



A Post-COVID Retrospective Review of Child Sexual Exploitation and Paedophilia Offences in South Africa: The Impact of Police Operational Safety

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Abstract: Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is one of the most heinous forms of violence against children in the world and one that has remained an issue which has been a thorn in the flesh of criminal justice systems and child protection agencies. To address this social vice bedeviling Africa, this study examines the changing dynamics of paedophilia-related offences and child sexual exploitation (CSE) in South Africa in the post-COVID-19 operational environment, with a focus on police operational safety. Significant social and structural upheavals brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic included heightened socioeconomic vulnerabilities, limited mobility, and increasing digital participation, all of which changed the trends and frequency of child exploitation offenses. These developments have continued in the post-pandemic era, creating a more complicated police environment marked by the growth of internet exploitation, international criminal networks, and heightened expectations on law enforcement to conduct investigations. Using a retrospective review methodology, this study examines how changes in the operational environment have affected the types of child sexual exploitation offenses as well as the circumstances in which police officers work by synthesizing previous research and documented patterns. The role of the South African Police Service (SAPS) in addressing these changing dangers is given specific attention, particularly the specialist units in charge of sexual offenses, child protection, and family violence. The study demonstrates the increasing significance of inter-agency cooperation, digital investigative skills, and international cooperation in combating crimes against children that are made possible by technology. The well-being of officers, the efficacy of investigations, and the larger criminal justice response to child abuse are all significantly impacted by these dangers. The study duly recommends investing in digital forensic skills, bolstering institutional support, and creating complete occupational health frameworks that are adapted to the requirements of investigating child exploitation offenses in a South African post-COVID era.

Keywords: Child Sexual Exploitation; Paedophilia; Post-Covid-19; Police Operational Safety; South Africa

Introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is one of the most heinous forms of violence against children in the world, and one that has still remained an issue that has been a thorn in the flesh of criminal justice systems and child protection agencies (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024). CSE is generally defined as the instances where a child is influenced, pressured, or compelled to engage in sexual acts to the advantage of a third party, in most cases, power, trust, or authority is not in balance. These effects of such exploitation are serious and extendable, as they impact the mental health of victims, their social, and long-term life consequences (Laird et al., 2023:2243-2244). CSE is becoming an emerging global menace that is known by international child-protection organisations, particularly as technological advances continue to provide new opportunities to exploit and abuse. Millions of children have been identified as having experienced some type of sexual exploitation in their lifetime

globally, which has brought forth the necessity to do more to prevent this terrible social vice, enhance policing ability, and global collaboration in combating the issue (UNICEF, 2024). Sexual offences against a child have been a leading issue among law-enforcement agencies in most countries, including South Africa, because they are complex and sensitive and have terrible impacts on their victims (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2016:1-10).

The COVID-19 pandemic created numerous social and institutional disturbances amongst which include lockdowns, social distancing, and movement restrictions which changed the normal daily activities and impacted the capacity of police agencies to conduct usual crime-prevention and investigation activities (Laufs & Waseem, 2020:1-17). Routine activity theory indicates that the daily social structures might be changed to impact the criminal opportunities by shifting the guardian patterns, targets, and offender behaviour (Hayes & Maher, 2024:372; Thomas et al., 2025:860-862). The pandemic placed conflicting demands on police organisations across the world, such as the implementation of regulations to ensure good public health, dealing with diminished human resources, and adapting to new working practices. Such difficulties put additional pressure on the law-enforcement agencies and frequently necessitated the process of reprioritising the policing resources. Meanwhile, studies have shown that the pandemic setting also caused changes in crime trends, specifically, cyber-enabled crimes and crimes that misuse digital settings (Lallie et al., 2021:1-15).

The extremely fast growth of online spaces, in which children communicate, interact, and learn, has become one of the most important changes throughout and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Gherghel et al., 2023:1-10). The shutdowns and the need to use online technologies more frequently implied that the number of children spending more time on the Internet and becoming victims of grooming, coercion, and exploitation increased exponentially (Harris, 2021:6). Reviews show that online child sexual exploitation has taken the status of a significant international issue as some studies have shown that every 1 in 12 children in the world have in one way or another been a victim of online sexual exploitation or abuse (Fry et al., 2025:188). Similar statements have been made by international police authorities stating that the accumulating amount of online child exploitation content poses significant challenges to the police forces, especially with perpetrators turning to encrypted means of communication and international networks to hide their actions (Holt et al., 2020:1-2). Such changes have revolutionized investigative activities of police departments, necessitating the acquisition of new digital forensic expertise, technology and special purpose investigative units.

Crime that is connected to paedophilia has thus become more complicated to the contemporary law-enforcement officer (Holt et al., 2020:1). In comparison with most of the conventional crimes, the crimes related to child sexual exploitation are usually associated with several jurisdictions, advanced digital technologies, and secret online communities that support the creation and sharing of abusive content (Hillman et al., 2014:687-698). Studies on the use of technology to perpetrate offenses reveal that the investigators are frequently required to examine vast amounts of digital data when they cooperate with global law-enforcement agencies and technology firms to discover offenders and victims (Holt et al., 2020:1). Such investigations can also include covert operations, internet surveillance and specialised victim-identification techniques, which necessitate high levels of technical skills, criminal profiling and institutional resources. With the growth in the level and complexity of these offences, the police institutions ought to change their investigation approaches to adequately identify and act on such activities (Hillman et al., 2014:687-698).

However, in this changing Covid policing context, the safety of police operations has taken on a more significant role of concern. Operational safety is not only related to the physical risks that law-enforcement operations are exposed to but also to the psychological and occupational risks that officers can be exposed to during investigations (Simonovska et al., 2023:2). The officers dealing with cases of sexual exploitation of children are often exposed to contentious material and emotionally demanding circumstances, which may lead to secondary trauma and work stress. Research where investigators interact with evidence of child exploitation has indicated that professionals can develop psychological distress and burnout through continued exposure to such data unless they have good support systems (Wortley et al., 2026:1-2). Besides, the growing use of digital investigations and undercover online operations brings about new operational risks, such as cybersecurity threats and possible exposure of the undercover investigators.

Prevalence and Pattern of Previous Sexual Exploitation and Paedophilia-Related Offences

CSE and paedophilia-related crimes are an issue of global importance as far as public safety and human rights are concerned. Studies have continuously revealed that sexual exploitation of children is a global phenomenon that cuts across all parts of the world and thus affects millions of children yearly. Recent estimates provided by the UN children fund (UNICEF) have shown that over 370 million girls and women across the world in the age group of less than 18 have faced rape or sexual assault (UNICEF, 2024:1). The count of girls and women affected by sexual exploitation increases to around 650 million around the world, including all the broader forms of the issue, which are online abuse,

grooming, or non-contact sexual violence, indicating the ubiquity of the issue (UNICEF, 2024:3). These results show that child sexual exploitation is no longer an isolated phenomenon but a widespread problem that has considerable consequences concerning the protection of children, the law enforcement agencies, and the general health systems.

Empirical studies also show that boys are also victims of sexual exploitation, though it is not well-reported because of the social stigma attached to the issue and the barriers to reporting. According to UNICEF, it is estimated that 240 million to 310 million boys and men all over the world have been raped and sexually assaulted as children, and even more widespread sexual violence may have been experienced by 410 million to 530 million males (UNICEF, 2024:8). These statistics show that child sexual exploitation is a problem that is experienced by children of both sexes, but girls are the ones who are reported to be victims of child sexual exploitation more. This is demonstrated by the systematic review and meta-analysis of national population-based studies, which revealed that the world lifetime prevalence of sexual violence against children is approximately 11%, with a further 9% of that type of sexual abuse being contact-driven, which further shows how prevalent such crimes are in society (Barth et al., 2013:430-438). These statistics reveal that there should be better surveillance systems and reporting systems to get a better understanding of the entire magnitude of the problem.

The regional trends show that, especially in developing areas, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the prevalence rates are high. In sub-Saharan Africa, over 79 million girls and women, which is more than 1 in every 5, have been raped or sexually assaulted prior to their 18th birthday (UNICEF, 2024:2). In these situations, the resulting high rates of sexual exploitation can be attributed to factors of poverty, gender inequality, conflict, inadequate child-protection systems, and the inability to enforce the law. Most of the time, and unfortunately, the perpetrators are people familiar with the victim, such as family members, caregivers, or community members, and thus it is hard to detect and prosecute. The trends of child sexual abuse have always indicated that the abuse is often committed in the very places where children should feel secure, in other words, homes, schools, and the community (Barth et al., 2013:430-438). These situational circumstances bring out the intricate social and cultural processes that influence child sexual exploitation trends.

The recent years have witnessed a lot of changes in the trend of child sexual exploitation and the number of offences related to paedophilia due to technological progress. The development of digital communication technologies, encrypted messaging services, and communities on the Internet has contributed to the generation and sharing of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Studies on online networks show that child pornography is highly spread by anonymous platforms, such as dark-web networks, that permit criminals to remain anonymous and avoid being detected by law enforcement (Jani et al., 2024:11519-11521). The presence of such technologies has allowed offenders to form international networks to share exploitative material and groom or exploit minors internationally.

The issue of online sexual exploitation has also become an even more significant part of the trends of child sexual abuse. According to a systematic review of the literature on online exploitation, it is estimated that about 5.5% of children worldwide have encountered some types of online sexual exploitation, and the Eastern and Southern Africa regions are the most affected (Fry et al., 2025: n.p.). Online grooming, coercion to create explicit images, livestream abuse, or sharing sexual photos about minors without their permission may all be considered online exploitations. Such exploitations are usually used concurrently with offline abuse and can have several offenders in different jurisdictions. Therefore, online exploitation has been cited by the law-enforcement agencies all over the world as one of the aspects of child sexual offending that is rapidly expanding.

The other interesting trend in child sexual exploitation is the vulnerability and age of the victims. It is always found that adolescents are most vulnerable, although young children are also often targeted. The studies of illegal web searches of abusive experiences show that much demand is placed on the content involving the children of 11 years old and below, which means that very young victims are frequently targeted by the criminals (Wolak et al., 2022:6). Also, children in socially disadvantaged situations like those who are living in poverty, displaced, with family troubles, or unsupervised are prone to exploitation. These are the vulnerability elements that are involved in the continuation and the growth of child sexual exploitation networks in the world. Although the bulk of the large-scale prevalence research is based on international samples, it is plausible to assume that the same trends are observed in the context of South Africa, as the internet penetration is growing, and the national victimisation surveys are showing the same trends. This migration to online offending is especially relevant in the post-COVID period, with heightened online interactions between children contributing to lockdowns putting them at risk of more potential criminals and eliminating chances of protective supervision (Katz et al., 2021:6)

All these studies bring to light two relevant trends: first, the number of children sexually exploited in South Africa is considerable and multidimensional, with large percentages of victims of child sexual abuse having encountered victimisation in later life also; and second, the presence of online sexual abuse greatly enhances the prevalence rates

of child victimisation, which supports the role of the digital environment in modern paedophilia-related crimes. With the migration of paedophilia-related crimes to cyberspace, law enforcement agencies must change modes of investigation to deal with the challenge and magnitude of digital exploitation, as well as continue to respond effectively to crimes committed in person.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to give a post-COVID retrospective overview of child sexual exploitation and paedophilia-related crimes in South Africa, and more specifically, the information about the safety of the operation of police investigators. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the dynamics of crime fundamentally, creating more possibilities of child exploitation online and complicating the cases managed by law enforcement agencies. These transformations have put new physical, psychological, and digital threats on those police officers who operate in specialised units dealing with child protection and sexual offenses investigations.

The purpose of the research is to investigate the empirical trends in child sexual exploitation and paedophilia-related offenses especially after the COVID-19 epidemic, as well as the shift in crime trends concerning in-person and online-mediated offenses. Through these trends, the study will assess the effects of operational demands, workload on investigations and exposure to traumatic material among police officers in South Africa on their safety and effectiveness as well as their well-being. Additionally, the research aims to offer evidence-based suggestions to enhance operational safety measures, increase the digital forensic and investigative competencies, strengthen the psychological assistance to police officers, and encourage the cooperation between sister security agencies. This study helps formulate better and more sustainable operational risk-reduction and risk-sharing policing strategies to tackle child sexual exploitation and crimes related to paedophilia in the post-pandemic environment through the connection of the shifts in offence patterns with the corresponding operational risks involved.

Conceptual Review

The conceptual review explores three central issues that apply to the research namely; understanding paedophilia-related offences, COVID-19 and changes in crime dynamics, and policing paedophilia-related crimes in South Africa. The section will be based on the world and local literature, such as Interpol, UNICEF, and UNODC reports, to provide the context of the research and outline the operational and investigation difficulties.

Child Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation in children (CSE) is a well-known issue of children's rights breach and one of the greatest societal safety-related challenges in the world. It can be defined as those cases when a child was manipulated, coerced, or forced into sexual acts to benefit another individual and, in most cases, there was a lack of balance of power and trust or authority (Laird et al., 2023:2243-2244). In contrast to other forms of abuse, CSE frequently involves an element of exchange, wherein the offender may offer presents, money, or other forms of encouragement in order to gain the kid's cooperation. The exploitation can be done through physical, online, and organised criminal groups that generate and traffic child sexual abuse material.

Studies have shown that the effects of child sexual molestation are long term and very devastating. The victims can be psychologically traumatized, depressed, anxious, and have long-term problems with interpersonal relationships and personal development (Piolanti et al., 2025:264-272). Due to these significant effects, CSE is gaining recognition as a criminal justice problem and a social health issue that should be addressed in concert by the law enforcement, social care, and health systems.

Paedophilia and Paedophilia-Related Offenses

Paedophilia may be defined broadly as a continuous sexual yearning in pre-pubescent children. Paedophilia-related offences in criminological, psychological and legal terms are defined as an abnormal behaviour where people respond to such interests by performing an act of illegal sex with children or by creating, possessing, or sharing child sexual abuse content (Gina et al., 2022:596-619). Although paedophilia as a psychological disorder does not necessarily imply criminal behaviour, the concept of paedophilia-related offences generally denotes crimes that are both against criminal law and abuse children. These are crimes which may have numerous forms such as sexual assault of minors, grooming, and child sexual exploitation, and creation or distribution of child sexual abusive content. The digital technology has increased the ranges of how such offences take place, especially through the online platform where the offenders may communicate with the minors, exchange illegal materials, or organize their activities in hidden networks (Hillman et al., 2014:687-698).

Child Sexual Abuse: Technology Facilitated

Digital technologies have greatly changed the character of child sexual exploitation due to its rapid growth. The social network, online platforms, and encrypted messaging apps have opened new possibilities to the offenders to reach vulnerable children and circulate exploitative content. Exploitation using technology usually occurs through grooming, in which offenders develop trust with children over a period and eventually exploits or coerces them to engage in sex (Holt et al., 2020:1).

The internet also allows criminals to conduct business across national borders making the activity very difficult to investigate by the law enforcement agencies. Online platforms enable offenders to hide their identities, communicate over encrypted platforms, and share exploitative content on the international level. This means that digital forensic methods, specialised technological equipment, and global partnerships will be increasingly useful in helping the investigators to locate criminals and save victims.

Exploitation of Children in South Africa

Child sexual exploitation and child sex offences are still a major issue of concern by law enforcers and child protection organizations in South Africa. The nation has developed legal measures to safeguard children against sexual abuse and exploitation, and this will include the fact that the laws criminalise possession and distribution of child sexual abuse content (Amponsah et al., 2024:4). Despite these endeavors, poverty, social inequalities, and inaccessibility to services that could help reduce the vulnerability of children may make children more susceptible to exploitation.

The studies of sexual offending in South Africa indicate that a significant proportion of offenders have complicated backgrounds, and it might involve being victimised or exposed to violence, which can affect offending patterns (Naidoo et al., 2024: 1-10). There is also the escalation of internet access which has increased avenues to exploit online and therefore, it is more challenging to detect and investigate such offences by the law enforcement agencies.

Police and Operational Safety Implications

The research on child-sexual exploitation and Paeophilia-related crimes places a great strain on police forces. Such cases may involve a lot of digital evidence research, undercover operations, and liaising with foreign policing agencies (Wortley et al., 2026:3). These types of inquiries are not only operational but also psychologically dangerous to the officers, especially when they should look at disturbing content or approach the offenders in the undercover setting.

In this definition, operational safety goes beyond physical security to include psychological and digital security. Recurrent exposure to graphic evidence might cause secondary trauma or work-related stress in investigators in specialized units (Simonovska et al., 2023:2; Wortley et al., 2026:1-2). These risks can only be dealt with through organisational support structures, specialised training and policies that ensure that the wellbeing of investigators is safeguarded.

Theoretical Connection to Current Research

The current study is based on several interconnected theoretical foundations that explain the operational realities of policing CSE as well as its occurrence. These theories offer a basis for comprehending how the COVID-19 pandemic's environmental effects have affected crime trends and police tactics.

Routine Activity Theory: This theory as one of the most pertinent theoretical frameworks holds that crime happens when three factors come together—a motivated offender, a suitable victim, and the lack of a skilled guardian (Cohen & Felson, 1979:589). The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed normal behaviours in the setting of this study by boosting children's online presence while concurrently decreasing in-person monitoring from educators, social workers, and community organizations. This change made it easier for child sexual abuse content to be distributed, as well as for online grooming and sexual exploitation. As children became easier targets in less regulated digital contexts, the idea helps explain the reported increase in online offenses during and after the pandemic.

The Opportunity Theory of Crime: this theory highlights how closely connected opportunities in the environment that significantly influence criminal behaviour are. Increased digital connectivity and anonymity in the post-COVID operational environment have given criminals more chances to participate in exploitation without being discovered right away. Law enforcement actions are made more difficult by the fact that criminals can now reach victims across geographic borders, frequently using encrypted platforms. This theoretical framework emphasizes how crucial situational elements—like technological access and a lack of digital guardianship—are in enabling crimes related to paedophilia.

Social Learning Theory: also sheds light on criminal behaviour from a psychological standpoint. According to this hypothesis, people pick up abnormal behaviours through imitation, reinforcement, and observation (Bandura, 1977:22). By bringing people with similar deviant interests together, online spaces like forums and dark web groups can normalize and perpetuate exploitative behaviours. Peer approval and the availability of content about child sexual abuse in these networks may be contributory factors in the continuation and intensification of criminal activity. This theoretical viewpoint is especially pertinent to comprehending how online communities contribute to the continuation of crimes related to pedophilia.

Occupational Stress Theory and Secondary Traumatic Stress Frameworks: these are essential for comprehending police operational safety; they are also used to describe offender behaviour in this study. Psychological strain, burnout, and decreased job performance can result from investigators' frequent exposure to upsetting material and emotionally taxing circumstances when working on child exploitation cases (Figley, 1995:7). Due to the need for police officers in South Africa to conduct intricate investigations and examine substantial amounts of explicit material, the post-COVID rise in digital cases has increased these exposures. These frameworks emphasize the value of organisational interventions and psychological support networks in ensuring the wellbeing of police officers.

Systems Theory: Additionally, this theory offers a more comprehensive perspective for comprehending the interdependence of social institutions, law enforcement, and child safety. The efficiency of police responses to child sexual exploitation depends not only on the performance of individual officers but also on how well the larger criminal justice and child protection systems operate. Disruptions to social services, school systems, and community networks have reduced protective mechanisms in the post-COVID setting, making policing institutions more necessary. The study's emphasis on how systemic issues affect both crime prevalence and police operational safety is supported by this notion.

By offering a thorough explanation of the growth in child sexual exploitation in the post-COVID era and the related difficulties faced by law enforcement, the integration of various theoretical frameworks generally enriches the existing study. Occupational Stress and Systems Theories contextualize the hazards and expectations placed on police personnel, Social Learning Theory clarifies offender behaviour in digital spaces, and Routine Activity Theory and Opportunity Theory explain the environmental factors that encourage criminal activity. When taken as a whole, these viewpoints support the study's goal of investigating the relationship between changing crime trends and police operational safety in South Africa.

Role of the South African Police Service

South African Police Service (SAPS) is at the forefront in preventing, investigating and responding to crimes against children involving child sexual exploitation and offences related to paedophilia in South Africa. Being the main national law-enforcement, SAPS is duty bound to ensure the safety of the people, implement criminal regulations, and defend vulnerable groups, such as children. In the domain of child protection, SAPS assists in identifying the perpetrators, investigating crimes and facilitating the prosecution of people, who have become the subjects of sexual exploitation and abuse of children (Aphane, 2025:415).

Another initiative of SAPS in response to crimes against children is the Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences (FCS) units which were introduced to create a specialised investigative unit to handle cases involving sexual violence, domestic violence, and children related crimes. These are specialised teams that are trained to deal with sensitive investigations of child victims and their responsibility is not only to collect evidence, interview victims in a trauma-conscience way, and liaise with social services and healthcare providers to ensure victims receive appropriate support (Fernandes et al., 2024:1384-1386). The presence of specialised investigative units will demonstrate that crimes against children need specialised skills and processes to guarantee effective investigation as well as victim protection.

Besides the domestic policing operations, SAPS also cooperates with the international law enforcement organisations and transnational investigation networks to fight online child sexual exploitation. Since a significant part of the offences committed by paedophiles is facilitated using digital methods and cross-border networks, they may need to collaborate with other organisations, including Interpol and other partners across borders to monitor the activity of offenders and break the criminal networks operating across borders (UNODC, 2022:21). Such collaborations allow the exchange of information, joint activities, and technological support of the detection of the culprits and the saving of lives.

The other significant role of SAPS is to enforce the national laws that are aimed at preventing the sexual exploitation of children. The activities that criminalize the South African law include the possession, distribution or production of

child sexual abuse material, grooming and sexual exploitation of minors (Coetzee, 2023:1-20). The task of SAPS investigators is to collect digital and forensic evidence required to prosecute a criminal based on these laws, which is becoming increasingly connected with surveying huge amounts of electronic data and carrying out online inquiries (UNODC, 2022: n.p.).

Nevertheless, the increasing digitalisation of child exploitation offences has tremendously widened the police duties. The investigators now must manoeuvre through coded messages, web forums, and online platforms that the criminals share illegal content. The specialised technical skills, digital forensic capabilities, and continued training of law-enforcement officers are needed in these developments (Holt et al., 2020:1-3). Therefore, SAPS needs to keep changing its methods of investigation and technology to adequately combat new types of child exploitation via computer technologies.

Moreover, SAPS is significant in the prevention and awareness of the population. Law-enforcement agencies also often cooperate with the government departments, schools, and community organisations to teach the citizens about online safety, reporting channels and how to prevent the exploitation of children. This kind of preventive measure is necessary as a lot of cases of child sexual exploitation are not reported at all, especially when it is committed online or when the involved person is a member of a community and is trusted by them.

Presently, SAPS still has several issues in effectively acting to deal with crime related to paedophilia. The scarcity of resources, lack of specialised staff, and the escalating complexity of the digital investigations may disrupt the efficiency of the investigation (Aphane, 2025:1). The issues are even more increased by the emotional and psychological needs of investigators serving regularly on the cases of child abuse and exploitation. Consequently, enhancing the institutional capacity, technological resource, and offering adequate support to the investigators have become imperative in prolonging the efforts of the SAPS to crimes related child sexual exploitation.

Challenges

Digital Investigations

Most crimes involving paedophilia revolve around digital evidence, which is, however, very challenging. The investigators also should work with massive amounts of information, such as encrypted messages and material stored on the clouds, which need to be handled with highly technical standards and tools (Strickland et al., 2023: n.p.). Lack of trained staff and resources may undermine the investigation process and diminish the success of the prosecution (Nwafor, 2024:255-257). The fast-changing digital world also makes it difficult to detect and collect evidence, which requires constant change by the SAPS units.

Undercover Operations

One of the most important investigative tools is undercover operations, especially on the internet. To gain access to abuse networks, officers can impersonate minors or go through middlemen. These activities are both effective but impose psychological risks on the personnel involved, need to be followed by the letter of the law, and are also resource-intensive because of time and planning (Wortley et al., 2026:4). The balance between the operational integrity of the office and the safety of the officers is always a sensitive matter, and it proves the problematic nature of covert investigations conducted (Cajada et al., 2024:557-572; Moretti et al., 2025:1-8).

Cross-Border Crimes

Some of the offences associated with paedophilia entail international networks and therefore, make it hard to enforce. Prosecution may be hampered by jurisdictional boundaries, and the only answer may be to partner with foreign law enforcement agencies like Interpol or the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Whereas such partnerships have resulted in successful arrests, inter-country communication delays or legal differences between countries may hamper timely responses (UNODC, 2021:22).

Victim Protection

SAPS activities are based on the need to protect the victims, which is not without challenges. When investigating, child victims must receive trauma-informed care, and police, social services and healthcare providers need to coordinate their efforts so that they can reduce the tendency of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and re-traumatization. Resource constraints and lack of knowledge about the services may prove detrimental to victims accessing the support they need, and thus all-encompassing victim-oriented approaches are necessary (Hanson et al., 2020:1-20).

Police Operational Risk Empirical Research

There has been growing empirical research on the various risks of police officers in the line of their operational performance. It is not a secret that police work is a high-risk job position which throws the officers into a complex of physical, psychological, and occupational risks (Acquadro Maran et al., 2015:466-473; Purba & Demou, 2019:1-20). These dangers are caused by direct experiences with offenders, being subjected to traumatic experiences and demands of ensuring safety in society when facing complex and frequently unpredictable situations (Anders et al., 2024:3-5; Ugwu & Idemudia, 2025:650-652). Research has always indicated that the accumulative impact of these risks can have major implication of the physical health, psychological wellness and performance of the police officers.

Risks Related to Physical Operations

There has been a large amount of empirical data on the physical risks to law-enforcement officers. Police officers often act within the conditions of violence, opposition, or confrontation when arresting and investigating crimes. A study of injuries associated with arrests shows that the contact between the officers and the suspects can be a primary cause of the officers being physically injured especially during investigations that are either violent or emotionally intense (Bozeman et al., 2018:466-472).

The risks are likely to increase in serious crime investigations like sexual offences against children. Those incidences usually necessitate the process of search warrants, detention of suspects, and seizing evidence that can be accompanied by conflicts with criminals trying to escape the police (Joseph et al., 2025:5-15). There is empirical evidence to indicate that these working environments need meticulous risk management plans so that the officers are not endangered in investigative processes (Holt et al., 2020:2).

Psychological and Emotional Risks

Besides the physical threat, police officers are also at a great risk of psychological harm, which comes out of experiences of traumatic events. It has demonstrated that exposure to violence, victimisation, and upsetting evidence may cause escalation of occupational stress, burnout, and post-traumatic stress symptoms among the officers with repeated exposure (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014:2-3). The mental burden of policing is especially clearly noticeable among the officers in specialised investigative forces where they must solve homicide, domestic violence, and child exploitation cases.

The investigators working on the cases related to the area of child sexual exploitation might have to examine graphic evidence such as images and videos of abuse. Empirical literature suggests that secondary traumatic stress and emotional exhaustion may occur in case of long-term exposure to this type of material unless proper support systems are provided (Kanno & Giddings, 2016: n.p.). These psychological risks underscore the importance of organisational interventions that should be closely used to safeguard mental health and resilience of police officers who are positioned on high-stress investigative units (Purba & Demou, 2019:1-20).

Digital and Cyber-Operational Risks

There are new operational risks to personnel in law-enforcement presented by the growing digitalisation of crime. Cybercrime and electronic child exploitation investigations frequently put officers in online environments that can expose them to cybersecurity-related risks, internet harassment, or efforts by perpetrators to recognize and recruit any investigator (Holt et al., 2020:3). Such risks are especially noticeable in undercover internet-based investigations wherein authorities can pretend to be underage individuals or join online discussion groups and interact with criminals to obtain information.

Empirical research on the investigation of online child exploitation reveals that the officers operating on cyber units are often exposed to other sources of stress, such as the complexity of technologies and the unceasing presence of shocking digital content (Simonovska et al., 2023:2). Additionally, digital investigations may imply working with large volumes of data and encrypted communications, which may serve as a source of workload pressure and prolong the investigation.

Organisational and Occupational Risks

Organisational factors that influence the nature of operational risks that police officers in South Africa face include workload, staffing levels as well as institutional support systems. Studies have revealed that the heavy workload, insufficient resources, and excessive working time may lead to fatigue and a lack of decision-making skills among the officers (Anders et al., 2024:5-7; Violanti et al., 2022:2-4). These pressures may be heightened in specialised units

dealing with child exploitation because of the complexity of the cases and emotional pressures linked with victim-centred investigations.

Empirical evidence from the study of Papazoglou and Andersen (2014) indicates that some of these risks can be reduced when officers have effective organisational support, including psychological counselling, peer support programs, and specialised training; these support measures are likely to enhance officer's resilience (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014:4). Agencies which put the welfare of officers and operational safety as their primary focus are in a better place to ensure that they remain effective in investigation and at the same time they can protect the health and performance of their officers.

When taken as a whole, empirical research demonstrates that operational hazards to law enforcement might be related to psychological, digital, and organizational threats in addition to traditional physical ones. The range of hazards that investigators face is expanding due to the increasing complexity and technology mediation of crimes like child sexual exploitation. This evidence confirms the need to establish advanced operational safety plans that can involve physical safety and psychological health among the officers. To the police organizations, especially those tasked with the responsibility of investigating the offences related to paedophilia, enhancement of the police officer safety systems is critical in maintaining the efficiency of the law-enforcement responses and preserving the health and psychological well-being of the investigators involved.

Post-COVID Operational Environment

The new environment of operation following the COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the way law-enforcement agencies conduct their research and address the issue of CSE and offences related to paedophilia. The pandemic brought unprecedented social interruptions like lockdowns, school shutdowns, more use of internet, and economic distress, all of which have led to changes in the patterns of crime against children. These structural shifts still affect the nature of child exploitation crimes and the working conditions of police officers as societies shifted to the post-pandemic stage. Law-enforcement agencies, such as the SAPS, also have faced the necessity to adjust to new investigative issues, including those involving digital environments, transnational networks of offenders, and more cases of online exploitation (Interpol, 2020:2).

The pandemic has seen mass lockdown actions that have made children spend much more time on the Internet, both as an educational and entertainment resource and a means of social interaction. This change ironically provided more windows of negative online grooming, sexual extortion, and distribution of child sexual abuse content (CSAM). There is an indication that internet exploitation activities were so high during the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 and have remained so to impact law-enforcement activities in the post-pandemic era. As an example, a study of international threats by law-enforcement agencies has shown that the number of child sexual abuse content and negative online grooming cases has increased significantly during the pandemic, and the offenders are now more willing to use social media and gaming networks to target children (Europol, 2020:6). Such digital tendencies have continued after the pandemic, forming an increasingly technologically sophisticated working environment of investigators who are supposed to deal with crimes related to child exploitation.

Structural issues in policing systems in South Africa that investigate sexual offences on children have also been brought to light in the post-COVID environment. The SAPS Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences (FCS) Units are at the centre of responding to these crimes, but investigators are often limited in resources, caseloads are large, and the digital skills required to conduct investigations are also in demand. The increasing number of cases of online exploitation necessitates the officers to undertake advanced cyber investigation, which may entail digital forensics, undercover online investigations, and collaborating with other jurisdictions in the enforcement of legislation (UNODC, 2021:18). Such investigative requirements impose further operational pressure on the police officers and subject them to constant change in response to emerging cyber technological threats.

A different important element of the post-COVID policing environment is that investigators will be at greater risk psychologically and occupationally when they are assigned to child exploitation cases. The officers that are tasked with such investigations are often exposed to upsetting internet-based evidence and victim interviews that are traumatic. It has been shown that such material when exposed to over a certain period may result in secondary/vicarious traumatic stress, burnout and emotional fatigue to the investigators especially those who are fully involved in the examination of huge amounts of child sexual abuse material (Cieslak et al., 2014). The load related to the review of digital evidence grew with the number of cases of online exploitation (completed during the pandemic and afterwards), which also put a certain psychological burden on investigators.

The need to have inter-agency cooperation and international policing cooperation has also been highlighted in the post-pandemic environment. It is common to have cases of children exploitation networks that are spread across provinces especially in cases where online platforms and encrypted communication channels are used. As a result, the law-enforcement agencies must collaborate with international organizations, digital service providers, and child-protection institutions to find the offenders and save the victims. Global policing response research shows that cross-border investigation and collaboration to share intelligence have become an indispensable element in the fight against online child exploitation (UNODC, 2021:22). In the case of law-enforcement agencies in South Africa, it implies that they will have to rely more on working with international policing organizations and digital platforms.

Moreover, after the COVID era, there has been an increased appreciation of the importance of improved police operational safety structures. Operational safety in this case does not only consider the safety against physical dangers in cases of arrests or rescue operations; it also covers safety on psychological wellbeing, security on the internet and resilience in the occupation. When conducting their research/investigation into online child exploitation, investigators could be victim to cyber threats, cyber identity exposure during undercover actions or harassment by offender networks that are online. These dangers explain why police and officers dealing with sensitive crimes against children require specialized training, safe digital infrastructure, and mental-health care support systems (Interpol, 2020:5).

In general, the child sexual exploitation and the connected offences policing in the post-COVID environment have changed. The pandemic hastened the transition of these crimes to cyber space and at the same time made the investigation more challenging and riskier to the law-enforcement staff. In the case of agencies like SAPS, some of these difficulties must be resolved through better technological solutions, increased investor training, greater international collaboration, and the overall safety of operations. These changing circumstances are crucial in understanding the impact of operational safety of the police on the success of child exploitation crime investigations in the post-pandemic period.

Recommendations for Policy and Operations

The operational and policy changes in policing institutions should be specific to solving the emerging complexity of the paedophilia-related offences in the post-COVID era. With the growing presence of child exploitation crimes online, the law enforcement agencies must implement tactics that promote greater investigative work, improve the security of officers, and increase interagency efforts (Wortley et al., 2026:5). According to empirical studies, response to exploitation of children online needs specialised training, better technological infrastructure, and international collaboration between law enforcement bodies and child protectors (Interpol, 2023).

Among the policy priorities that are of great importance is the development of specialised training programmes on South African police officers dealing with child exploitation cases. The investigators in sexual offences and cybercrime departments are required to have high digital investigations, online undercovers, and victim-oriented investigations. The psychological issues related to exposure to child sexual abuse content should also be discussed during training so that the officers could be allowed to create coping mechanisms and resilience (Strickland et al., 2023: n.p.; Wortley et al., 2026:6). Studies concerning law enforcement preparedness have demonstrated that specialised training is beneficial to the effectiveness of the investigation and the skills of the officers to react to complicated digital crime settings (Holt & Bossler, 2021:112-114).

The other significant change in operations is the increase in digital forensic capacity in the policing institutions. The investigation of paedophilia often involves the need to analyze a large amount of digital evidence, such as images, videos, encrypted communications, and online network data. The absence of proper forensic equipment and qualified professionals can make investigators extremely slow in handling evidence potentially obstructing criminal prosecutions and victim protection activities. The research of cybercrime investigation has focused on the idea that law enforcement organizations should invest in the development of sophisticated digital forensic laboratories, data-mining tools, and qualified staff to be productive in the fight against online exploitation networks related to CSE (Interpol, 2023:2).

Investigators also need mental health support considering the psychological requirement involved with the investigation of paedophilia. Child sexual abuse investigators face the risk of secondary traumatized stress, burnout, and psychological distress when repeatedly revisiting materials related to child sexual abuse. This means that the policing organisations ought to put in place well-organised wellness programmes that incorporate psychological counselling, peer support programs, and workload management programs aimed at managing and alleviating investigator stress.

Moreover, there is a need to have closer cooperation with other international law enforcement agencies when combating the transnational dimension of online paedophilia networks. The crimes of child exploitation are often characterized by offenders working in different countries or provinces and such a situation does not provide an opportunity to investigate and prosecute cases at the local level. The national and international cooperation systems allow police organisations to exchange intelligence and coordinate investigations, thereby tracing offenders who operate internationally. Global policing organizations emphasize that dismantling the extensive networks of child exploitation requires the cooperation of national police agencies, forensic experts, cybercriminal departments, and foreign partners (Latonero, 2022:88-90).

Lastly, the police departments are supposed to come up with better safety measures in their operations to ensure that the officers in high-risk investigations are safeguarded. Paedophilia and child exploitation cases typically involve search warrants, arrests and undercover operations, which expose the officers to both physical and digital exposure. Specific operational protocols, risk analysis and specialised tactical training will assist in minimising the chances of injury or failure in operations in such investigations. The enhancement of operation safety policies will guarantee that the officers will be able to work efficiently and reduce the risk of physical and psychological trauma.

Together, these policies and operational reforms point to the necessity of the overall approach that consists of the combination of training, technological potential, psychological support, and international collaboration. This is needed to make sure that the policing institutions would be able to effectively address the changing nature of the crimes involving paedophilia in the digital age.

Conclusion

The post-COVID South African context has brought to the fore various challenges in mitigating the issues of child sexual exploitation and offences related to paedophilia both old and new. The pandemic changed the nature of social relations, made children more vulnerable online, and brought new pressure to work on the law enforcement side. These sensitive crimes compel officers to work through complicated digital evidence, safeguard traumatized people, and in many cases, work in circumstances that are physically and mentally dangerous and exhausting.

Health and safety of the police members are essential in providing good investigation results. Operational stress may be caused by exposure to traumatic material, working undercover, and stakes in every interaction with an offender, which, when not managed, can affect the performance of the officer and the safety of victims. The review highlights the importance of specialized training, psychological assistance, and the institutional solutions that would protect officers and at the same time will not compromise the high investigative standards and rules of engagement.

In general, this study contends that the problem of child sexual exploitation in South Africa requires not only sophisticated methods of investigation but also a comprehensive approach to the issue of the safety of the operation of the police. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen these dimensions to improve outcomes in the field of justice, safeguard vulnerable children, and guarantee a strong law-enforcement workforce in the context of changing threats.

Declarations

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Author Contribution: David Okanandu Iloma (DOI): Study conceptualization, methodology, theoretical framework, and references, data curating, discussion, and proofreading, empirical review, and general organization of the study. The author duly read and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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Author Biography

David Okanandu Iloma, BSc, MSc, PhD, graduated from the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka in Anambra State, where he obtained his bachelor's degree in psychology. He proceeded to Nasarawa State University, Keffi where he earned his master's degree in forensic and correctional psychology. Furthermore, he bagged his PhD in Clinical Psychology at the University of Uyo in Akwa Ibom State. Dr. Iloma is also proficient in cyber-security and has taught in the Department of Sociology/Criminology and Security Studies at Topfaith University Mkpatak, Department of Psychology at University of Uyo, and is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Police Practice, University of South Africa. Dr. Iloma's research interests are in psychological distress and crime prevention, with subspecialty in substance use/abuse, suicidal ideation, social change, LGBTIQ+ community, behavioural addiction, and AI/social media disorders amongst others. Dr. Iloma is also interested in crimes against women and young children (girls and boys alike). He has participated in several local and international conferences, local and international grants, as well as mentoring/coaching programs and community development projects. As a scholar/researcher of multidisciplinary background, licensed clinical psychologist, forensic expert, prolific writer, and seasoned statistical analyst, Dr. Iloma has to his credit, dozens of publications in learned journals or indexed/abstracted in Clarivate Analytics and Scopus/Scimago.

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