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“We Have to Do Something”: The Lived Reality of Investigating Online Child Sexual Abuse in Sweden

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Abstract

In this article we foreground the occupational experiences of ‘Anna’, an online child sexual abuse investigator in the Swedish police force. We do so for two main reasons: to provide a much-needed insight into the lived realities of this under-researched form of extreme work; and to progress our theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of moral injury. In relation to the former, through Anna we reveal what the work of investigating online child sexual abuse involves, the challenges investigators encounter and the personal and emotional tolls paid along the way. In relation to the latter, we (re)conceive—and shift the focus of extant analysis—away from moral injury as a purely individualized phenomenon, to understanding the systemic conditions that contribute to, create and amplify it. In doing so what we reveal are the organizational and institutional dimensions of moral injuries, which thus far remain largely overlooked and unexplored.

Keywords

moral injury, online child sexual abuse, police work, extreme work, digital investigations, Sweden

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Introduction

Online child sexual abuse (CSA)¹ is a significant problem (Internet Watch Foundation, 2025). In 2024 alone the US-based National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) received 21.2 million reports of suspected online CSA via their CyberTipline.² Remarkably, this was an improvement on the previous year. In 2023 more than 36 million reports were made. Of the reports made to NCMEC in 2024, 2,252,528 came from India; 1,177,758 came from United States of America; 176,427 came from the United Kingdom; and 51,148 came from Sweden. Whilst enormous these numbers likely represent just a fraction of the abuse that actually occurred, as recent estimates suggest approximately 8% of children globally experience some form of sexual abuse annually (Fry et al., 2025).

In the context of these chilling statistics, we use this article to foreground the occupational experiences of ‘Anna’, a pseudonym for an online CSA investigator employed by the Swedish Police Force. The story we present covers the lived realities of Anna’s work. In her own words, she details what her work involves and the sometimes great difficulties she has executing it. She also describes the anger and frustration she feels knowing so much more can be done to protect children and secure justice for victims.

Before turning the article over to Anna, we preface her story with an account of the challenges online CSA investigators are known to face. We then elaborate on the empirical and theoretical significance of Anna’s story, and the specific advances it affords.

The challenge of online child sexual abuse offences

As the opening statistics attest, a significant part of the challenge of online CSA is the sheer scale of the crimes. Police forces worldwide struggle with the volume of reports made, with few forces (if any) having the resources they need to properly investigate them all (Khan et al., 2023; Lindholm et al., 2024). Equally challenging is the technical complexity of the crimes. It is relatively easy for perpetrators to access cheap, readily available technology to mask their identities and offences. The pace of change in the online world is also extraordinarily fast, with new arenas for abuse constantly emerging. For example, in 2024 15 new social media apps (a common feature in online CSA) were launched, adding to the more than 400 that were already in use worldwide (Ali et al., 2023). In this fast-moving space, offenders adapt rapidly, and generally do so far quicker than those trying to policing them (Watson and Huey, 2020).

The challenges are not just organizational. Investigating online CSA has long been described as form of ‘dirty work’ (e.g., Huey and Broll, 2015)—as work that is ‘physically, socially and morally beneath’ (Hughes, 1958: 122). There is stigma and taint attached to it, which has been shown to lead to intense feelings of isolation and job dissatisfaction amongst investigators (Lindholm et al., 2024). Allied to this is the point that online CSA investigators are constantly exposed to material that violates deep cultural and moral norms. As de Rond (2025: 8) explains, ‘it is hard to conjure up something more universally abhorrent’, with the corresponding consequences on investigators being profound. Indeed, investigators’ repeated exposure to such content is widely linked with a broad range of adverse health outcomes including

post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression (Krause, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2015).

Evidence is also starting to emerge showing that the scale and egregious nature of online CSA, combined with acute police under resourcing, is creating conditions in which investigators routinely suffer myriad forms of moral injury (Tapson et al., 2022). Distinct from illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder, moral injury is the trauma suffered when an individual is involved in ‘perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations’ (Litz et al., 2009: 697). In the context of online CSA investigators, it is the psychological harm that arises from an officer trying to perform their civic duty in a job many feel ‘called’ to do (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Cohen et al., 2019; Hall and Chandler, 2005), but within a system that forces constant compromises and cut-cornering even at the (probable) expense of victims. Indeed, the effects of moral injury on online CSA investigators are likely very acute, with Conway et al. (2024) showing that feelings of institutional betrayal, being unsupported, undervalued and undermined are among the strongest predictors of poor mental health.

The significance of Anna’s story

Anna’s story matters for two main reasons. The first is because it provides a rare, detailed and candid insight into the lived realities of an under-researched, poorly understood form of ‘extreme work’ (Turnbull and Wass, 2015). In the context of this paucity, Anna reveals the distinct challenges online CSA investigators face. She describes the difficulties investigators have progressing complex cases within rigid police bureaucracies, and the associated stresses and strains these cause. She also describes the juridical standards that bear heavily on her work. In particular, how single-digit typographical errors can mean the difference between uncovering a crime and securing a conviction, or letting a perpetrator walk free. And, she explains how even faultless police work will not always ensure a conviction. She tells how, in the Swedish courtroom, as elsewhere in the world, many judges and jurors simply do not have the basic skills needed to fully comprehend the evidence they are being presented with. These insights are important because they echo and add weight to the idea that in classically extreme occupations, such as policing, it can in fact be the administrative—rather than the ‘blue-light’—aspects the job that are experienced as the most challenging of all (Granter et al., 2019; Mousa et al., 2025; see also McCann, 2022).

The second reason Anna’s story matters is because it enhances our empirical and theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of moral injury (Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 1994). Thus far research into moral injury has primarily focused on the personal toll it has on the afflicted (Griffin et al., 2019)—on individual experiences of distress following morally injurious events (Raudenská et al., 2020; Riedel et al., 2022), and on clinical interventions to mitigate these effects (Jinkerson, 2016; Williamson et al., 2021). Overlooked is what Eikenaar (2024: 1404–1406) calls the ‘occupational context’ within which moral injuries occur. Indeed, it is precisely this that stands out most in Anna’s story. It emerges in those parts of her story where she describes working in an organization where efficiency-orientated protocols force investigations to be cut short at victims’ expense; in her

frustrations with the discounts perpetrators get on their sentences because under-resourced investigations take far too long to complete; and in her anger at the jurors who decline to even view the images she and her team traumatize themselves to obtain.

Through these insights in particular we build on studies such as Eikenaar (2024: 1406), by showing precisely how institutional and organizational factors conspire to create moral injuries and shape the way they are experienced. In doing so we shift the focus of analytical attention away from moral injury as a purely individualized psychological phenomenon, and emphasize instead the systemic conditions that contribute to, create and amplify it (see also Rauch, 2025). Thus, we expand our theorizing of moral injury beyond its traditional psychological framework, offering a distinctly organizational understanding of how it unfolds in extreme work settings.

Anna's story

Starting at the online child sexual abuse unit

I am one of a small number of people in Sweden with the expertise required to investigate online child sexual abuse offenses. Along with seven other officers in my unit, I investigate crimes committed by people living in an area of Sweden that is roughly the size of the island of Great Britain.

I began my career as a patrol officer, quickly moving into what became known as the domestic violence unit. For eight of the ten years I spent in the domestic violence unit, I also worked with online child exploitation cases on the side. This is quite common in Sweden because very few people are willing to focus on these cases alone.

I decided to work on child exploitation cases because I felt I coped well with this kind of crime. When I was in the police training college we had a lecture on child pornography and we were shown images of abuse on children. I thought I handled it well, but privately I got into something strange like this, almost anxiety like state. For a month or two I just obsessed about things in my head. I was thinking like 'God, right now children are being abused and exploited, we have to do something'.

Ultimately I decided this work was not healthy. It was changing how I perceive men and their interactions with children. Rather than succumb to cynicism I switched to a new job. I became a teacher at the police academy. I enjoyed this job but I left after a few years to be with my partner in a different part of Sweden. Not long after I moved, an online CSA unit was set up in my new hometown. They were looking for an investigator. I got the job.

The unit I joined only works on sexual crimes against children and young people online. We investigate crimes that are linked to the internet—to apps such as Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. Our concern is with things like child pornography crimes, rape against children and grooming. Essentially, everything from downloading sexualized images and videos of children, to suspects persuading young people to send them sexual images and videos, or carrying out their own abuse which they then record and disseminate.

I started confidently. I had a lot of experience, but I also knew this job would be different. My last job involved a lot of face-to-face work with abuse victims and

perpetrators. This one would be more IT-focused. Because it was more technical, I figured it would be less emotionally taxing than what I was doing at the domestic violence unit. I thought it would be easier to deal with internet-based cases, rather than physical offenses against children who would always be sitting right there in front of me, sometimes with fresh bruises on their faces.

Right from the start I found the work incredibly interesting. It felt extremely important to help all these children, but it did drain a lot of energy from me. To deal with this I was told to take long walks or exercise, however I tended to just go home. I want to be tired and alone on the couch, and just watch Netflix and have a glass of wine. It is probably not the best way but that is what I did. It is what I still do now. The thing is, it is not the cases that get under my skin, it's the technical and administrative side of things—the bureaucracy. There is so much highly detailed technical information that needs to go into investigations, and all the evidence and notes need to be presented perfectly to leave no room for errors in the courtroom. It stresses me out.

A real-world example: The case of the '11 girls'

A case that has been consuming me lately began when a mother checked her daughter's phone and found messages discussing sexual content. She also saw pictures her daughter had sent and called the police. The first step in this kind of case is to identify who the daughter has been in contact with. We have to be absolutely sure who they are before they can be considered a suspect. In this case, we started by contacting Snapchat, where the conversation seen by the mother occurred. From Snapchat, we obtained an email address and other details that confirmed the person the child was talking to was an adult man.

The next step in the investigation was to search the person's house, seizing their phone and computer, and bringing them in for questioning. One thing I have learned is that when a person is suspected of a crime like this, and is involved in apps popular with young people, there is a significant risk there are multiple victims. People engaging in such behaviour do not usually limit themselves to just one person. In this case, when I started examining the man's phone, I discovered messages with a friend of the initial victim, mentioning that he had received pictures from her as well. These messages contained comments like 'she is braver than you, she sends worse'. It was at this point that I knew this would be one of those cases with more than one victim. Unfortunately I was right. When I reviewed our suspect's phone I found he had been in contact with approximately 1500 girls. He consistently began conversations by asking their age, and then continued to correspond with over 100 girls after confirming their age.

As we started to find more and more girls, the scope of the investigation rapidly expanded. My focus now was not just on investigating the initial report, but also trying to identify these other girls he had been chatting with. I gathered details from their chats, such as their birth years, where they lived, and their names. I then cross-referenced this information with police databases. For example, if I saw an unusual name and knew she lived in a certain city, I would check the passport photo we have access to on a national database to see if it matched the girl I could see in the chat. Through this process I was

able to identify 11 girls and initiate separate investigations for each of them. Unfortunately I couldn't identify all the victims, which was hugely frustrating.

When we gain access to a suspect's phone and computer, we examine all the chats, images and videos we find. This is always quite a harrowing part of the job because there can be millions of images and some are quite extreme. You become accustomed to it, but it is still traumatizing because these are children. When I review images and videos I make two judgments. The first is: 'do I, as the reviewer, assess that it depicts a child'? The second judgement I make is: 'do I assess that it is pornographic or contains abuse'?

When determining whether an image depicts a child, it is not about age. It is about whether they have gone through puberty. An image is considered pornographic if the child is engaging in explicit behaviour, such as posing provocatively or doing something suggestive. Even if no adult is involved, such images are still classified as abuse material. If the images depict a prepubescent child or involves penetration, bodily fluids, pain, violence, or coercion, they are categorized as 'heinous'. In court we provide a representative sample of this material.

Child pornography offenses consist of various elements: possession, depiction, and distribution are all crimes. In the '11 girls' case the main offence was depiction, meaning that we must prove the suspect knew the girl was underage when he asked for images or videos. Whether the girl had gone through puberty or not is irrelevant in this context. So here I had to search in the chats to find proof he asked for her age, that she told him in response, and that he still asked her to send these images and videos. Given that he is the reason for this material to be created, it falls under 'deception'. And if he has made a girl commit a sexual assault on herself (e.g., create a video in which she penetrates herself), it is labelled as child rape.

It sounds strange to say, but as a team we are weirdly happy when we find penetration videos, even though they are sickening. This is because we pass an evidence threshold. We can get him for child rape and the sentences are much more severe. We are therefore happy because we know we will take this man out of society. In the '11 girls' case we searched and searched and searched for evidence like this. It took a long time, but eventually we found what we needed. With the help of the IT-forensic team, we managed to access his iCloud account. He had deleted the videos from his phone, but they were still stored on iCloud. We were so happy. It sounds crazy, I know, but we were just like 'yes, we found penetration videos!'.

The challenge of securing a conviction

Getting reliable evidence is a major challenge. For example when I contact Snapchat (as I did in the '11 girls' case) I ask for information about a person with a specific account name. I also need to provide IP addresses, and the exact times when activities (like sending or receiving images) took place. The timing needs to be extremely precise, and because Snapchat's servers are based in a different country I also need to account for time differences. The margin for error is very, very small. If we are out by even a second Snapchat's searches may find nothing and the whole case might fall apart.

If we find videos in a girl's iCloud account, and we can link it to a request he made ten seconds earlier, then we have a strong case. However if there is a two-hour gap the evidence becomes less reliable. A defence lawyer might argue: 'maybe it was some other adult woman he was communicating with'. Consequently a common point of contestation in court relates to precisely when a video was made. If the defence argues that the video could have been made outside of this narrow timeframe it raises doubt. If the defence can create this doubt, then there is a risk the case could fall apart. This risk is particularly acute in cases that involve rape.

Even if the evidence is rock-solid things still are not easy. Presenting evidence in court is hard. For example, it might be that the suspect has received a video once from a girl, deleted the video but taken a screenshot of it. He may also have deleted that screenshot, but phones automatically generate thumbnail images (small, low-resolution images) of that screenshot which remain on the device. When I am examining the phone, I can see that thumbnail, and it is evidence of the crime. However it can be hard for people who do not know much about phones to understand that even if the original image and screenshot have been deleted, the thumbnail remains and it cannot be there for no reason.

Even if we can get lay judges to understand these technical points convictions depend on the strength of the evidence we have. Ensuring the evidence is strong enough is our responsibility, and we have to provide a large amount of abuse material. For example, to secure a conviction against someone for a serious offense we need to find 400 heinous images. It feels ridiculous. It shouldn't take 400 heinous images for someone to be considered to have committed a serious child pornography offense. It is terribly frustrating that it requires so much—so many images and videos of things like child rape for a case to be a severe child pornography offense. That's just insane to me. I think the problem is an outdated belief that 'it is just a picture saved from the internet, it is not that serious'. People do not seem to realize that real abuse has taken place, someone has photographed or filmed it, and are disseminating it to others.

Systemic constraints and the feeling of falling short

No matter how hard I work it will never be enough. You see, we are not just fighting an explosion in online child sexual abuse, we are also fighting on other fronts, as well. There are more perpetrators than ever, but the resources just are not there to find them all. I mean, the backlog of cases just in my part of Sweden is more than 20,000. I am personally working on 20 of these cases right now. This means 20 different prosecutors, and 20 sets of worried parents and 20 children that just want this horrible ordeal to be over. All this pressure means that I am constantly balancing conflicting factors and making trade-offs. This happens everywhere, all the time. Some trade-offs I make myself. Some are forced on me. All are because we do not have the resources we need.

I will explain: one thing to understand about online child sexual abuse crimes is that in Sweden if there is a known victim the penalty is higher on the sentencing scale, and so they are a higher priority to us. If we do not know who the victim is, it is less of a priority for us. However the truth is there is still a victim, we just do not know who she

is. Am I looking at an old image that has been circulating on the internet for 15 years, or am I looking at a new image showing a child that is still being abused? Sometimes I just do not know, and I do not have the time and resources I need to find out. There are just not enough people in the country who are trained to review, assess and investigate all these images.

Another dilemma is that when we review abuse material, there comes a point where you halt the investigation because you have hit a certain threshold. For instance, let us say someone has a million files on their computer (which is not uncommon). If I find 400 particularly heinous images, it will be classified as a serious child pornography offense in court. I have then hit the threshold, and it does not matter if I find 100 more images or even another 1000—it remains a serious child pornography offense. At this point the protocol—the rule—is to stop and move on to other cases. In some ways, this is very sensible because we have cases nobody has touched for months and even years. However the problem for me is that I never want to stop the investigation. So what if I have found 400 heinous images? I cannot just stop investigating. What if the remaining images include self-produced material where I can identify a victim who is still being abused? Of course, I always have to stop—there are just so many other cases outstanding—but it is a really painful dilemma.

Another part of the problem is that cases pile up because investigators do not have time to work on them. Some cases will be years' old before anyone starts investigating. Let us say I start working on a case two years after the initial report has been made (which is quite common), and it takes six months to finish. That means the time from the first suspect interrogation to the trial is so long that court usually gives a discount on the offender's sentence because of the mental anguish the wait will have caused them. I absolutely hate this. They get a lesser sentence because I do not have the resources I need to investigate and prosecute these crimes quickly. But what do I do? Do I spend ages working on cases looking at every single image and video trying to identify every victim? Or do I try to get through them as quickly as possible so the perpetrator in the next case does not get a discount on their sentence for mental anguish? It is another very painful dilemma.

One particularly upsetting feature of the Swedish legal system is that sometimes the images and videos my colleagues and I traumatize ourselves to find are not even looked at in court. Jurors can actually elect not to see these images and videos, but be read a description of them instead. I understand why people might do this, particularly if they have children of their own. The images are truly sickening. However if you do not actually see the images can you truly comprehend the crime—the depraved brutality of child sexual abuse? Personally I do not think so. If jurors do not see the images and videos it makes me think what is the point?—particularly if the final sentence is lower than what others got for similar crimes.

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Notes

1. World Health Organization (2022) identifies four main forms of online CSA: (1) online sexual solicitation and grooming, where children are recruited for online or offline sexual encounters or to provide sexual images or videos; (2) the production, sharing, or consumption of sexual content featuring children (the making of child sexual abuse materials); (3) live-streaming of sexual abuse, where acts are broadcast live for viewers; and (4) nonconsensual sexting and sexual extortion, where images are disseminated without consent or used for blackmail.
2. A designated worldwide mechanism for reporting suspected child sexual abuse.

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