



SEARCHLIGHT 2023

CHILDLIGHT ANNUAL FLAGSHIP REPORT

TECHNICAL NOTES

Project

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**The impact of online distribution
on child sexual abuse material
survivors in Australia**

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The impact of online distribution on child sexual abuse material survivors in Australia

Technical Note

The findings of the study are highly sensitive. The project has identified real and ongoing risks to the safety of the three survivors and their families. Details of the research findings cannot be publicly reported as yet. These findings have been shared with the relevant authorities to inform policy reform.

The first author collaborated with the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P)'s analyst team in August 2023 to identify three Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) survivors based on three criteria:

1. They are known to be Australian victims,
2. Their CSAM is actively traded amongst online networks of offenders and
3. Their case illustrates important policy and practice questions about the privacy and safety of CSAM survivors.

The project is based on data extracted from Project Arachnid, an innovative set of victim-focused tools operated by C3P to reduce the availability and harms of online CSAM. These tools include an automated webcrawler that detects and seeks removal of CSAM, and a web scraper that archives online chats from websites where offenders discuss child sex offending for retrieval and analysis (more information about Project Arachnid).

Distribution data for each series was extracted from Project Arachnid. Offender chats were searched for terms relevant to each survivor (such as the name of their CSAM series). Offender discussion about the series were subject to thematic analysis, with a focus on violations of privacy and safety. All data has been anonymised. Ethics approval for the project was granted by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (HC230917) and by the University of Edinburgh.

The project has key limitations. Firstly, Arachnid data is only available since 2018, however all three series have been in circulation for longer than this. As a result, the project does not document the full extent of online distribution experienced by the victims. Secondly, Arachnid identifies the number of distribution points (for example, a URL that links to a file of CSAM) but each distribution point does not represent an equivalent level of harm. For instance, one distribution point may be to a single image, an hour-long video, or an archive file with multiple files, with escalating levels of exposure and risk. Arachnid also cannot determine how many times CSAM was downloaded from a single link. As a result, the project cannot, as yet, measure the totality of harms associated with each distribution point. Future iterations of the project may incorporate new data sources to address this.

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