

Laura F. Kuhle | Daniela Stelzmann [Eds.]

Sexual Online Grooming of Children

Challenges for Science and Practice



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Preface – Why Online Sexual Offenses Against Children Are One of the Most Important Challenges of Crime Prevention Today

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In the last few years, humanity was faced with an extraordinary and unprecedented public health crisis. The day this preface was written, the COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, had infected more than 687 million cases and had caused 6.87 million confirmed deaths, making it one of the deadliest in history (Statista, 2023, May 2). At the same time, a second pandemic is haunting most parts of the world, which, unfortunately for all victims and survivors, has been slightly more concealed and silent than COVID-19. However, COVID-19 has certainly served as a fire accelerant for this second pandemic, which is sexualized violence against children by using online communication technologies. For example, the German police statistics (orig.: *Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik* [PKS]), which collects data of all registered offenses throughout the whole country, has indicated a substantial increase of online sexual offenses against children in the last few years (Bundeskriminalamt, 2021): Within the last ten years, the number of these offenses has tripled. Similarly, the *European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation*, better known under the name *Europol*, documented in its annually published *Internet Organized Crime Threat Assessment* (IOCTA) report also a substantial increase in sexual offending cases – particularly but not exclusively against children – in the area of social media and online gaming platforms (Europol, 2021). Furthermore, empirical studies about the prevalence of online sexual victimization experiences as well as expert surveys indicated an ongoing large dark figure of crime (e.g., Hasebrink et al., 2019; Wachs et al., 2012). In a diverse collection of surveys, between 20% and 25% of all children and juveniles reported that they have faced already experiences with online sexual offending behaviors (De Santisteban & Gámez-Guadix, 2018; Wachs et al., 2012). These are numbers which are shocking and alarming

also for experienced experts who are working for quite a long time in the field of criminology and forensic sciences.

One reason of this pandemic progress of online sexual offending behaviors is directly related to the distinctive properties of the Internet. With recourse to Cooper (2002), Seto (2013) proposes the notion of a „Triple-A engine“ (p. 15), consisting of the following three As:

- *Accessibility*, i.e., the high availability of sexual content in general and sexual deviant stimuli in particular, which enables an individual to consume child sexual exploitation materials within a few clicks.
- *Affordability* means that there are virtually no financial or temporal costs; as Seto (2013) impressively described, “a person motivated to solicit minors can approach hundreds – or more – individuals for free if they use [...] e-mail or social networks” (p. 16).
- The *anonymity* of the Internet – compared to most contact sexual offending behaviors – is probably the most relevant problem for the law enforcement authorities and, at the same time, is maybe the most important motivator for individuals committing online sexual offenses – even if the actual anonymity might be lower than the perceived one.

These aspects lead inevitably to the question how we could contain this pandemic. With recourse to the tremendous increase of knowledge about contact sexual offending behaviors in the last decades, there is one obvious answer to this question: We need as much empirically based scientific knowledge about (potential) offenders, (potential) victims, and the offending behavior as possible. Only the understanding of offending behavior allows the development of effective crime prevention strategies. And only the rigorous evaluation of these developed crime prevention strategies, and the revision of these strategies based on the evaluation reports, enables improvements and adaptations. Given that crime never sleeps, science should not be sleepy as well and needs permanent movement and development. At first glance, this could be exhausting for clinicians, because they must permanently question and scrutinize their everyday working routine, as well as for researchers, because never reaching the aim is part of their mission.

However, there are also some enormous gratifications for these demanding and challenging efforts, and maybe the most important one is the conviction that our work is actually working, i.e., it is effective. As we expressed in a previous publication, one highly relevant precondition for the development of effective crime prevention strategies is the cumulation

and dissemination of knowledge by, for example, writing, editing, and publishing books like the present one, which is still a cornerstone of sharing knowledge (Rettenberger et al., 2020). Therefore, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all authors who have contributed to this book, to the editors, and to the publisher to make this excellent and important piece of work possible. This sharing of knowledge contributes substantially to the implementation of evidence-based assessment and intervention efforts in many different countries all around the world. We have already strong empirical indicators that scientifically based assessment and intervention techniques have contributed to the effect of decreasing crime and recidivism rates in contact sexual offending behavior (e.g., Hanson et al., 2019; Rettenberger, 2018; Rettenberger & Eher, 2024). The present book contributes unquestionably to the effort to transfer this crime prevention success story from the contact (e.g., offline) sexual offending behavior area to the field of online sexual offending.

The book starts with a brief introduction of the main topic (e.g., definition aspects and characteristics of the phenomenon of sexual online grooming [SOG]) by Zeev Hill, Daniela Stelzmann, and Laura F. Kuhle. In the following three sections of the book, the authors are covering different aspects of the three most important perspectives of SOG: the perspective of children as victims and survivors of SOG (section 2), the perspective of the offenders (section 3), and the perspective of crime prevention (section 4).

In the first chapter of section 2, Julia von Weiler introduces a case study about being victimized during an SOG offense. Afterwards, Maria Ioannou and John Synnott review the current state of research about the risk factors and vulnerabilities of becoming a SOG victim. In chapter 2.3, Halina Schmid and Janina Neutze present results from a large-scale community-based research project, the so-called “MiKADO Project”, which systematically collected data about the online sexual experiences of German adolescents. In the last chapter of section 2, Jennifer Vogel describes prevention concepts for the most vulnerable and most relevant group of potential victims, primary school children.

In the first chapter of section 3, Miriam Schuler, and Klaus M. Beier present a case study of a hebephilic man with a history of SOG and discuss the treatment-related implications in this case. In chapter 3.2, Alexander F. Schmidt gives an overview about what we know so far about the offense- and offender-related characteristics. In chapter 3.3, Katharina Kärigel and Frederic Vobbe introduce and discuss the concept of hedonistic utilitarianism in the context of SOG and show that offenders use digital media strate-

gically to initiate, threaten, exploit, and humiliate their victims. Following, Anja Schulz and Petya Schuhmann report in chapter 3.4 data from an adult community-based sample to scrutinize what exactly we know about online sexual solicitation of minors and whether this offense could be interpreted as a specific form of SOG. In the final chapter of section 3, again Laura F. Kuhle and Daniela Stelzmann approach the topic of SOG by using qualitative data from the German Dunkelfeld project of men with a sexual preference for children.

The last section 4 might be interpreted as the most important one because it gives answers to the following question: How can we prevent children from SOG? First, Sebastian Büchner describes the efforts of the German law enforcement authorities to combat the phenomenon of SOG and reports the chances and challenges of the criminal investigation work of the police forces in Berlin. In chapter 4.2, Birgit Kimmel and colleagues give an overview about different crime prevention strategies available for protecting children from SOG. In chapter 4.3, Laura F. Kuhle and Daniela Stelzmann report on prevention strategies for offenders. Finally, Jenny Felser and colleagues describe the perspective of technological strategies to detect SOG to contribute to an effective crime prevention system.

As this summary shows, the present book provides an impressive and highly relevant collection of the current state of knowledge about online sexual violence against children. Thus, it is an extraordinary source for everybody who is interested in preventing online sexual crimes against children. I would like to congratulate the editors and authors for this impressive piece of work – and the readers for being able to benefit from this excellent book.

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