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**Abstract** | Despite increasing research on online child sexual exploitation, limited research compares female and male perpetrators. This study examined 116 females and 116 age-matched males known to police for online child sexual exploitation on group characteristics and risk of reoffending. Some differences emerged, with females co-offending and experiencing violent victimisation more often than males. However, several similarities were also apparent, including that females and males had similar risk of recidivism. These findings have implications for policy and highlight several important avenues for future research.

## Do females known for online child sexual exploitation differ from males? Group characteristics and recidivism

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### Introduction

In an increasingly technological age, children are at risk of being sexually victimised via the internet or other technologies, referred to as online child sexual exploitation (OCSE). Research has established treatment and assessment options for males who perpetrate OCSE (Henshaw et al. 2020; Seto & Eke 2015). In contrast, little research exists on females who engage in OCSE, despite increasing evidence some do victimise children online, especially in their role as caregivers (Bickart et al. 2019). Given the differing risk profiles of females and males who perpetrate sexual offences generally (Freeman & Sandler 2008), research results from males who perpetrate OCSE should not be blindly generalised to females. To date, however, comparative studies have not been published, limiting knowledge about whether policies and practices developed for males who perpetrate OCSE are relevant to females.

Sexual offending research highlights that males and females are partly distinct populations. While models of female sexual offending emphasise factors such as abusive relationships, personality dysfunction and intimacy deficits (Gannon, Rose & Ward 2008), for males the focus is on antisociality and atypical sexuality (Babchishin et al. 2018).

Females who engage in sexual offending (FwSO) are more likely than males to have a history of victimisation, including sexual victimisation, and to co-perpetrate sexual offences with a partner (Comartin et al. 2021; Johansson-Love & Fremouw 2009; Levenson, Willis & Prescott 2015). Compared to males, females also tend to be younger and have limited offending histories, including sexual and non-sexual offending (Williams & Bierie 2015; Williams et al. 2019). In turn, females tend to receive more lenient criminal penalties for sexual offending than males, including being less likely to be arrested and more likely to receive police diversion (eg Hull et al. 2025; Patterson et al. 2019). Recent research also reveals more females, particularly juvenile females, than males may be known to police for child sexual abuse material (CSAM) offending (Hull et al. 2025). These differences and the increasing recognition of female involvement in OCSE offending suggest a need for tailored policy and practice responses for females.

Males who perpetrate sexual offences present a higher risk of reoffending than FwSO. Freeman and Sandler (2008) compared 780 males and females on a sexual offender registry in the United States and found that males had higher rates of both sexual (5.4% vs 1.5%) and non-sexual (29.0% vs 21.3%) re-arrest. These rates align with the small body of work conducted on recidivism among females convicted of CSAM offences, with preliminary findings suggesting nil rates of sexual recidivism over at least 16 years (Ghossoub & Harake 2023), compared with a rate up to 10 percent over the same period for males (Elliott et al. 2019). While this indicates a lower rate of recidivism among females, Freeman and Sandler found that being male compared to female did not increase recidivism risk when controlling for other risk factors, such as prior offending history and age at time of sexual offence arrest. Other factors may therefore play a greater role than gender in explaining recidivism.

Available research has helped identify some risk factors for recidivism across female and online sexual offending populations. Research on FwSO indicates sexually offending by oneself (as opposed to co-offending with a partner), a prior offending history, and a history of victimisation increase risk of recidivism (Marshall & Miller 2020, 2019; Vandiver, Braithwaite & Stafford 2019). Some of these factors occur in males who perpetrate OCSE (eg prior offending; Seto & Eke 2015), while other factors do not. For example, while perpetrating multiple child sexual offences predicts recidivism among males with CSAM offending (Dowling et al. 2021), being convicted of multiple sexual offences may not predict recidivism among FwSO (Marshall & Miller 2020). Additionally, younger age both at the onset of offending and at index offence is associated with recidivism among males (Rice & Harris 2014), while findings are mixed for FwSO. Some research supports the trend for age at index offending (Marshall & Miller 2020; Vandiver, Braithwaite & Stafford 2019), while another study found that older age at time of first sexual offence was associated with recidivism (Sandler & Freeman 2009).

## The current study

Limited research has compared the group characteristics or risk of reoffending among females and males who engage in OCSE (only Hull et al. 2025 was identified). This knowledge will assist in establishing whether females require different assessment, treatment and management protocols compared to those used for males. This study therefore had two aims. Firstly, we explored whether factors which typically distinguish females and males in the broader sexual offending literature also distinguish females and males known to police for suspected OCSE offences. Secondly, we explored whether males and females have a similar risk of general recidivism after accounting for risk factors explored in existing research on female and/or online sexual offending populations.

## Methods

This study formed part of an Australian Research Council Linkage Project (LP180100090) undertaken in collaboration with Victoria Police, Corrections Victoria, the Australian Institute of Criminology and Monash University. All sample and variable data were obtained from the Victoria Police Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAP) database, which stores information on offending and victimisation histories of individuals who come to police attention for offending.

## Sample selection

Individuals were considered for inclusion in the final sample if they were known to police for specific online 'target charges' between 2004 and 2019 inclusive (elected to align with national legislation enacted in 2004 criminalising an array of CSAM offences). The target charges spanned three specific categories of child sexual offending:

- online CSAM offending (eg access, possession);
- online grooming and/or sexual communication; and
- the production of CSAM (which may have occurred offline but did not involve the direct sexual abuse of children).

Participant eligibility and index offences (the offence/s of interest for which an individual received some criminal justice sanction) were determined by examining the dates individuals were processed by police for target sexual offences. Specifically, the individual must have been processed by police for an online offence without any coinciding and/or prior offline (in-person, direct child sexual offence) or exclusionary charges (charges which could not be classified as online or offline in nature, or as occurring against children or adults). Additionally, the individual must have been aged 10 years or over at the time of the processing date, which was the age of criminal responsibility in Victoria at the time of data collection. If an individual was processed for an eligible target offence on more than one occasion, the date defining the index event was randomly selected (see Seto & Eke 2015), with offences before the randomly chosen date being categorised as 'prior' offences and offences after the categorised date as 'recidivistic'. This approach minimised possible inflation of recidivistic offences given the absence of conviction data and helped enhance statistical power for key variables of interest (eg prior violent offences).

Initially, data on 399 females and 7,015 males were extracted from LEAP. Of those, 544 (7.3%) did not have a recorded target offence between 2004 and 2019 inclusive, and 2,179 (29.4%) were known to police for exclusionary offences at the time of and/or prior to their index offence. One individual was excluded for being aged less than 10 years at the time of their target offence (<0.1%), 24 (0.3%) for having no documented date of birth, and seven (<0.1%) for only having online offences prior to 2004 (which could not be reliably conceptualised as occurring in the online or offline domain). Of those with target offences, 2,296 (31.0%) were known to police solely for offline offences and 342 (4.6%) for both online and offline (dual) offences. These exclusions resulted in a final sample of 2,021 individuals known to police exclusively for online offences at the time of and/or prior to their index offence (5.7% female,  $n=116$ ).

## Offence classification

For descriptive purposes, offences were classified as violent or nonviolent. Violent offences involved actual or threatened physical or sexual harm against a human victim or inducing fear in a human victim. These offences were further categorised as sexual violence (eg CSAM offences) and non-sexual violence (eg murder, stalking). All other offences were considered nonviolent, and were sub-categorised into breach (eg failure to answer bail) and other (eg property, drug) offences. The category 'any offending' encapsulated all offences.

## Variables

### *Demographics*

The employment and relationship status of each individual was operationalised based on the status last known to Victoria Police prior to the index offence.

### *Offending history*

Age at the time of first coming to police attention for any offence was measured, alongside categorical variables reflecting the types of offences for which an individual had come to police attention prior to the index offence.

### *Index offending*

Several features of the index offence were defined, including:

- whether at least one target offence had been formally proceeded against by police;
- whether or not the individual was aged under 18 years at the time of the offence;
- the total number of sexual offences perpetrated;
- the presence of co-occurring non-sexual offences; and
- the type of OCSE the individual was known for.

Except for the total number of sexual offences perpetrated, variables were categorical.

## Co-offending

Whether an individual had co-perpetrated a target sexual offence at the time of and/or prior to their index offence was examined. This was sub-categorised into whether they had ever co-offended in a pair, in a group of three or more, or with someone of the opposite gender.

## Victimisation

We analysed whether individuals had ever come to police attention for being the victim of a sexual and/or violent non-sexual offence across three points: lifetime (any age), childhood (aged below 18 years), or adulthood (aged 18 years or over).

## Recidivism and time at risk

Recidivism was defined as the first instance of being processed by police for an offence after the index offending event. All individuals were followed from the date of their index offence to the date of data extraction (19 September 2022). Data linkage was undertaken with Corrections Victoria and Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria to determine whether an individual was incarcerated or had died, respectively, during the follow-up period (and thus was not available for reoffending). If an individual reoffended, time at risk was measured as the time, in months, between the index offence and the first reoffence. If an individual did not reoffend, the entire follow-up period was used, with the date of death used instead of the data extraction date where relevant. Periods of incarceration were subtracted from at-risk periods to determine the actual time at risk. Please note that, due to changes in Corrections Victoria data management processes, some imprisonment data may be missing for records between 2004 and 2005, and thus time at risk may be overestimated for these cases. This limitation potentially impacted only a very small portion of the final sample (those with index offences prior to 2005;  $n=6$ ) and as such is not expected to substantially alter final outcomes.

## Approach to analysis

Analyses were completed with SPSS Statistics (version 29; IBM Corp 2023). Due to the large volume of eligible males ( $n=1,905$ ) compared to the final number of females ( $n=116$ ), males were randomly allocated to one of two groups, and males in each group were then age-matched to females based on age at time of data extraction. Males successfully age-matched in the first group were entered into the final analyses. Males successfully age-matched in the second group were used to explore the robustness of results by replicating all analyses across both aims (specific outcomes of these supplementary analyses can be obtained via contacting the authors directly). Twenty-five individuals in the final sample had pseudo-recidivistic offences (ie offences which were processed after the index offence but which were perpetrated prior to the index offence), which were excluded as recidivistic charges from main analyses. Demographic variables were unable to be used in multivariate analyses due to the large volume of missing data.

To answer the first research question, a binary logistic regression was run using gender (female compared to male) as the outcome variable. Predictor variables were chosen based on existing literature on factors which distinguish males and females who perpetrate sexual offences. The variable 'juvenile at index' was used in the final model instead of 'age at first contact' due to concerns regarding multicollinearity. Furthermore, sub-categories of violent victimisation (eg lifetime sexual, childhood violent non-sexual) did not meet statistical assumptions (eg cell counts were too small) and were thus collapsed into a broader category that captured ever being a victim of violent crime (lifetime violent victimisation). Receiver operating characteristic (ROC) and area under the ROC curve (AUC) analysis was used to determine whether the final model successfully distinguished females and males, with a significant AUC greater than 0.5 indicating that the model performed better than chance (Ozkan et al. 2020). In line with recent research (eg Holper et al. 2024), AUC cut-offs proposed by Rice and Harris (2005) were used to determine the performance of the model:  $>0.56$  was a small effect,  $>0.64$  a moderate effect, and  $>0.71$  a strong effect.

To answer the second research question, a Cox regression analysis was run for the higher-order category of any recidivism. This form of recidivism was elected given the small sample sizes associated with alternative forms of recidivism (in turn posing difficulties for meaningful analysis) and the higher rates of general recidivism found among sexual offending populations when compared to sexual recidivism rates (eg Vandiver, Braithwaite & Stafford 2019). In accordance with Tabachnick and Fidell (2019), the analysis was completed in two steps (sequentially). In Step 1, empirically supported risk factors for recidivism were entered as control variables. Gender (female or male) was then entered in Step 2 to determine whether it contributed to recidivism risk beyond the risk factors in Step 1.

Relevant assumption testing was completed, including for the assumption of proportional hazards via analysing log-log plots and time-dependent Cox regressions. The variable 'total index sexual offences' did not meet the linearity assumption and was converted to a binary variable, identifying whether the individual had one or multiple index sexual offences. Harrell's C-index was used to determine whether the Cox regression was able to successfully distinguish recidivists from non-recidivists. This statistic is equivalent to the AUC but accounts for varying times at risk, thus being more appropriate for evaluations of survival models (Hartman et al. 2023). Overall, an index of 0.5 indicates that a model is performing no better than chance while an index larger than 0.7 indicates good discriminatory strength (Hartman et al. 2023).

## Ethics

The research received approval from the Justice Human Research Ethics Committee (CF/20/17580) and the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee (20225770-11015).

## Results

### Sample description

Table 1 presents descriptive information about the final sample. These data characterise the sample only and not all listed variables were included in the main analyses. Males had a higher rate of employment while females were more often students. Rates of prior police contact were approximately equivalent between the two groups, though males tended to have higher rates of prior police contact for sexual offences. Both females and males were most likely to be known to police for index CSAM offences, but males had a higher rate of being known to police for grooming/sexual communication offences. In contrast, females were more likely to be juveniles at the time of their index offending and had higher rates of co-offending and victimisation.

**Table 1: Descriptive information on individuals known to police for suspected online child sexual exploitation offences**

Variable	Females ( <i>n</i> =116) <i>n</i> (%) / <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Males ( <i>n</i> =116) <i>n</i> (%) / <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Total ( <i>N</i> =232) <i>n</i> (%) / <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
<b>Demographics</b>			
Recorded employment			
Missing data	58 (50.0)	54 (46.6)	112 (48.3)
Unemployed	8 (6.9)	10 (8.6)	18 (7.8)
Employed	16 (13.8)	30 (25.9)	46 (19.8)
Student	34 (29.3)	22 (19.0)	56 (24.1)
Recorded relationship			
Missing data	73 (62.9)	68 (58.6)	141 (60.8)
Single	30 (25.9)	36 (31.0)	66 (28.4)
In a relationship	9 (7.8)	9 (7.8)	18 (7.8)
Previous relationship	4 (3.4)	3 (2.6)	7 (3.0)
<b>Offending history</b>			
Age at first contact (years)	22.3 (12.1)	23.5 (12.0)	22.9 (12.1)
Any prior police contact	36 (31.0)	35 (30.2)	71 (30.6)
Prior contact for violent offences	18 (15.5)	19 (16.4)	37 (15.9)
Prior contact for sexual offences	2 (1.7)	5 (4.3)	7 (3.0)
Prior contact for violent non-sexual offences	17 (14.7)	15 (12.9)	32 (13.8)
Prior contact for nonviolent offences	28 (24.1)	23 (19.8)	51 (22.0)
Prior contact for breach offences	5 (4.3)	5 (4.3)	10 (4.3)
Prior contact for other offences	28 (24.1)	22 (19.0)	50 (21.6)

**Table 1: Descriptive information on individuals known to police for suspected online child sexual exploitation offences (cont.)**

Variable	Females ( <i>n</i> =116) <i>n</i> (%) / <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Males ( <i>n</i> =116) <i>n</i> (%) / <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Total ( <i>N</i> =232) <i>n</i> (%) / <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
<b>Index offending</b>			
Proceeded against by police	75 (64.7)	88 (75.9)	163 (70.3)
Juvenile at index	65 (56.0)	41 (35.3)	106 (45.7)
Total index sexual offences	1.2 (0.5)	2.2 (5.2)	1.7 (3.7)
Multiple index sexual offences	24 (20.7)	38 (32.8)	62 (26.7)
Violent non-sexual offences	3 (2.6)	9 (7.8)	12 (5.2)
Nonviolent offences	8 (6.9)	13 (11.2)	21 (9.1)
CSAM offences	109 (94.0)	95 (81.9)	204 (87.9)
Grooming/sexual communication offences	5 (4.3)	23 (19.8)	28 (12.1)
Production offences	14 (12.1)	15 (12.9)	29 (12.5)
<b>Co-offending</b>			
Any co-offending	60 (51.7)	19 (16.4)	79 (34.1)
Ever in a pair	28 (24.1)	10 (8.6)	38 (16.4)
Ever in a group	32 (27.6)	9 (7.8)	41 (17.7)
Ever with the opposite gender	47 (40.5)	4 (3.4)	51 (22.0)
<b>Victimisation</b>			
Lifetime, violent	39 (33.6)	12 (10.3)	51 (22.0)
Lifetime, sexual	20 (17.2)	2 (1.7)	22 (9.5)
Childhood, sexual	16 (13.8)	2 (1.7)	18 (7.8)
Adulthood, sexual	6 (5.2)	0 (0.0)	6 (2.6)
Lifetime, violent non-sexual	30 (25.9)	12 (10.3)	42 (18.1)
Childhood, violent non-sexual	17 (14.7)	8 (6.9)	25 (10.8)
Adulthood, violent non-sexual	15 (12.9)	5 (4.3)	20 (8.6)

Note: CSAM=child sexual abuse material

Table 2 presents descriptive information on cumulative fixed-interval recidivism outcomes for females and males known for OCSE. Although only general recidivism was a focus of the current paper, the base rates presented help to contextualise reoffending patterns and contribute to a scant literature on female OCSE offending. Females tended to reoffend more often with nonviolent offences, while males had a higher rate of sexual recidivism than females.

**Table 2: Recidivism outcomes for females and males known for online child sexual exploitation**

Offence type	Female (n=116)			Male (n=116)		
	1-year n (%)	5-year n (%)	Total n (%)	1-year n (%)	5-year n (%)	Total n (%)
Any	13 (11.2)	46 (39.7)	51 (44.0)	18 (15.5)	40 (34.5)	45 (38.8)
Violent	3 (2.6)	18 (15.5)	21 (18.1)	8 (6.9)	18 (15.5)	20 (17.2)
Sexual	0 (0.0)	2 (1.7)	2 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	5 (4.3)	7 (6.0)
Violent non-sexual	3 (2.6)	17 (14.7)	20 (17.2)	8 (6.9)	16 (13.8)	19 (16.4)
Nonviolent	12 (10.3)	40 (34.5)	47 (40.5)	16 (13.8)	37 (31.9)	41 (35.3)
Breach	1 (0.9)	16 (13.8)	22 (19.0)	6 (5.2)	21 (18.1)	25 (21.6)
Other	12 (10.3)	35 (30.2)	40 (34.5)	13 (11.2)	26 (22.4)	29 (25.0)

Note: As the data are cumulative, five-year subtotals may match the final total if there was no further offending beyond five years

### Factors distinguishing females and males

Table 3 presents the results of the binary logistic regression identifying gender. When accounting for all other predictors, only two variables distinguished males and females. Co-perpetration of a target online offence increased the odds of being female by nearly five times—that is, those known to police for co-offending were more likely to be female than male. Similarly, females were more likely than males to be known to police for being the victim of a violent offence, with a history of violent victimisation increasing the odds of being female by more than five times. No other predictors reached significance, and thus did not successfully distinguish females and males.

The AUC analysis revealed that the final model demonstrated strong discrimination between females and males known for OCSE offending. The results followed a similar trend in the validation sample, with only any co-offending and lifetime violent victimisation reaching statistical significance, and the final model demonstrating strong discrimination. Collectively, these results support the robustness of the final model.

**Table 3: Outcome of binary regression predicting gender**

Variable	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval
Prior contact for violent offences	1.07	0.43, 2.71
Prior contact for nonviolent offences	1.16	0.54, 2.51
Proceeded against by police	0.55	0.27, 1.11
Juvenile at index	1.69	0.87, 3.29
Total index sexual offences	0.74	0.47, 1.15
Any co-offending	4.87***	2.49, 9.53
Lifetime violent victimisation	5.23***	2.32, 11.80
Omnibus test	$\chi^2(7)=65.40***$	
Area under the curve [95% confidence interval]	0.792*** [0.734, 0.850]	

\*\*\*statistically significant at  $p < 0.001$

## Risk of recidivism

Table 4 presents the outcome of the Cox regression analysis predicting risk of any recidivism at any time. In Step 1, when controlling for all other covariates, individuals known to police for prior nonviolent offences were at higher risk of any recidivism than individuals without such a history. Specifically, individuals with a history of prior police contact for nonviolent offences had a recidivism risk nearly three times higher than those without such a history. Additionally, juveniles at the time of the index offence were at higher risk than adults of coming to further police attention for any offence, presenting a level of recidivism risk nearly double that of adults when holding all other covariates constant. No other potential risk factor achieved statistical significance. Step 2 did not significantly differ from Step 1 ( $\chi^2(1)=0.29, p=0.590$ ), and gender did not significantly contribute to the model ( $p=0.590$ ). Therefore, females and males were at similar risk of any recidivism when controlling for all other risk factors.

Harrell's C-index revealed that the final model contained moderate strength in predicting risk of any recidivism at any time. Within the validation sample, both prior nonviolent offences and being a juvenile at the time of index offending significantly predicted risk of any recidivism, and gender did not significantly contribute to the model. In addition, those with multiple index sexual offences had a significantly higher recidivism risk than those with only one index sexual offence. Overall, these results support the robustness of the final model.

**Table 4: Outcome of Cox regression analysis for any recidivism**

Variable	Step 1 RR [95% CI]	Step 2 RR [95% CI]
Prior contact for violent offences	1.64 [0.99, 2.72]	1.65 [0.99, 2.75]
Prior contact for nonviolent offences	2.99 [1.88, 4.75]***	3.00 [1.89, 4.77]***
Juvenile at index offence	1.91 [1.20, 3.04]**	1.94 [1.22, 3.10]**
Multiple index sexual offences <sup>a</sup>	1.43 [0.90, 2.27]	1.41 [0.89, 2.25]
Any co-offending	0.85 [0.54, 1.32]	0.88 [0.55, 1.40]
Lifetime violent victimisation	1.53 [0.97, 2.40]	1.59 [0.99, 2.53]
Gender <sup>b</sup>	–	0.88 [0.56, 1.39]
Omnibus test	$\chi^2(6)=43.69$ ***	$\chi^2(7)=44.01$ ***
Harrell's C-index	–	0.653

\*\*\*statistically significant at  $p<0.001$ ,\*\*statistically significant at  $p<0.01$

a: The reference category was being known to police for only one sexual offence during the index period

b: The reference category was being recorded as male on LEAP

Note: RR=relative risk of recidivism at any time. CI=confidence interval. Significance testing was unavailable for Harrell's C-index

## Discussion

This study explored the group characteristics and risk of recidivism between females and males known to police for OCSE offences. Females were more likely than males to have co-perpetrated an online offence and to have experienced lifetime violent victimisation. Despite these group differences, females were just as likely as males to reoffend, with only prior nonviolent offending and younger age at index offending explaining recidivism outcomes. These results indicate that differences in group characteristics do not necessarily equate to differences in general reoffending patterns among females and males known for OCSE.

The current findings support research that suggests FWSO are more likely than males to co-offend and have a history of victimisation (eg Comartin et al. 2021; Levenson, Willis & Prescott 2015). Policies directed at the prevention of OCSE would therefore be remiss to neglect factors associated with the unique needs of female perpetrators, including the probable role of antisocial or sexually deviant co-offenders and the impacts of violent victimisation, such as trauma. Some results also diverged from the literature, with females and males in the current study sharing similarities across prior offending, number of index sexual offences, being a juvenile at the time of index offending, and being formally proceeded against by police for OCSE offences. Existing research has found differences between males and females by primarily examining offline or heterogeneous samples (ie both online and offline offenders, or offenders with both child and adult victims). Therefore, it is possible that females and males who perpetrate OCSE have more characteristics in common than females and males who engage in other forms of sexual offending. This emphasises the need to continue comparing females and males who perpetrate OCSE as stand-alone cohorts to properly inform resourcing and management frameworks.

Despite some baseline differences in group characteristics, females and males were just as likely to come to police attention for further offending when controlling for other risk factors. This aligns with Freeman and Sandler (2008), who found that risk factors such as prior offending history and age at the time of arrest for sexual offending were more important than gender in explaining sexual and non-sexual recidivism. Collectively, these findings suggest that specific risk factors (whether present in males or females) may be more important than gender in explaining recidivism risk in OCSE populations. In the current study, this may partly be explained by the finding that factors which distinguished females and males did not contribute to recidivism risk. For example, co-offending status distinguished females and males but did not predict recidivism.

Of the factors that did predict recidivism, findings aligned with prior research. For instance, a nonviolent offending history and younger age at the time of index offending are typically associated with recidivism within broader sexual offending populations (e.g., Rice & Harris 2014; Vandiver, Braithwaite & Stafford 2019). However, most factors did not predict recidivism, despite research on FwSO and/or males who perpetrate online offences indicating otherwise (Dowling et al. 2021; Marshall & Miller 2020, 2019; Vandiver, Braithwaite & Stafford 2019). There are several possible explanations for the discrepancies in findings. For one, the current study analysed a combined sample of juveniles and adults who had come to police attention (and were not necessarily convicted), whereas most prior research used convicted adult samples (eg Marshall & Miller 2019; Seto & Eke 2015). Differences in findings could therefore be related to differences in the research populations. Another possibility is that the importance of the risk factors for recidivism may differ between females and males, suggesting that gender interaction effects for these factors should be studied. Future research should also focus on identifying additional risk factors for recidivism within female samples (eg mental health factors).

Given that many similarities were found between females and males known for OCSE, it would be tempting to infer that risk assessment protocols developed for males may be appropriate for use with females. However, future research would first need to investigate various other factors associated with recidivism in the OCSE and/or female sexual offending literature (eg victim characteristics, mental health difficulties) before drawing conclusions on similarities or differences in the risk profiles of females and males. Furthermore, the association between juvenile status and recidivism is worthy of future consideration given that young people likely require specialised prevention and intervention protocols. Finally, it would be important for future research to replicate the present findings with violent forms of recidivism (eg sexual, violent non-sexual) given that these constitute serious offending behaviours in terms of both potential judicial consequences and long-term harm to victims. Successfully addressing risk of violent recidivism could in turn alleviate resourcing and economic burdens on the legal and mental health systems.

## Limitations

Results should be considered alongside several limitations. Firstly, only policing data were used to capture offence history, meaning there is no indication of whether individuals in the current study were formally sanctioned or convicted. Rates of recidivism may therefore be overestimated, and results may not apply to convicted samples. Secondly, to assist in maintaining sample size, both juveniles and adults were included. Young people who engage in sexual offences have unique developmental considerations and may have different motivations to adults when engaging in OCSE (eg 'love triangles'; Dodge 2021). Results should therefore be applied cautiously to adult sexual offending populations. Thirdly, although the current study extends research by considering a diverse range of OCSE offences, most of the sample was known for CSAM offences and may thus primarily reflect individuals who engage in CSAM-type offending. Any findings would therefore need to be replicated to ensure results are robust across different OCSE offending populations. Fourthly, although the sampling period aligned with key legislative changes in Australia, the length of the study period (approximately 15 years) means that social factors such as enhanced police responses to online crimes and the normalisation of internet use may be confounding factors. Finally, several domains which distinguish females and males in broader literature (eg victim characteristics) or which are likely relevant to female sexual offending broadly (eg mental health, substance use) were unavailable for analysis in the current study. Investigation of the predictive value of these factors is a substantive gap in the current literature on female online child sexual offending. Although data limitations meant this was not possible for the current study, future research should endeavour to investigate how these domains may relate to recidivism among females who engage in OCSE.

## Concluding statement

The current study found that females and males known for OCSE are largely similar cohorts in terms of group characteristics and risk of general recidivism. However, females appear to have salient characteristics which need to be addressed in management frameworks, including a higher likelihood of requiring trauma-informed care. These results extend and support the longstanding contention that research pertaining to male sexual offending should not be generically applied to female perpetrators. Although several limitations of this study were discussed, research on female OCSE offending is relatively rare, and only one other study thus far has compared male and female cohorts (Hull et al. 2025). This study therefore makes an important contribution to a scant research area, hopefully paving the way for ongoing investigation into a historically neglected cohort.

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*URLs correct as at October 2025*

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