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Research project FAQs

Why did you only survey men?

Men are more likely to be involved in child sexual offences. A recent meta-analysis found that female offenders commit 2.2% of child sex offences reported to police, while 11.6% of child sexual abuse survivors identify female perpetrators in retrospective victimisation surveys (Cortoni et al. 2017).

Furthermore, women who abuse children are different from men who abuse children. Female offenders are more likely to co-offend than male offenders (Williams and Briere, 2015). These women often report being physically and psychologically coerced by these male partners to commit the offences. A study by Gannon et al. (2008) found that 91% of female offenders had experienced domestic abuse before they engaged in criminal behaviour. Additionally, female offenders were nearly three-and-a-half times more likely to use drugs than their male counterparts.

These gendered differences in offending patterns suggest that community-level prevalence research into female perpetrated sexual abuse should be designed specifically for women, rather than distributing a survey to women that does not capture their specific risk factors and behaviours associated with child sexual abuse.

How did you find the men for your survey?

Our participants were provided by CloudResearch (<https://www.cloudresearch.com>), an online recruitment and survey company with access to an international pool of over 1.5 million participants. Online panels are well suited for sensitive research topics where participants are traditionally reluctant to participate due to the lack of anonymity, such as telephone or in-person methods (Porter et al., 2019). Evidence also indicates that data provided by CloudResearch is more likely to be of a higher quality than that from other online survey platforms or the use of undergraduate students (Douglas et al., 2023). We obtained three stratified random samples of men aged 18 years or older representative of the Australian, UK, and US male population in terms of age, residential region, annual household income, and educational attainment.

What are the limitations of using online recruitment?

CloudResearch employs various online recruitment methods, including crowdsourcing platforms like MKurk and PrimePanels. Additionally, they offer a Managed Research service, which was utilised for this survey. The Managed Research service provides the support of an experienced project manager when targeting hard-to-reach or more complicated sample groups. This survey aimed to target men over 18 in Australia, the UK, and the US who met the study's representative requirements for age, location, income, and education. With the Managed Research program, a CloudResearch project manager posts "tasks" on participants' CloudResearch portals to recruit individuals who meet the study's specific demographic criteria.

The recruitment method used in our study relied on convenience sampling and was a nonprobability strategy, which means that we could not ensure that every member of specific populations had an equal chance of being invited to participate. As a result, there could be a lack of generalizability of our findings. Additionally, there have been criticisms of crowdsourcing samples for recruiting participants seen as “cheaters” or “speeders” (Smith et al., 2016). Cheaters are participants who misrepresent their identity by lying about demographic data or sampling criteria to ensure inclusion in the study (Mullen et al., 2021). Participants can also use computer algorithms and artificial intelligence bots to complete a study multiple times on crowdsourcing platforms, leading to the possibility of invalid data within a sample (Smith et al., 2016). Speeders, on the other hand, are participants who progress quickly through a study, do not read the questions and directions, and therefore pose a threat to the validity of the data (Smith et al., 2016).

Services offered by CloudResearch aim to minimise these limitations through a pre-survey vetting system called Sentry, which uses both behavioural assessment and technological checks to identify and remove low-quality participants before they enter the survey. We also included attention checks throughout the survey and removed any participants who failed these checks. In addition, we asked an honesty question at the end of the survey, as used in previous research on child sex offending, which asked participants to rate how honest they were in their responses (Ó Ciardha et al., 2021). Participants who stated they were not honest were removed from the survey.

How did you measure ‘sexual offending’?

Five survey items were used to determine if men had sexually offended against people below the age of 18 years. Four of these items are considered online sexual offences against children (determined as under the age of 18) in Australia, the UK and the US. These are:

- Have you knowingly and deliberately viewed pornographic material containing people below the age of 18;
- Have you flirted or had sexual conversations with a person below the age of 18 online;
- Have you webcammed in a sexual way with a person below the age of 18;
- Have you paid for online sexual interactions, images or videos involving a person below the age of 18;
- Have you had sex or sexual contact with a person below the age of 18 while over the age of 18.

For more information on online sexual offences with children under 18 in the UK, see here: <https://www.ceop.police.uk/Safety-Centre/what-is-online-child-sexual-abuse/>

In the US, see here: <https://report.cybertip.org/faqs>.

In Australia, see here: <https://www.acce.gov.au/help-and-support/what-is-online-child-exploitation>

How did you measure ‘sexual feelings’?

Six survey questions determined the measure of sexual feelings towards people under 18. These are:

- Do you have sexual feelings towards people below the age of 18 years;
- Would you have sexual contact with a child between 12 to 14 years if no one would find out;
- Would you have sexual contact with a child between 10 to 12 years if no one would find out;
- Would you have sexual contact with a child younger than 10 years if no one would find out;
- Do you have concerns about sexual feelings towards people below the age of 18 years;
- Is the lowest age you find attractive under 18 years.

The age of consent is lower than 18 in parts of the US, UK and Australia depending on the offence category. How do you know you did not capture consensual sexual activity?

As the age of consent varies throughout Australia, the US and the UK, we used under 18 as the definition of a child, consistent with legislation on online sexual offences and international legal definitions of childhood. Therefore, some of what is noted as contact sexual offending with a child in our study may be consensual activity. However, we are confident that our data has not inflated the prevalence of adult sexual contact with children for the following reasons:

- **Men who reported sexual contact with children were older on average than the rest of the sample:** Sixty-two Australian men (3.2%) said yes to the question, "Have you had sex or sexual contact with a person below the age of 18 while over the age of 18?". Of these men, 95% were over 24 years of age, and almost half (48.4%) were over 54 years of age. The odds of having had sexual contact with someone under 18 years was 4.80 (95% CI = 2.29 - 10.06) times greater for men aged 65 years or older than those aged 18-34 years. If our survey was misidentifying a significant group of men reporting consensual sexual activity with children (for instance, a 19 year old have sex with a 17 year old) then we would expect the contact offending group to skew younger rather than older.
- **The majority of men who reported sexual contact with children had other indicators of sex offending or sexual interest in children:** Of the 62 men, 70.0% had also engaged in online child sex offending and/or had sexual feelings towards children. Most of the remaining men indicated that they *may* have sexual feelings towards children or *may* have engaged sexually with a child online. This indicates that it is most likely that these men were not in consenting relationships with someone under the age of 18.
- **Our findings are supported by other studies:** Our finding that 3.2% of men have had sexual contact with a child is in line with other community studies of men's sexual interest in children and, therefore, provides further evidence that our survey has most likely captured sexual offending rather than consensual activity with someone under 18 years of age. A representative study by Dombert et al. (2015) showed that 3.2% of men reported sexual offending against prepubescent children, and a non-representative study by Ó Ciardha et al. (2021) showed 2.9% of men reported having had sexual contact with someone younger than the age of consent since the age of 18.

For reference, the legal age for consensual sex varies between 16 and 17 years across Australian state and territory jurisdictions.

In the US, the majority of states, it is 16 years of age. In the remaining states, the age of consent is either 17 or 18 years old.

In the UK, the legal age of consent is 16 years.

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