The virtual door to online child sexual grooming is wide open

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Credit: The Conversation

[The nature of sexual offending has changed](#) with most interactions occurring online and involving younger victims. This change is seeing people taking more risks by virtually opening their door to "strangers".

A harsh reality of "contact" sexual offending is that many offenders will use various [grooming techniques](#) to enable them to commit [sexual offences](#). Whether this is an online conversation manipulated into a face-

to-face meeting, or a chat in a cafe or bar resulting in a victim being led to a less crowded area, the reoccurring themes are coercion, control and trust.

A new offence of sexual communication with a child was introduced in April 2017. Before this, police could not intervene until groomers attempted to meet victims face-to-face.

The latest figures reveal that a staggering 1,316 offences were recorded in the first six months of this law being introduced in England and Wales. There are now calls for social media sites to do more "grooming prevention" and consider the use of "anti-grooming alerts" for potential victims. But there are some key issues that should be considered before furthering this idea.

What is the true scale of online grooming?

Crime figures released for 2015/16 indicate there were 37,778 child sexual offences (including grooming) in England – that's 36.3 sexual offences per 10,000 children under 16. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland recorded even higher rates.

Within these figures, the NSPCC reported that there were 11,230 child rape offences and 25,577 involving sexual assault/sexual activity against children. These figures are much higher than the reported grooming offences (1,316 over six months). But why?

Crime data does not detail how many sexual offences also included grooming, or whether grooming offences are dropped when evidence of child sexual abuse is found. Undetected grooming offences can lead to horrific sexual abuse, such as in the much publicised Rochdale grooming case (where young girls were targeted by older men who plied them with alcohol) and in the online grooming world too. Child victims describe

grooming as a [key feature](#) of their abuse.

Is it that the intelligence tools available are unable to identify interactions in time to stop contact sexual abuse occurring? There is no doubt that the [demand on police](#) is ever increasing, with this type of crime requiring specialist skills and expertise.

Responsibility on social media companies

Social media companies should do all they can to reduce illegal behaviour on their platforms. A key issue centres on the ability to accurately identify potential groomers. Various studies have reported good results in [identifying grooming behaviour](#). But research has also noted that offenders are using [a wide variety of grooming processes](#) to snare their victims.

Evidence of differing functions within [offender-victim interactions](#) have been observed with some restricting their sexual behaviour to online (fantasy-driven) and others using the internet to facilitate the abuse of children (contact-driven). Research has also shown that a [key part of the "offending pathway"](#) from online to contact abuse is grooming.

Consequently, many researchers agree that although the motivations behind interactions are sexually deviant, they may [seem innocent](#) in nature when observed, making it [difficult to identify](#) before actual [abuse](#) occurs. This becomes more problematic if [young people](#) are the groomers, [displaying complex grooming behaviours](#). Using multiple social media platforms, as well as online and offline methods, further reduces the ability to identify offenders.

There is also the controversial belief that some offenders find engaging in sexual deviant fantasies online [reduces urges](#) to commit contact offences. A real fear is that social media warnings could push these

offenders to interact offline.

But if the intention is for social media companies to give potential child victims "grooming alerts", this puts the onus on victims to acknowledge that they may be subject to grooming. The power a groomer has over a victim may override any considerations to stop interactions.

Those committing these offences are often highly skilled at identifying vulnerable victims, and manipulating them by giving compliments and attention.

> Technology can help protect young people from groomers online. Here's what we think Government needs to do https://t.co/VzxYdbar9D pic.twitter.com/XwIcxiOnaA
>
> — NSPCC (@NSPCC) January 29, 2018

Developing grooming alerts may also inadvertently lead to parents/caregivers taking their eyes off the ball when it comes to their childrens' social media accounts. Assumptions might be made that the technology is able to detect suspicious behaviour better than they can. Not enough is known about childrens' online interactions, with reports only just highlighting this issue within adult populations.

The new child grooming law was introduced to reduce the risk of contact sexual offences. However, it seems the ability to identify grooming behaviours before sexual abuse still falls short. There are issues here for social media companies, the police, teachers and parents. But the message is clear. The virtual door to strangers is wide open. More needs to be done to identify and respond to online sexual grooming.

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