

Police investigators of online child abuse at risk of mental harm

December 10 2020



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Police who investigate online crimes against children, and protect wider society from seeing images of violence against young people, are themselves at risk of moral injury and other psychological harms.

Researchers at the University of Portsmouth and Solent University explored moral injury amongst child exploitation investigators and interviewed police officers from two Constabularies during a year-long study. The CREST (Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats) funded project asked questions relating to motivations for beginning the role, any personality changes, prior trauma, difficulties relating to their current role, coping mechanisms, moral decision making and use of professional support.

Professor Peter Lee, Director of Security and Risk Research and Innovation at the University of Portsmouth, said: "We found that law enforcement professionals who investigate child exploitation can be continually exposed to traumatizing visual images in their jobs for years on end. This makes them particularly vulnerable to moral injury, PTSD, anxiety, depression and secondary trauma."

Speaking ahead of the launch of the report Professor Lee added: "Investigating online child sex crime is an extreme example of regularly and repeatedly witnessing acts that transgress the moral frameworks of those involved. This study is important to find out more about the causes and consequences of moral injury amongst these police investigators to enhance support in the future."

Researchers found that some individuals were distressed by their current role. This was a consequence of repeatedly experiencing intrusive thoughts and images, with overwhelming workloads and timeframes. The study suggests ways to improve management of the psychological distress of viewing indecent images by enhancing current professional support. Police officers rely heavily on family and peer support to help process their distress, rather than use the current help available to them.

Dr. Mark Doyle, Solent University said: "We are enormously grateful to CREST for funding this vitally important research and to those [police](#)

[officers](#) that have taken part. We aim to build on this current research and support it with a further in-depth exploration of the issues raised, by collaborating with relevant government organizations, police and industry authorities where traumatizing imagery is regularly encountered.

"We also aim to improve the recognition, training and professional support for those who conduct this difficult role. We have identified a number of areas for follow-on research and engagement with police online investigators to enhance existing support schemes and develop new specialized training to promote the psychological wellbeing of those on the front line."

The evidence and insights from the research will help to enhance good mental health practice, not just for these [police](#) investigators but for other professionals whose work can be mentally traumatic. The research team hopes to go on to establish greater understanding of the prevalence and severity of mental health difficulties, personality change, mental health stigma, behavioral and other factors that specifically influence wellbeing.

Provided by University of Portsmouth

Citation: Police investigators of online child abuse at risk of mental harm (2020, December 10) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-12-police-online-child-abuse-mental.html>

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