

Tijana and Niels CF – involved in work with Thorn

https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Thorn_SOEResponse_Report_2026.pdf

Amanda Goharian – THORN Director, Research & Insights

Following on from discussions at TM in Latvia about The Com network and our response to it – research published

Advancing Response to Sadistic Online Exploitation in Networked Youth Environments

1. Niels Van Paemel	Belgium
2. Andreas Berger	Denmark
3. Nina Kavanagh	Denmark
4. Kristiina Kaldma	Estonia
5. Caroline Barré-Villeneuve	France
6. Guðrún Kristín Kristinsdóttir	Iceland
7. Elizabeth Donlon Fox	Ireland
8. Catriona Mulcahy	Ireland
9. Ilaria Visconti	Italy
10. Zoé Scherer	Luxembourg
11. Carmen Weyer	Luxembourg
12. Martina Testa	Malta
13. Vineeca Kuo	The Netherlands
14. Bono Lardinois	The Netherlands
15. Simona Levi	North Macedonia
16. Emily Ellis	Norway
17. Nelli Kongshaug	Norway
18. Kristiane Kvarstein	Norway
19. Kristin Slettvåg	Norway
20. Julia Piechna	Poland
21. Andrea Cox	Slovakia
22. Lina Kovač	Slovenia
23. Marko Puschner	Slovenia
24. Marta Cantón	Spain
25. Elina Johnsson	Sweden
26. Amanda Goharian	Thorn
27. Karl Hopwood	Insafe/EUN
28. Camille Odillard	
29. Marie Le Gouais	

Amanda Goharian is Director of Research at Thorn which is a non-profit which aims to protect children and young people from sexual abuse and exploitation in the digital age.

They are specifically looking at how to strengthen response and also build tech for law enforcement and industry to help with CSAM detection.

The research included a literature review of around 50 publicly available resources from academia, government and other organisations including Resolver, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue as well as public journalism and several legal documents from the US.

There are lots of different terms being used to talk about sadistic online exploitation (SOE) which can be challenging – the Com and 764 are commonly referred to as well as NLM (no lives matter) or Gregg’s Cult. Nihilistic violence is also used although this is more oriented to countering terrorism.

The research looked at how this emerging harm type and threat is fitting into to the existing ecosystem and then strengthen resilience by informing stronger coordination and system wide interventions in informing the response.

SOE is defined as **youth-driven, digital environments where engagement is structured through participation in harm, with violence, humiliation, and exploitation functioning as mechanisms for belonging and status.**

Young people are encouraged to participate in these youth driven and dominated digital environments with acts of violence, humiliation and exploitation and see this as a way to access belonging and status in these groups.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT?		CORE DYNAMICS	
Dimensions	Historical Patterns	Shared Features	Emergent Patterns
Motivation(s)	Primarily sexually motivated (paraphilia-driven)	Intentional infliction of physical and psychological harm, humiliation, and degradation for personal benefit	Centered on social status, belonging, and group acceptance: status achievement is a dominant driver
Offenders	Predominantly older adult male perpetrators	Presence of both individual and networked offenders; some display antisocial or oppositional defiant disorder pathologies	Predominantly adolescent and young adult males (aged 11-25); in some cases, observed neurodivergence and/or underlying mental health concerns, as well as substance abuse or dependency
Offender Dynamics	Often isolated individuals or small groups of coordinated offenders with limited group identity communicating via transactional and opportunistic interactions for selling/distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM)	Some degree of coordination and social-reinforcement of offending behavior; shared tactics and techniques (e.g., grooming manuals)	Digitally native, decentralized networked ecosystems with strong and intense group dynamics, inclusive of bespoke group identity, branding, language, and iconography ; multiple grievances and high psychological distress and extreme amount of time online (e.g., terminal usage)
Mechanisms for Perpetration	Direct and indirect access to children; offender communities on the darkweb	One-to-many perpetration; grooming, coercion, production and distribution of CSAM, cross-platform clear web dynamics	Many-to-many perpetration; youth-driven exploitation of other youth, victim-to-victimizer offending dynamics ; perpetrators will engage in secondary and tertiary harm by directing other youth to perpetrate
Relationship to Broader Online Harms	Generally distinct from other online harm ecosystems	Some overlap in tools (e.g., VPNs, spoofing, personally identifiable information exploits) and platforms (e.g., gaming and social media, Telegram)	Convergence with subversive violent online subcultures (not always ideologically driven) and cybercrime communities (e.g., hacker and/or crypto scam communities)

It is important to recognise that this is not something new, it pre-dates the internet but in the last decade there has been a clear divergence from previously documented patterns as shown in the table above. It is now more difficult to focus the response. Predominantly the perpetrators are 11–25-year-old males. Anecdotally there appears to

be a heavier appearance of neuro-divergence and some underlying mental health concerns and some substance abuse or dependency.

The groups have distinct identities and spend extreme amounts of time online – upwards of 10 hours per day. Often one perpetrator will be targeting several victims. There is convergence with other subversive online subcultures e.g. extremism, cybercrime communities, hackers, identity theft and crypto-scammers.



The high level of coercive control is similar to that being seen in gangs and trafficking situations – there is multi-dimensional victimisation with victims often being coerced into harming others including siblings.

There is strong youth dominance with children and young people being exposed to extreme materials and then incentivised to harm others. There is low reported prevalence but very high severity.

SCALE

Low *reported* prevalence,
high severity

REPORTING IS CONSTRAINED BY:

- Limited public awareness
- Significant barriers to victim disclosure, including self-implication
- Limited platform awareness; voluntary & uneven nature of platform detection & reporting
- Misclassification in reporting

3,000+

related CyberTipline reports in 2025

400+

FBI investigations across all 55 field offices

2,700+

victims within internationally prosecuted cases

There are challenges particularly when a child could be a victim and a perpetrator. Numbers are increasing but there are different indicators of the same problem so it is difficult to be accurate. Some organisations will capture CSAM but not self-harm etc.

There are several hurdles in response, these are areas of strain that make it more difficult to respond. Current systems are misaligned with the definition of SOE and the systems are overwhelmed.

01

SOE networks function as accelerated social conditioning environments

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

- **Mainstream digital platforms.** Designs optimized for engagement: status visibility. Persistent & ambient access.
- **Digital norms among youth.** High-volume content sharing, including sharing sensitive and personal information & high-volume image sharing.
- **Algorithmic exposure to subversive norms and harmful content.** Widespread & diffuse circulation of subversive worldviews & narratives.
- **Adolescence as a primary risk amplifier.** Heightened sensitivity to belonging & social status. ↑ reward-seeking, ↓ risk appraisal.

SOE NETWORKS

- **Exploitation of "gateway" environments.** Concentrate vulnerable youth & serve as recruitment pools.
- **Digital "peer group" meeting unmet developmental & social needs.** Transforms "exposure" into a socialization pathway: coordinated grooming.
- **Access to status & belonging.** Participation spans a *continuum* of roles, including passive observers, active participants, victims, and perpetrators.
- **Intense forms of ritualized & gamified belonging.** Accessible and uniform-based association (e.g., icons, handles, slang, lorebooks, cut/fan signs, "points" based systems, badges)

CHALLENGES IN RESPONSE

- Outward behaviors are largely treated as spontaneous and isolated
- "Antisocial" behaviors functioning within a social context that *rewards* them
- Risk progression that is earlier, broader, and more embedded than current systems are designed to detect or disrupt

These networks are found on mainstream digital platforms. They have conditions and norms that shape how young people connect e.g. through games, DMs, group chats. There are norms around high volumes of content sharing etc.

There is gamified access to status and belonging including icons, handles, slang, badges and points-based systems as well as law books that capture violative materials of victims.

Perpetrators have identified key targeting grounds e.g. a dedicated Discord server which is supporting young people who are exploring their identities or a support group for those recovering from eating disorders. These spaces are intentionally being targeted in order to form connections establish rapport quickly before moving to a dedicated online space for SOE specifically. The perpetrators are social conditioning their victims by meeting their unmet needs and they transform the exposure of extreme materials into a socialisation pathway. It is clear to see that these groups offer social conditioning environments but the responses don't acknowledge this and don't address the social component.

The behaviours are not treated properly. A young person presents with self-harm and this is treated but there is no opportunity to identify or surface that there is an online exploitation component.

Anti-social behaviours are functioning in dedicated social environments that reward it. Harm, humiliation and violence against others means you get status within the group. This is a popularity contest which involves violence and harm.

02 Existing classification frameworks struggle to integrate multiple dimensions of SOE

RISK-ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORKS

- **Alignment to specific threat domains:** child safety vs. counter extremism.
- **Orientation to perceived culpability:** sexual grooming vs. radicalization pathways.
- Parallel application vs. **integrated application**

VICTIM SERVICE FRAMEWORKS

- Eligibility, assessment, and intervention models often **rely on clear distinctions** (assumptions) between victim and offender.
- SOE cases may involve **role fluidity**, roles may overlap and/or be cyclical for some youth.
- **Limited evidence-based service protocols** for victim-centered care when a young person is both harmed & causing harm.
- **Intense forms of ritualized & gamified belonging.** Accessible and uniform-based association (e.g., icons, handles, slang, lorebooks, cut/fan signs, "points" based systems, badges)

CHALLENGES IN RESPONSE

- Gaps between response structures are mistaken as gaps in knowledge bases
- Delayed recognition of broader behavioral risk indicators & networked activity; no shared models results in incomplete & variable risk assessments
- Adapted & improvised service approaches; inconsistent and uneven outcomes

Current risk assessments are aligned to child safety **or** counter terrorism and they rely on assumptions about the nature of the threat with identifiable roles. In SOE the distinction breaks down. Roles and behaviours and motivations are inter-dependent on child safety **and** counter terrorism. It tends to be youths that we talk about in the child safety environment and adults in CT and radicalisation with the adults making their own choices whereas a child is a victim and not culpable. When these two meet and the

young person is both the victim and the perpetrator the risk assessment cannot provide reliable results.

Should the response be a referral to victim support services or a justice pathway?

When a child is assessed via a child safety route, the intervention and outcome will be different from using the counter terrorism model. Clinicians and front-line workers are improvising their approaches in the absence of a solid evidence base. We need to establish a community of practice.

03 | A complete intelligence picture gets fragmented at intake

- INDUSTRY DETECTION
- REPORTING MECHANISMS
- LAW ENFORCEMENT INVESTIGATIONS

- **Threat operates horizontally across response verticals.** Speed & velocity of hybrid threat compounds while response structures struggle to deconflict harm/violation types based on mandates & actionability.
- **Information gets cut down (or delayed) based on initial entry points.** Allocation is fractured from broader threat assessment of connected behaviors. Threat intelligence is secondary to violative content.
- **Inconsistent escalation thresholds and pathways.** Certain types of content can't be reported to certain reporting bodies; no unified reporting mechanism to contain related information.
- **Professional strain.** Limited pool of professionals available; wellness & secondary trauma concerns.

- CHALLENGES IN RESPONSE**
- Operational friction slows response and fragments visibility
 - Activated vertical determines legal & procedural possibilities; what can and cannot be considered
 - Constrained and incomplete interventions

The response becomes fractured immediately depending on whether a case is referred to child protection or CT.

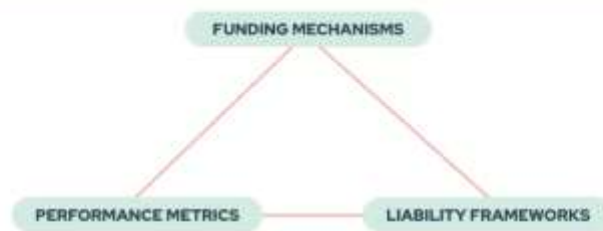
04 | Formalized ways of coordinating across different sectors are lacking



- CHALLENGES IN RESPONSE**
- No institution owns the full picture and there's no formal mechanism forcing the pieces to connect
 - Often informal or case-dependent rather than formally interlinked and structurally embedded
 - Inability to adequately synthesize and circulate contributions

No one organisation owns the full picture. Long term intervention does not sit within the mandate of any of the sectors and so they are treated as secondary. The ability to coordinate is very fragile as there is no formal governance. Any progress that is made tends to be because of an individual who has good connections but this can be lost when they move on.

05 Institutional incentives often inadvertently discourage adaptive collaboration



CHALLENGES IN RESPONSE

- Inability to generate sustained momentum, internally or externally
- Absence of shared metrics for success across institutions (optimized for different outcomes)
- Coordination often requires additional time, resources, and risk, while offering limited institutional return

Institutions are evaluated on how they perform within their own mandates. There is nothing in place about the ability to contribute to a wider response effort. Platforms prioritise policy and user engagement, victim services prioritise support and recovery but both need to be shared.

Opportunities for impact

- Earlier upstream identification of these cases – helplines can do this
- Build the ability to coordinate
- Prevention and long-term disruption of the networks

EXPAND RISK IDENTIFICATION UPSTREAM

Recognizing the coercive socialization processes before it produces acute crisis points or crosses criminal thresholds

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

- Harm functions as: proof of belonging, status achievement, social currency, identity performance → tightly coupled with adolescent social reward systems
- Participation is often reinforced through: coercive peer dynamics, emotional dependency, desensitization, fear of exposure, constant online engagement
- Many youth involved: may not self-identify as victims, may first present through behavioral or mental health concerns, may simultaneously experience victimization and involvement in harming others
- Interpretative behavioral frameworks: "delinquency," "acting out," may instead reflect coercive compliance, identity signaling, belonging rituals, desensitization, fear of punishment

IMPLICATIONS FOR VICTIM SERVICES

- Anchor community education in observable behaviors rather than unfamiliar terminology/full threat comprehension
- Adapt intake and screening tools to include online social conditioning and exploitation indicators
- Build & support "linkage literacy" across common system entry points, e.g., CACs, schools, behavioral health, and juvenile justice
- Establish clear referral pathways to specialized clinicians and MDT partners

We need to spot the coercive socialisation process early. The harm is proof of belonging and status, it is a social currency. Children and young people will not always identify as victims even if they are experiencing more severe forms of victimisation. This could manifest itself as behaviour or mental health concerns.

Anchor awareness around observable behaviours – what are key areas that have been identified in these cases – if you see or hear an individual express something that is a red flag – e.g. follow up with questions related to SOE when someone mentions self-harm.

UNIFY CONCURRENT RESPONSE EFFORTS

Coordinating responses to reduce case fragmentation and incomplete assessments

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

- Cases involve multiple areas of expertise simultaneously: child advocacy, behavioral health, law enforcement, juvenile justice, extremism prevention, school systems, digital safety teams
- Multidisciplinary coordination is essential (not optional)
- Need for shared case formulations that integrate: trauma, coercive control, online exploitation, developmental vulnerability, behavioral escalation, family-system impacts
- The role of role fluidity: some youth are simultaneously exploited, socially conditioned, emotionally dependent, and participating in harm

IMPLICATIONS FOR VICTIM SERVICES

- Establish supervised communities of practice
- Develop SOE-informed MDT protocols and consultation pathways; establish a referral network of providers
 - Develop and implement a recommended assessment protocol
 - Create harm-reduction protocols for role-fluid youth; recognition that harm may function as survival, status, or coercive compliance, & balancing accountability with rehabilitation and developmental interventions
- Identify critical points that require information-sharing alongside coordinated escalation practices

EXPAND LONG-TERM CAPACITY & RESILIENCE

*Building recovery,
belonging, and
sustainable
disengagement
mechanisms*

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

- Effective interventions must be capable of replacing the social and emotional functions of SOE groups
- Recovery must be inclusive: rebuilding autonomy, restoring critical thinking, reconnecting offline supports, developing safe & prosocial belonging
- Need to extend support beyond impacted youth: caregivers, siblings, impacted peers, frontline professionals with exposure
- Evidence base is early stage: effective responses will require adaptive learning, multidisciplinary collaboration, careful harm reduction, and long-term investment in recovery & prevention infrastructure

IMPLICATIONS FOR VICTIM SERVICES

- Develop and scale credible "exit capacity" for belonging, identity, safety, and connection outside SOE networks
- Create tailored support mechanisms for secondary victims; caregivers, communities, & responders with exposure
- Invest in prevention and early intervention as core system functions
 - Evidence base building, clinical research/trials, diagnostic clarity
 - Likely integrates trauma treatment, identity reconstruction, prosocial peer alternatives, family stabilization, and gradual reintegration supports

It is important to develop credible exit pathways that can replace the idea of belonging and safety. We also need to consider support for secondary victims – first responders with exposure – this is the worst of the worst. Even seasoned CSAM investigators are struggling because it blends so many different types of egregious harms.