Online Offending Behaviour: Findings from the European Online Grooming Project

Aims

The aim of this European project was to: describe the behaviour of both offenders who groom and young people who are 'groomed',; describe how information, communication technology (ICT) may facilitate online grooming; identify how young people are selected and prepared by online groomers for abuse online; and contribute to the development of prevention initiatives aimed at parents and young people.

Key Findings

- Online groomers are not a homogenous group in terms of their demographic and offending characteristics. Scores on Full Scale Intelligence Quotient (FSIQ) standardised tests were high, with a FSIQ score of over 110 common. The current offence of online grooming also tended to be the first conviction for the sample.

- Limited education or training in ICT was not a barrier to achieving a sophisticated understanding of computing and the Internet. Learning was developed at the workplace and/or by covertly watching the behaviour of family members online. Desktop computers, laptops, as well as gaming consoles were all used to facilitate online grooming. The map of sites and chatrooms accessed by participants encompassed: social networking sites; instant messaging; online dating/romance; image exchange; and sexual abuse sites. Finally, the extent of some groomers' activity meant being online for four to six hours (outside of work) a day.

- Six features of online grooming were identified (vulnerability, scanning, identity, contact, intensity, outcome) alongside two important concurrent factors: offence maintenance and risk management. Movement through the different features of online grooming was neither unitary nor linear. Instead, it was cyclical and involved a pattern of adoption, maintenance, relapse, and re-adoption.

- The process of online grooming was described as taking minutes, hours, days or months. Consequently, online groomers remained at different behavioural points for various lengths of time according to a dynamic inter-relationship between their goals and needs, and the style, needs or reactions of the young person.

- Contact with young people online was made and sustained in four ways. Forums and chat-rooms were used for text communication that continued until the encounter with the young person ended, or escalated into a physical meeting. Alongside text chat, some offenders also described using webcams as a key part of their offending behaviour. Webcams reinforced, strengthened and maintained grooming by bringing some offenders' fantasies to life. Phones were used to contact young people and were described as being a more immediate and intimate method of contact. Finally, online game platforms were used by some men that were attempting to groom young boys. Grooming via game platforms helped to reinforce the fantasy aspect of offending behaviour and gave the men credibility in the eyes of the young men being approached.

- Three types of online groomer were identified across eight behavioural dimensions. These dimensions were whether the offender: had any previous convictions for sexual offending; used their own or another identity; the nature and extent of indecent image use; if they contacted other offenders online; the type of offence-supportive beliefs described; the speed of contact made with young people; how contact was made and sustained; and the outcome of the offence (online offending and/or offline meeting).

Policy Context

The findings have implications for criminal justice policy particularly in respect to the risk assessment and treatment of Internet Sexual Offenders who currently receive a diverse range of interventions across Europe. This research could contribute to programme content in various ways. For online groomers without offline contact histories and no previous conviction, it is not clear if current static risk assessment scales can be reliably used. For static scales to accurately assess the future risk for online grooming, it would be helpful to consider the number of people contacted online and whether multiple identities were used. The dynamic risk factors it would be helpful to consider include: the role of indecent images and sexual chat in maintaining the offence process; and the impact of the online environment on disinhibition, with particular regard to anonymity and identity masking.

Methodology

The European Online Grooming Project had three separate but interlinked phases. The first was a scoping project that involved a literature review, review of police case files and interviews with key stakeholders. Phase 2 of the research provided the principal focus to understand groomers' behaviour. This involved in-depth interviews with male offenders convicted of online grooming in the UK, Belgium and Norway (N = 33). Online groomers' chat-logs were sourced from Italy. Phase 3 comprised of focus groups with young people in three of the countries (UK, Italy and Belgium). This highlight presents the results of Phase 2 of the research.

Background

The European Online Grooming Project was funded by the EC's Safer Internet Programme.