

Investigation of Online Child Sexual Abuse: An Account of Covert Police Operations Across the Globe

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Abstract : Child sexual abuse (CSA) has taken several forms, particularly with the advent of internet technologies that provide pedophiles access to their targets anonymously at an affordable rate. To combat CSA which has far-reaching consequences on the physical and psychological health of the victims, a special act, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, was formulated amongst the existing laws. With its latest amendment criminalizing various online activities about child pornography also known as child sexual abuse materials in 2019, tremendous pressure is speculated on law enforcement to identify offenders online. Effective investigations of CSA cases help in not only to detect perpetrators but also in preventing the re-victimization of children. Understanding the vulnerability of the child population and that the offenders continue to develop stealthier strategies to operate, it is high time that traditional investigation, where the focus is on apprehending and prosecuting the offender, must make a paradigm shift to proactively investigate to prevent victimization at the first place. One of the proactive policing techniques involves understanding the psychology of the offenders and children and operating undercover to catch the criminals before a real child is victimized. With the fundamental descriptive approach to research, the article attempts to identify the multitude of issues associated with the investigation of child sexual abuse cases currently in practice in India. Then, the article contextualizes the various covert operations carried out by numerous law enforcement agencies across the globe. To provide this comprehensive overview, the paper examines various reports, websites, guidelines, protocols, judicial pronouncements, and research articles. Finally, the paper presents the challenges and ethical issues that are to be considered before getting into undercover operations either in the guise of a pedophile or as a child. The research hopes to contribute to the making of standard operating protocols for investigation officers and other relevant policymakers in this regard.

Keywords : child sexual abuse, cybercrime against children, covert police operations, investigation of CSA

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