see online problematic behavior as a form of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), impulse control disorder (Shapira, Lessig, Goldsmith, Szabo, Lazoritz, Gold, & Stein, 2003; Yellowlees & Marks, 2007) or hypersexuality (Reid & Kafka, 2014).

Although the debate on whether the diagnosis of Internet addiction should exist is still underway and a full discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of the current chapter, there is a relevant secondary issue—whether someone can be addicted to CEM. This discussion is distinct from the one about general problematic Internet use; in this case, the argument is whether someone can become addicted to particular content. If so, are we limiting the conversation to adult pornography and CEM addictions? Or, for example, can someone become addicted to images of Ferraris? Or thunderstorm videos? If we conclude people can become addicted to certain content, would that include, say, videos created by terrorist organizations on how to make bombs?

An alternative way of addressing this issue is to acknowledge that pedophilia is a disorder, not an addiction, but also recognize that *if* research ultimately suggests Internet addiction exists, then—in theory—pedophiles could *also* be addicted to the Internet. In this author’s experience, however, the fervor with which offenders seek CEM is not the result of addiction to the material or an underlying OCD but rather is attributable to basic behavior modification. As a result of repeated positive reinforcement (masturbation and orgasm) and negative reinforcement (reduction of stress and management of

negative mood states), some offenders condition themselves to rely on the Internet for reducing stress and regulating negative mood states. In the absence of healthier strategies for dealing with life's stressors, the behaviors of downloading and viewing CEM and masturbating to the images can become prominent, and even central, activities in their lives.

### Curiosity

People sometimes try an exotic food just to see what it tastes like. No doubt some visitors to Scotland have tasted their national dish, *haggis* (a pudding containing a sheep's heart, liver, and lungs minced with oatmeal and spices, traditionally encased in the animal's stomach), visitors to Sweden may have sampled *surströmming* (fermented, rotting fish), and tourists in Vietnam or the Philippines might have tried *balut* (soft-boiled fetal duck). But curiosity ends at the first bite, when you know if you like these traditional delicacies or not. The distinction between those who will begin to save these foods in their refrigerators and kitchen pantries, and those who will not, is: "I liked it." Curiosity, however, only prompted the first bite.

Society is curious—indeed, apparently fascinated—by crime and acts of violence. Several of the most popular television shows involve the investigation of criminal behavior (and often very aberrant criminal behavior), and "specials" about serial killers and missing children abound. But the popularity of these programs is not attributable to gratuitous violence (they typically do not depict egregious acts of violence); rather, it is the thrill of the hunt—the "whodunit"—that makes them interesting. CEM is quite different—it involves a significant display of horrendous acts, and there is very little mystery involved in the primal attacks. So if an offender says he viewed CEM out of curiosity, a reasonable question one might ask is, "What is there to be curious *about*?"

There are only two answers to this question: (a) he is curious about the sexual depravity of others, or (b) he is curious about his own. In the former scenario, he does not have to download or view CEM to understand the issues involved, just as those interested in others' drug use do not have

to smoke crack cocaine to assuage their curiosity. While experiential knowledge is desirable in certain circumstances, it is completely unnecessary to appreciate the horrors of child abuse. One's imagination is sufficient. Further, any experiential value gained as the result of curiosity must be balanced against his responsibility for the consequences of his actions, whether they are motivated by curiosity, greed, anger, or any other motivational pathway. He can "experience" the rush of a bank robbery if he wants to, but he also should be prepared to experience the excitement of prison.

It is theoretically possible, albeit bizarre, for someone to be curious enough about what CEM looks like to go online, seek it out, and view it. But even if we accept an offender's report that he experienced a sudden fit of "curiosity" and felt a strong urge to see CEM to better understand himself or his fellow human beings, why did he not simply limit his viewing to one glance at the depravity before shutting down his computer with a shudder? Why did he examine these images for hours or days on end? Why did he masturbate to them? Why did he save 10,000, 100,000 or even perhaps even 1,000,000 files? Why did he create folders and subdirectories on his computer to sort the files according to some personal criteria (e.g., age of child, race of child, sexual act, degree of sadism)? Why did he encrypt or otherwise hide the material? As any investigator, forensic computer examiner, or prosecutor who has viewed CEM can affirm, curiosity is immediately assuaged as soon as the video is played or the image is opened. This material causes what behaviorists call "one-trial learning"—you do not need to view children getting raped dozens (never mind hundreds, or thousands) of times to "get it."

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### False Mitigators

It is important to note that in pretrial settings, offenders have one goal: they want forensic evaluators and treatment providers to present them in a positive light (or at least not in the most negative light) in the courtroom. They therefore offer



excuses and disclose information to these professionals to fool them into thinking their behavior was more benign, less frequent, and less egregious than it was. The offenders will claim they had fewer victims than they do, and will downplay their online activity. As far as disclosing other deviant and/or criminal activity, most defense attorneys will almost certainly advise their clients to admit nothing beyond what the authorities already know, and only then in the context of a plea agreement.

It is also not uncommon for defense counsel to hire certain mental health professionals they know will accept the excuses provided by the offender, and who they strongly suspect are likely to view him as “low risk” or simply in need of treatment. Sometimes these professionals primarily work for the defense and purposefully (and unethically) skew their findings to say what defense counsel wants them to say. Others are well-intentioned but very naïve; they believe everyone can be rehabilitated with a little unconditional positive regard. These are the professionals who erroneously believe when the offender shows “remorse” it is a step in the right direction and is a mitigating factor for risk (in fact there is no evidence that remorse is associated with risk, and almost every sex offender who is identified and apprehended demonstrates remorse). They believe “social standing” is meaningful (social status is also not correlated with risk—abusers are found in every socioeconomic class). They testify or write in reports that offenders with no criminal records are at lower risk (This is incorrect. Most sex offenders—even prolific sex offenders—were never arrested before their instant offense). Finally, they believe everything the offender tells them with few challenges and practically no confrontation.

Once the offenders arrive in post-conviction treatment settings, however, it is not uncommon for them to disclose how they manipulated not only their family, friends, and coworkers, but also these gullible evaluators and treatment providers. When I worked with offenders in clinical settings it was fascinating, albeit troubling, to hear the offenders describe how they “played” well-intentioned professionals. Their techniques

included what Salter (2008) calls “the appeal to narcissism” (p. 91) and, as more than one offender has informed me, simply “telling them what they already wanted to believe.”

Some professionals are not cut out to work with sex offenders. One cannot work in this field without an ability to discern nonsense, and too many psychologists and social workers accept what offenders tell them—hook, line, and sinker. Whether attributable to personality or training, the sad fact is many clinicians operate under the assumption they should believe their client *under all circumstances*. For example, how many professionals were taught in graduate school to challenge a client’s tearful assertion that he was sexually abused when he was a boy? Weren’t we instead taught to silently hand the man the box of tissues, thus showing empathic regard while simultaneously allowing him to “be with his pain”? Such empathy is entirely appropriate with victims, but a mistake with offenders. The challenge is being able to tell the difference.

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### Why Sex Offenders Lie

“I downloaded those videos because I’m sexually aroused by children. I am a danger to practically every girl younger than 12 years old.” That is not the explanation an offender would normally express at the time of arrest, nor is it typically what he or she would say to the judge during trial and sentencing. For most offenders, the sound of police knocking on their door was the last sound they heard before their world crashed (as many have said to me); the sound that immediately preceded the horrifying realization their life was about to forever change. Many offenders related that as they observed detectives confiscate their computers, hard drives, and other electronics, they experienced the simultaneous weight of multiple crises—legal, moral, family, social, and financial. As the police carried out boxes of digital evidence and the implications sank in, most felt pronounced psychological distress in the form of devastating embarrassment and shame.

The typical human response to shame is to attempt to psychologically escape from the

situation. We may employ any or all of a number of defense mechanisms, including denial and attempts to misdirect blame to someone or something else. As Zaslav (2016) notes:

[T]he impulse to blame in response to shame is well documented in history and literature. For example, the Genesis account in the Old Testament, written thousands of years ago, explicitly notes that the fundamental human responses to shame are to hide and direct blame. . . Research in neuroscience and moral psychology suggests that emotional, morally judging brain systems operate swiftly and out of conscious awareness. . . Plausible sounding blame narratives are produced after our emotional brain systems have already lodged the judgment. (para 3, 6)

Because it is human nature to want to escape from shame, when people are initially confronted about their misbehavior many lie and/or create reasons, excuses, and justifications. We tell “white lies” and “whoppers” to save face and protect ourselves from moral judgment. Thus it is not unexpected that someone accused of engaging in sexual misconduct would respond with deception or excuse-making. In fact, it would be even more expected in case of sexual criminality, because their desperate attempt to lessen their shame is combined with their desire to avoid arrest or minimize the legal consequences of their actions. The truth—that they searched for, viewed, became aroused by, masturbated to, and then saved images and videos of children on a hard drive—is difficult to disclose. And since they know that even the most courageous admission likely will not mitigate their embarrassment or guilt, and it is certainly no legal defense, there is very little benefit to coming clean.

As the reality of the situation sets in and investigators begin to ask him about his behavior, the average offender feels he has no choice but to tell a story. After all, if he immediately acknowledges he downloaded thousands of CEM, his relationships with his parents, siblings, and friends likely will suffer. If he admits to his wife that he has been fantasizing about children since he was a teenager, that disclosure could very well prompt her to leave him and seek full custody of their children. If he tells investigators he viewed and downloaded CEM at work, his honesty will not

protect his reputation in the workplace, and it could cost him his job. If he admits during his court-appointed mental health evaluation that he fantasized about family members as well as male children in the neighborhood, his estimated level of risk could increase. Perhaps most importantly to the offender, if he admits that in addition to the CEM he has also acted out his fantasies with one or more hands-on victims, the admission is not only unlikely to help him in court, but it will likely hurt his case and could lead to additional charges and additional time in prison. In addition, the disclosure certainly will place him at higher risk on risk assessment measures and, in combination with other factors, could even make him eligible for civil commitment. In other words, from the offender’s standpoint, in this situation there is everything to lose and very little to gain by telling the truth—that he *downloaded CEM because he is sexually aroused by minors*. He will not say he viewed the photographs and video clips because they enhanced and satisfied his sexual desires. He will refuse to admit they made his fantasies more exciting and more real.

Of course, if the offender is not going to tell the truth, he must come up with a believable story, and there are not many plausible explanations for why someone would become involved in this form of online criminality. Some will seek refuge in denial and will claim mistaken identity (e.g., someone hacked into their network, someone else downloaded the material onto their computer when they were away). Others will use the “curiosity” defense or blame their own abuse history (which may be nonexistent). Some may attribute their conduct to a virus or accidental clicks on pop-up advertisements. Or any number of other reasons they hope will allow them to save face.

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## Research Using Criminal Histories

It is perplexing to see researchers “type” offenders based on the offense for which they were apprehended. On the one hand, it is understandable. In addition to being convenient, the use of “rap sheets” to place subjects into study samples

seems justified because of the weight of terms like “official records” and “convicted in a court of law.” On the other hand, neither of those terms is synonymous with “accurate” or “comprehensive.” If they were, we would place notorious gangster Al Capone in a sample of nonviolent offenders since he was convicted of tax evasion. We could then add two of the most prolific serial murderers and bank robbers in the twentieth century, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow (“Bonnie and Clyde”) to the nonviolent group since they had been formally charged only with automobile theft at the time of their deaths.

An offender’s “official” criminal history (i.e., the crimes for which he was convicted) is almost never a complete (or near complete) accounting of his misdeeds. Studies have demonstrated that official records of all kinds suffer from inaccuracies—sometimes significant ones—and can be misleading. Studies examining medical and mental health records (Cradock, Young, & Sullivan, 2001; Hong, Kaur, Farrokhyar, & Thoma, 2015; Weng, 2017) consistently find problems. Weng, a physician and researcher, noted so many discrepancies between patients’ self-report and what was written in the “official” medical record she wondered if she and her colleagues could even trust what is written in their patients’ charts (Weng, 2017, p. 232).

Criminal records also suffer from inaccuracies. The Uniform Law Commission (n.d.) noted, “Recent studies have demonstrated that criminal records. . . may be inaccurate or incomplete.” The basis for these concerns is supported by facts provided by the U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ) Bureau of Justice Statistics. In their 2014 Survey of State Criminal Record Repositories they note that 13 states report 20% or more of all dispositions received could not be linked to the arrest/charge information in the state criminal record database, and 14 states don’t know how many dispositions they have that cannot be linked. Further, 17 states have over 1.8 million unprocessed or partially processed court dispositions, ranging from 200 in Wyoming to 633,100 in Utah (DOJ, 2014). With regard to the specific use of criminal records to estimate recidivism, Andres (1989) remarked, “A reliance on official records

as a measure of recidivism leads to an underestimation of predictive accuracy because many criminal acts of higher risk cases may never show up on official records” (para 19).

As concerning as the inaccuracies are, this is not the most problematic issue regarding official records. The most troubling issue is clinicians’ failures to understand that as a result of horrible base rates for detecting sexual abuse and exploitation, the crimes listed in the official records represent only a fraction of offenses the subject has committed—they are the metaphoric tip of the iceberg. A man in the prison-based sex offender treatment program where I once worked provides an interesting example of the significant problem that emerges when we “type” offenders based on their crimes of conviction:

“James,” an incarcerated sex offender, disclosed he had molested “thousands” of boys of all ages. The therapist, suspicious of this high number, asked how could he have had access to that many children. He replied, “It’s easy. All you have to do is pretend to be a physician for about 40 years. You go from village to village in Central America and South America, conducting “physicals,” including rectal and testicular examinations. And you also take “medical photographs” of the boys’ genitals. I have easily fondled and digitally penetrated thousands of boys.”

James was arrested when he tried to return to the United States and his laptop was searched at the border. The photographs he had taken were found and he was charged with possession of child pornography. His defense at trial was that he was not a danger to children and that he was not a hands-on offender because there was no record that he had ever even been *accused* of any sexual misconduct. He was sentenced to only 18 months in prison with 36 months of supervised release. Despite being one of the treatment program’s most prolific abusers, he also was not eligible for civil commitment because he had never been convicted of a hands-on offense.

Researchers who claim they can statistically control for the low base rates may miss the boat from a conceptual standpoint. They may compare a group of “hands-on” offenders with a cadre of “hands-off” offenders (so named because there is no record of a hands-on offense in the offender’s “official record”) and confidently describe

differences between the two, despite fundamental errors inherent in the sample selection process.

The reason researchers rely on official records is simple—such records are typically the only type available to academics. We cannot get our hands on the records locked up in the file rooms of child protective services and child advocacy centers—for obvious reasons, those are not available for research purposes. We also cannot possibly acquire records of abuse that have been handwritten in the diaries of teenagers or texted to a friend after she promises to keep the information a secret. Similarly, admissions made in therapy are hidden behind the veil of confidentiality. Thus, the only records that occasionally are made available (and even in those cases, often with personally identifiable information redacted and with strict controls) are cases that have gone through the court system. And although most researchers presumably know these records are poor proxies for the offenders' real histories, they justify their use by assuring themselves they can account for the discrepancies through statistical means. Alternatively, they may indicate their use of the records is wise because these cases have made it through the adversarial rigors of the justice system and thus are the most "valid." Or they simply shrug and figure they are "doing the best they can with what they have" and decide everything contributes to science in some way.

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### How a Crime Becomes an Official Record

For a crime to become a part of an official record, the following must occur:

1. Unless someone walked in on the abuse, the victim *has to be aware* he or she was abused. This excludes cases involving victims who were unconscious, passed out, or significantly intoxicated. It also does not include crimes where the victim was an animal, an infant, or deceased.
2. The victim *has to have the ability to disclose*. This eliminates preverbal children and some

severely disabled individuals, as well as victims suffering from some forms of mental illness and those with significant cognitive impairment, including dementia.

3. The victim *has to decide to disclose* what took place and then must follow through with the disclosure.
4. The person to whom the victim discloses *must believe the victim*.
5. The person who heard and believes the victim *must decide to contact the police* or a child abuse hotline. They cannot choose an alternative means for handling the issue—they cannot choose to handle the matter within their house of worship, within their family, or deal with it themselves. They must contact authorities.
6. The *authorities must "take the report"* and law enforcement officers must begin the process of collecting sufficient evidence to present for prosecution.
7. The prosecutor *must receive sufficient evidence* to prosecute AND *must decide to accept the case*.
8. The perpetrator *must be charged with a sexual offense* and not a lesser offense without the sexual component (simple assault, contributing to the delinquency of a minor).
9. The perpetrator *must not plead down* to a lesser offense.
10. The perpetrator *must be indicted* and a trial must take place.
11. The case *must not get thrown out* on a technicality, *or be dismissed* for lack of evidence, because the victim's mother does not want the child to testify, or due to staleness issues or a statute of limitations, etc.
12. The perpetrator *must be found guilty*.
13. The perpetrator *must lose all his appeals*.

Only after step 13 does the crime ever make it into official records. And the remarkable thing is as many as 84% of sexual assaults never make it to step 3. More than any other crimes, sex offenses are crimes of secrecy because unlike other crimes, these acts typically go unreported. Factors such as shame, embarrassment, and fear prevent victims from coming forward and prevent offenders from

seeking help. Thus the crimes continue to accumulate, with the same victim or with others. Sometimes the crimes go unreported for generations, or are never disclosed.

There are only two ways to truly know what an abuser has done: (a) you must ask him, or (b) you must ask his victim(s). In atypical (but sadly, not rare) cases, there is a third way to definitively know what the offender has done: (c) you could watch the video of the assault. But—statistics or not—you will not be able to determine if someone found in possession of child exploitation material is a hands-on offender from his official record. You also will not be able to know if he is a voyeur, or an exhibitionist, or a rapist of adults. The only way you will ever know the extent of what he has done is to ask him.

Of course, some offenders will lie, which will leave you no better off than you were when you had just the records in the first place. That being said, although it surprises many people, most treatment providers can attest that with sufficient rapport sex offenders often will discuss what they have done. In fact, perhaps because of their desire to rid themselves of shame and/or a desire to not reoffend, many offenders seem almost impatient to get their crimes off their chest. And if the listening occurs in a nonjudgmental context, their self-report is typically accurate. Peterson, Braiker, and Polich (1981) found that “Inmates answered detailed questions about crimes they had committed (especially violent crimes) during the 3 years before their present prison terms. Internal consistency and good rates of response suggest that the accuracy of self-reported survey data was high.”

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## Myths About Internet Sex Offenders

There are number of myths clinicians maintain about sex offenders. As Seto (2008) notes, “Much of what laypeople and professionals believe about pedophiles and sexual offending against children. . . is not supported by empirical evidence” (p. xii).

## Internet Offenders Are Not Dangerous

“Your Honor, my client is not a danger to children. As most experts know, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, and there are no indications he has ever molested a child.” For CEM offenders, those sentences are among the most harmful risk-relevant statements heard in our courtrooms. The predictive efficacy of “past behavior” works well with some types of crimes—driving under the influence of alcohol, assault on a law enforcement officer, and exhibitionism, for example. But the typical hands-on offender has no arrests on his rap sheet, and because of low base rates, such “predictions” are next to meaningless.

An equally dangerous assumption is describing the offenders whose sexual interests in children were identified through their online behavior as “just pictures” defendants. Significantly, the consequence of such heuristics is not simply a semantic or conceptual error—these individuals are often presented as being at lower risk for engaging in a hands-on sexual act against a child simply because they were apprehended as the result of an online investigation rather than an offline investigation.

I am certain that there are pedophiles and hebephiles who are sexually interested in youth yet manage to constrain their behavior to Internet offenses against children. For some of these men and women, hands-on abuse has not occurred simply because they do not have access to children in a setting where they can offend unobserved. Others may have the opportunity to express their fantasies in the “real world” but there exist sufficient obstacles that impede their desires to commit hands-on offenses (e.g., moral or religious prohibitions, fears of apprehension by law enforcement or detection by a significant other). In this respect, I have little reason to believe individuals who are sexually aroused by children but do not “act out” against minors offline are dissimilar from people who fantasize about other criminal acts but ultimately choose to refrain.



Here, however, an important factor must be considered: sexual predilections are biologically driven. That is not to say the etiology of every sexual interest is biological—the answer to that question is beyond the scope of the current chapter. Here, it is sufficient to simply recognize that these sexual interests and urges are components to a drive that cannot be “turned off” any more than any other biologically based appetite. As any reputable treatment provider will attest, the model for treating sex offenders is not a *curative* model but rather one focused on the offender’s ability to *manage* his or her desires.

### **The Internet Causes People to Become Pedophilic**

Imagine you were asked to identify the gender of people to whom you are most attracted and then write down that gender on a piece of paper. Then you were asked to write down how many sexually explicit images of the opposite gender it would take before you “converted” to the other side. What would you write? 100? 1000? 7 million? Most people would refuse to write down a number; they would tell you “There is no number—it doesn’t work like that!” If the point has not yet been made, consider how many images it would take for you to be led down the path toward becoming sexually attracted to a 5-year-old child.

The point is, people do not get talked into (or exposed into) their sexual orientation, fetishes, sexual preferences, and sexual interests. And with the exception of remaining attracted to people in our age group as we age, people’s sexual interests remain the same throughout the lifespan. No one wakes up at age 45 suddenly afflicted with a bad case of pedophilia. And the Internet does not cause anyone to suddenly become aroused to children. While online behavior can reinforce latent sexual interests, it appears from extant research that those predilections have existed since adolescence. The Internet provides stimuli that allow individuals to reinforce their fantasies, desires, and urges. It can strengthen impulses, but the things people are aroused to do not vary significantly.

### **The Polygraph Should Not Be Used**

Any comprehensive literature search on the psychophysiological detection of deception will result in studies that describe the limitations of the polygraph. Although this research is fraught with methodological problems, the studies are often cited as evidence of the instrument’s shortcomings. While a full assessment of the validity and reliability of the instrument is beyond the scope of the current chapter, the author has found a much more pragmatic reason to justify the use of the polygraph: as an investigative tool, it works.

For the purposes of sex offender assessment and management, it seems wise to remove ourselves from the debates about the degree to which examiners can be fooled, or if individuals physiologically react in ways that lead to inconclusive results. We do not need to debate the merits of the polygraph’s utility as a “lie detector”—that issue is separate from the one at hand. Instead, we should focus on the most pragmatic reasons to use the tool—whether it is effective as an interview tool to unearth undetected behaviors an individual is hiding (criminal and otherwise). The answer is an unequivocal “yes.”

The current author examined the issue in a paper that described what my colleagues and I termed “tactical polygraph” because of the need to conduct a test strategically and quickly<sup>2</sup> (Bourke, Fragomeli, Detar, Sullivan, Meyle, & O’Riordan, 2014). We found the polygraph significantly increased admissions about previously undetected sexual crimes. Importantly, we also found the test helped identify victims who had not disclosed their abuse, including 97 victims who were still minors, allowing social service intervention. Ten of those children were being currently abused by the subject, and because of the tactical polygraph those children were rescued from that ongoing abuse.

<sup>2</sup>Some critics feel the term sounds aggressive, but this appears attributable to a lack of understanding of the definition of “tactical,” which is not solely associated with militaristic acts (e.g., tactical building entry) but also refers to “small-scale actions serving a larger purpose” and “adroit in planning or maneuvering to accomplish a purpose” (Tactical, 2017).

At the conclusion of our tactical polygraph study, nearly 58% of our subjects, all of whom were the so-called “child pornography” or “hands-off” offenders, admitted committing hands-on abuse of at least one child. These results supported the findings of a previous paper Andres Hernandez and I conducted in the federal prison system where 85% of men arrested for child pornography offenses acknowledged committing hands-on offenses (Bourke & Hernandez, 2009). A recent study by DeLisi et al. (2016) also examined the utility of the polygraph in detecting hidden hands-on abuse; the researchers found 69% of their sample of federal “child pornography” offenders admitted committing hands-on abuse when the polygraph was implemented.

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## Conclusion

While it is technically correct that the crimes of possession and distribution of child exploitation material are hands-off offenses, and child molestation is a hands-on offense, it is a mistake to assume the former perpetrator is a hands-off offender and that the second abuser is a hands-on offender. The groups are not dichotomous and, based on the most accurate empirical research (i.e., studies where information is collected from both official criminal history as well as self-report, and using a form of veracity testing), at least two-thirds of subjects (58–85%, with the 58% a likely underestimate) arrested for possession of CEM fit both categories (Bourke & Hernandez, 2009; Bourke, Fragomeli, Detar, Sullivan, Meyle, & O’Riordan, 2014; DeLisi et al. 2016).

Let us consider a hypothetical study analogous to the child pornography (“hands-off”) and child abuser (“hands-on”) false dichotomy. In this study, researchers plan to examine differences between drug users and non-drug users. They acquire a sample of individuals who were arrested and convicted of being under the influence of a controlled substance; to wit, crack cocaine. They call this group “drug users.” They also put together a comparison sample of people convicted of possessing drug

paraphernalia (i.e., crack cocaine pipes). Assuming the crimes of conviction accurately describe the two groups, they name the second group “drug paraphernalia collectors.”

As ridiculous as it is to assume the second group are “non-drug users” and to view them as “collectors,” it is similarly foolish to label those arrested for possession of child pornography “hands-off offenders” and to view them as “collectors.” Possession of drug paraphernalia and possession of child exploitation material are each indicative behaviors for adjunctive crimes. We should not assume the collections are the end point—the paraphernalia suggests the person is interested in using drugs, and the CEM “collections” suggest the person fantasizes about abusing children.

It is interesting that some of my colleagues who complain the loudest when CEM possessors and distributors are portrayed as dangerous, and who claim the men are “just curious” or explain away their behavior in some other manner, also balk when I ask them if, in that case, they would allow those men to babysit their children. It is ironic how willing some mental health professionals are to write reports explaining how someone is at low risk because he “only” possessed CEM but then, when it applies to them, quickly change their tune.

To give another example—if a parent finds a hidden stash of magazines under her child’s bed and notices the magazines are devoted to the drug culture and methods for growing marijuana, does she immediately breathe a sigh of relief because he is obviously a *collector of drug-related material* and therefore not a *drug user*? Of course not. Any good parent would consider the material indicative of their child’s interest in marijuana and would assume that (a) their child is already using marijuana, or (b) he is likely to use the drug if given the opportunity. The parent would not assume *collectors* are different from *users*, and certainly would not believe possession of the magazines somehow mitigates the teen’s desires to get high. Of course, whether the material is printed or obtained online is irrelevant. A parent discovering her child’s online search history contains hundreds of searches relating to the

construction of homemade pipe bombs, school shootings, and suicide would be equally (if not more) concerned.

This chapter addresses only some of the common misunderstandings in the field of child exploitation. Unfortunately, these and other pervasive myths continue to influence judges and lawmakers, which of course affects case law and policy. As technology continues to evolve and offenders continue to find new ways to exploit youth, it becomes imperative to clarify biased or inaccurate assumptions before they take root. Empirical investigations using accurate and meaningful data, as well as qualitative studies to examine the underlying issues, are collectively important as we attempt to protect the world's young people who have not been victimized and secure justice for those who have. As Salter (2008, p. 76) once observed about those who abuse children, "No one has all the answers about how to stop them, nor even why all of them do what they do. But at least we should have the decency as a people to stop making excuses for them."

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