

Deterrence strategies for online child sexual abuse and exploitation: A global and national review with recommendations

An applied research project in partnership with Macquarie University and ICMEC Australia

Deterrence is about preventing individuals from engaging in harmful or illegal sexual behaviours involving children by reducing the opportunity, increasing the perceived or actual risk of being caught, or changing attitudes and beliefs that support such behaviour.

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) describes online exploitation and abuse of a sexual nature against a child that has, at some stage, connected to the online environment.

Deterrence initiatives take a variety of forms across the globe.

They aim to target different groups related to OCSEA such as potential offenders and victims, while also providing intervention across Primary, Secondary and Tertiary levels.

Primary

Targeting those before harmful behaviour happens e.g. public awareness and safety campaigns, education, etc.

Secondary

Targeting those exhibiting risky behaviours early via helplines, therapeutic services and scare campaigns.

Tertiary

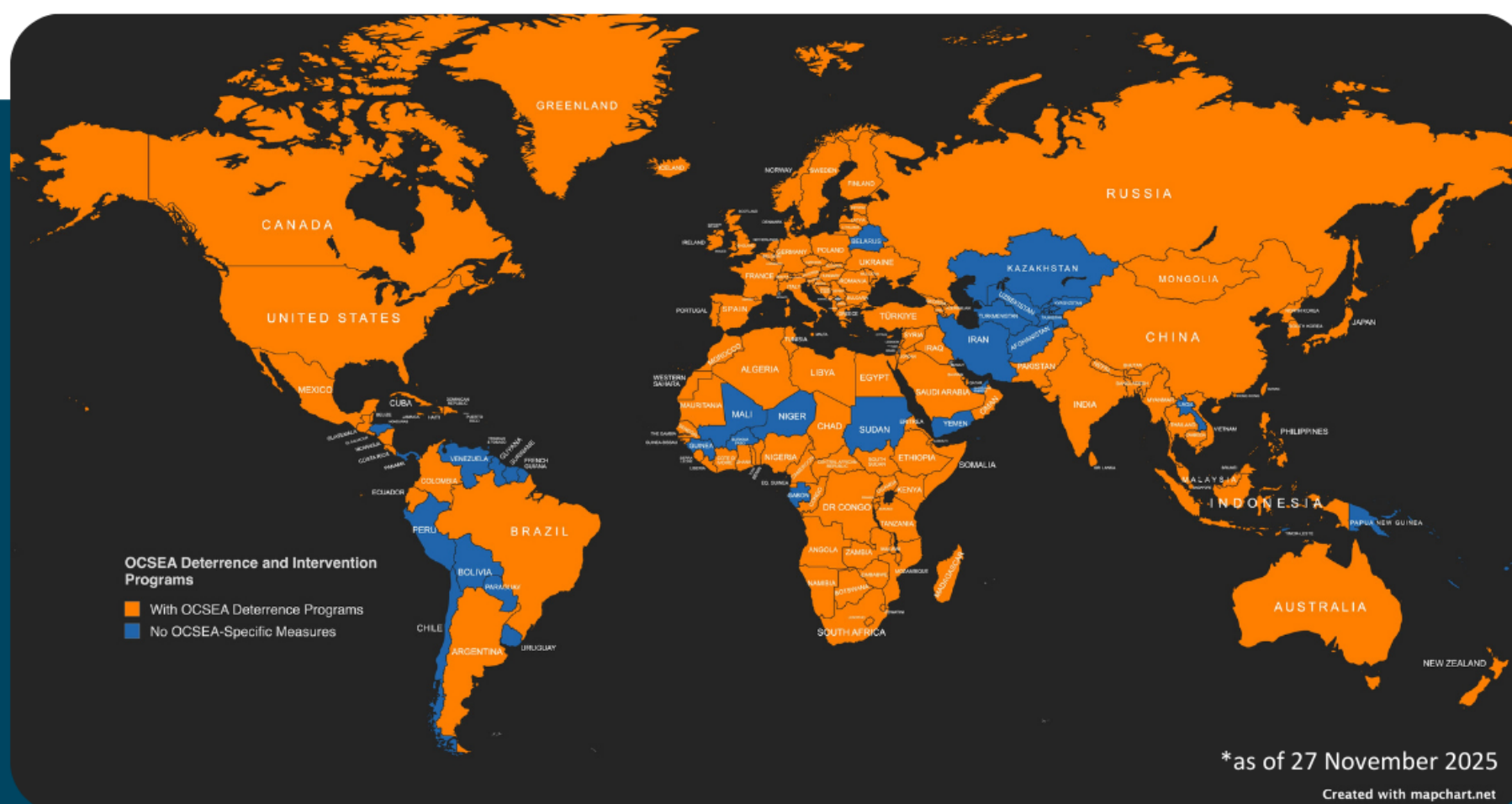
Targeting those who have already offended/been victimised, before re-offending can occur. Some countries have specific sexual offender programs aiming to correct behaviour after release.

OCSEA deterrence initiatives often utilise multiple layers such as:

Legislation, situational & technical, moral & self-deterrence, and peer or social deterrence.

Key findings - Global

Of the countries below, 38 have no publicly available information indicating the existence of any national OCSEA deterrence programs, nor participation in any international deterrence initiatives.



Prevalence in Australia

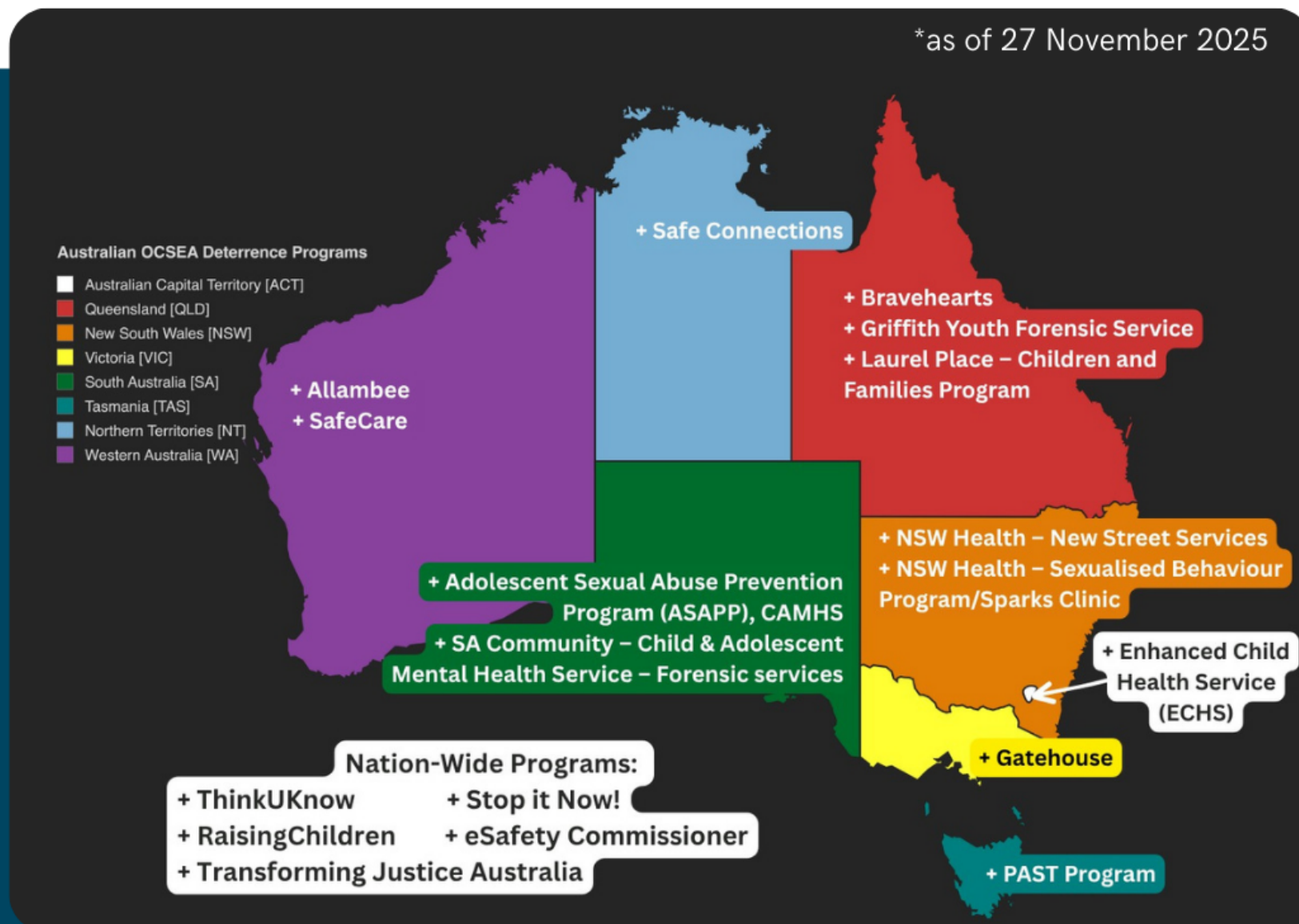
In 2024, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study investigated the prevalence of online sexual abuse and exploitation of young people (aged 16-24):

17.7% had experienced online sexual solicitation by an adult before age 18

7.6% had a sexual image of themselves shared without their consent before age 18

Key findings - Australia

Deterrence efforts often appear focused on children and young offenders via nation-wide educational campaigns such as 'ThinkUKnow' and 'Stop it Now!'. These campaigns work alongside state-based clinics and behavioural therapeutic programs such as the QLD-based 'Bravehearts' or the NSW-based 'SPARKS Clinic'. However, many Australian states and territories do not have specific programs or specialised support services dedicated to adults who have offended or may be at risk of offending. Below is a non-exhaustive list of OCSEA deterrence programs in Australia.



Recommendations

Definitional changes: Continue global efforts to reinforce the use of the term Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) in place of "child pornography" which minimises the severity of the crime and the abuse experienced by children. Accurate terminology is essential to appropriately frame OCSEA offences and centre victim harm.

Sustained support for national deterrence initiatives: Maintain and expand nationally consistent offender deterrence and prevention services across all jurisdictions. These services should serve school-aged children through to adults exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours, and include continued investment in initiatives such as Stop It Now! Australia.

Further research towards targeted intervention: Increased focus on intervention programs designed to address offenders' cognitive distortions to deal with the underlying cause of and continued reason for offending.