

Youth-Produced Images Are the Majority of Child Sexual Abuse Materials: Categories of Youth and Adult Perpetrators From a Victim Based Study

Sexual Abuse
2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–17
© The Author(s) 2026
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: [10.1177/10790632261415819](https://doi.org/10.1177/10790632261415819)
journals.sagepub.com/home/sax



David Finkelhor¹ , Deirdre Colburn¹,
Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan², Jennifer E. O'Brien³, Lisa M. Jones¹,
Heather A. Turner¹, and Kimberly J. Mitchell¹

Abstract

This study examined dynamics of childhood sexual image abuse episodes prior to age 18, based on victim self-reports. An online sample of individuals aged 18-28 filled out a survey, yielding 3,254 episodes of image abuse that occurred prior to age 18. The majority (86%) of abusive episodes involved images that were produced by youth, either as victims or perpetrators. Less than 8% of episodes involved adult-produced images. Youth were identified as perpetrators in 30% of the episodes, and adults were perpetrators in 29%, with the remainder unidentified. Notably, even among adult-perpetrated episodes, 75% of the images had been originally produced by the youth victim. In cases of adult perpetrators, 59% were offline acquaintances. To better understand the diversity of image abuse experiences, we proposed a five-category framework. Adult perpetrator cases were subdivided into (1) adult image producers, (2) adult coercers of youth made images and (3) adult groomers of youth made images. Youth perpetrator cases were subdivided into (4) juvenile coercers, who pressured victims, and (5) juvenile betrayers, who misused images originally taken or exchanged

¹Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA

²School of Social Work, Faculty of Social Welfare & Health Sciences, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

³School of Social Work, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:

David Finkelhor, Crimes against Children Research Center, Family Research Laboratory, Department of Sociology, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824, USA.

Email: david.finkelhor@unh.edu

voluntarily. The prevalence of youth-produced and youth-involved image abuse highlights the importance of prevention strategies tailored to school-aged youth.

Keywords

online sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation, child pornography, juveniles with problematic sexual behavior, sexting, sextortion

Introduction

The dissemination of sexual images of children has become a major priority for international law enforcement. These images, still referred to in many criminal statutes as child pornography, have been recently relabeled by most authorities as child sexual abuse images (CSAI) or materials (CSAM). This shift in terminology was intended to emphasize that the images were often made by in-person sexual abusers, who recorded their abusive conduct in images or videos to memorialize or monetize their encounters with victims (Martin, 2014). The new conception also acknowledged the ongoing harm to the children depicted, as these shareable images can be characterized as ongoing abusive provocations and reminders (Finkelhor, Turner, et al., 2024).

In the early years of digital technology, adult-created images dominated the discussions of CSAM. With the rise of affordable recording devices and digital sharing platforms in the 1990s, it became easier for abusers to create and distribute explicit images and also share them without an interfering intermediary to develop the image or report them to authorities (Jenkins, 2001). However, a new shift occurred as digital media became integrated into adolescent socialization. Increasingly, adolescents began producing and sharing sexual images of themselves and their peers (Mitchell et al., 2012).

These self-produced images emerged in a variety of contexts, some of which reflected consensual dynamics, such as intimate relationships, humor, or flirtation. However, other contexts involved coercion, manipulation, or abuse, including bullying, peer pressure, and intimate partner abuse (Lenhart et al., 2010). Law enforcement investigators have come to refer to these as “youth produced images,” differentiating them from images created by adults (Wolak et al., 2012). As social norms have changed, youth produced images have become increasingly prevalent. By 2010, self-produced images made up 40% or more of the materials cataloged in the International Child Sexual Exploitation Image Database, a law enforcement tool used to track and investigate CSAM cases (Quayle et al., 2018).

Youth produced images pose challenges for law enforcement and the epidemiology of CSAM. On the one hand, even when they are self-produced without coercion, many such images qualify as criminal according to existing child pornography statutes, which only require that they be images of juveniles engaged in sexual acts or portrayed in a way intended to evoke sexual arousal. This can criminalize young people for non-malicious sexual behavior occurring on their own, or voluntarily with peers or intimate

partners (Barroso et al., 2023; Ojeda et al., 2022; Strasburger et al., 2019). Efforts have been made to exempt certain classes of these cases from criminal sanction, such as non-coerced youth self-production (Dodge, 2024; Leary, 2010; Lee & Darcy, 2021; O'Connor et al., 2017).

However, research and victim testimonies have indicated that many youth-produced images are taken or shared in contexts that make them abusive and harmful for reasons beyond the sexual depiction of a juvenile (Madigan et al., 2018; Walker & Sleath, 2017; Wolak et al., 2018). Several malicious contexts qualify as abusive even though not all are necessarily images of a sexual crime (Krieger, 2017). For example, some youth take sexual images secretly of their peers — sleeping, intoxicated, or in sexual encounters. Youth may also take images with the intent to intimidate, humiliate, shock or extort other youth (Harper et al., 2021). In other cases, youth who initially share sexual images willingly later discover that these images have been distributed without consent, a dynamic often described as non-consensual sexting or revenge pornography (Strasburger et al., 2019). We will use the term “youth perpetration” to apply to this peer abuse, but this is not meant to imply that those responsible should necessarily be treated as criminal offenders (Harris & Socia, 2016).

There are other scenarios of youth producing and sharing sexual images of themselves, but under conditions that society considers non-consensual and criminal, even if no explicit force was used. This includes images that are produced by youth but are exchanged for items of value, a form of prohibited commercial sex (Walsh et al., 2024). It also includes episodes when youth share images with an impermissibly older adult as a result of grooming and manipulation, both reflecting an abusive context of unequal power (Greenbaum, 2018).

Some advocates and researchers, in light of these evolving dynamics, have preferred the term “image-based sexual abuse” (IBSA) to refer to this broader spectrum of exploitation beyond what has been associated with CSAM. The IBSA term has been defined to encompass three categories: the non-consensual taking and making of images, the non-consensual distribution of images and threatened image distribution (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022; Pedersen et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2022). In many parts of the world IBSA has largely been used in relation to adults, often where females are victims and where the motive has largely been seen as revenge (Parton & Rogers, 2025; Rigotti et al., 2024). This IBSA conceptualization applied to children does encompass conventional CSAM, since CSAM are non-consensually made by adults as part of their sexual abuse. IBSA also covers images non-consensually made by peers as well. It also includes voluntarily shared images that were then misused or distributed non-consensually by peers or adults (Henry & Beard, 2024; Scott et al., 2022; Van Ouytsel et al., 2021).

The growth of youth production and perpetration is also challenging for the measurement and description of the problem. Police give priority to cases that they can readily prosecute (Grossman et al., 2024). Unfortunately, images depicting adolescent, post-pubertal youth are challenging for law enforcement because there are no foolproof physical indicators to discriminate minors (illegal) from young-looking adults (legal) (Kloess et al., 2019; Rosenbloom, 2013). So, cases involving prepubertal and early

pubescent children, typically adult perpetrated, are over-represented in law enforcement and agency related data. In contrast to this, episodes recruited directly from community samples of victims likely include many more youth produced and perpetrated images (Sutton & Finkelhor, 2023). Similarly, more recent samples even of police cases may reflect more youth production. Post-pubescent images in the Child Victimization Identification Program (CVIP) archive rose from 56% in 2021 to 62% in 2023 (NCMEC, 2024).

The present study seeks to further expand our understanding of the dynamics particularly of youth produced abusive images by examining these diverse experiences from the accounts of the youth victimized. One key question will be the proportion of episodes involving images made by youth themselves in contrast to adult producers. Another question is whether those perpetrating the offense were part of the victims' social network, in the form of family, friends or romantic partners or whether they were strangers. Considerable research has shown that in spite of stereotypes, stranger perpetrators do not predominate in IBSA and CSAM offenses (Sutton & Finkelhor, 2023). Finally, the study will look to see if a previous typology of IBSA adapted from a national sample of police cases (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011) can be applied to episodes from a community survey. This typology distinguished adult from juvenile perpetrators and whether coercive strategies were used.

Methods

Data was collected for the *Digital Life Study* through an online survey designed to oversample sexual and gender minority (SGM) individuals. Individuals aged 18-28 were recruited across the U.S. through Facebook and Instagram advertisements. Participants who completed the online screener and were deemed eligible were directed to complete the survey in Qualtrics. Participants completed the survey between June 28, 2023, and April 1, 2024. During data cleaning, cases were dropped due to reasons such as declined consent (n = 227), duplication or suspected fraud (n = 289), incomplete response (n = 1763), or having no matching screener data (n = 161). Cases were considered complete if they reached the 90% "progress threshold" determined by the Qualtrics survey platform, resulting in 48 mostly complete questionnaires added to the final data set for a total of N = 6,204 participants. Of these, 46.0% (n = 2,854) reported at least one IBSA incident during childhood. These participants provided detailed information on 4,205 IBSA incidents. Data for 727 incidents were dropped because they did not involve actual IBSA images or videos, resulting in an analytic sample of 3,254 incidents for the current paper. These incidents were reported by 2,083 participants. On average, the survey took 25 minutes to complete. Those who completed the survey and provided a valid U.S. non-P.O. box mailing address were sent a \$15 Amazon gift card as a thank-you. Providing a mailing address was voluntary; approximately 15% of respondents declined when asked if they would like to receive an incentive. Responses to the incentive acceptance module and main behavioral survey were never stored together and were linked only through a random identifier. This study's human subjects protection plan was approved by the University of New Hampshire

Institutional Review Board. The survey was designed to meet enrollment quotas so that 50% of the sample identified was female at birth, 20% or more Hispanic, 20% Black, and there was an over-representation of sex and gender minority. There were 20,795 completed screener surveys, yielding $n = 6,204$ valid full surveys for a completion rate of 29.8%.

The sample was not designed to be nationally representative; instead, our methodology aimed to maximize the number of participants who had experienced IBSA prior to age 18. To do so, there were two screener questions designed to allow an oversample of individuals with IBSA. These items included, “On a scale of 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (extremely likely), how likely would you be to.....” (1) “Send a photo or video that was sexual?” and (2) “Have someone ask you for a photo or video that was sexual?” Initially, those who answered a likelihood of “2” or above on the screener questions were directed to the full survey. This criterion was modified to “3” during recruitment to increase the likelihood of identifying participants with IBSA involvement.

Measures

Demographics. Participant characteristics were collected through several items in the survey including race, ethnicity, rurality, income, education, gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual attraction.

Respondents were asked to describe their gender identity before the age of 18 and presented with several options where they could select all that apply. A dichotomous “any” vs. “no” gender minority before age 18 variable was created where those who answered cisgender boy or cisgender girl *only* were coded as “no” and all others coded as “any” gender minority identity.

Participants were also asked to describe their sexual orientation before the age of 18 by choosing all that apply from the following list: (1) Gay, (2) Lesbian, (3) Bisexual, (4) Heterosexual, or (5) None of these describe me, and I’d like to see additional options. For analyses, a dichotomous “any” vs. “no” sexual minority identity before age 18 variable was created where those who answered heterosexual *only* were coded as “no” and all others coded as “any” sexual minority identity.

Image Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA) Screeners. Participants were asked a series of questions from the recently validated IBSA scale (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2025) detailing their experience with several types of child sexual exploitation before the age of 18.

Non-Consensual Taking or Making: Respondents were asked, “Before the age of 18, did someone ever take, make, or share with other people a sexual picture or video of you without your permission?” This was designed to measure both the taking of sexual images and making, through photoshop or photo editing, sexual images of the youth without consent. This item was separated into *taken or made image* and *shared image* abuse for analyses.

Forced or Pressured Image Sharing: Respondents were asked, “Before the age of 18, did someone ever threaten, try to force you, or strongly pressure you to provide sexual pictures or videos online or through a cell phone?” This item was disaggregated into *threatened or forced* image recruitment versus *pressured* image recruitment for analyses.

Threatened Sharing: Respondents were asked, “Before the age of 18, did someone ever threaten to share a sexual picture or video of you to get you to do something – like take or send other sexual pictures of yourself, have a sexual relationship with them, pay them money, or something else?”

Self-produced Image Sharing with Someone Older: This screener was designed to measure IBSA in the context of a sexual relationship with an adult 5 or more years older than the youth. The question asked, “Before the age of 18, did you ever share sexual pictures or videos (online or through a cell phone), even if you wanted to, with a person who was 5 or more years older than you?” Episodes were classified in these analyses as Self-produced Image Sharing with an Adult only if the victim reported the perpetrator to be aged 18 or older.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation: This item was designed to measure sexual exchanges of a commercial nature. “Before the age of 18, did you ever make, send or post sexual pictures or videos of yourself over the Internet or a cell phone (including texting) in exchange for money, drugs, or other valuable items?”

IBSA Episode Characteristics. Each type of IBSA endorsement was followed up with questions about the specific incident. A single incident was endorsed by 1,215 (58.3%) of respondents, two incidents by 617 (29.6%), and three or more incidents by 250 (13.7%). To ensure that each incident was unique, after the first follow-up, we asked the participant, “Is this the same situation you told us about earlier?” If no, they continued with the follow-up questions for this separate incident. If yes, they were asked if there was a different situation (of this type) they could tell us about. If yes, they continued with the new incident follow-up questions and if no, they were skipped to the same set of questions for their next endorsed IBSA screener type (if any).

IBSA Episode Perpetrators. Participants were asked to think of the person responsible for the episode (or most responsible if they indicated more than one person involved). We asked two questions to assess whether the respondent knew the perpetrator’s identity: (1) “Do you know the actual identity of the person who was most responsible for this happening?” (yes/no), (2) “Is this someone you knew in-person? That is, you knew him/her offline before it happened?” (yes/no). Among those who knew the identity, we asked, “How did you know this person?” For those who knew the actual identity, we asked, “How old was this person when this first happened? Your best guess is okay.” Those who indicated they did not know the actual identity of the person responsible were asked how likely they thought that person was an adult (very/somewhat/not likely). “Very” and “somewhat” were coded as adults.

Analyses

Data were analyzed using Stata/SE version 17.0. Data were weighted to general population targets from the Current Population Survey for 18-28 year olds on age, gender, education, race and Hispanic ethnicity, as well as gender and sexual identity proportions from Pew Research Center (Brown, 2022, 2023). First, we used bivariate statistics to compare perpetrator age and relationship categories across SGM status with chi-square tests. Next, we again calculated bivariate statistics with chi-square tests to examine perpetrator relationship categories across sub-types of IBSA. Analyses were conducted at the episode-level ($n = 3,254$ reported by $n = 2,083$ participants) because the key research questions concerned the perpetrators of episodes, not the risk factors or outcomes for victims.

Results

There were 4,205 total qualifying episodes before age 18 reported by respondents. After removing incidents that did not involve an actual image (e.g., only a threat) or had missing perpetrator identity information, the final sample of IBSA cases was 3,254. Approximately one-third of episodes were reported by participants with only one qualifying episode (35.2%), 37.8% with two episodes, 20.6% from participants reporting three episodes, 7.7% with 4 unique episodes, and less than 2% (1.78%) were reported by participants who experienced five unique qualifying episodes. Important to note, it is possible that episodes, though unique with respect to other dynamics, were perpetrated by the same individual. Therefore, while results represent the total number of episodes that are characterized as having a certain type of perpetrator, there may be an overrepresentation of one perpetrator type if the same person was responsible for multiple victimizations of a respondent.

The categories of offenses, ranging from most frequent to least frequent, were: being pressured to send images (37.3%), images taken of someone without consent (26.3%), images being sent to an illegally older adult partner (21.1%), threats to share images with someone else (9.4%), being coerced to send images (4.2%), and commercial sexual exploitation (1.8%).

Importantly, 85.8% of all episodes were youth produced: 73.7% produced by the victim themselves and 12.1% produced by other youth making nonconsensual images. Only 7.6% of episodes involved adult produced images and 5.2% were produced by someone of an age unknown to the victim.

The perpetrator identities were diverse (Table 1). About 30% of episodes were perpetrated by a youth offender, and 28.8% by an adult. A large portion (36.7%) of cases involved perpetrators whose age or identity the victim said they did not know, complicating the analysis. In 4.3% the respondent's judgment about age of perpetrator was missing. However, among known perpetrators, episodes with youth perpetrators slightly outnumbered those with adults. Even in cases where an adult was responsible, three-quarters of episodes (75%) included an image originally produced by youth themselves.

Table 1. Perpetrator Age and Relationship Sub-categories (n = 3,254)

Perpetrator identity	Weighted %
Adult perpetrator	
Dating partner (n = 251)	9.5
Friend (n = 78)	3.2
Other acquaintance (n = 126)	3.9
Not known in-person (n = 318)	12.3
Total (n = 773)	28.8
Youth perpetrator	
Dating partner (n = 498)	14.3
Friend (n = 163)	5.7
Other acquaintance (n = 164)	6.8
Not known in-person (n = 121)	3.4
Total (n = 946)	30.2
Unknown or missing info on perpetrator	
Identity or age unknown to victim (n = 1,360)	36.7
Missing information (n = 175)	4.3
Youth produced^a	
Total (any perpetrator) (n = 2,810)	85.8
With adult perpetrator only (n = 572)	21.6

Note. This table shows the proportion of the episodes that fall into each perpetrator age-relationship sub-categories. Perpetrator identities are categorized by age (adult, youth, unknown or missing) and relationship type (dating partner, friend, other acquaintance, or individual not known in person).

^aYouth production of images could occur with adult perpetrators, youth perpetrators, or in episodes where perpetrator's age status was unknown.

Among episodes involving adult perpetrators, the majority of episodes (59%) involved individuals known to the victim from offline contexts, such as dating partners, friends, and other acquaintances, while the rest of episodes involved individuals met online. Among episodes involving youth perpetrators, two-thirds included people from offline contexts, including a large portion of dating partners.

The characteristics of perpetrators did vary in some cases based on the demographic characteristics of the victims who reported each episode (Figure 1). Episodes with victims under the age of 13 had somewhat more unknown perpetrators and fewer youth perpetrators (Design-based F (8.52, 35811.19) = 4.88, $p < .001$). Those involving male victims were more likely to report unknown adult perpetrators and were less likely to report adults as those responsible (Design-based F (3.11, 9411.31) = 16.61, $p < .001$). Episodes reported by sexual and gender minority victims had a distribution of perpetrators no different from those experienced by non-SGM youth.

The distribution of perpetrators also varied under some other episode dynamics (Table 2). Among episodes where someone else took a non-consented image, the youth perpetrators were high (46.0%) and the unknown perpetrators were low (18.9%).

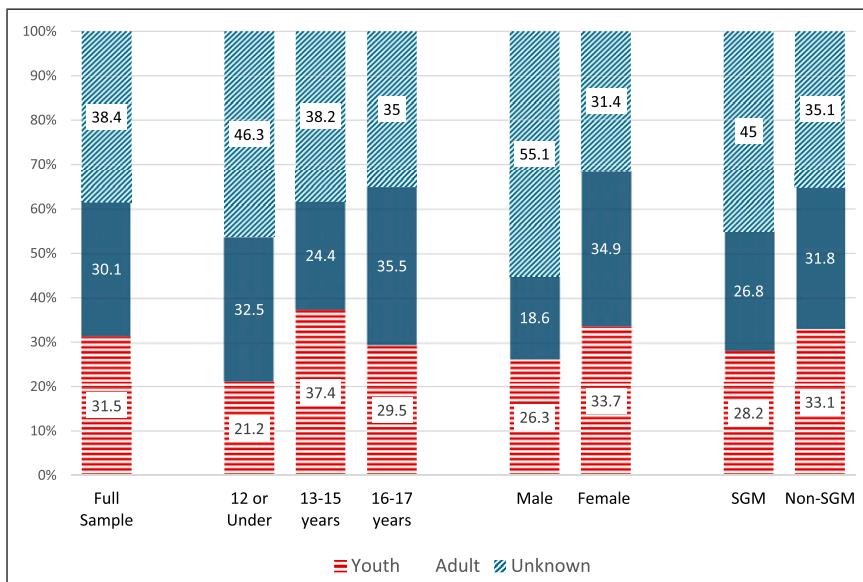


Figure 1. IBSA perpetrator identity by victim characteristics

Among cases where there were threats to share images, the unknown perpetrators were high (54.5%), and the adult perpetrators were relatively low (16.7%).

One approach to summarizing these analyses is a framework that highlights episodes by perpetrator age, image producer age and level of coercion (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011) (Figure 2). The distinction between adult and youth in these cases is critical because of different legal statuses and ethical considerations. These age dimensions can be combined with the degree of coercion and non-consent.

Episodes with adult perpetrators can be divided into three subtypes: (a) Adult producers (12% of all episodes, both adult and youth perpetrated), which included adults who created images documenting their abuse; (b) Adult coercers (19%), who coerced youth to create and share explicit content through threats or blackmail; and, (c) Adult groomers (17%), who persuaded youth to share images by manipulating them into believing it was part of a romantic relationship, business opportunity, or for payment.

The youth-perpetrated cases were divided into two main subtypes: (d) Youth coercers (26%), who used force, threats, or guilt to get youth victims to supply images; and (e) Youth betrayers (26%), who took or created images without consent or who received images voluntarily but later shared them without permission. These framework percentages are based only on cases where adequate information on the age and relationship of those responsible was available.

Table 2. Perpetrator Relationship by Image Abuse Dynamic (n = 3,254)

Perpetrator identity	Forced threat (n = 199)	Forced pressure (n = 1,258)	Threat share (n = 277)	Took w/o consent (n = 822)	Illegal age (n = 698)	CSEC ^b (n = 80)	p-value
Weighted %							
Adult							
Dating partner (n = 251)	3.7	8.7	2.3	14.2	10.0	0.0	.006
Friend (n = 78)	0.1	2.7	4.8	3.3	4.0	0.6	.497
Other acquaintance (n = 126)	12.3	3.3	2.2	3.3	4.7	4.0	.060
Not known in-person (n = 318)	7.2	13.4	7.5	6.7	20.4	16.6	.001
Total (n = 773)	23.3	28.1	16.7	27.5	39.1	21.2	<.001
Youth							
Dating partner (n = 498)	5.8	19.3	8.3	23.0	n/a ^a	1.2	<.001
Friend (n = 163)	0.2	6.5	6.0	10.3	n/a	0.8	<.001
Juvenile other acquaintance (n = 164)	10.4	6.1	9.2	11.2	n/a	15.1	<.001
Non-adult not known in-person (n = 121)	7.9	6.0	2.5	1.4	n/a	11.9	.001
Total (n = 946)	24.4	37.8	25.9	46.0	n/a	28.9	<.001
Unknown or missing							
Unknown to victim (n = 1,360)	50.0	31.7	54.5	18.9	56.3	45.8	<.001
Missing (n = 175)	7.5	2.3	2.4	2.9	4.6	4.2	.011

Note. This table shows the proportion of each episode, by image abuse type (forced threat, forced pressure, threat share, took without consent, illegal age, CSEC), that falls into each perpetrator age-relationship sub-categories with overall (row) design-based chi-square.

^an/a = Not applicable, as incidents only qualified as "Illegal age" if with adult perpetrator.

^bCSEC = Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Discussion

This study examined episodes of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) of juveniles from the point of view of victims in the general population, rather than from cases coming to

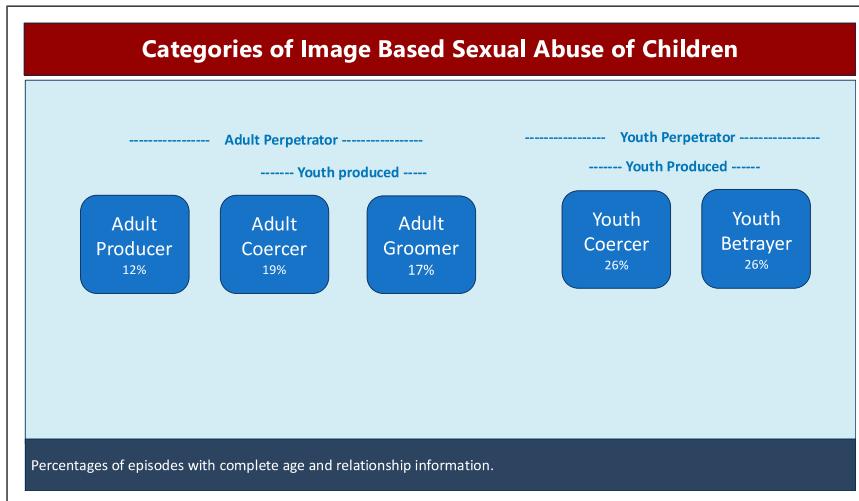


Figure 2. Categories of image based sexual abuse of children

police and agency attention. The findings indicated that most episodes of image abuse involved images originally produced by adolescent youth themselves rather than images produced by adults. Additionally, youth perpetrators were involved in a substantial proportion of these episodes, somewhat more than adult perpetrators. This supports a significant shift in the conceptualization of childhood image-based abuse, which was previously characterized primarily as adult sexual abusers who made and then disseminated images they took of victims.

The findings also highlight that most of the perpetrators responsible for IBSA episodes were known to their victims from offline contexts, and not primarily people whom the victims met online. This aligns with findings from other victim studies on online child exploitation, such as the international Disrupting Harm studies ([ECPAT International & UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2022](#)), which has found that IBSA occurred most often with offline acquaintances and other youth. These findings challenge the narrow, stereotypical portrayals of IBSA and emphasize that image-based abuse involves a wide range of scenarios and relationships.

To better represent the diversity, we have delineated categories of IBSA based on the age status of perpetrator, the producer of the image and the degree of coercion involved, adapted from a previous typology on sexting ([Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011](#)). Adult-perpetrator cases were subdivided into adult producers, adult coercers, and adult groomers, while youth-perpetrated cases were classified into youth coercers and youth betrayers. This adaptation worked well and confirmed the preponderance of youth produced and youth perpetrated images. But this typology may need subsequent refinement. As with many typologies, some complex cases are hard to assign, and new dynamics may appear. “Live streaming,” for example, is mostly either adult managed or youth initiated, but the assignment would depend on the specific dynamics. Artificial

intelligence (AI) images with various dynamics may be assignable to the existing categories, but more research is needed to know whether they can be accommodated in this framework or perhaps need a new category. While this framework may not capture all dynamics in a rapidly evolving environment, it has the benefit of directing advocates, policy makers, and law enforcement to the varieties that should be considered in educating families and professionals about the problem.

Limitations

There are also limitations to this study that need to be borne in mind. Several features of the study may have permitted a biased sample of cases to be collected. The respondents were not systematically selected and included an over-representation of SGM persons, whose experiences may differ from other populations. The sample may also not represent current conditions because these were young adults disclosing episodes that in some cases occurred as many as 15 years earlier, at a time when fewer youth had digital devices and the technology environment was quite different. The time lapse may also have fostered omissions or distortions due to memory retrieval. Some episodes may have been perpetrated by the same offender, whose characteristics may be over-represented in the sample. The findings reported here need to be confirmed in studies of more contemporary and more systematically representative samples. Moreover, there is a substantial percent of episodes where the victim did not have information on the perpetrator's age or identity. There was no reason to presume these to be primarily adults or primarily other youth since both would have incentives to hide their identity. But it is possible that the proportion of episodes perpetrated by the adult or youth category may indeed be larger, were we to know about all identities. However, these proportions reflect perceptions of victims which may be an important element in the impact.

Implications

There are several implications from these findings. Organizations that provide training, report numbers and conduct advocacy about CSAM and image abuse need to remind their trainees and other audiences about the variety of contexts in which these offenses occur, including the large role of youth produced images. Law enforcement should broaden their investigations to include more cases that involve post-pubertal youth. Data systems, when they make reports, need to caution readers about the biases in data that may undercount youth produced images. Prevention efforts need to develop and disseminate strategies for discouraging youth from making and sharing the images that contribute to the CSAM and image abuse problem.

Based on the findings reported here, it would be our recommendation that questionnaires on IBSA make substantial efforts to collect details that allow its diversity to be recognized. This would mean gathering information about the perpetrator's age and relationship to the victim, as well as who produced the image, and the elements of coercion and non-consent that were present in the episode.

It is also our recommendation that questionnaires for operationalizing IBSA include questions about images shared for commercial exchange and with impermissible adult-age partners, even if they are not felt to be “unwanted” exchanges by the respondent. Many questionnaires ask only about “unwanted” image taking and sharing (Finkelhor, Cavanaugh, et al., 2024), but this does not fully encompass other episodes that also qualify as criminal and abusive because of commercial exploitation and age disparity.

This study adds a great deal to the literature by revealing IBSA from the point of view of victims. But it adds complications to the research on IBSA, which is already quite fragmented and confusing. Studies have been based on a wide variety of sources including archived child pornography, cases reported to hotlines, cases extracted from police files, cases identified by web crawlers, undercover operations, and images identified by AI trained robots (Stevenson et al., 2024). The terminology in the field is still unresolved. A large effort is needed to create classifications and categories that can be applied more universally and can help policy makers understand the full scope and evolving situation.

The prevention implications from the findings are also quite strong. Since so much of the IBSA involves youth produced images and so many perpetrators are other youth, a prevention strategy based on harsh criminal penalties as deterrents is likely to be problematic. Obviously, it is important for young people to understand the criminal elements of the IBSA dynamics. But punitive sanctions are likely to have several complicating effects. First, victims may be reluctant to seek help and make reports because they are afraid that the sanctions may be applied to them or to other friends and partners, whom they do not want to implicate. Second, the application of harsh sanctions to juvenile offenders is increasingly viewed as counterproductive in situations where other responses like rehabilitation, education, and restorative justice have been shown to be more successful (Letourneau et al., 2008). This creates tensions among agencies (schools, police, mental health) about how to handle cases.

There are other prevention strategies that may be preferable particularly for dynamics like youth production and non-consensual sharing. There needs to be education and awareness building: Education for young people, for example, about the harm experienced by victims, the consent standard that should govern sexual behavior and image production and sharing, the dynamics of abusive romantic relationships, how to resist peer pressure, and why we have laws prohibiting relationships between adults and juveniles (World Health Organization et al., 2022). These skills and understandings are particularly important for teen age youth. Warnings simply to not talk to strangers, not to share information and not to make sexual images are insufficient. These do not address the complexity of the situations many youth face or the context for these offenses, which include romance, bullying, and normal developing interests in sex.

There are other policy recommendations for preventing IBSA and reducing its harm that recognize the dynamics of the youth-produced material (Powell, 2023). There is need for more hot-lines and supportive services, including technically resourced organizations that can track and remove unwanted content. Police need to be trained to understand the dynamic of youth produced images and to provide help without blaming victims, an approach informed by a developmental understanding of trauma and sexual

exploitation. There is a need for multi-disciplinary investigative and treatment agencies, like Children's Advocacy Centers, that build collaborations among police, prosecutorial, family support and victim treatment services.

ORCID iD

David Finkelhor  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7008-4252>

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research is funded by the US Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, under grants #2020-R2-CX0015 and #15PNIJ-21-GG-02983-MUMU.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Barroso, R., Marinho, A. R., Figueiredo, P., Ramião, E., & Silva, A. S. (2023). Consensual and non-consensual sexting behaviors in adolescence: A systematic review. *Adolescent Research Review*, 8(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-022-00199-0>

Brown, A. (2022). About 5% of young adults in the U.S. say their gender is different from their sex assigned at birth. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/06/07/about-5-of-young-adults-in-the-u-s-say-their-gender-is-different-from-their-sex-assigned-at-birth/>

Brown, A. (2023). 5 key findings about LGBTQ+ Americans. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/23/5-key-findings-about-lgbtq-americans/>

Dodge, A. (2024). Misunderstandings and intentional misrepresentations: Challenging the continued framing of consensual and nonconsensual intimate image distribution as child pornography. *Canadian Journal of Law and Society / Revue Canadienne Droit et Société*, 39(1), 23–43. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cls.2024.6>

ECPAT International, & UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti. (2022). Children's disclosures of online sexual exploitation and abuse. *Disrupting Harm Data Insight 2. Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children*. https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/DH-data-insight-2_FinalB%282%29.pdf

Finkelhor, D., Cavanaugh, C., Turner, H., Colburn, D., Sutton, S., & Mathews, B. (2024). When is online sexual solicitation of a minor considered sexual abuse? Recommendations for victim prevalence surveys. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(5), 4117–4129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241268835>

Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Colburn, D., & Mitchell, K. J. (2024). Persisting concerns about image exposure among survivors of image-based sexual exploitation and abuse in childhood. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 17(Suppl 1), S88–S93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001815>

Gámez-Guadix, M., Mateos-Pérez, E., Wachs, S., Wright, M., Martínez, J., & Íncera, D. (2022). Assessing image-based sexual abuse: Measurement, prevalence, and temporal stability of

sexortion and nonconsensual sexting (“revenge porn”) among adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*, 94(5), 789–799. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12064>

Gewirtz-Meydan, A., Turner, H. A., Finkelhor, D., Jones, L. M., Colburn, D. A., & Mitchell, K. J. (2025). Measuring image-based sexual abuse (IBSA): Psychometric validation and analysis of the IBSA scale. *Child maltreatment*, 10775595251338188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595251338188>

Greenbaum, J. (2018). Child sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. *Advances in Pediatrics*, 65(1), 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yapd.2018.04.003>

Grossman, S., Pfefferkorn, R., Thiel, D., Shah, S., DiResta, R., Perrino, J., & Stamos, A. (2024). The strengths and weaknesses of the online child safety ecosystem. In *Stanford internet observatory*.

Harper, C. A., Fido, D., & Petronzi, D. (2021). Delineating non-consensual sexual image offending: Towards an empirical approach. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 58, Article 101547. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101547>

Harris, A. J., & Socia, K. M. (2016). What's in a name? Evaluating the effects of the “sex offender” label on public opinions and beliefs. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 28(7), 660–678. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063214564391>

Henry, N., & Beard, G. (2024). Image-based sexual abuse perpetration: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(5), 3981–3998. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241266137>

Jenkins, P. (2001). *Beyond tolerance: Child pornography on the internet*. New York University Press.

Kloess, J. A., Woodhams, J., Whittle, H., Grant, T., & Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. E. (2019). The challenges of identifying and classifying child sexual abuse material. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 31(2), 173–196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063217724768>

Krieger, M. A. (2017). Unpacking “sexting”: A systematic review of nonconsensual sexting in legal, educational, and psychological literatures. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 18(5), 593–601. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016659486>

Leary, M. G. (2010). Sexting of self-produced child pornography? The dialogue continues - Structured prosecutorial discretion within a multidisciplinary response. *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law*, 17(3), 486–566.

Lee, J. R., & Darcy, K. M. (2021). Sexting: What's law got to Do with it? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50(2), 563–573. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01727-6>

Lenhart, A., Ling, R., & Campbell, S. (2010). Teens, adults and sexting: Data on sending and receipt of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images by Americans. *Pew Internet and American Life Project*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2010/10/23/teens-adults-and-sexting-data-on-sending-receiving-sexually-suggestive-nude-or-nearly-nude-photos-by-americans/>

Letourneau, E. J., Chapman, J. E., & Schoenwald, S. K. (2008). Treatment outcome and criminal offending by youth with sexual behavior problems. *Child Maltreatment*, 13(2), 133–144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559507306717>

Madigan, S., Ly, A., Rash, C. L., Van Ouytsel, J., & Temple, J. R. (2018). Prevalence of multiple forms of sexting behavior among youth: A systematic review and meta-analysis prevalence

of sexting behavior among youth prevalence of sexting behavior among youth. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 172(4), 327–335. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2017.5314>

Martin, J. (2014). “It’s just an image, right?”: Practitioners’ understanding of child sexual abuse images online and effects on victims. *Child & Youth Services*, 35(2), 96–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935x.2014.924334>

Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., Jones, L. M., & Wolak, J. (2012). Prevalence and characteristics of youth sexting: A national study. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), 13–20. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-1730>

NCMEC. (2024). *Office of justice programs, U.S. department of justice, CY 2023 report to the committees on appropriations, national center for missing and exploited children (NCMEC) transparency* (CY-2023).

O’Connor, K., Drouin, M., Yergens, N., & Newsham, G. (2017). Sexting legislation in the United States and abroad: A call for uniformity. *International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, 11(2), 218–245. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1037397>

Ojeda, M., Dodaj, A., Sesar, K., & Del Rey, R. (2022). “some voluntarily and some under pressure”: Conceptualization, reasons, attitudes, and consequences of sexting among adolescents. *Telematics and Informatics*, 75, Article 101891. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2022.101891>

Parton, L. E., & Rogers, M. M. (2025). The predictors, motivations and characteristics of image-based sexual abuse: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 0(0), Article 15248380251320992. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380251320992>

Pedersen, W., Bakken, A., Stefansen, K., & von Soest, T. (2023). Sexual victimization in the digital age: A population-based study of physical and image-based sexual abuse among adolescents. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 52(1), 399–410. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02200-8>

Powell, A. (2023). I DIDN’T consent: A global landscape report on image-based sexual abuse.

Powell, A., Scott, A. J., Flynn, A., & McCook, S. (2022). Perpetration of image-based sexual abuse: Extent, nature and correlates in a multi-country sample. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(23-24), 23–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211072266>

Quayle, E., Jonsson, L. S., Cooper, K., Traynor, J., & Svedin, C. G. (2018). Children in identified sexual images – Who are they? Self- and non-self-taken images in the international child sexual exploitation image database 2006–2015. *Child Abuse Review*, 27(3), 223–238. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2507>

Rigotti, C., McGlynn, C., & Benning, F. (2024). Image-based sexual abuse and EU law: A critical analysis. *German Law Journal*, 25(9), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2024.49>

Rosenbloom, A. L. (2013). Inaccuracy of age assessment from images of postpubescent subjects in cases of alleged child pornography. *International Journal of Legal Medicine*, 127(2), 467–471. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00414-012-0765-8>

Scott, A., Mainwaring, C., Flynn, A., Powell, A., & Henry, N. (2022). Image-based sexual abuse among Australian youths: The experiences and perspectives of victims, perpetrators and bystanders. In *Interpersonal violence against children and youth* (pp. 85–108). Rowman & Littlefield.

Stevenson, J., Fry, D., Pitman, Z., Vermeulen, I., & Lawson, M. (2024). Childlight index-indicator 3 2023. <https://osf.io/285tj>

Strasburger, V. C., Zimmerman, H., Temple, J. R., & Madigan, S. (2019). Teenagers, sexting, and the law. *Pediatrics*, 143(5), Article e20183183. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3183>

Sutton, S., & Finkelhor, D. (2023). *Perpetrators' identity in online crimes against children: A meta-analysis* (p. 15248380231194072). Trauma Violence Abuse. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231194072>

Van Ouytsel, J., Walrave, M., De Marez, L., Vanhaelewijn, B., & Ponnet, K. (2021). Sexting, pressured sexting and image-based sexual abuse among a weighted-sample of heterosexual and LGB-Youth. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 117, Article 106630. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106630>

Walker, K., & Sleath, E. (2017). A systematic review of the current knowledge regarding revenge pornography and non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit media. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 36, 9–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.06.010>

Walsh, W., Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., & O'Brien, J. (2024). Online commercial sexual exploitation of children in a national victim survey. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001821>

Wolak, J., & Finkelhor, D. (2011). *Sexting: A typology*. Crimes against Children Research Center - University of New Hampshire. [Bulletin]. https://www.cola.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV231_Sexting2-Typology-Bulletin_4-6-11_revised.pdf

Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., & Mitchell, K. J. (2012). How often are teens arrested for sexting? Data from a national sample of police cases. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), 4–12. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2242>

Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Walsh, W., & Treitman, L. (2018). Sextortion of minors: Characteristics and dynamics. *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 62(1), 72–79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.08.014>

World Health Organization. Finkelhor, D., Walsh, K., Jones, L., Sutton, S., & Opuda, E. (2022). What works to prevent violence against children online? <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240062061>

Appendix

Abbreviations

CSAI Child sexual abuse images
CSAM Child sexual abuse materials
IBSA Image based sexual abuse
SGM Sex and gender minority