



Survivor Perspectives on Institutional Use of Child Sexual Abuse Material

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Abstract

This literature review draws together literature describing how child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is currently used in institutional contexts – by police, courts, academic and policy researchers and private sector entities. In doing so, it reveals that there has historically been scant engagement with victims and survivors about such uses, and little research into the impacts of reuse for individuals who are depicted in CSAM. Despite the specificities of CSAM experience (as described by victims and survivors), and the recognised value of lived experience perspectives, inclusion of CSAM victim and survivor perspectives in research design and policies governing institutional reuse of this material is still a rarity. We hypothesise that better outcomes can be achieved for children and adults who experience victimisation through CSAM if these perspectives are prioritised in ways that are supported by human-centred and trauma-informed research and practice.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse; child sexual abuse material; CSAM; participatory; trauma-informed.

Introduction

For survivors of child sexual abuse whose experience includes victimisation through child sexual abuse material (CSAM), battles for justice do not end when (or if) perpetrators of physical abuse are brought to account. The unpalatable reality is that the internet has facilitated commodification and propagation of such material (Eggins and Mazerolle 2021) as both demand-driven consumables (Teunissen and Napier 2023) and fan-based collectables (Binford et al. 2015; Salter and Richardson 2021). This continued recirculation and reposting of content (effectively creating ‘permanent records’ of abuse) perpetuates psychological harm to victims and survivors, and may also lead to additional harm and harassment (Salter and Woodlock 2023) – including through doxing, the often-gendered disclosure of personal details and harassment via online channels, resulting in online and physical harms (Eckert and Metzger-Riftkin 2020). These impacts are exacerbated by a scarcity of specialised support services for adult survivors of CSAM (Binford et al. 2015; Salter and Woodlock 2024).



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Complex inter-jurisdictional efforts to counter the illicit trade in child trauma investigations are smoothed by information-sharing between law enforcement agencies and supported by police collaboration with a variety of non-profit and for-purpose organisations (INTERPOL 2018). These include technology companies and intelligence analysts with expertise in the development of automated tools to detect, categorise and interpret sensitive content. Such technology-led interventions must have a cross-disciplinary focus that recognises the psychology of offenders, the trajectories of victims and survivors, and the effects and efficacy of laws and policy interventions (Binford 2023).

The intent of this literature review is to investigate how the recognition and inclusion of victims' and survivors' views and preferences occur (or do not occur) when efforts to counter child sexual abuse include the institutional reuse of CSAM. By this we refer primarily to sanctioned uses of material that law enforcement agencies have identified as CSAM. We explore how the literature documenting operational uses by police – as well as use in legal and courtroom processes, private sector technology development, and academic or policy research – reflects ethical and moral thresholds to reuse of CSAM, and what it has to say regarding the views, attitudes and sensitivities of CSAM victims and survivors regarding such use.

Our initial motivation for conducting this review was in the context of growing research use of CSAM (in its various forms, from social media chat logs to visual depictions of abuse) and the extent to which victim and survivor consent might be obtainable for this use of material documenting their abuse. Thus, our inquiry encompasses survivor perspectives on *all* sanctioned uses of CSAM, not just those concerned with the direct pursuit of justice. We recognise that CSAM use within law enforcement and legal processes dwarves other uses as these form the front line in tackling child sexual abuse and CSAM. However, CSAM seized as evidence is emerging as a key resource in the technological arms race to counter these crimes, as the 'creation of larger training and testing CSAM datasets by law enforcement will provide important insights ... and drive the development of new algorithms capable of effectively operating' to detect and classify CSAM in an automated manner (Westlake et al. 2022: 9). We also point to the ways the literature deals with a number of edge cases, such as the use of material that may not meet legal thresholds for classification as CSAM but that holds significant affective weight for victims and survivors.

There is a recognised specificity to CSAM experience (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan et al. 2018) that we believe warrants dedicated attention. We have not sought to comprehensively address how victim and survivor experience informs the broader array of research on child sexual abuse, or to capture all the parallel literature in relation to family violence, intimate partner violence, or technology facilitated image-based abuse that is perpetrated on adults. However, this review does include an overview of some of the key literature with regard to trauma sensitive and survivor-centred practice that illustrates the value of this approach.

The Human and Relational Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse

While varying case by case, human impacts of child sexual abuse are profound and wide-reaching. Sexual abuse in childhood incurs a range of long-term or lifelong psychiatric, psychosocial and physical health impacts for victims and survivors (Briere and Elliott 1994; Hailes et al. 2019), those close to the abused who are dealing with guilt or grief (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017; Salter and Wong 2021, 2023) and even those close to perpetrators of abuse, attempting to reconcile their personal relationship with new knowledge of a partner, friend or family member (Armitage et al. 2023; PartnerSpeak 2021). For some people, particularly in the case of familial abuse (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan et al. 2018), both the abused and the abuser may be known to them, or they too may be a victim of the same abuser.

Child sexual abuse also contributes to secondary or vicarious trauma for professionals who deal with these crimes as part of their working life: law-enforcement agents (Cullen et al. 2020; Strickland, Kloess and Larkin 2023; Wortley et al. 2014), prosecutors (Cullen et al. 2020); counsellors (Follette, Polusny and Milbeck 1994) and others. The impacts of workplace exposure to CSAM are the subject of extensive research for some of these professions – most notably policing (Krause 2009; Leclerc et al. 2022; Mitchell et al. 2023; Powell et al. 2015; Redmond et al. 2023), highlighting the availability of formal organisational supports for police tasked with investigating CSA/M, albeit with debatable efficacy (Cullen et al. 2020; Wortley et al. 2014). However, other workers who are exposed to such material may have only minimal access to employment support – particularly content moderators working for online platforms (Riesewieck and Block 2018; Spence et al. 2023; McIntyre 2023), although this work is beyond the scope of this literature review, occurring prior to referral of content to police (INHOPE 2022a: 58).

Child Sexual Abuse Material

Child sexual abuse may include (or be wholly constituted by) the production, possession or transmission of content that is legally classed as CSAM in the relevant jurisdiction(s). Definitions under law vary by jurisdiction. However, broadly defined, child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is content in any format (text, image, video, sound, digital or otherwise) that gratuitously depicts child nudity or sexual anatomy, or that documents real or simulated sexualised activity being performed

on or by children. Some definitions of CSAM also include ‘creative’ works that sexualise children, ranging from material that is clearly fictional (e.g. manga/hentai artwork) to content that is virtually indistinguishable from documentary recordings of real-world abuse (Internet Watch Foundation 2023).

Such synthetic child abuse content, now able to be generated by consumer-grade AI, which may or may not incorporate likenesses of real children and/or pre-existing abuse imagery (Internet Watch Foundation 2023), brings new complexities and new problems to the fight against CSAM (Christensen and Vickery 2023; Thiel, Stroebel and Portnoff 2023). While the extent of harms caused by artistic representations of CSAM continue to be debated in the literature (Eelmaa 2022; Moritz, Pearson and Christensen 2022), there is irrefutable evidence that real children are implicated in both non-contact offending and synthetic CSAM content: these cannot be considered ‘victimless’ forms of child sex offending.

CSAM: A Technology-Facilitated Crime

CSAM is not produced in all cases of child sexual abuse, and not all CSAM created by abusers is shared with others (Cale and Holt 2021). However, the shift to online communications, interactions and transactions as a fundamental part of our present-day societal structure, together with the prevalence of personal digital devices, has enabled an environment where CSAM content is easier to produce, distribute and access than it was pre-internet (Binford et al. 2015; Salter and Whitten 2022; Teunissen and Napier 2022).

Online environments have also created new opportunities for abusers to initiate contact with and groom children and young people, and facilitated the rise of large, organised online communities of CSAM users (Krone and Smith 2017; Liggett et al. 2020; Westlake 2020). Not only does recirculation of CSAM cause harm to victims and survivors of past abuse, but the availability of this content may lead to, or hasten progression toward, contact offending (Insoll et al. 2022). For the sake of past and potential victims, the imperative to disable online CSAM distribution networks is high. Strategies to achieve this are varied and at times controversial – such as the use of CSAM by law enforcement as part of undercover operations (Bleakley 2019; Witting 2018).

Also contentious are perceived encroachments on established human rights and social expectations, most notably in the form of proposals for widespread monitoring or surveillance techniques that disrupt rights to privacy and freedom from persecution in relation to online activity by individuals who are not suspected of any wrongdoing. Balancing human rights against single-minded approaches to online safety for children is a core consideration for CSAM prevention (Bleakley et al. 2023; Chousou et al. 2023; Defence for Children and ECPAT the Netherlands 2021; Salter and Hanson 2021), but are largely outside the scope of this review.

Terminology and Definitions

A great deal of variance exists in the social norms, legislative frameworks and legal thresholds that shape what constitutes child sexual abuse, and what is agreed to be CSAM. For example, both the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) prescribe a child as being anyone below the age of eighteen years; however, the nomenclature shift from ‘child’ to ‘young person’ is frequently applied at younger ages (Clark, Locke and Bialocerkowski 2015). Nor is there a single standard for the legal age of sexual consent, for the specific activities that constitute child sexual abuse or for the types of depictions that qualify for inclusion in CSAM offences (ICMEC 2023; INHOPE 2022b).

These variances affect local and national efforts that may be working across different sectors, policy portfolios or geographic jurisdictions where definitional and legislative inconsistencies can hinder effective collaboration (INHOPE 2022b). ‘Even where the same terms are used, there is quite often disagreement concerning their actual meaning [, creating] significant challenges for policy development and programming, development of legislation, and data collection’ (Greijer and Doek 2016: 1). These challenges are further compounded by the predominantly online distribution of CSAM: whether in static forms or, increasingly, as livestream content (Parviainen and Rajamäki 2022). Accordingly, reporting on and investigation of CSAM may commence in jurisdictions that are distinct from (and have different laws to) those in which the material is being hosted and/or those where it was produced and/or those where associated criminal offences might eventually be prosecuted.

For clarity and ease of reference, we begin by setting out definitions of our key terms. We seek to be inclusive of a wide range of victim and survivor experiences, and respectful of the extensive work that has already been done to better harmonise legislative and policy language. In particular, we acknowledge the Luxembourg Guidelines (Greijer and Doek 2016) as a benchmark in providing guidance for harmonising language and terminology used when discussing sexual abuse or exploitation of children (INTERPOL 2023a; Varrella 2019). However, our focus on victim and survivor perspectives and

their participation has implications for the language we use (O'Neill, Selakovic and Tropea 2012), differing from the language of law enforcement or policy-makers who are focused on disruption and prevention (e.g. Setter et al. 2021: 10). Additionally, sources referenced in this literature review often use different terminology and/or cite differing definitions to those we have chosen. As exposure to the range of terminology broadened in our work, it iteratively informed the terms used for the literature search.

In particular, we note that the phrase 'child pornography' remains in use in much current legislation relating to child sexual abuse, and still commonly appears in research literature and media coverage that reports on CSAM. However, we echo the words of victims and survivors in saying:

We want people to ... separate child abuse imagery from pornography. Pornography is consensual ... [CSAM] is never a choice for that child; it is abuse. (CSAM survivor, quoted in Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc 2019: 8)

Accordingly, we refuse use of this term due to the misleading nature of the term 'pornography', which implies consensual production (Greijer and Doek 2016). This is not to pretend that coercive practices are absent from the creation of adult pornography – sadly, they are not (Griffith et al. 2012), but nor do we believe that pornography is necessarily victimising of performers. We stand with victims and survivors in pushing back against the inaccurate labelling of crime scene evidence as being anything other than depictions of abuse.

Table 1*Key Terms Used in This Review*

Term	Definition	Notes
Child sexual abuse (CSA)	Actions that involve a child in, or expose a child to, sexual or sexualised activity with an adult or another child for purposes of gratification or profit.	<p>This moves beyond abusive acts themselves to encompass issues of power, developmental age, cognitive ability, emotional attachment and so on, and the discourse around consent (see World Health Organization 2003: 75; Royal Commission 2017: 320).</p> <p>There are occasions where peer sexual interactions ‘may’ be developmentally appropriate and consensual (see Queensland Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services 2023).</p>
Key literature: Commonwealth of Australia 2021; <i>Criminal Code Act 1995</i> , s 473.1; Greijer and Doek 2016; INTERPOL 2023b; Queensland Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services 2023; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017; United Nations (2000); Westlake 2020; Whittington 2021; World Health Organization 2003.		
Child sexual abuse material (CSAM)	Material that documents or depicts the sexual abuse of a child.	<p>Includes: text; images; audio; videos; live streams; chat logs of grooming or describing actual or desired sexual activity; and synthetic or artificial CSAM – whether photo-realistic or not.</p> <p>Note that the legal distinction between real and synthetic may be irrelevant for victims and survivors – for example, if synthetic CSAM is created to add ‘new’ material to an existing CSAM series (see ICMEC 2023; INHOPE 2020).</p>
Key literature: Christensen, Moritz and Pearson 2021; Christensen and Vickery 2023; <i>Criminal Code Act 1899</i> ; <i>Criminal Code Act 1995</i> ; Greijer and Doek 2016; ICMEC 2023; INHOPE 2020; Moritz and Christensen 2020; Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council 2017, Thorn 2023a; Westlake 2020. cf Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions 2023; Franqueira et al. 2018; UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2020.		
Victims and survivors	People who, as children, experienced sexual abuse.	<p>An inclusive term meaning to represent the continuum of experiences of having been subjected to harmful and/or criminal acts.</p> <p>Note that the (legal term) ‘victim’ does not label the person as weak and/or helpless, while ‘survivor’ does not convey how much the person has overcome.</p> <p>Just as people (including children) may reject the term ‘victim’, the same could happen with the term ‘survivor’. Outside of the legal context, it is important never to label a person who does not want to be called a ‘victim’ or ‘survivor’ (Greijer and Doek 2016: 80).</p>
Key literature: Greijer and Doek 2016; National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse 2024.		
Institutional (re)use	Sanctioned and legal activities that require access to CSAM undertaken by organisations investigating, prosecuting and/or countering online child sexual abuse.	Includes: police and other law enforcement agencies; the subsequent legal proceedings which follow such as prosecutions and court processes; supporting institutions such as research organisations; and those in the private sector developing (often technical) capabilities for preventing, detecting and addressing online child sexual abuse.
Key literature: See following discussion including Tables 2, 3, and 4 below		

Institutional Uses of CSAM

Knowledge of the existence of images in police databases may be just as harmful for the child ... Other issues to be addressed include whether a victim of sexual abuse images (either as a child or later as an adult) should be able to have their image removed from a database. These matters are yet to be resolved. (Muir 2005)

Sexual abuse that occurs during childhood is a fundamental breach of trust, rights and safety. A key safeguard for CSAM victim and survivor wellbeing, therefore, is minimising the occurrence of further breaches of trust in relation to how materials documenting childhood sexual abuse are handled once they enter police custody, regardless of whether these are perceived or actual infractions. To provide this safeguard, it is important to understand both how CSAM is used after it comes into police hands and how victims and survivors feel about those uses.

The second of these themes is heavily under-represented in the existing literature. The views of CSAM victims and survivors as a distinct group were almost completely absent from the literature until the Canadian Centre for Child Protection's benchmark survey of 150 survivors globally in 2017 (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017). Although skewed to Northern and Western Europe, it remains the most valuable source of collected CSAM victim and survivor views available to researchers and policy-makers. Out of this work emerged the Phoenix 11 in 2018, a core group of female CSAM survivor-advocates, followed by the Chicago Males in 2019 and the Aramid Collective in 2020 (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2023a). Collectives such as these have undertaken work with researchers and policy-makers to ensure their voices continue to be represented in discussions about CSAM. They have addressed the ongoing impacts of CSAM on abuse victims and survivors; the value of lived experience advocacy; and the role CSAM can play in securing reparations for victims and survivors (Salter and Woodlock 2024). However, we have been unable to locate any substantial research directed towards understanding victim and survivor knowledge and perspectives regarding the broader question of how organisations are using CSAM across all stages of investigative, restitutive and preventative work.

Our strategy for searching the extant literature was broad and iterative. We searched academic databases and material from known producers of grey literature in the sector (including government agencies, NGOs and research organisations) using the combination of material-context terms and their synonyms, such as 'CSAM', 'CSEM', 'child sexual abuse material', 'child sexual exploitation material' and 'child pornography', together with use-context terms and their synonyms, such as 'police', 'law enforcement', 'legal', 'courts', 'research' and so on. As additional synonymous terms were discovered (see previous section), they were added to our search lexicon. The intention was that if a source made any mention of survivor perspectives on the sanctioned use of CSAM, it was to be included in our primary source list; the references of these to be similarly reviewed to identify other relevant literature. Sources referring to sanctioned use – without mentioning survivor perspectives – were retained to form a representative basis for describing usage use-cases. In the absence of our primary literature, we turn to these next.

Along with actions to support formal classification of abuse material against known typologies or schema of severity (Kloess, Woodhams and Hamilton-Giachritsis 2021), the most obvious institutional use of CSAM – and certainly the most time-critical – is the investigative identification of the individuals (victims, perpetrators and observers) who are present in CSAM. Such material is examined for this purpose by specialist investigating officers, potentially including officers in other jurisdictions. While a possession case may continue locally, victim ID work might be transferred to another state or country according to the (presumed) geographic location of victims and offenders. As part of this process, and to assist in future investigations, CSAM and associated metadata may be uploaded to and retained in databases both within and outside the jurisdiction in which the material is reported. Existing to 'facilitate the process of identification of child victims of sexual abuse and to minimise duplication of efforts by law enforcement' (INTERPOL 2018: 5), ... such databases include Interpol's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database, the Australian Federal Police's Australian Victim Identification Database (AVID) - previously, the Australian National Victim Identification Database (ANVIL) - and the US Child Victim Identification Program (CVIP) (which is unique in being managed by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), rather than by law enforcement directly). They may also serve as authorised 'clearing houses' for formally classified CSAM to be used for the purpose of generating individual cryptographic hashes – a kind of 'file fingerprint' that allows for extensive scanning of digital content to identify known CSAM without having to further circulate the abuse material itself among law enforcement agencies.

CSAM may also be handled by law enforcement officers in other parts of the policing workflow, as summarised in Table 2. Specialist digital forensics teams are often tasked with (for example) creating a forensic image of a hard drive or personal digital device to enable detailed analysis of content (such as image and video files, messages, and internet search history) that may later be relied on in court as evidence of child sex offences. Law enforcement agencies may also act as mediating bodies to enable external access to data about child sexual abuse – including access to datasets consisting of CSAM content (Gangwar et al. 2021; Laranjeira et al. 2022; Westlake et al. 2022) – for purposes of research and/or technology development.

Table 2

CSAM Use Within Law Enforcement Agencies

Who	Purpose/context(why)	Example activities
Digital forensics technicians Subject matter experts (with deep knowledge of CSAM data and offending)	Preparing copies of material for analysis (forensic imaging) Development of capabilities Supporting research collaborations Supporting take-down operations of external organisations (e.g. internet platforms)	Using datasets for R&D Preparing datasets for eyes-off or supervised access research uses: (commissioned research, collaborative research or other authorised use) Hash generation; maintenance of CSAM databases Coordination of hash-sets with other agencies and external organisations
Digital forensics technicians	Recording incidences of CSAM that have been detected in order to: – avoid duplicating investigative effort – enable online platforms to quickly identify known CSAM and remove it	Creating unique hash codes for CSAM items in order to subsequently recognise previously detected CSAM Maintenance of the source CSAM as evidence (that hash equates to CSAM content, if that were to be contested) Sharing hash sets with other agencies Sharing hash sets with online platforms so that known material can be detected and taken down
Specialist investigators (primarily, those tasked to child sexual abuse crimes; use of CSAM and/or associated data may be by other specialists including human trafficking; financial crimes and so on)	Classification of material Victim identification Investigation of offenders Cross jurisdictional coordination	Close examination of material Transmission of content to/receipt of content from centralised law-enforcement databases for sharing between agencies Use of facial recognition technologies
Covert operations (undercover agents)	Infiltration and disruption of perpetrator networks such as dark web chat boards	Use of CSAM for ‘credentialing’ Temporarily running networks
Consulting specialists	Developing cases prior to handing over to prosecution Support during court proceedings	For example, external medical specialists providing expert opinion for age estimation Technical/software specialists assisting in age progression visualisation or comparative assessment
Key literature: Dalins et al. 2018; ECPAT International 2018; Franqueira et al. 2018; INHOPE 2022a; Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council 2017; Witting 2018.		

The development of automation technology for tackling CSAM is motivated by the exponentially increasing volumes of material being reported and investigated (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children 2011, 2021) and complicated by the recent emergence of AI-generated CSAM (Internet Watch Foundation 2024). The sheer number of items that need to be viewed, categorised and analysed for investigative clues strains limited law enforcement and legal resources (Dalins et al. 2018). Additionally, many working in law enforcement, forensic analysis, the courts and related areas can suffer trauma resulting from repeated and ongoing exposure to often highly disturbing material (Brown, Fielding and Grover 1999; Powell et al. 2015; Seigfried-Spellar 2018). Both these factors limit the effectiveness of systemic responses to CSAM and, while not entirely removing the need for human analysis, automated analysis of CSAM goes some way towards addressing this. However, there is an obvious tension between individual victim and survivor preferences and the good-faith use of CSAM in this context.

Whether as evidence of a crime, or as a data source that might help prevent future crimes, there are various legitimate (legally sanctioned) ways in which CSAM may be – and is – used by police, the courts, private sector organisations and researchers. Because of the extreme sensitivity of the content, and because the transmission and possession of CSAM are criminal offences, most use cases (particularly by persons external to police) are both ‘hands off’ and ‘eyes off’: they do not involve transmission of content outside police custody, and do not involve content depicting abuse being viewed by people not involved in an investigation.

However, this is not always so, as legal proceedings may involve CSAM being transmitted and viewed outside police hands (Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council 2017; Sanchez et al. 2019). While every case differs, use of CSAM in court cases can involve it being seen by medical experts, prosecutors, lawyers for the defence, the accused, jury members, magistrates and judges. Further context is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

CSAM as Used Within Court Proceedings

Who	Purpose/context (why)
Prosecutors	Assessing whether a case is prosecutable on the evidence (i.e. if a conviction is likely) Legal requirements for brief of evidence that may be called on in court to be prepared ahead of trial commencement Legal requirements in relation to provision of information to defence counsel
Defence lawyers	Preparation of defence: understanding the full extent of charges against the client, and legal analysis of the evidence that may be presented by the prosecution to substantiate these charges
The accused	Legal rights of persons to be fully informed of the extent of criminal charges that are laid against them <i>Note:</i> such rights may not apply in all jurisdictions; however, they do apply in Australia.
Medical experts	Visual analysis of images to provide expert opinion on the age of child/ren depicted in CSAM that is being presented as evidence
Jury members	Evidentiary: assessing CSAM presented in evidence as proof of the charges being prosecuted
Magistrates and judges	Evidentiary (magistrates court/non-jury trial): assessing CSAM presented in evidence as proof of the charges being prosecuted Sentencing: assessing representative sample as an indicator of the severity of offending, to help decide judicial sentence
Administrators (eyes-off use post-conviction)	Reparations: In the United States, there are legal mechanisms in place that provide for formal schemes whereby CSAM victims can opt in to be notified and compensated when CSAM in which they appear is part of the evidence on which persons are convicted of child sex offences. <i>Note:</i> there are currently no such provisions in Australia. The United Nations is investigating implications for a similar scheme in Europe).
Key literature: INHOPE 2022b; Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council 2017; Sanchez et al. 2019.	

A second example that may involve the CSAM being viewed by persons outside law enforcement is police use of material as part of covert operations to disrupt organised CSAM distribution networks. This is not a common practice, nor is it allowable in all jurisdictions; however, it does occur. In Australia, for example, the Queensland Police Taskforce Argos used real CSAM images to help infiltrate dark web membership sites dedicated to the trade in CSAM (Bleakley 2019). In this instance, content was used to establish and maintain the ‘credentials’ of undercover officers in their false identities as CSAM users and site administrators. The imagery used for this purpose was drawn from extant CSAM that police had seized in other investigations.

Both of these examples present use cases that are potentially highly distressing to CSAM victims and survivors, who clearly indicate that not knowing who has seen or might see the content is a significant trigger for continuing anxiety in relation to the existence of CSAM in which they are depicted (Binford et al. 2015; Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017; Martin 2015):

Every day of my life I live in constant fear that someone will see my pictures and recognize me and that I will be humiliated all over again ... I want it all erased. I want it all stopped. But I am powerless to stop it just like I was powerless to stop my uncle. When they first discovered what my uncle did, I went to therapy and thought I was getting over this. I was very wrong. ‘Amy’ (extract from Victim Impact Statement, cited in Binford et al. 2015: 121)

Instances where sanctioned use of CSAM involves child sex offenders viewing that content are likely to be particularly difficult for victims and survivors to process emotionally. This does not mean all use of CSAM in court processes or covert operations is inappropriate or unwanted by victims and survivors; however, it does suggest that more work may be needed to better communicate, or communicate more transparently, with victims and survivors about the existence of (and rationale for) such uses, possibly even involving them in decision-making. As one lawyer, acting for abused children, explains:

Several of my clients would have welcomed police use of their images in the battle to track down abusers. They know how skilled these men are at hiding and understand what it takes to catch them, ... If victims could be consulted along the way, it would give them a sense of control. Control is exactly what they were deprived of during the assaults. (Høydal, Stangvik and Hansen 2017)

This specificity is missing from the limited CSAM literature – whether victims and survivors would, overall, prefer (or not) to know about these, or any other of the sanctioned uses of CSAM after it enters police custody. This missing information is critical knowledge for achieving institutional processes that are trauma-sensitive and respectful of victims and survivors. Legal and ethical sensitivities necessitate that police-mediated uses of CSAM – whether internal to law enforcement or involving external parties (INTERPOL 2018) – are subject to stringent controls (Muir 2005). Similarly, protocols should ensure that people who design, apply and operate under those controls have an informed understanding of how victims and survivors are impacted by authorised uses of CSAM.

Similar questions arise when considering the disclosure of the existence of abusive images to now-adult victims who may be unaware of the existence of that CSAM. A theoretical analysis (without direct research participation by persons with lived experience) by Ost and Gillespie (2019) suggests that, for this situation, potential harms outweigh the benefits, although they acknowledge there is ‘a need for further empirical research exploring practitioners’ and victims’ views to take forward this theoretical analysis’ (2019: 240–241). At the same time, they also recognise – as do we – the dangers of generalising the autonomous views of a research sample of individual victims and survivors.

Transparency and Secrecy

Technology development that supports operational policing to counter CSAM remains necessarily opaque to some degree, as it is critical not to reveal functional information that can be used by criminals to evade detection. Along with the inscrutability of AI algorithms (Castelvecchi 2016), their design by private sector entities (i.e. the underlying technologies together with the training/testing data) is also subject to commercial sensitivities. Peer-reviewed academic papers provide more information about such technologies undergoing research and development than can be found from private sector entities about actual products. By comparison, by and large, public claims made by private sector organisations about efficacy are not independently verified or transparently explained, despite such figures often being relied upon by policy-makers (Kabelka 2022).

CSAM used in research and technology development can, in exceptional cases, involve eyes-on use of CSAM data by persons external to law enforcement (Table 4). Given the status of CSAM content under law, any such access is required to pass stringent ethical review. Although such access is rarely granted, exceptions can be found in published research literature. Examples are supervised access to unidentified victim content in Interpol’s ICSE database being allowed to a nominated ECPAT researcher as part of joint research (INTERPOL 2018) and chat logs detailing arrangements for procurement of

child abuse material (Napier, Teunissen and Boxall 2021) and documenting the online grooming of children (Powell, Casey and Rouse 2021) being made available for analysis led by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Table 4

CSAM use Within Research and Technology Development

Who	Example purposes
Universities; private sector	Developing capabilities to detect previously unknown CSAM via vision-based AI tools (using existing CSAM as test and/or training data)
Universities; private sector	Developing capabilities to classify and/or triage images/video against CSAM classification schemata via vision-based AI tools (using existing CSAM as test and/or training data)
Universities; private sector	Developing capabilities to detect predatory/grooming behaviour via language-based AI tools (using existing text based CSAM as test and/or training data)
Universities, government	Non-technological psychological or criminological studies aimed at understanding and countering perpetrator motivations and behaviours, such as predatory, grooming, or exploitative activity (using existing text based CSAM as research data)
Government, NGOs	Analysis of CSAM for criminology, law, policing, policy research and so on.
Key literature: Bursztein et al. 2019; Dalins et al. 2018; INHOPE 2022a; Thorn 2023b; Westlake 2020.	

Opportunities for Further Research

The existing literature also does not explore in detail the views of victims and survivors regarding potential input into how records of their abuse are represented in institutional holdings. Victim impact statements (Project Safe Childhood 2023: 11), participation in advocacy or research to share descriptive or narrative insights directed towards shaping policy and formal mechanisms to put preferences regarding reuse on record are all avenues that might allow greater agency.

For some victims and survivors, recovering agency over CSAM imagery may be a powerful tool in trauma healing. For others it may be a source of further pain that hinders recovery (Ost and Gillespie 2019). Understanding the spectrum of views – and the potential harms of use cases – is particularly important to ensure that systems and practices intended to support victims and survivors consider their expressed needs and wishes as well as emotional/psychological capacity for continued contact with authorities in relation to CSAM. Greater knowledge of victim and survivor perspectives is required in both the general sense (‘this is how images of abuse might be used’) and the specific sense (‘this is how images of your abuse will be used’).

Victim and Survivor Perspectives?

Where, then, does the power lie in PhotoDNA* and in the service of Whom? [There is] the notion of a ‘survivor centered approach to records’ in cases of documenting human rights violations, but in the case of PhotoDNA, the survivors themselves seem to be largely absent from consideration altogether. (Roberts 2021)

* PhotoDNA is an example of hashing technology used for duplicate CSAM detection

The aim of this section is to move from a review of what has (or hasn’t) been accomplished to look forward, suggesting avenues by which victim and survivor perspectives on the institutional use of CSAM may be sought and incorporated into policy and practice.

We suggest that studies from other disciplines can be applied to CSAM research to help inform theoretical and empirical understandings of how people with lived experience of complex trauma can be brought into research and practice in this domain. Parallel literature can provide a range of insights into methodologies that prioritise care and respect when researching with adult victims and survivors of trauma in participatory contexts, or that provide channels for the views and preferences of children. Also highly relevant to organisational use of CSAM, are bodies of work that demonstrate the impact for victims and survivors of being able to exercise or reclaim personal agency through intervention on how evidence of trauma is managed in institutional processes.

Questions around ethical and caring practices relating to CSAM acquisition and use by institutions also resonate with much broader questions of data ownership, access, preservation and reuse, as well as institutional relationships with people. In particular, in both research and practice, there has been a reckoning with datafication and associated assumptions about how information should be captured, who has the right to capture it, and who can use it – shifting power from data-holding nations, institutions or individuals towards those that consider the needs, wants and experiences of those to whom the information pertains (see Broomfield and Reutter 2022; Christen 2012; Dencik, Jansen and Metcalfe 2018; Jo and Gebru 2020; Tansey 2020).

This turn is evoked through a focus on person-centred approaches to service relationships – a term first established as a theory in psychology practice (Rogers 1961) that has continued to be developed across a wide range of contemporary contexts, including health, social work and archival studies (e.g. see Caswell and Cifor 2016; Goodrich and Cornwell 2008; Health Innovation Network 2016; World Health Organization 2021). Approaches that emphasise relationships that respect the agency and capacity of all those involved have come to be employed across a wide variety of disciplines. Such practice is also in alignment with the concept of an ethics of care, a philosophical/epistemological orientation that prioritises relationships, particularly with an emphasis on emotional sensitivity as well as notions of empathy, friendship, love and compassion (Douglas 2021; Gilligan 1982; Jagger 1989; Noddings 1995).

Although the full depth of both of these concepts extends far beyond the scope of this review, a general understanding of what these orientations mean is a useful starting point for exploring the current epistemological turn of researchers who are engaged with trauma survivors.

Participatory Research

In the context of research relationships, one method of increasing person-centredness is to engage in participatory research. Participatory approaches generally demonstrate ‘1) a commitment to the needs and interests of the community; 2) a direct engagement with the community so as to permit its problems and goals to be defined in its own voice; 3) a moral commitment to the transformation of social, political and economic injustices directly afflicting the community studied’ (Petras and Porpora 1993: 108). This can mean involvement of participants in any and all stages of research, from design to dissemination, although many approaches still typically focus on matters of data collection (Grace et al. 2019).

The person-centredness of participatory approaches suggests that they are particularly valuable when working with communities that have experienced a lack of agency in their experiences (Aldridge 2015; Robins and Wilson 2015). As such, they are frequently employed in research with trauma survivors using a subset of research methods known as community-based participatory research (CBPR). Although not a singular methodology, CBPR typically involves engagement of the researcher with established community groups and intense consultation with the engaged communities in the form of the development of focus groups, taskforces and/or steering committees that work to design and direct the research (Israel et al. 2001; Wallerstein et al. 2017). The methods and goals that emerge from CBPR initiatives are wide ranging, are intended to be based on community needs and desires, and often incorporate existing connections and services that the participating organisations maintain and provide (Nelson et al. 1998; Ragavan et al. 2020; White et al. 2013).

Common activities in which participatory approaches engage include the collaborative collection of new information about a community (Cortez et al. 2011; Sullivan et al. 2005; Valandra et al. 2019), the analysis or design of processes to support the needs of victims and survivors (Hester et al. 2015; Poleshuck et al. 2018), and the creation of public health/educational materials that spread awareness and aim for prevention of the traumatic event(s) community members have survived (Bloom et al. 2009; Miller et al. 2022; Roberto et al. 2013).

Benefits of Participatory Research

Researchers engaging in participatory research benefit from the ability to utilise community perspectives to better orientate their efforts to produce results that will be effective and useful to the community, as well as the ability to develop deeper relationships and partnerships that might otherwise not have been accessible to a research-only team.

In terms of the participant communities themselves, community members might gain several types of benefits from partnering with researchers (Mason and Clemans 2008). These can include a fusion of research and practice in which abstract takeaways and reflections on the mechanisms of the process are disseminated to wider research and practice communities; a better understanding of the pervasiveness of a traumatic phenomenon, validating individual experiences while articulating the societal power structures that might not be as visible to victims and survivors feeling isolated in their trauma; and empowerment through storytelling and witnessing that amplify community voice and experience, recognising the authority of participants to define and describe their experiences as they see fit.

Caveats

Although participatory approaches can heighten participant agency in the research relationship while supporting restorative and reparative justice, there is no way to entirely eliminate the emotional and intellectual labour that research entails. Pierre et al. (2021: 2) define this labour as ‘epistemic burden’, or ‘the actual burden that participatory design research collaborations place on community organizations or community members’.

It is also impossible to ignore the fact that, even if the goal is to place community or individuals first, participatory research involves exposure to research methods and paradigms. Commonly encountered problems may include the need to orient community participants to research processes (Cortez et al. 2011) and the potential for complicated dynamics between funder and community expectations (Ghanbarpour et al. 2018). As a result, it is the responsibility of the researcher to remain critically reflexive about the research process and their role in it (Mortimer, Fileborn and Henry 2021).

Similarly, Ghanbarpour et al. (2018) propose that researchers should be talking about what they call ‘community-led research’, which aims to further diffuse issues of power imbalances and the division between community and researcher spaces in the work, particularly through the integration of trauma-informed practice on the part of the researcher.

Caring Practice

In addition to bringing lived experience and participation into research, a focus on the integration of concepts such as ethics of care, relationality and trauma-informed practice into client-facing protocols is another way to foreground victim and survivor perspectives.

Trauma-Informed Practice

While there is no standard to which organisations are held in implementing trauma-informed practice, researchers conducting reviews of trauma informed literature, such as Hanson and Lang (2014, 2016), Donisch, Bray and Gewirtz (2016) and Guevara et al. (2021), as well as practitioner-centred organisations (e.g. Mental Health Coordinating Council 2018; National Child Traumatic Stress Network 2014) have identified commonalities in the types of solutions that are considered to be trauma informed.

The Agency for Clinical Innovation (2023: 2) provides a succinct description of this typology: Trauma-informed care looks like:

- treating consumers with empathy and compassion
- taking the time to engage with clients in order to build safety
- asking questions to understand a consumer’s experience
- providing consumers with access to space, resources or supports when dysregulated
- providing choice and collaboration wherever possible
- assuming consumers are doing the best they can with the resources they have, at all times.

Evidence of these different strands of trauma-informed practice can be found throughout literature that reviews and problematises existing service models for working with survivors of complex trauma, including child sexual abuse (Campbell, Goodman-Williams and Javorka 2019; Knoche, Summers and Miller 2018; Rich 2019). For example, developed over 20 years ago, trauma-informed care and practice has been implemented in policing operations, using a strengths-based approach and understanding the physiological and psychological impacts of trauma from a police operational lens. Tangible benefits to trauma-informed policing have been shown to include a better understanding of the challenging behaviours of traumatised young people, learning new responsive approaches that increase safety and trust and gaining an awareness of trauma that can promote resilience for organisations as well as the individual. Rich (2019), in particular, provides a comprehensive discussion on the benefits, techniques, challenges and implications for implementation of trauma-informed policing on management, recruitment, training and inter-organisational collaboration. Two kinds of awareness of trauma emerge from these themes in the provision of trauma-informed services.

Individual Histories of Trauma

One of the most common techniques advocated for is universal screening and the development of emotionally sensitive screening techniques (Ghandour, Campbell and Lloyd 2015; Harris and Fallot 2001; Raja, Rabinowitz and Gray 2021), which enable service providers to appropriately interact with and direct individuals who might have trauma-specific needs. In addition to healthcare settings, this technique can be applied in educational contexts (Pataky, Báez and Renshaw 2019).

Collectively Accommodating for Trauma and Its Effects

Wilson, Fauci and Goodman (2015: 589) describe three environmental factors identified in trauma-informed literature: creating a welcoming environment; demonstrating the safety and security of the space; and the importance of establishing calm and quiet spaces. All these factors relate to choices made both about the literal physicality of the space (see also Bollo and Donfrio 2022; McCracken and Hogan 2021) and the intellectual factors that contribute to the space (Cavanaugh 2016; McKinsey et al. 2022).

Beyond environment factors, trauma-informed practice also involves the need to reflect on the types of services that are offered by an organisation. Practices and policies that are designed in a trauma-informed manner provide support for different courses of decision-making than those that do not, and they also often propose different orientations to established services and proceedings – for example, in responses to student behaviour (Phifer and Hull 2016), court proceedings (Garvin and Belooof 2015; Randall and Haskell 2013) or social work (Levenson 2020). Although individuals within any system may operate in a trauma-informed manner, the development of sustained change in practice requires reinforcement, support and the buy-in and investment of leadership (Crosby 2015; Fraser et al. 2014).

Interpersonal Interactions and Professional Training

Individual service providers' knowledge of trauma and emotional regulatory capacities plays a vital role in the provision of trauma-informed care and services (Brunzell, Stokes and Waters 2019; Thomas, Crosby and Vanderhaar 2019). In particular, identification of potential trauma responses and implementation of de-escalation techniques usually require skills, practice and development if they are to be deployed effectively (Davidson 2021; Fraser et al. 2014). As a result, the literature strongly recommends profession-specific training in emotional sensitivity and education about trauma and its effects.

Professional training is also viewed as being increasingly important for addressing potential vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue that might emerge from heightened engagement in empathetic service provision.

A Note on Intersectionality

It is important to recognise that marginalised individuals are often disproportionately impacted by systems that 'create enormous population-level disparities of life chances' (Spade 2015: 60). Explorations of the impact of trauma – and often a lack of trauma-informed practice in the experiences of marginalised communities – demonstrate the need to understand the intersectional nature of identity and experiences (Bryant-Davis 2019; Kulkarni 2019; McIntosh 2019; Tujague and Ryan 2021) to avoid the siloing of trauma-informed approaches in their design and implementation.

Beyond Improving Service Provision

In addition to its direct benefits, trauma-informed research engagement can facilitate engagement and leadership of conversations around the development of policy and practice. The shift of conversations from services to policy can occur through changing researcher conceptualisations of when and why participant voices might be consulted. Asking participants to 'comment on matters of public importance rather than personal trauma' offers an opportunity to move beyond research hyperfixation on recounting trauma and towards 'build[ing] more trust and rapport, but also interest, enthusiasm, ambition and leadership' (Purtell 2023: 143).

Making space for storytelling is valuable not only to bringing participants' voices into research spaces that they might not have otherwise had access to (Rolan et al. 2019), but it also has implications for the development of powerful policy and practice tools (Department of Social Services 2015). Connecting those with lived experience and individuals whose work directly affects their wellbeing presents exciting and important opportunities to reify victim and survivor experiences in ways that abstraction fails to convey. An example of these manifestations of trauma-informed and participatory research from the related Child Protection sector can be found in Rolan et al. (2019, 2020), where a cohort of young care leavers worked with a transdisciplinary team to drive the development of a record-keeping system for records of care.

Incorporation of participatory research methods and trauma-informed practice in work with victims and survivors requires an understanding of their experiences and views, together with the intentional choice to elevate these perspectives for better outcomes and praxis. Engaging with CSAM victims and survivors in participatory research-based discussions about their opinions on CSAM reuse may represent an important step in moving towards a more empowering, victim- and survivor-led approach.

Connecting to the Child Sexual Abuse Landscape

We have, for the most part, incorporated research that focuses on trauma and, to some extent, children; however, *participatory* research with adult victims and survivors of child sexual abuse is not so easily identifiable within the literature

using the terms from the above discussion. Nonetheless, we do want to provide an overview of a small and relevant body of literature, particularly as it most directly relates to the research that we propose must come next.

Surveys and Stories: A Different Type of Participation

Some of the most important research that has been conducted in the realms of child sexual abuse and CSAM has not been participatory its design but has still been crucial in the collection and amplification of victim and survivor voices in a way that cannot be overlooked. Reports and surveys such as those produced by ECPAT International (Lynch, 2017) and the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2017) provide researchers and practitioners with accounts that can be used to amplify victim and survivor experiences without having to re-interview or over-research the community. For example, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2019) makes use of material from the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2017) in tandem with materials from its own interviews and workshops with mental health practitioners.

Designing Opportunities for Better Care

Studies that have engaged victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in participatory research have focused predominantly on the design of support services such as professionally delivered counselling and support (van Loon and Krallik 2008), and community-member delivered counselling and support (Ellis et al. 2023; Schlingmann 2023). Additional work has been done to consider the information and care needs of survivors (Matthew and Barron 2015; van Loon, Koch and Krallik 2004).

Designing Opportunities for Better Research

In addition to research on services (real or designed), Stern and Nathanaili-Penotet (2023) engaged survivors in participatory, arts-based research that examined the validity of the paradigm for working with survivors of child sexual abuse. The authors concluded that participatory approaches should be prioritised in work with victims and survivors, but also cautioned that, ‘given the number of dimensions in which symbolic violence can lead to complications, in several settings, the level of survivor-led research as one step further might be required’ (2013: 243). This is corroborated by findings reported by Matthew and Barron (2023: 650), whose survey of survivors of ritual abuse found that participatory research activities such as ‘helping design research, anonymity, and more research opportunities’ can help to assuage survivors’ anxieties relating to research participation.

Where to From Here?

Given all of this, we propose there is a need for research programs to surface and communicate victim and survivor perspectives on the sanctioned use of CSAM, and to do so in ways that are:

- *Participatory.* Co-designed and run with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse (if not CSAM itself); governed by an advisory board comprising academics, professionals, and those with living experience of child sexual abuse; oriented towards not only knowledge generation, but actionable recommendations that can materially affect the wellbeing of victims and survivors in relation to institutional use of CSAM – understanding that one-size will definitely not fit all; living experience participants being remunerated for their expertise; communication of outcomes not only academically or for professional sectors, but for victims and survivors and the community at large.
- *Trauma-informed and responsive.* Emplacement of support mechanisms for research participants; being continually conscious of not contributing to ongoing trauma through subjectification of research participants; flexibility in engagement, meeting participants where they are in their living experience; multi-modal engagement methods (surveys, interviews, etc.) that support participants’ ability to commit time and attention; a focus of the perspectives and forward-looking advice rather than yet another recounting of trauma; and transparency of data collection, use and communications.

Conclusion

Our investigation of the literature suggests that there is general acceptance among law enforcement and child welfare professionals regarding the existence and validity of experiential specificities unique to CSAM victimisation, which are distinct from either the associated experience of sexual abuse or general effects of complex trauma. Most notably, these experiences and lived effects are described in the literature surrounding the landmark US statute 18 U.S.C. 2259, which mandates restitution for victims of ‘child pornography’ [sic] (Bhatty 2015; Binford et al 2015); in the responses provided by victims and survivors to the benchmark C3P survivor survey (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017); and in subsequent advocacy work by CSAM survivor collectives such as the Phoenix 11, the Chicago Males and the Aramid Collective.

The literature also evidences that these unique circumstances are not being addressed sufficiently by corresponding specialist supports (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2023b; Salter and Woodlock 2024). While some progress has been made on this front, much work still remains to be done. Our literature survey suggests that, despite the known benefits of lived experience and participatory research perspectives, inclusion of CSAM survivor perspectives in the design of research and policy governing institutional reuse of CSAM is still a rarity. However, the growing focus on survivor-centred outcomes that is visible in the recent literature leaves us hopeful that this can extend to more participatory inclusion opportunities, which will provide real scope for victims and survivors to set their agenda and parameters with regard to downstream use of CSAM after it enters police custody.

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We seek to honour the lived expertise of all survivors of child sexual abuse, harnessing all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds, and commit to substantially addressing the harm of child sexual abuse, now and well into the future. We recognise that there are children and young people today who are experiencing sexual abuse and dedicate ourselves to doing all we can to promote their effective protection and care.

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Legislation

Criminal Code Act 1899 (Qld).

Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth).