

# **Exploring Psychological Boundaries:**

***A contextual look into vicarious trauma and the child  
pornography investigator***

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## **Warning**

This paper deals with the subject of sexually exploited children. Some readers may find the description of or reference to the material disturbing. Some details have been purposely excluded to prevent the re-victimization of victims or identification of any person.

It is not intended to glorify the actions of offenders or to further exploit their victims.

Other modifications in language have been made to ensure the document complies with the applicable laws in Canada. These modifications do not affect the truth or validity of the content of this paper.

## Abstract

The epidemic of child exploitation and the resulting child pornography images have reached a pinnacle of publicly enlightened awareness. On a daily basis, news agencies globally release the names and faces of child molesters or “child pornography” collectors charged with horrific crimes. What is generally lacking are the tales of the painstaking hours, days or months that the respective investigators spent analyzing and solving those cases. There are hundreds of police officers world-wide who view, categorize and identify images and videos of child sexual abuse intercepted from the Internet. Having once been one of those investigators, this paper gives the reader a practitioner’s view on the effects of doing the work as well as what circumstances have the potential for lasting harm. The goal of this paper is to share the specific concerns faced by investigators in this field as they struggle with understanding human behaviours; both the offender’s and their own. Post-traumatic stress disorder is common place within law enforcement whether it is involvement in a police related shooting or witnessing a grotesque crime scene or even suffering serious injuries in a car accident. To a lesser extent, other diagnoses have surfaced in the areas of vicarious trauma specifically in officers who constantly work with victims or who have been repeatedly exposed to traumatic imagery. The necessity for safeguard programs for officers exposed to this material over extended periods of time has been grossly inadequate and although in recent times it has improved, more can be done.

## Introduction and Background of the Author

The following paragraphs are not intended to walk you through my entire curriculum vitae. I would like to highlight my work experience and the related training I have received and delivered as a police instructor. As I stated in my abstract, this paper has been written by a former practitioner in the specific topic area. My practical experiences are crucial insight into the issues and the lack of academic qualifications in this context are somewhat less significant. I have a grade twelve high school education with no post-secondary courses. After a short semi-pro football career after high school, I became a police officer. I am married to my second wife, a police officer; combined we have three children ages twelve, fourteen and fifteen years.

I have been a member of the Toronto Police Service since January of 1990. I have worked in many capacities as a police officer in Toronto including uniform patrol, traffic, plainclothes, and community based policing. I have worked in the downtown area of Toronto for the majority of my career in known or identified high crime areas. I have purchased narcotics and solicited prostitutes as an undercover officer. I have had to face armed persons with guns or knives and on many occasions been involved in violent conflicts in the apprehension of criminals. I have seen, searched, investigated or otherwise had contact with numerous dead bodies in murders, suicides and car accidents. None of the above, to the best of my recollection, caused me to lose my perspective or my belief in the good of mankind or forced me to change my way of life.

In January 2004, I transferred to the Sex Crimes Unit of our Service and was assigned to the Child Exploitation Section (C.E.S). My duties were to investigate any instance of computer facilitated crimes against children and the distribution, production, manufacture or procurement of child pornography circulating on the Internet. It was a highly specialized area of policing to which I had not been previously exposed. It was a combination of good old fashioned police work combined with the technical age of computers, thumb-drives, smart phones and the World Wide Web.

While a member of the Toronto C.E.S. I worked a standard schedule of Monday to Friday from 6:00, 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. for a period of eight hours unless the need arose to remain on overtime. We also had an afternoon shift which was typically 1:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. You generally had weekends off however we took turns being “on-call” which meant someone could call you during your off time for assistance on a child pornography related investigation. Although rare, it might have been necessary to go in on a Saturday or Sunday if it was considered urgent even if it was 2:00 a.m. I can think of only one occasion in almost six years where that was justifiable. The other times it was generally misinformation that made it “urgent” or a bad decision by a supervisor who felt something couldn’t wait until the next day. The schedule is an important factor related to some of the points I will mention later.

Working in a specialized unit allows for individuals to become as good as an expert or just really good at specific things. Although cohesively you are a team, the reality is that each person tends to be stronger in some areas than others and often when given the opportunity some find their niche. When I started in the unit I was an extremely competent investigator having just spent almost five years in a Major Crime Unit, drafting search warrants and conducting high level investigations. I was above average in the technology area but I was much weaker than some of the others already in the unit. Child exploitation work has a steep learning curve particularly in the technical components of how these images and videos circulate their way around the Internet.

I am a “hands on” learner and so in this type of unit a person like me can improve their weak areas extremely rapidly. I started out as a general investigator who was assigned cases as they came into the office. Some of those cases were workable and with others there wasn’t enough information to identify a suspect or make an arrest. For example, lots of reports came into the office about “spam email” where a citizen clicked a link they got in their inbox and they were taken to a website showing naked pictures of children. This type of commercialized child exploitation is nearly impossible to investigate, typically leading to second or third world countries where cooperation from local law enforcement was non-existent.

After ten months in the unit, I received a very valuable training opportunity. I was the first ever Canadian police officer to be invited to and take part in the Europol “Combating the Sexual Exploitation of Children” training course in Selm, Germany. This was a nine day intensive technical course and I participated with numerous European officers from several countries, some of whom had been “in the game” for years. The training, experience and networking I received really improved my technical skills as well as highlighted for me how International this crime type was. I realized if we were going to do anything to help kids it had to be a global effort.

I don’t remember specifically why or how it started, but after returning from Germany my ability to remember images became enhanced. My supervisor at the time recognized that I had the ability to identify key details about the evidence we were looking at. It didn’t matter whether it was a child’s face, an offender’s mole or objects in the background of an image; I seemed to recall where I had seen something before and was able to identify the name of the series where a single picture belonged. Unfortunately, the images of child abuse are known, traded, collected or identified by law enforcement using the name they have been associated to. Generally this is their “Internet” name and it is typically called a series. For example, the “tent series” featured a pre-pubescent child being sexually abused by an adult male inside a tent. The names can be given by the producer (abuser) or the traders and collectors using the Internet as well as law enforcement who give names to help identify the images for other agencies to facilitate collaboration in solving these cases.

In January 2005, just shy of a year in the unit my supervisor assigned me to the role of an image analyst (also called a victim identification officer). My job was to work with another officer already in the same role and view all material that was seized by our office. Our purpose was to identify and rescue the victims depicted in the evil imagery collected by offenders. We had full freedom to investigate, pursue or expend as much effort as needed to rescue a child. I was no longer tied down to search warrants or cyber tips.

I joined the Interpol Image Experts Group representing the Toronto Police Service and Canada in this International network of investigators who were viewing material all day every day in an attempt to geographically place the origin of the victim. As part of our duties as image analysts, we collected all images and videos seized from each offender's computer in Toronto, any material intercepted by our undercover officers and participated by offering our skills to the Interpol group in identifying shared foreign material. We had a "makeshift" database that held evidence that had been seized from before I arrived in the unit. In addition, we had access to several other countries that could also provide additional evidence to help further an investigation. We needed to determine if what we were looking at was previously solved; was the child identified or was it new material hence a new victim we needed to find. This concept is more challenging than I have described. A victim may have been identified but the responsible law enforcement agency for the case had not reported it internationally. Looking back, I spent hundreds of hours looking for children who were already safe and no longer suffering the abuse I was seeing in the images. The system was far from perfect and without either binding legislation or an International standard operating procedure each country handled these cases differently.

For five years, on a daily basis, I viewed images and videos of child sexual abuse. In some cases the purpose was to identify the location of the child to facilitate their rescue and in other cases my analysis was used as evidence against the collector in court proceedings.

In late 2005, I received more training at the Canadian Police College in Ottawa from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I became a qualified computer forensic examiner after successfully passing the course and additionally I was trained in Network Intrusion and other cyber-crime areas. Although I wasn't actively doing computer forensic examinations, the background knowledge helped me become a better image analyst.

Between 2005 and 2009, I continued to receive training in Canada, the United States and Europe in relation to the identification, categorization, distribution and manufacture of child exploitation material. This training, combined with my hands on experience, allowed me to become an expert specific to the material itself. My analysis in written reports as well as testifying in court was used in thirty-six cases across Canada as expert opinion, court exhibits or facts in issue.

In 2006 I designed and built the Toronto Police Child Exploitation Image Database (T.C.E.I.D). This database was built with commercially available software which I purchased myself because we had no funding for it. When I left the unit in April 2009, this database had over seven-hundred and twenty thousand (720, 000) images of child exploitation material contained in it. Our database was one of the most intricate and complete databases in the world and was relied upon by Interpol and other agencies globally as a resource for material. I had personally viewed each image before adding them to the database and I used it daily to compare new images that came to my attention from any source. T.C.E.I.D was responsible for the identification of new material or further evidence in numerous International cases.

My exposure to the material was often the repeated analysis of sets of new material comparing them to images contained within T.C.E.I.D. I utilized the database to assist me in proving expert reports and analysis in helping the courts to know the contents of each offender's collection. In addition to T.C.E.I.D, I was also one of the North American managers in the Interpol Expert Group's network. Interpol is located in Lyon, France and searches of their databases were not available twenty-four hours a day back then. I assisted agencies who needed searches done on Interpol's database, or access to the evidence within the expert group for investigators who were unable to access it due to the time zone issue. To accomplish this I had a duplicate copy of the Interpol database stored on my computer containing evidence of identified children from all over the world.



I could compare any image to either database in literally minutes, often at all hours of any given day of the week, providing investigators information as to whether or not an image had been seen before or was identified.

I conducted thousands of comparison searches through these databases.

Each time we arrested a new offender and obtained his collection, I added it and compared it to the evidence already in T.C.E.I.D. viewing each image as if I hadn't seen it before. A conservative estimate is that in the five years and four months I was in the unit, I viewed and analyzed over seven million images and videos of child sexual abuse or exploitation. I saw the same children in some cases hundreds of times, watching them get older before my very eyes as their abuse continued.

I became an expert in the categorization of images and the manipulation or enhancement of images to try to solve cases. In one case, I testified how I digitally enhanced pictures of a penis to prove that the images depicting the sodomy of an infant when compared to images of a male in various stages of masturbation were in fact the same penis and therefore the same offender. He was convicted and was sent to the penitentiary. The Judge said he could not think of anyone who had appeared before him that had seen more than the estimated one thousand penises that I said I had seen (I wasn't really counting).

Every time I saw images I exhausted my best efforts to ascertain if they were previously identified or not. If not, I would open a file and begin to work on solving it. I opened approximately three hundred such cases from Toronto based evidence. Some of them were eventually solved; most were not. Additionally, I worked on several others that originated elsewhere. If I felt using my analysis, expertise or technical skill I could contribute something, I was committed to assisting.

For example, in a case submitted by Police in the United Kingdom, they had video of a child and their abuser speaking with one another before, during and after the abuse occurred. They knew it had taken place in the U.K but needed some assistance with the sound quality of the video. The voices were muffled, garbled and quick. They knew if I could enhance the voices, they could listen closely and would be able to isolate the dialect of the U.K. accent geographically to its place of origin. They extracted the sound from the video and asked me to do what I could to improve the quality. Sound enhancement was one of the areas on which I became very proficient. When I was unable to finish that day I worked on it at home that night knowing with the time difference in the U.K (+6 hrs) the earlier I could get it to them (their time) the better. I finished my enhancements around 9:00 p.m. our time and spent the next two hours trying to find the origin. Using the Internet I found a web site that had samples of dialect and accents from various regions within the U.K. I listened and compared the voices in the child abuse sound byte to the samples on the site to try and geographically place it myself. Why would I do that, knowing full well as soon as the British Police heard the new and improved audio they would be able to do it in seconds? The answer: because I wouldn't rest until I finished what I started. I was suffering from vicarious trauma and couldn't go to bed until I found a match. The next day I learned I was off by two counties.

In my five years as a victim identification officer I was involved in or directly responsible for the identification and rescue of fifty seven children worldwide. By any yardstick in policing an outstanding achievement which brought me emotions I never knew nor will ever experience again. I have been away from child exploitation work for almost a year and a half and although I have no regrets, I can honestly say that there are things I wish I had never seen. I am proud of my work and that of the people I had the honour of working with locally and globally.

Since late 2005, I have given numerous presentations to law enforcement, government and community groups all over the world on the sexual exploitation and victimization of children on the Internet. In 2007, I became a part time instructor for the International Center of Missing and Exploited Children located in Washington D.C.

The I.C.M.E.C. program was sponsored by Microsoft Inc. and was created to assist global law enforcement with much needed training in computer facilitated crimes against children. In this program, I have taught other law enforcement and prosecutors in area of image analysis, victim identification, International networking, case management, the Child Exploitation Tracking System (CETS) and open source intelligence. As an instructor for both I.C.M.E.C and Microsoft, I have travelled to teach investigators in the Czech Republic, Greece, South Korea, Columbia, Italy and Australia. I am still under contract to I.C.M.E.C to provide training in other countries when required.

Overall since 2005, I have given over one hundred and twenty presentations, lectures or workshops globally to a combined audience of over four thousand professionals in many areas of computer facilitated crime against children.

In April of 2009, I left the Child Exploitation Unit to become a full time instructor at the Toronto Police College. Our facility is responsible for all training to any member of the Service throughout their career. I work in the Criminal Investigative Section where I designed and teach a computer and technology facilitated investigations course. It is not child exploitation specific, but I teach many of the skills I learned to investigators to use in any criminal investigation they might be tasked with. The students receive five days of training on technological devices, basic computer forensics, social media, open source intelligence, search warrants and the law involving computer related crime.

Through this document, I hope to share some of what I experienced, and continue to endure, after a prolonged exposure to child sexual abuse images. I believe there has to be more research and resources dedicated to short, mid and long term effects on investigators in this field of work. Vicarious trauma is serious, and more can be done to protect officers whose quality of life is deeply affected by doing this important and necessary job.

## Vicarious Trauma (VT) VERSUS Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

According to the Vicarious Trauma Institute in Scottsdale, Arizona ([www.vicarioustrauma.com](http://www.vicarioustrauma.com))

*“Vicarious Trauma is defined as a transformation in the helper’s inner sense of identity and existence that results from utilizing controlled empathy when listening to clients’ trauma-content narratives. In other words, Vicarious Trauma is what happens to your neurological (or cognitive), physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual health when you listen to traumatic stories day after day or respond to traumatic situations while having to control your reaction”.*

I think the vulnerability to investigators in child exploitation cases is increased because the victim is a child and the act perpetrated on them is so heinous that we overwhelmingly feel we **MUST** help. In order to do that, the instant hatred generated towards the perpetrator must be controlled and in some cases ignored. Many times while looking at an image I felt if I could reach through the monitor, I would pull the child out to safety and punch the offender in the face (likely more than once). Although this was a bonafide fatherly reaction, as a police officer, it would be highly unprofessional and completely wrong to do so. I came to realize that the longer I was exposed to the material, getting that reaction or having thoughts about what I would like to do to physically punish an offender, the more I realized I was okay and wasn’t becoming de-sensitized to the abusive images. According to any of my non-police friends, they would have had the same feelings if faced with what I looked at daily and some said they would do worse to the guy.

Post-traumatic stress disorder by contrast has been defined in many literacy sources. Lori Haskell from the Center for Addiction and Mental Health in Ontario says *“Post traumatic stress is the result of exposure to a traumatic or extremely emotionally and psychologically distressing event or events. Traumatic experiences have traditionally been defined as life threatening”.*

In policing, rules, procedures and regulations govern how we conduct business. The Toronto Police Service has procedures in place for dealing with Critical Incidents which falls under our Occupational Health and Safety provisions. We do not have a similar policy for ongoing traumatisation as described above for cases of vicarious trauma. That being said we do have an Employee and Family Assistance Plan which may help a member who has the need for a referral on a number of issues.

In fairness, PTSD in my opinion has been a more documented, researched and diagnosed health issue for law enforcement when compared to vicarious trauma. I certainly do not want to assign any level of severity or importance to either one because I believe they are both measured on a case by case basis and equally can be severely disabling to those affected. It has been my experience however that PTSD in certain circumstances has become expected. For example, in 1992, I responded to my first traffic fatality where a serious car accident occurred minutes before my arrival. One of the female occupants of the car was seriously injured and had no vital signs. The ambulance hadn't arrived yet but was enroute, so I initiated CPR based on my training and qualification to do so. Unfortunately I could not revive her and even after the paramedics worked on her for an additional thirty minutes she was pronounced deceased at the scene. It took about two hours of accident scene management before I could sit down in my police car and that's when I came to the realization that I failed to save a life; something I had been sworn to do. At home that night I couldn't sleep and I started to doubt my ability to perform my duties. The lack of confidence and self-blame lasted a couple of days but eventually I wrote it off as "there was nothing I could have done".

The next day I showed up for work ready to go because I was expected to. It would not have been acceptable for me to take a couple of days off and deal with my anxiety. In terms of "then and now", in that same scenario, it would be looked at differently today and if I needed a couple of days to deal with those issues it would be tolerable to take them.

The purpose of the paper is not to go into the symptoms of or treatment for VT or PTSD. I am not qualified to give you an opinion on whether or not something that bothers you constitutes trauma. The paper will discuss what happened to me during my tenure as an investigator exposed to child pornography. I will also highlight lasting effects that I have endured after leaving those duties over a year ago. I also have some ideas and recommendations to help bring attention to the underappreciated diagnosis of vicarious trauma.

## The Beginning

Prior to arriving to the Unit, I had seen about a dozen images of child pornography when attending the Sexual Assault course, a pre-requisite course I needed before becoming a member of the unit. I remember feeling helpless and angry at the same time. It motivated me to want to make a difference, honestly believing I could. In the lecture, the unit manager talked about the challenges faced when conducting these types of investigations; I was looking for new challenges in policing.

I will discuss recommendations later but I will highlight this one now. No officer should go or be sent to a child exploitation unit without first seeing a quantity of images. Unfortunately the reference to child pornography can have liberal meaning to many people. The word pornography could imply consensual, casual, “happy” sex between young people under eighteen. It could also mean just naked pictures of children under eighteen. Many people can minimize what they think it is by associating their own definition in their mind; not for acceptance but for tolerance. If we actually called it or named it for what it actually was, it leaves less flexibility for pre-determined and incorrect visualizations.

An image of an adult male sexually touching or penetrating a five year old child is not pornographic nor is it consensual, casual, “happy” sex. It is an image of child sexual abuse and therefore should be named accordingly. An image of a naked child, sexualizing them for those that are sexually attracted to such an image, should be called child exploitation material and should be illegal.

It is no different than a drug addict possessing paraphernalia to use drugs. The reason they have the paraphernalia is to help facilitate using drugs when they get some. From my perspective, after interviewing several offenders, paedophiles collect images of naked children because they are sexually attracted to the children depicted in the images creating or maintaining their cognitive distortions.

The unit was designed in an open concept format meaning we all sat together in desks set in groups of two or four. They were not cubicles; there were no dividers or screens separating what one was viewing on their monitor or on their neighbours'. We were situated in a corner of a large office and there was no controlled access; people could just walk right in. My desk faced the rear so my back was to the entrance, but my computer monitor faced it. People could walk towards where I sat from the other part of the office and they could see what was on my monitor before I knew they were there. It was a constant and conscious distraction worrying about what was on my screen when people were milling around.

When you are a new member of the child exploitation unit in Toronto there is no "ice breaking" or a "just get your feet wet" period. I started exactly a week before my son's 6<sup>th</sup> birthday and was assigned my first file on my first day. I was also told to familiarize myself with as many images as possible, to memorize and be able to identify from a legal definition stand point as to what child pornography was. Sometimes that meant knowing specific information about a series of images because the child depicted had been identified and their age confirmed in the image. When asked you could say an image fit the definition under Canadian law because it was sexually explicit and depicted a child definitely under eighteen years.

I was directed to the unit server where I could find numerous folders of child exploitation material stored there as evidence. One of the first few folders I clicked on was entitled "under 7" and when you clicked on that folder it opened into numerous subfolders, in fact twenty six of them, each named for the alphabet A through Z. In all, there were several thousand images of child sexual abuse and exploitation in those subfolders, sorted by the series name or file name in the corresponding folder. It was some of the most horrific imagery I had seen and if you hadn't guessed, named as such because the children, both boys and girls were mostly under 7 years. For me that was the beginning. I had to make a decision whether I continue with this work or should I opt out. I would argue that despite careful and deliberate planning or preparation, nothing can prepare you for what you might see in this type of work. The images will always be worse than you are capable of imagining.



After a few months of exposure to the images, I started to change both in my personal routine and in my way of looking at otherwise normal people. I stopped kissing my son on the lips and I didn't allow him to kiss me except on the cheek. It didn't matter if it was for "good night" or otherwise; I felt uncomfortable with it and after all he was six years old. I still hugged him and he never asked me why I would turn my head when he wanted to give me a kiss. I started to become distrusting of men in the company of children, at least strange men, not my friends. I used to take my son to the local community pool to spend some quality father and son time. It was a good way to bond during my "every other weekend access" after the divorce from his mother. Unfortunately, I started to become uncomfortable in the change room seeing other naked men and boys and realized it was causing me to think of material I viewed at work. I started to wonder if any of the boys I saw in the change room were possible victims and the men their abusers. It would make me sweat and I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I was reluctant to help my son get dressed or undressed because it made my hands shake. I had to stop taking him there and we found other activities to spend our time together.

Looking back, and having since discussed some of this with my son as a mature twelve year old, there was no harm done to our relationship; in fact he doesn't even remember it. I often wonder if other investigators in my position had similar experiences but as to be expected it's not openly discussed at the "water cooler". One of the reasons I wrote this paper is to hopefully reach out to other investigators to assure them they are not alone, nor are they robotic or impenetrable. As police officers we are trained to be impartial, professional and ethical but there are limits to one's psychological well-being and putting on a uniform or carrying a badge doesn't protect you from it.

In a way, I am glad I reacted the way I did because I have to come realize it was normal. Sure there was a cost; quality time with my son was sacrificed due my stress and anxiety of being in a certain public place. Looking back after all I have seen and investigated would I have done anything differently? The answer is no and I can also confirm that children have been victimized in public change rooms or washrooms at swimming pools; I have seen pictures of it.

## Impact

Any crime in society has an impact on the community at large. Crime statistics are kept and published because people generally want to know what's happening in their neighbourhood except when it's child abuse. It becomes the unspeakable and unthinkable evil and until the advent and proliferation of the Internet it was a "behind closed door" mythology. Now, the sexual abuse of children is photographed, videotaped and distributed publicly for the whole world to see on the Internet.

It has become so public, that the community outrage has demanded changes to laws, government funding, National victim databases and more cops. Law enforcement worldwide has had to create specific units whose sole mandate is to investigate child pornography related cases. There are millions of images and videos seized by law enforcement globally representing tens of thousands of children being victimized. There are thousands of child pornography files available by doing a specific search in Google or by browsing one of the many file sharing networks. Law enforcement has spent millions of dollars in training investigators, providing them with equipment and funding their overtime and operations to combat this crime. There have been Police commissioners, chiefs, directors and administrators who have stood up and said we have a zero tolerance policy for child sex offenders and those who prey on children. They will exhaust all resources to fight the sexual abuse of children; that is impact. For the most part I support this policy but who is looking out for the ones tasked with doing this work; those who protect the innocent?

In November 2009, the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire conducted a study on work exposure to child pornography. (Wolak & Mitchell, November 2009). This study was funded by the United States Department of Justice and was conducted on both sworn and civilian members of Federal, State and local law enforcement as well as prosecutors. These participants were members of the Internet Crimes against Children Task Forces across the United States.

The I.C.A.C.s are mandated to investigate child pornography offences at both the State and Federal level. There were a total of 1,797 law enforcement agencies that received the survey via email. *The responses were received from 40 ICAC Task Forces and 524 affiliates. "Over 90% (511) had sworn personnel who were exposed to child pornography during investigations".*

I will highlight a few of the results and findings reported in the study later in the paper:

For the first three years in my unit, we did not have mandatory psychological or counselling sessions. Once a year, usually close to Christmas, we all attended our Employee Assistance Center and had a group debriefing with one of the peer counsellors. It was strongly suggested that you attend but it was not mandatory. I found these meetings to be unproductive but it was all that was available at that time. Let's face it; nobody was willing if they had issues to stand up in front of their team members including our boss and say "the pictures are bothering me".

In my fourth year, the Service brought in a psychologist who was employed by the Police Service and she developed a program (pilot at first) to allow us individual support. The biggest hurdle we had to overcome was the confidentiality issue as it was thought that she could be ordered by a superior to turn over our "personal records" to our employer and it could be used against us. After a few months of negotiating we started our semi-annual sessions with "the good doctor". The program required mandatory attendance but voluntary participation so as an individual you could say as much or as little as you liked as long as you went.

The term exposure leads an outsider to believe it was accidental and even preventable. It is somewhat misleading as investigators in these units seek the material on the Internet in order to apprehend the individuals collecting and trading it. Analysts, like me, were tasked with organizing; identifying and categorizing the material therefore exposure occurred all day, every day as well as most evenings and on weekends. Many investigators assigned a file may be viewing child pornography daily in order to prepare for prosecution of the offender.

The trauma endured by individuals has so many variables that detailed and long term study would be required to accurately diagnose and treat. At one time in my unit, it was unlikely that any person saw as much child pornography as I did and hopefully no person will in the future. The type of analysis I did is no longer being done. Additionally, newly developed technological solutions allow investigators to categorize and sort the material using automated software tools preventing them from having to repeatedly view the same images and videos. Now investigators can utilize databases combined with technical advancements which pre-determine what material is contraband and whether it has been seen before, saving them from having to actually view the image.

It is unfair to judge the impact an individual's exposure could have on them based on the quantity of material they have viewed. For example, just because I have viewed more than the next officer doesn't mean I am suffering any more or less trauma. I have seen individuals who worked a specific case who were more traumatized by that one case than others who have worked numerous cases. The side effects of the trauma also vary individually. I have punched a wall, suffered tremendous mood swings, experienced changes in appetite as well as weight and had the odd cry.

It's my opinion that anyone who has viewed child pornography is impacted by what they saw. The degree of impact varies with each individual and some people ignore what significance that memory or memories have in normal situations. I have discussed this with others both those in the field and those who were only inadvertently or casually exposed to it. The consensus was either a stated and deliberate hyper-sensitivity around supervising or caring for children or a subconscious one where steps were taken to be more vigilant when supervising children. This was supported in the ICAC study (Wolak & Mitchell, November 2009) where some of the participants reported being more vigilant around children after being exposed to child pornography. In the cases of the people I spoke to, most felt their own children were not directly at risk of being victimized because there were no strangers in the children's lives.

In November 2008, I attended a Prosecutor's conference in Portland, Maine where I was a keynote speaker. After my session, I listened to a presentation by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (N.C.M.E.C.) located in Washington D.C. They presented statistics collected from cases where a child depicted in child pornography material was identified and submitted to them by law enforcement. They had conducted analysis on the relationship of the offender to the child in each case up to September 30<sup>th</sup> 2008. In 73% of the cases the offender was a: parent, other relative, family friend, coach, babysitter or guardian's partner. In only 3% of cases the offender was unknown to the child, so much for the "no risk due to lack of strangers in the child's life" theory.

## The Side Effects

Like many things, the effects of vicarious trauma associated to viewing and working child pornography cases can differ with individual investigators. Some of the more common ones are dramatic increases in determination, dedication and the ever dangerous development of a “personal attachment”. There were times I was so wrapped up in what I was doing on my computer when I looked at the clock I realized I was running late to catch my train home. I had no idea where the eight hours had gone. I became so committed and dedicated to identifying children that for some time it consumed me.

There are other factors in play such as; when you identify something in an image that eventually leads to the rescue of a child, there is no greater reward nor a better reason to try even harder on the next one. The work never ends because there are thousands of victims to find and eight hours a day, five days a week doesn't amount to enough time to do it. In fact, mathematically I could have never saved the three hundred victims I opened files for even working twenty four hours a day, seven days a week for ten years. The reality is that some victims will never be found but you don't usually think that way. I guess that is why despite the odds, I brought my work home every night and spent three to five hours doing something, anything to make a difference. On some specific cases you can add an unknown quantity of hours I did on weekends too. To keep things in perspective I was only paid for my eight hours a day Monday through Friday. If I had been billing the Toronto Police Service for all of the off-duty work I did to be a successful image analyst, they would owe me in excess of fifty-thousand dollars in overtime over the five years. For me and many others it wasn't about the money.

I cannot give you a definition of what a side effect is for the vicarious trauma associated to viewing child sexual abuse. In fairness, family, friends and therapists would likely be able to do that. In my case, my wife could certainly tell you more about my moodiness and demeanour as she shared in both my triumphs and my depression. In my opinion, no person could do that work without a supportive spouse or partner; the relationship would not survive.

I was fortunate that my wife, being a police officer and having served as a manager of a child abuse unit, I could show her something that was upsetting or frustrating me. She was always compassionate, understanding and supportive. I know there were days when she would have preferred I didn't turn my laptop on because she knew if I did I would not leave anything unfinished. There were nights I went to bed angry because I was too tired to continue and hadn't accomplished anything. I never had trouble sleeping and yet I was always tired. I have now come to know it was because I tossed and turned for most of the time I was in bed. I sleep differently now, more restful.

There is a positive side to being an image analyst, scouring images for clues. The majority of the time you are focusing on what is in the background or foreground of an image and less time on the actual abusive act. You can actually start to block out of your mind the horrific part and concentrate on the shampoo bottle in the corner. I couldn't tell you how many products I saw and attempted to identify. If I had to guess it would be hundreds, such as: bath products, drinks and other kitchen or food items, shopping bags, labels and the like. If the scenes indicated they were in a house or hotel room we would identify wall plugs, furniture, paintings, carpet and other household structures. In outdoor scenes we would analyze climate, vegetation, landscape and landmarks. We also tried to identify vehicles where abusive images appeared to be taken inside a car; we compared door handles, seats, dashboards and paint colours. Most of the identification techniques required extensive Internet open source searching. I became very proficient on how to search and analyze Internet sources. For example, I had a case where a bridge could be seen behind the child who was standing on a beach. Using Google, I searched for pictures of bridges in Canada since that was where I was focusing. I got over a million and a half results, I started on page one and looked at each one looking for the match.

There were other times when I would go to Home Depot and look through various household items to see if I could find something I saw in an image. If I could find it there, it was a strong indication the child could be in North America.

I would do the same thing at Walmart and clothing stores, it didn't matter what the clue was, if I could try to physically identify it, it meant I was one step closer to finding that victim. The more evidence I analyzed the more often I would see something in my travels that reminded me of a case or series I had seen. It is very difficult to block these pictures from your mind especially when unsolved. At times, I would have to deliberately make myself not think about work.

I have had conversations with many other investigators around the world who view images of child sexual abuse as a part of their duties. There is consistency among them about their fear of certain side effects and I concur. Equally we all share the fear of becoming de-sensitized to the material because we view so much. In addition, most had not met the victims they helped to identify nor did they want to. In fact, many investigators didn't want to know the child's name or details to prevent that bond. The personal attachment to each victim would change how they would be able to investigate future cases.

There were lots of little things that I can now look back at and say they were a direct result of what I was viewing. My son wasn't allowed to join cub or boy scouts because I was involved in the arrest of four leaders and analyzed their collections, all young boys. In social settings I would hope that nobody would ask me what I did for a living because I didn't want to have to explain how sick some people in the world were. Much of the stress or depression I had wasn't necessarily because of what I was seeing. It came from the lack of effort or dedication of others. I did as much on some cases as I possibly could, often leading to another country or place. I passed on the information to the respective agency to find and rescue the victim. Occasionally these agencies didn't think it was as much of a priority as I did. In fairness, sometimes there wasn't enough information to solve the case but generally I gave a place to start. When that happens, you find yourself almost wishing for new pictures to surface with new clues that will help narrow down the victim's location. If wishing for the continued abuse of a child doesn't highlight a crossing of a psychological boundary, then I couldn't imagine what would.



I am normally an easy person to get along with but when it came to lazy police work or pure incompetence, I could be nasty. I have never shied from giving someone my opinion whether solicited or not. If I felt that someone wasn't doing what they could to locate and rescue a child, I would have no trouble voicing my displeasure with them. I could justify why I was vocally accusatory at some people or agencies. Their lack of action allowed the child to be continually abused longer than they should have been.

In June 2007, I was working through some images intercepted on the Internet by another agency. They shared them with the Interpol network seeking assistance in identifying the child depicted in them. I observed what appeared to be a can in the background on a table behind the child. I had to do some enhancement work to try and read the label of it, but was only able to make out some letters. It appeared to be a beer can "Black and Tan". After several minutes of going through Internet sources for Black and Tan beers I found the exact brand and matched the label. It was a U.S. beer and only available in six states along the north-east States according to the manufacture's website. I gave this information to a U.S. federal agency (name withheld); that sends leads out to law enforcement for follow up. There were other workable clues in the series of images that required further investigation by U.S. law enforcement since the victim was clearly in the United States. I heard nothing for over a year until a U.S. officer called me wanting to know if I had anymore pictures from the series so they could try to solve it. The case had just come to their unit's attention recently. I was angry it wasn't already solved; I just assumed it was and nobody bothered to let me know or just took credit for my work. I worked together with this officer revisiting all the clues again and in just a few weeks it was solved. During the entire year the case sat dormant the child had continuously been abused including two days before the police went to the house. There were other victims as well. This sort of disconnect intensifies the trauma that working on these cases can bring.

Unfortunately, that scenario was not an isolated incident and to this day I don't know how the people responsible for "dropping the ball" sleep at night. My side effect; tremendous outbursts of anger followed by guilt that overshadowed the joy of rescuing those kids.

## Lasting Effects

After leaving the unit, I managed to go over a year without seeing a child sexual abuse image. I was hoping for longer but it wasn't under my control. I'll never forget what I saw or the cases I worked on, but I was comfortable in not having to view the images as long as there were no reminders. Generally speaking I mean "out of sight, out of mind". The difficulty is that almost everything I see or do has the potential to remind me of a series, a case or a specific detail I investigated or analyzed.

In 2005, the other image analyst and I worked a series of movies and images of a child being victimized in unimaginable ways; it was considered to be one of the most prolific series traded on the Internet. There were many clues in the material that pointed us to a possible location of the North-Western United States. After spending some months going through the material and collecting as much as we could of this series we started to put the clues together. We focused on one particular movie where still images of a certain scene in the movie showed some type of cups in the background. The cup had a logo on it and we felt strongly it was a fast food style "soda" cup but it wasn't one of the major conglomerates like McDonald's or Wendy's. We spent hours scouring the Internet trying to identify this logo so we could see if it fit geographically with we had already. Finally after a few days, we found it and we were in luck. Not only were we in the right area but it narrowed our focus to a two hundred mile radius between two specific States. This fast food restaurant had less than forty locations in total between state lines and we easily mapped out their addresses on a map. We notified the U.S. authorities and a task force was formed in search of this child. Despite the two hundred mile radius they never found them.

In the meantime, this child had reported the abuse years after and an investigation was conducted. It never came to light that pictures or movies of the abuse were taken nor was an examination of the involved computer done.

The offender was charged and put into the system. However prior to trial he fled the U.S. as a fugitive and in November 2006 the case aired on the television show America's Most Wanted. We worked with the U.S. authorities and put two and two together, it was the same child we were looking for, now a young adult. I helped the U.S. law enforcement agencies piece together the evidence we had proving the abuse in the images and identified a location which proved the offender travelled from one state to another to molest the child in a motel. I helped to identify that motel using the crime scene photographs. I prepared detailed analysis reports outlining crime scene photos where the victim was abused and geographically placed those locations on maps. I used historical photographs from the insurance company that insured the motel as it had since been demolished. All of my analysis and the work we did to find the child was used in the grand jury indictment of the offender as well as the eventual trial. He was located and arrested in Hong Kong and extradited back to the U.S. He pled guilty and was sentenced to fifty years in prison, for him at age forty-five, likely a life sentence.

It was a sensational case and the victim became a National spokesperson for victims' rights in the battle against child sexual abuse. I was presented with awards from the U.S. law enforcement agency I worked with in the prosecution of this predator. I also received a personal letter of thanks from the U.S. Ambassador.

In November 2009, I was asked to co-present this entire case at a Child Abuse Summit taking place in Portland, Oregon in April 2010. This was the city where some of the abuse occurred and the very City I helped to identify the hotel in. I was asked to co-present with the lead agent that I worked with for over one and a half years. Each of us was to tell the story of what we did to help bring this story to a happy ending. There were many people who had involvement in the case especially in my unit and the presentation would highlight the extraordinary effort by all involved behind the scenes to try to rescue this victim. It was all set and approved and so I was scheduled to arrive in late April 2010 to do the presentation. I was excited because I was going to get to meet the lead agent who I felt so close to as we had done so much together over the phone or over email to prepare the evidence.

About five weeks before I was to arrive we were speaking on the phone trying to summarize what the presentation would look like, who would say what and how to fit it all together chronologically. He told me he had told the victim and her family what we were doing and the details of the conference and our presentation. They had known of my involvement and my role in the case. They told him that they wanted to come and see the presentation and to meet me. I remember it like it was yesterday, my stomach turned and I started to sweat while on the phone. I became a little upset after the call; I did not want to meet the victim, what could I possibly say? Would I say sorry we didn't find you sooner, it wasn't my fault we didn't, I did everything I could have done sitting on a chair in an office in Toronto. It started to stress me out. In the end, about eight days before the conference while speaking to him again on the phone, he told me they weren't coming because the victim had gone into a relapsed state of depression, dropped out of school and was not dealing with their issues well. Instead, a lawyer was coming to sit in and represent their interests. I was relieved but also wondered did we cause this by agreeing to do this presentation, a question I will never have an answer to.

I arrived in Portland the night before our presentation and the agent came to meet me at my hotel room with a six-pack of locally brewed beer. We went over the presentation and he had his part on his police laptop. When he showed me his slides, he had sanitized versions of the evidence that he was going to present for his role; some of it I had not seen before. It quickly reminded me that I didn't miss looking at the pictures, even when they had been altered to not show actual abuse; I felt awkward and uncomfortable seeing it after so long.

The presentation went off without a hitch and in fact we received rave reviews from the over two hundred in attendance. Even now as I write about it here I can relive the experiences and emotions I felt during the entire case right up to and ending with the presentation. I have not forgotten any of the details of that case dating back to 2005. I will always wonder about that victim and how they heal through life. I know we did the right thing by identifying this victim after the T.V. show to be the most widely sought child pornography series amongst paedophiles on the Internet. But inevitably we have also contributed to their struggles going forward.

I cannot block what I saw or what I did for that length of time. Many things I do now remind me of cases, victims, offenders and loose ends I didn't close. When I go to the mall I see things in stores that remind of a clue I tried to identify. When I meet children, their name might be the same as the Internet name of a child I was looking for, or worse it might be the same name, a real name of a child I helped rescue. Through some of my contacts who I befriended as a result of this work, they tell me about cases getting solved now because I had contributed something to them at one time and I believe they want me to know I made a difference. I have decided although these stories bring me sadness that it has taken so long to solve, it is better than not knowing at all.

I don't know if I will ever be able to look at a forest of trees without spending a few minutes trying to identify the species. I also don't know if I will stop analyzing every hotel room I stay in for business or pleasure. I avoid certain products because they remind me of cases. We arrested and convicted "Mr Spilly Pants", an actor who portrayed a Scottish man in Canadian beer commercials on television. I analyzed his collection and it was very disturbing. I don't drink that beer now for that reason. I hope one day I will forget what I have seen but I am preparing for the worst and expecting it will be something I will have to live with and adapt to.

The lasting effects of viewing child pornography for me aren't always negative. I take great pride in what I managed to do and how I helped so many children and their families. My office at home is decorated with awards and letters of recognition I have received in the cases where I helped rescue a child. I jokingly call it the "me wall". I have received thirteen prestigious awards from eight different countries for my work in identifying and rescuing kids, none of which have come from my employer. It isn't about bragging, my office is in the basement and nobody sees them but me. It's about reminding me that no matter how bad things get there is someone out there who needs your help and no matter how small your contribution, it can make a difference in their life. Reward is just another way of saying "never give up" and the amount of effort or time I invested in my work was paid back when I helped to rescue the first child; the rest just became routine.

1. **The ICAC Study** – Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. 2009, Janis Wolak, Kimberly J. Mitchell
  - *39% had worked child pornography cases for between 2 and 4 years, while 19% had them for a year of less*
  - *37% had attended presentations or trainings that discussed psychological reactions to child pornography*
  - *Most agencies provided mental health resources to sworn personnel*
    - *82% had Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)*
    - *67% had chaplains*
    - *51% provided other internal psychological services*
    - *36% had peer counselling programs*
    - *53% had access to external mental healthcare providers*
  - *Only 4% of agencies provided no psychological resources*
  - *61% provided at least 3 out of the 5 resources listed above*
  - *39% of participants said their agencies needed more psychological resources for personnel exposed to child pornography*
  - *13% of ICAC task forces and 5% of affiliates had mandatory mental health requirements for sworn personnel who viewed child pornography, mostly annual or semi-annual visits to psychologists*
  - *83% of participants said they rarely or never heard personnel discussing feelings about viewing child pornography*
  - *Some agencies created opportunities for discussions*
    - *25% held staff meetings where reactions to child pornography were discussed*
    - *25% had individual case reviews where such matters were discussed*
    - *5% had group sessions led by a psychologist*
  - *In addition, the sensitivity of supervisors to this issue may be a factor in opportunities for discussion*

- ***Informal gatherings of personnel such as lunches, sporting events and other after work get-togethers forge bonds that encourage discussion. However only 30% of participants said their agencies had informal gatherings***
- ***75% of participants supported mandatory introductory programs that described the nature of child pornography and possible reactions to it***
- ***71% of participants agreed that “People find great satisfaction in their work because investigating child pornography helps children”***

There were two main conclusions the researchers drew from their study:

***First, it is important to be aware of and acknowledge that exposure to child pornography can cause problems for some personnel.***

***Second, awareness is enhanced by education and training.***

The difficulty with studies like this one is how do you accurately measure the exposure? There was no analysis to quantify how much child pornography was viewed or by what amount of exposure each participant had. Was it a casual viewing such as two or three seconds of one image or thousands? Was it in-depth analysis for several hours a day for years? In my mind the term exposure could be in reference to both scenarios but the study doesn't define exposure so we don't know. The authors of this study published some recommendations as a result of their findings which I will address at the end of the paper.

## Summary

As a criminal investigator we face daily challenges that occasionally touch our human values and beliefs and show us a part of society that many people don't know or have not seen. We have standards, protocols and procedures that govern how we deal with those situations and many times they become natural, emotionless and mundane exercises of authority and law. Child abuse cases go one step further by challenging us and our psychological boundaries, our ethics and the belief in the good of mankind. Even as objective observers and upholders of the rules of law whether we agree with those rules or not; the individuals who sexually abuse children severely test those boundaries.

I suspect the question everybody wants to know the answer to would be something like this: If I knew six years ago, what I know now about how investigating image and videos of child sexual abuse would affect me, would I have accepted or applied for the job? The answer for me is absolutely. I am consciously aware of how and when these issues have arisen for me and that gives me the opportunity to work through them with friends, family and professionals. I wish I didn't see some of what I did, but I don't regret anything because against many odds I did what I could to help. I will never suffer what any of the victims have or will, for them being on the other side of the camera is a "life sentence" and the Internet has made it permanent.

My goal in writing this paper was to assist practitioners who may be involved in debriefing or treating other investigators like me in similar circumstances. I also wanted to let investigators who may read this know they are not and never will be alone. Finally, I hope that administrators and supervisors who manage these kinds of units will read this to benefit from knowing what your people deal with so you can be a better support mechanism for them. I am often asked now that I have had a break from it, with all of my experience and expertise would I go back? I have seen enough child abuse to last me ten lifetimes and I will never go back to doing that work again. I have found other ways to stay involved in keeping kids safe on the Internet and it has nothing to do with looking at pictures victimizing them.



## Recommendations

I have a few recommendations and suggestions that I believe will reduce as well as control the level of vicarious trauma investigators exposed to child pornography will suffer. It cannot be eliminated but in a co-ordinated response from Government, Police management, the psychology community and other stakeholders it can be minimized.

### 1. Pre-requisite Testing

I think there should be mandatory psychological testing of applicants prior to being deployed to a Child Exploitation Unit. This testing would include being shown a controlled sampling of the very material they will be exposed to over an extended period of time. It would be followed by an interview by a psychologist or psychiatrist where exploratory questions could be asked about their reactions to viewing the material. This interview would also include background questions about family and friends; assessing the support mechanisms in place should the candidate get the job. After a three month trial period a successful candidate would be brought back for a follow-up interview to re-assess or identify potential red flags.

### 2. Mandatory Training for Administrators, Commanders and Managers of Child Exploitation Units

This training would help them to understand and recognize what vicarious trauma is and provide them with tools and information of how to deal with the issues when they arise. This training would be designed by the psychological community and would easily provide investigators the support from the people they trust to look out for their best interests. It would also educate these section heads as what their investigators deal with on a daily basis.

### **3. Mandatory Psychological Counselling for Investigators**

Members of a Child Exploitation Unit must participate in a program where they can privately discuss how doing their job affects their life. I suggest these sessions be with a psychologist or psychiatrist three times a year per officer. Protocols should be in place that govern and protect the privacy of these sessions to ensure officers will take part. If they don't have the confidence that the program is confidential then they will show up but they will not participate. This program would also extend to include officers who exit such a unit for a minimum of one year after they leave.

### **4. Health and Wellness Program**

Members of a Child Exploitation Unit would have access to a program that allows them time while on-duty to fitness, nutrition and quality of life resources free of charge. For example, a fitness center membership which most police stations have or at an outside facility paid for through their operating budget. Exercise is a great way to relieve anxiety and officers should be encouraged to take part. It would help break up their eight or twelve hour shift of constant exposure to child pornography and help them with vicarious trauma.

### **5. Structured Succession Planning and Mandatory or Voluntary Rotation**

Structured succession planning would mean each specialized role within a unit has a minimum of two people in that role who have different tenure so that when one leaves the other remains on the task. In addition, with that plan in place it would provide an opportunity to rotate members out for six month laterals to other units to help alleviate any associated trauma suffered by members.

It could be a voluntary or a mandatory rotation as a Unit Commander saw fit with an individual investigator. The well-being of the officer should be the priority.

## 6. Workload Restrictions and Schedule Flexibility

Members of Child Exploitation Units should have restrictions on taking their work home and working from home. Should it be necessary to take work home, the time should be monitored and limited. There would be times that require officers to do work on cases at home but it needs to be controlled, monitored and revocable if there are signs of trauma.

With respect to schedules, the Monday to Friday eight hour shifts with only two days off is not appropriate for Child Exploitation investigators. On more than one occasion we asked to work a modified schedule that would fit better into recommendation #4. For example, when investigators put in time at home to do required work they should be compensated with time off some other day without being docked the hours. There has to be more “give and take” with this type of unit due to the nature of the work.

## 7. Recognition

Before writing this paper I did a quick poll amongst some of my peers who work for other agencies in many different places. They all work Child Exploitation cases. Overall I found that a majority had received recognition, albeit some type of certificate or letter or award from another agency thanking them for their contribution to a case.

Very few of them had received such recognition from their own organization. It is important for supervisors and managers to appreciate the depth of commitment that these officers put into their work. A sign of appreciation for their efforts goes a long way to help ease the pressure, anxiety and trauma that working on these cases can bring.

## In Closing

In my case, my greatest reward came when I knew the children were safe. The most significant reward I received didn't come directly to me at all. It was a comment posted to a media article on-line (The Ottawa Citizen, October 16<sup>th</sup> 2009) describing how I helped rescue two young children in the United States:

### YOUR COMMENTS

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#### **A Grandmother in the U.S.**

☺☺ Warren Bulmer, a Canadian police officer, is one of my heros. I would love to meet this man and shake his hand personally. The victims in this case are my grandchildren. The "perverts" have to serve 85% of their sentences. One had to pay \$75,000. to the victims, the other was ordered to pay \$30,000. for each victim to be placed in a Victims Funds. By the time that either one one of them can get out, they will be very old. So this is basically a life sentence for both of them.

October 20, 2009  
5:20 PM

You have no idea how wonderful it is to know that there are people out there that are willing to go beyond to help bring people like this to justice. I pray that this officer and everyone involved in solving this case find piece and joy and prosper in their lives. They should feel extremely proud, I know I am.



## October is Child Abuse awareness month:

I dedicate this paper to all victims of child sexual abuse and to the men and women, not only the investigators but also the families, support workers, treatment providers and friends who do all they can to heal them.

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5. **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children** <http://www.ncmec.org>
6. **The Ottawa Citizen October 16<sup>th</sup> 2009 Article # 2116447**

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