

Before It Begins: A Narrative Examination of ‘Upstream’ Approaches to Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

Lyric Buzza
Doctoral Candidate
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice
Griffith University

Supervisors: Associate Professor Danielle Harris, Professor Michael Townsley, Dr Andrew Childs

Levels of CSA Prevention



Primary



Secondary



Tertiary

Secondary Prevention

Early intervention with at-risk populations

Evaluations demonstrate the willingness of at-risk individuals to seek help

Limited in its development

Helplines, confidential treatment groups



The Gap in Current Prevention Initiatives




Most CSA prevention initiatives occur post-hoc




Missed opportunities to prevent offending



Limited knowledge on pre-contemplation and contemplation stages of CSA offending



Limitations of Current Prevention Methods



May indirectly place the responsibility of prevention in the hands of children

Offenders may not access secondary initiatives due to shame, guilt, or fear around disclosure

Tertiary initiatives limit the capacity to prevent offending before it begins

UPSTREAM



DOWNSTREAM





Stop It Now!


UK & IRELAND

Helping prevent
child sexual abuse

**Free, anonymous
confidential advice
and support**

0808 1000 900

stopitnow.org.uk/helpline



Stop It Now!

Originated in the US in 1992

Adopted by the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands,
Belgium, and Australia

Targets offenders and potential offenders

Confidential phone helpline and chat feature



Effectiveness of Stop It Now!

Many studies evaluate the program's success

Higher levels of public awareness around CSA

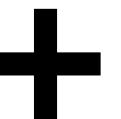
Callers felt more in control of behaviours, felt less isolated, and had improved wellbeing

In 2022/23, the UK service assisted 8,614 people



My Honours Project

- Timeline of Stop It Now! US history and development (2000-2022)
- Interviewed 20 international stakeholders across the UK, US, Scotland, and Belgium
- Determined moderators of success, barriers and key achievements of the program





This study: PhD paper 1





Why do Stop It Now! service users initially contact the helpline?



Data Source



Redacted and deidentified call notes generated by Stop It Now! clinicians during and immediately after each call



2 years of data (2022-2024)



571 total cases



Participants



571 calls= 376 men, 142 women, and 10 non-binary callers



As we are interested in initial calls, n=127

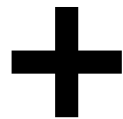


Participants were informed at the beginning of each call that their call notes may be used for research purposes

Codebook Manual

Coding Manual

Participant Number	Summary of First Call	Codes	Definitions
#1 Example Participant	Code any information regarding the initial reason for engagement with the helpline. This should include any information about the service user's current life situation, arrest status, and offending status (pre-contemplation, offending, post-offence, arrest, post-arrest).	Example code: Wants to manage offending risk	Example definition: The service user self-reports as currently at risk of offending (this may be a contact offence or CSAM engagement) and would like to discuss self-management with a clinician in this context.




Results

+




Why Did Service Users Call the Helpline?





Most Common Reasons for Helpline
Engagement



Wants Support with Distress or Suicidality

A large majority of service users reported experiencing extreme levels of distress and suicidality, whether this be ideation or active attempts, because of their attraction to children. Numerous service users described their attraction as 'unwanted intrusive thoughts' that were frequent in nature, causing high levels of stress, anxiety, and considerations of suicide.





Wants Support and Guidance from Service

These service users varied in age, life circumstances, and offending stages. Types of support and guidance sought by service users included a space to speak freely about their attraction, assistance in creating a safety plan for those in contact with children, and accessing module content created by the service.





Wants to Discuss a Historical Offence

Service users calling to discuss these occurrences often expressed guilt, shame, and anxiety around having carried out these behaviours. Many were seeking advice around how to have discussions with the victim and family members, who were often encouraging engagement with the service.





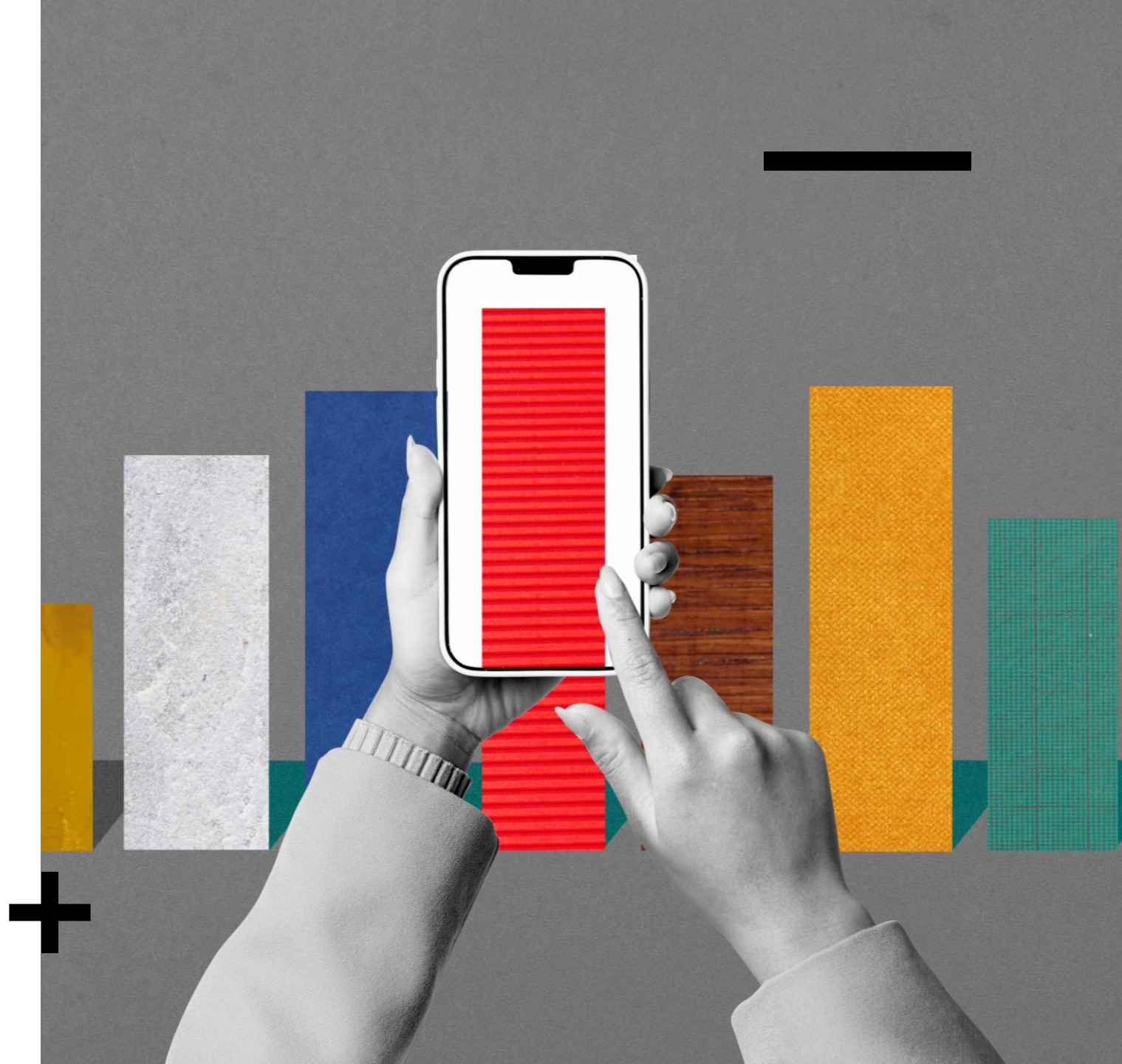
Wants to Understand Why They Offended

“He stated that he has been depressed and confused since learning the illegality of his behaviour. He wishes to further understand why he could not control his impulses, why these arose in the first place, and why disgust did not override sexual desire.”



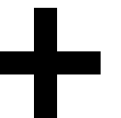
Wants to Manage Risk

This included the risk of committing an initial offence or the risk of recidivism post offence or arrest. Many of these callers expressed a desire to keep children safe, either due to being victim-survivors themselves or these children being known to them.



Seeking Professional Support

Service users contacted the helpline for referrals to other types of professional support. These included counselling, psychologists, and programs for people with attractions to children. These callers sought this support both before offending, whilst offending, and post offending/arrest.






Reasons Specific to Unarrested Callers



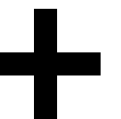
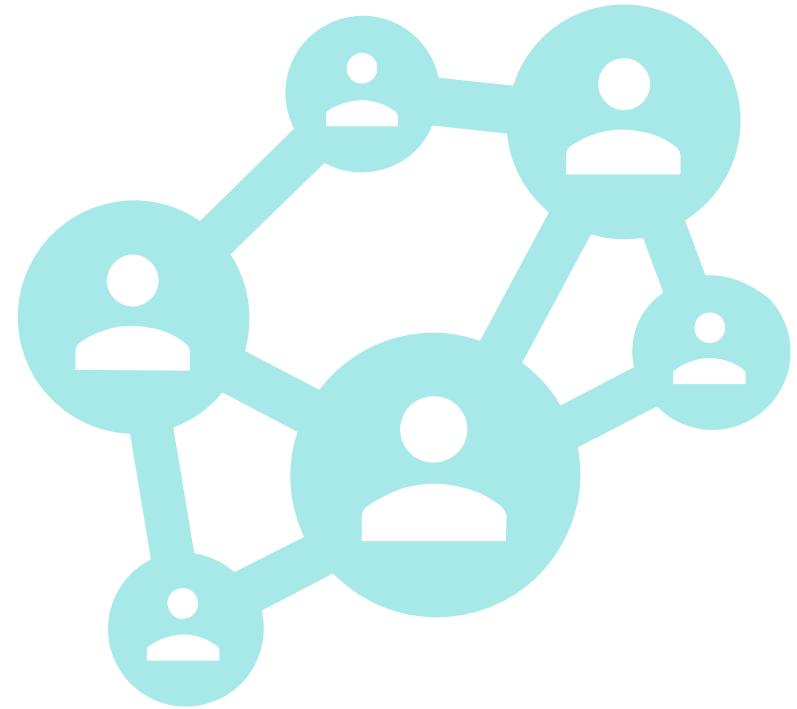
Wants to Stop Actively Offending

“[Caller] has ‘desperately’ wanted to stop accessing CSAM for ‘a while now.’ He has ‘wanted to make this call for a long time now.’ At the end of the call caller stated, ‘I’ve had this hidden folder on my phone that I have been trying to delete for 6 years...I have just deleted it now after this conversation.’”



Wants Help with Disclosure

Another reason for initial helpline engagement was to seek guidance around how to disclose attractions to partners, friends, family, and GPs. Service users calling for this reason acknowledged the social taboos that accompany this type of attraction, and feared the potential consequences of disclosure.



Partner Found Out

“Caller reached out due to his wife finding out about his online offending behaviour (CSAM). His wife discovering his search history appears to be a motivator for him to stop.”



Wants to Ask a Hypothetical Question or Clarify Legal Terms

“[Chatter] asked ‘hypothetical questions’ about whether we would have to report if someone found out their partner had accessed CSAM. Chatter then asked about ‘the connection between OCD and people who have disturbing sexual fantasies.’”



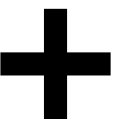


Reasons Specific to Arrested Callers



Wants to Explain their Behaviour

“[He] was arrested for CSAM and [redacted] around 4 weeks ago. It was around the time he had a few deaths in the family, and his kids developed health issues. He is not trying to excuse his behaviour but is trying to explain it.”





Wants Help Navigating the Criminal Justice System


Guidance was sought at multiple stages during the arrest process, such as immediately post-arrest, during the sentencing process, during the prison sentence, and post-release. Callers were seeking advice on how to emotionally prepare for trial, how their conviction could impact their employment, and how police cautions work. The service does not provide legal advice.



Have Realised They Need Help

For some, the arrest itself served as a catalyst for help-seeking. These offenders expressed the realisation that the behaviour they engaged in is illegal and they require professional help.

“[Caller] calling for help to manage sexual thoughts and OSEC offending that he was arrested for. Caller stated, ‘I’m a paedophile and I need help.’”



Study Contributions

Provides insight into how at-risk/offending individuals engage with anonymous helplines

Deepens knowledge surrounding the contemplation stages of CSA offending

Temporal advantage

First study to explore why help-seekers initially engage with the service

