

Why business must lead the fight against child sexual exploitation: Prevention, not just detection



Each year, authorities are inundated with tens of thousands of reports of online child sexual abuse material. The harm that follows is unimaginable, and for more than one in four Australian children, this is their reality (ACMS, 2023). Behind every image or video is a real child, yet across the country, only around 20 specialists are actively working to identify and support these victims. The scale of this silent crisis is staggering, and our response is struggling to keep pace.

Businesses play a central role in this landscape, often without realising it. Offenders exploit everyday infrastructure across sectors: technology, finance, accommodation, transport, gaming and telecommunications, yet these same systems offer powerful opportunities to identify risks and prevent harm.

Despite this, many companies underestimate their exposure. The On Us Coalition (2023) found that 65% of organisations believe child exploitation could not occur in their industry, and fewer than half have safeguards in place to protect children when engaging with their services. Businesses have an urgent and unique role to play, and a responsibility to not only act as a matter of compliance but as a fundamental duty of care.

A human rights crisis with costly consequences

Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) represent a significant human rights crisis that has profound social and economic implications. A study conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology in 2025 estimated that crimes against individuals, including CSEA and human trafficking, which involve serious and organised crime, cost the Australian economy up to \$1.1 billion in the 2023–24 fiscal year.

But these numbers only tell part of the story. The true cost lies in the lifelong impacts on survivors: mental illness, chronic health issues, social isolation, and economic hardship. This trauma extends beyond the individual as well, reverberating through families, workplaces, and communities.

Let's take a moment to consider what these statistics mean for your business. One in four children are affected by sexual exploitation, and research indicates that as many as one in five Australian men have experienced sexual feelings towards children, and/or have sexually offended against children (Australian Human Rights Institute, UNSW Sydney, 2025).

These are not distant statistics: they represent people within our workplaces, customer groups, and social networks. Each of us is part of this ecosystem, and reliance on our response system extends far beyond law enforcement, placing immense pressure on our health, justice, and social service systems.

For companies, inaction can carry serious risks – from regulatory penalties and reputational damage to the erosion of stakeholder trust. Yet the greatest risk of all is moral: the risk of knowing harm exists and choosing to do nothing. Too often, businesses wait for regulation before recognising that the responsibility is already theirs. As Chris Owen and Mary-Frances Murphy, Pro-Bono Team, Norton Rose Fulbright, shared, "Protecting children from exploitation isn't just a legal obligation - it's a business and human rights imperative."

Every dollar invested in prevention reduces future costs across health, justice and welfare systems, yet responses too often focus on detection after the harm has already occurred. This issue demands more than compliance. It requires compassion, innovation and the courage to lead. Prevention is not only a moral choice. It is a strategic investment in people, communities and the long-term sustainability of business itself.

Meaningful change begins within business

From digital child trafficking to financial sexual extortion, exploitation intersects with business and community systems in ways many organisations struggle to recognise. Technology has accelerated this crisis, enabling offenders to operate across borders and platforms with alarming speed.

The financial sector has demonstrated what is possible when child safeguarding is embedded into core operations and collaboration occurs across industries to deter exploitation.

“Our industry is uniquely positioned to detect and disrupt exploitation networks, and collaboration is key to protecting children”, said Jodie Arthur, General Manager, Financial Crime at Westpac. “We are working closely with law enforcement, regulators, and other financial institutions to strengthen our collective response.”

Westpac, along with other financial institutions, continues to invest in advanced analytics and cross-sector initiatives to identify suspicious activity and prevent exploitation. But we need more sectors to join the fight.

“Financial crime risk management and compliance, at its heart, is about disrupting criminal actors and preventing harm to our community. There can be no greater threat to our community, both domestically and internationally, than those willing to exploit our most vulnerable for financial gain.” - Grace Mason, Partner, Financial Crime, Korda Mentha.

Businesses possess an agility that government and the public sector often cannot match. They can innovate faster, harness data for good, and embed safeguards across systems at scale. Every company, regardless of size or sector, holds the ability to shape safer systems.

The truth is clear. Businesses are part of the solution. They can see what others cannot, provide evidence critical to prosecuting perpetrators and design technology that protects rather than harms. In doing so, they can reduce the scale of the harm.

When business leads, others follow. Protecting children is one of the most profound demonstrations of responsible corporate practice. The question is no longer whether your organisation plays a role in preventing harm, but how you choose to act.

A whole-of-system approach

On 6 November, ICMEC Australia hosted the 2025 Symposium: Convergence, bringing together leaders from government, law enforcement, business, technology, academia, and the community sector. The event underscored a shared goal: strengthening the professionals who detect, disrupt, and prevent CSEA in Australia.

Key themes included:

- Working as a collective: a coordinated system response is essential to disrupting offenders and protecting children at scale. We must strengthen collaboration and information-sharing across sectors.
- Adopting a child protection-centric mindset: whether innovating in technology, reshaping policy, or enhancing reporting, children must remain at the centre of every decision.
- Investing in prevention, not just response: mitigating the risk before it occurs from various avenues, including business systems, education, awareness, etc.

This convergence of sectors is critical. No single entity can solve this crisis alone. Businesses must lean into prevention, not just detection, embedding child safeguarding into governance, risk frameworks, and compliance strategies.

As David Pegley, Managing Director of the Australian Financial Crimes Exchange, shared, "Collaborating across industry, government, and law enforcement is essential to effectively disrupt bad actors and reduce the harm they cause."

Such collaboration - this convergence of effort - is exactly what is needed. No organisation can tackle this issue in isolation. It demands a *whole of system* response, with business at the table not as a bystander, but as a driver of change.

Call to action

Imagine being the difference between a child continuing to be harmed or being saved. Between a life shaped by trauma, or one where a child is protected and free to thrive.

You can be that difference.

We cannot wait for regulation to dictate when we act. Businesses must lead the fight against child sexual exploitation, collaborating with government, law enforcement, and civil society to build a future where technology cannot be used to harm children.

"The work of ICMEC Australia is indispensable in combatting child sexual exploitation. Their research and initiatives enable stakeholders across sectors to implement effective protections and make a tangible difference in children's lives worldwide," summarised Dr Doron Goldbarsht, Director of the Financial Integrity Hub.