

Costs of online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Australia: An initial review

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This ICMEC Australia funded research project focused on identifying the costs of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) in Australia. “Cost” is defined as something that has or is likely to have a monetary, financial, economic, or expenditure impact in some way.

The issue

This research focuses on “costs” because it presents a significant knowledge gap, but one which is important for a holistic understanding and response to OCSEA.

The goals

- Establish the existing knowledge base.
- Conceptualise the multifaceted meaning of “cost” in the context of OCSEA.
- Create a baseline of what is currently known and not known.

The methodology

- An extensive literature review.
- Identification of cost categories, cost components, people likely affected, and professional sectors involved.
- A comprehensive search for publicly available Australian costing data.
- Creation of preliminary and incomplete hypothetical costing scenarios.



Key findings

One. Very little research exists on the costs of OCSEA specifically. Only two articles were found that focused on OCSEA, neither of which were about Australia.

Two. What is missing in both the literature and publicly available data is robust information about the specific costs distinctive to the digital age and which impact OCSEA uniquely.

Three. In the research literature, for Australia, lifetime costs for child abuse or child abuse and neglect as a whole ranged from \$5.8 to \$17.4 billion depending on the study.

Four. The most significant contribution of the present review is the identification of the various cost categories and costs themselves, along with who they may impact, and which professional sectors are likely to be involved.



Cost categories

Of the 73 costs, 60 are applicable to both OCSEA and child sexual abuse or exploitation without an online component, while 13 costs apply only to OCSEA.

Costs were grouped thematically to help the Australian professional response community in identifying where they are more or less likely to be involved.

Justice, child protection, and allied professionals

22 costs identified

Medium- to long-term health and wellbeing and associated losses

16 costs identified

Prevention, education, and research

16 costs identified

Technical, legal, business, regulatory, and enforcement costs unique to OCSEA

12 costs identified

Immediate to short-term health and wellbeing of victims and families

6 costs identified

Payment of blackmail or ransom

1 cost identified

Of the 73 costs, robust publicly accessible (but not necessarily complete) data was found for only 10, all related to administration of justice and child protection.

73 different kinds of costs were identified that are likely related to OCSEA.

Recommendations

As a broad community of professionals, stakeholders, and researchers, we should all strive to get better at leaving siloes, working together, and sharing information.

One. Each individual OCSEA crime can be studied, not only broad categories of child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation, child abuse, or child maltreatment.

There is mostly an international literature base on these broad topics, including some cost estimates; but there is almost nothing specifically about CSEM, livestreaming, capping, online sexual solicitation/luring and grooming, sextortion, and child sexual abuse tourism.

Two. Need for better information sharing in an open, transparent, and generous way.

There is a need to prioritise this important area of inquiry by making more widely available relevant information and data. For example, this could be administrative data, corporate data, expenditure information, staffing statistics, and other such information relevant to OCSEA.

Three. Future research.

There is a need to build upon this review by doing long-term analysis of empirical, primary, first-hand, and ideally longitudinal data.

