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The social harm of self-generated indecent images of children – is it a problem for law enforcement?

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This research is concerned with the harms that are produced by self-generated indecent images (SGII) of children.

Key details

Lead institution	The Open University
Principal researcher(s)	Nicole Woodhall Nicole.Woodhall@open.ac.uk
Police region	South East
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	August 2018
Date due for completion	October 2026

Research context

This research is concerned with the harms that are produced by self-generated indecent images (SGII) of children, both experimental and aggravated. Despite academia developing a typology of SGII (see Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011) it is still viewed, categorised and recorded as a single type of offending.

This research is seeking to understand the harms and how these images are impacting upon on the law enforcement response to indecent images of children (IIoC) as a whole.

In a society that is routinely promoting sexualised behaviour, it is imperative that we understand the

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impact of SGII, whether it is harmful and who it is harmful to. This includes the defined victims of SGII, as well as wider society and law enforcement.

It is essential that operating procedures are appropriate within law enforcement, and demand is managed to reduce the risk of additional harm occurring. This can only be done by understanding the extent of the problem and the impacts it is having.

This is a gap in current literature which this research seeks to fill by drawing upon the social harm perspective within critical criminology. It will focus on self-generated indecent images of children, a social phenomenon which is categorised by criminal acts and unknown social harms.

The aim is to explore the impact that SGII is having on law enforcement and wider society, utilising the knowledge gained to inform operating procedure relating to SGII. To achieve this aim, the following overarching research question has been identified, along with 3 further sub questions.

1. What is the social harm implicit in self-generated indecent images (SGII) of children and what impact does this have on law enforcement?

   1a. What is the current impact of SGII on law enforcement?

   1b. Is the demand from SGII impacting upon the response to other indecent image of children (IIoC) offences?

   1c. Are there any harms resulting from the current response to SGII that are not being met by the legislative position and criminal justice response?

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Research methodology

A mixed method design has been chosen as it provides the ability to deepen the understanding obtained in the research; making sense of human experiences and phenomenon by allowing a dialogue among research approaches (Greene, 2012).

The quantitative data and their subsequent analysis provide a general understanding of the research problem. The qualitative data and their analysis refine and explain those statistical results by exploring participants' views in more depth.

The thesis will take a sequential-explanatory approach, initially carrying out analysis on quantitative data, before progressing to the qualitative stage. This design was chosen after considering the priority, implementation and integration of the research.

The first stage of the research will involve quantitative analysis of secondary data to establish the known scale of the SGII problem. The quantitative data will inform and be supported by semi structured interviews; allowing for a deeper, more triangulated exploration of the issue.

The interviews will be conducted with a selection of professionals working within CSAE arena, in order to assess the perception of policing practitioners. Additionally, participants will be identified within other partner and non-governmental organisations to ensure the research is representative and not skewed towards the perceptions of the researcher's parent organisation.