

## A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PORTRAIT OF CHILD PORNOGRAPHY OFFENDERS

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**Abstract:** *The present study analyses the characteristics of 71 individuals convicted of child pornography, who were incarcerated in the national penitentiary network between 2019-2022. The data presented below represents an analysis of the information provided by 21 prisons, who supported me in completing a questionnaire that included the following indicators: gender, residence area, age, education level, family situation, housing situation, criminal record, relationship between the offender and the victim, number of minors abused. The characteristics of the offenders were compared with those identified in studies conducted on the same topic in other countries. The results indicate a series of similarities with the research I referenced, as well as some differences. Romanian offenders are mostly men between the ages of 25-45 who, at the time they committed the crime, had started their own family or were involved in a serious long-term relationship. From an economic perspective, the data indicates a high proportion of individuals without stable employment, of those with a low level of education, and of those who had incomes below the average level. The most significant differences from other studies in the field are the higher proportion of female offenders, the large number of individuals with a low standard of living and of those without stable employment. The study is part of my Ph.D. thesis, "Sexual Behaviours in the Online Environment: Between Normality and Deviance."*

**Keywords:** cybercrime, child pornography, offenders, characteristics.

### 1. Defining the concept – child pornography as a form of cybercrime

The global expansion of internet among all population categories and its intensive use in all areas of private and social life, highlights this technology's essential role in contemporary society. In early 1995, 1% of the world's population used the Internet; by 2024, this percentage has grown to 66%. Today, users spend an average of 7 hours daily online to communicate, work, or relax (webage.ro, 2021). At the individual level, the internet contributes to human and social capital growth for those who have digital skills, increasing their chances to learn and access opportunities.

The rise of the internet is considered the third industrial revolution, significantly transforming people's way of life (Apostoiu, 2019). A new reality emerges—virtual reality, which is characterised by new ways of interaction and which promotes new activities and social actors. The specifics of online interactions lie in the ability to transcend the physical limits imposed by conventional reality, allowing individuals to communicate and select interactions based on personal preferences, affinities, or areas of interest. The internet enables the emergence of new currents of opinion, attitudes, and values, that are not controlled by social pressure or by the interventions of social control institutions. In this sense, the internet allows its users a degree of freedom that was previously inaccessible to them. It is also a vast space where legal norms are difficult to apply because of the anonymity that this technology allows and also because of the new issues that constantly arise in this space, which exceed the capacity of authorities to legislate and intervene effectively. National and international social control institutions are currently trying to manage the perverse effects produced by the internet.

Cybercrime is one of the hard-to-anticipate and especially difficult-to-combat consequences resulting from the widespread diffusion of the internet. The global cost of cybercrime in 2024 is estimated at 9.5 trillion dollars. Most cybercrimes are economically motivated (M. Ahlgren, 2024). Alongside economic crimes, sexual abuse-related crimes also find a conducive environment in virtual reality. It has been demonstrated that pornography consumption has increased at an accelerated rate with the spread of this technology, and alongside the explosion of adult pornography, child pornography - a highly severe form of victimisation of minors, has also expanded.

Statistics cited by the European Commission in the preamble of the *EU Strategy for a More Effective Fight Against Child Sexual Abuse* (2020) show that, worldwide, in 2019, 17 million cases of child abuse were reported online, 17 times more than in 2010. At the EU level, the increase is equally alarming: from 23,000 cases in 2010 to over 725,000 in 2019 (National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, USA, 2020, apud. C.E. 2020). The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) estimates that there are 40,000 public chat rooms where predators seek to abuse children. However, abuse also occurs in other online spaces, which elude the control of authorities (FBI 2011 apud. Terre des Hommes, 2013).

From a sociological point of view, child pornography refers to any action intended to produce, procure, or distribute sexual materials depicting individuals under the age of 18, aimed at stimulating the sexual appetite of the viewer. The various actions described by the definition of child pornography may have different motivations. In this paper, all forms of child pornography manifestation will be analysed, regardless of the motivation behind the act (whether the act was committed for material gain, to satisfy the sexual fantasies of the offenders, or for revenge or humiliation of the victim).

Child pornography is incriminated by the Romanian legislation under article 374 of the New Criminal Code and under article 51 of the “Law 161/2003 on measures to ensure transparency in the exercise of public duties, public functions, and in the business environment, prevention, and sanctioning of corruption”.

## **2. Theories regarding the causes and effects of child pornography**

The first studies that addressed the problem of adult pornography started from the concern about the effects that it can have on its consumers behaviour. E. Goode (apud. Rădulescu, 1996, p. 177-179) identifies three possible theoretical models. The first is the catharsis theory, which posits that pornography can function as a safety valve, allowing individuals with deviant tendencies to express their sexual impulses in a form that does not have an antisocial character. From this perspective, a man’s sexual energy is expended through masturbation, eliminating the danger of it being consumed through socially dangerous actions. This theory was found to be incorrect because it treats sexual assaults as being exclusively sexual behaviours. At the same time, this theory is based on the false premise that every man possesses a finite amount of sexual energy that can be consumed through masturbation.

A second theory is the media determinism theory, which presents pornography users as passive victims of online content: individuals who watch pornographic materials imitate or model their own behaviour based on what they see in such materials. From this perspective, pornography is a form of socialisation of violence against women.

A third theory holds that pornography does not affect the consumer. The neutrality theory of pornography is supported by studies that found that exposure to erotic materials did not alter the sexual behaviour of men. The results of these studies are contested because they do not distinguish between erotic materials and aggressive materials, a distinction that can significantly influence the results obtained.

The studies conducted reveal contradictory explanations. However, there are enough indications that exposure to erotic materials has very few or no effects on adult subjects with already-established attitudes toward sexuality and sexual morality. However, in the case of minors or young people, there is evidence that, in association with other risk factors, pornographic materials with aggressive content can have a negative impact, contributing to distortions in how sexuality is perceived and manifested.

These theories have been subsequently tested in an attempt to understand the impact of child pornography on its consumers. Child pornography has become the subject of numerous studies due to the accelerated spread of pornographic materials involving children in the virtual environment and the noticeable changes in the content of these materials, which increasingly feature unimaginable forms of violence.

Several studies have analysed the influence that access to child pornography has on the sexual preferences and behaviour of its users. A new area of interest is related to understanding the effects that interactions within online groups have on group members.

Most research has been conducted on small groups of individuals convicted of child pornography offences, which limits the generalisation of the conclusions. Moreover, many studies have yielded contradictory results. While some research confirms that exposure to child pornography influenced consumers’ sexual preferences, cultivating and encouraging an interest that did not exist before, other studies show that a significant number of child pornography consumers already had pedophilic tendencies before accessing such materials. Other studies indicate that the use of child pornography served as a substitute for acting out deviant sexual fantasies, preventing potential physical sexual assaults on children (Riegel, 2004 apud. McCarthy, 2010).

M. Seto and A. Eke (2011) concluded that not all child pornography consumers possess the characteristics necessary to commit sexual abuse in the physical world, where the victim may resist, express suffering, or reveal the abuse.

J. Ray, E. Kimonis, and M. Seto (2013) showed that while some of the subjects analysed became consumers following overexposure to online pornography, including child pornography, others consumed pornography due to their pre-existing sexual attraction to children. These same authors provide evidence

that a significant portion of child pornography consumers are also interested in physical sexual contact with a minor

In a comparative analysis between individuals who committed only online offences (non-contact offences) and those who also committed offline sexual abuse (contact offences), J. A. McCarthy (2010) concluded that child pornography offenders form a heterogeneous group that must be approached with different prevention and treatment methods. Thus, there is a significant proportion of child pornography consumers who pose a low risk of transferring their fantasies into the real world by initiating physical contact. There is also a second category of consumers, that has a higher risk of acting offline. The variables associated with an increased risk of offline aggressions include a history of drug abuse, criminal records, and deviant sexual interests. Consumers of pornography who also commit contact offences are more likely than non-contact offenders to have a history of substance abuse, to have been convicted of a sexual offence, and to have been diagnosed with pedophilia. Additionally, offenders who have had physical contact with victims communicated more often, both online and offline, with other individuals interested in child pornography or used the internet to locate and communicate with potential victims. A significant difference was observed in the ratio of child pornography to adult pornography in the offenders' collections, as well as the use of non-pornographic materials featuring children (such as photographs from magazines or beauty contests) by offenders who had physical contact with children.

Regarding the influence of online interactions within child pornography consumer groups, there is a consensus among different studies showing that interactions in such settings provide its members with social support and justifications that lead to a change in perception of their sexual preferences, the validation of inclinations, minimisation of guilt, and, in some cases, facilitation of transitioning to action (Blevins, Holt and Burket 2012; Quayle and Taylor, 2002).

### **3. Socio-demographic characteristics of child pornography offenders**

Regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of child pornography offenders, the study conducted by Seto and Eke (2005), led to the following results:

- Among the analysed offenders, only one woman was registered, who acted in complicity with a man.
- 56% of the offenders had a criminal record at the time of the offence. Of these, 25% had been convicted of sexual assaults involving physical contact, 17% of non-contact sexual offences, and 15% had been investigated for child pornography.
- Offenders with a history of sexual abuse of a child present the highest risk of recidivism.

D. Howitt and K. Sheldon (2007) found that, in their sample, pornography consumers had a higher level of education compared to sexual offenders who only engaged in physical contact or mixed contact (online and offline offence). The average years of schooling in the first case was 13.8 years, while in the second case, it was 11.2 years. For offenders who acted both online and offline, the average years of schooling was 12.7 years.

Analysing the relationship between the offender and the victim, the same study shows that offenders who abused victims only physically acted more frequently within the family than other offenders. Thus, among contact offenders, 56% acted only within the family, 20% only outside the family, and 24% in both contexts. Among offenders who committed both online and offline sexual offences, 20% acted only within the family, 60% outsider the family, and 20% in both contexts.

McCarthy's (2010) study indicates that child pornography offenders represent a heterogeneous group. Summarising the results of several studies on this topic, the author describes individuals convicted of such offences as predominantly white, aged between 25 and 50 years, with above-average intelligence, and employed at the time of the offence. Regarding the personal life of the offenders, some studies analysed by McCarthy suggest that most of them were in a relationship at the time of the crime, while other studies indicate a large proportion of single individuals or of those who had never been married.

In terms of sexual inclinations, most studies analysed by Mc Carthy, show a correlation between possession of child pornography and pedophilia. A significant proportion of individuals with paraphilic tendencies have been identified among child pornography offenders. Also, the study shows that a significant proportion (between 26% and 50%) of individuals had a history of childhood sexual victimization.

McCarthy conducted her own study on a group of 107 individuals convicted of child pornography. The group included both individuals who committed only child pornography offences (non-contact offences) and individuals who used child pornography but also committed physical abuse of a minor (contact offences). Data analysis of the entire group led to the following results: the average age of

offenders was 39 years; 59% were single and had never been married; most offenders (37%) were university graduates, and a significant percentage (17%) had completed high school; 18% had suffered sexual abuse during childhood; 15% had been previously convicted for a sexual assault, and another 20% for a non-sexual offence; 24% had a history of alcohol abuse, and 40% had a history of drug abuse.

Another study that contains information about the characteristics of individuals convicted of child pornography and the motivation behind this behaviour was conducted by L. Reijnen, E. Bulten, and H. Nijman (2009). In terms of age, education level, and ethnicity, the authors found no differences between child pornography consumers and non-sexual offenders. Significant age differences were found between child pornography consumers, whose average age was 37 years, and other types of sexual offenders, who had an average age of 47 years. In terms of education level, most individuals convicted of child pornography had completed primary or secondary education, similar to other sexual or non-sexual offenders. 59.1% of the offenders convicted of pornography were not involved in a relationship, and 40% lived alone. The percentage of child pornography consumers who had children (18.1%) is much lower than that of contact sexual offenders who had children (59.6%) or that of non-sexual offenders (54%). The personality tests applied during the research concluded that individuals who download child pornography are less socially integrated, lack interpersonal skills, and face intimacy issues. At the same time, the conclusions show that internet offenders are less energetic, impulsive, thrill-seeking, friendly, and extroverted and have a better tolerance for frustration than non-sexual offenders.

D. Finkelhor considers that online child sexual abuse is just another form of child sexual abuse and that offenders who act online are not different from those who act in the physical reality. Child pornography consumers who do not commit physical abuse (online offenders) are an exception and they must be treated differently, but at this moment we cannot draw conclusions regarding them due to the lack of relevant data (Finkelhor, 2012. Summarising some of the results obtained by Finkelhor in various studies on child sexual abuse (1986, 2013, 2020), we can identify the following characteristics of offenders who commit sexual assaults on children:

- Most child sexual assault offenders are men. In most cases, women are involved by instigating or encouraging men; the percentage of women cited by the author is 5%.
- 25% of offenders are related to their victims, 60% are acquaintances, and 15% are strangers. Most offenders who operate online are individuals who have met the children in real life, with the internet merely being a tool used to develop a relationship with the victim.
- Only 10% of offenders have a prior history of sexual abuse.
- 35% of offenders were subsequently convicted for committing other offences; most were convicted of theft or violence.
- The recidivism rate increases with the length of the monitoring period for offenders: if the recidivism rate is 11% within the first five years, the recidivism rate doubles after extending the monitoring period to 22 years. The existence of prior sexual assault and a young age at the time of the first sexual offence are the main factors statistically associated with recidivism. Intelligence level, occupational status, or sentence length do not influence the risk of recidivism.
- Individuals who assault boys are at least twice as likely to recidivate compared to those who assault girls.
- Only a small proportion of offenders are convicted for their actions: only one-third of the identified offenders are convicted, and these come from those who acted negligently, committed multiple offences, come from less privileged social categories, and lack the resources to defend themselves in court.
- Most abusers are not pedophiles but opportunistic offenders. Most sexual offenders do not choose children due to a sexual preference but for a variety of other reasons. The access to an unsupervised minor in the context of the absence of an adult partner or the desire to experiment is considered the main contributing factor in most cases of abuse.

#### **4. Methodology of the study**

This paper aimed to highlight the characteristics of the individuals convicted for child pornography offences in Romania. As much as the data allowed me, I compared the traits of Romanian offenders with the characteristics of the offenders analysed in the international studies cited in the previous chapter.

Statistics from the Romanian Police regarding reported child pornography offences were consulted. These statistics contain information regarding the gender of the offenders and their relationship with the victims. To identify the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the offenders, I developed a questionnaire containing relevant indicators, which was sent to all penitentiaries in the national network. Due to personnel shortages or procedural reasons, only 21 penitentiaries

responded to the request. After the assemble of the data received, a database was created containing a total of 71 offenders who were in custody between the 2019-2022. The quantitative data collected refers to the offenders' gender, residence, age, education level, family situation, criminal record, relationship with the victims and number of victims. Thus, the quantitative data used to outline the socio-economic characteristics of the offenders are based on incomplete information. A more accurate understanding of the investigated aspects was not possible at the time of data collection, as none of the institutions I contacted did not create databases or analyses on the subject of child pornography. The limited data I received was only possible due to the support of the specialists in the education and psychosocial assistance services, who filled out the questionnaire with the required information. I would like to thank them on this occasion. Although the data obtained are based on the analysis of a limited number of subjects and take into consideration only the child pornography cases identified by the authorities, they provide a starting point for understanding the particularities of a worrying phenomenon that affects Romanian society and which has not been addressed by sociological research.

### 5. Research results

The statistical data centralised by the Romanian Police provides information on the gender of individuals suspected of committing child pornography offences, and also on the relationship between the offender and the victim. A predominant proportion of male offenders was recorded, with men making up 88.4% of the total number of individuals convicted of child pornography offences. Although the proportion of women is significantly smaller, their presence is notable in absolute terms, with 29 female offenders registered in 2022 and 32 in the previous year.

**Table 1: Distribution of suspects according to their gender (source: IGPR)**

Year	TOTAL	Male	Female	Percentage of male offenders
2022	251	222	29	88.44
2021	263	231	32	87.83

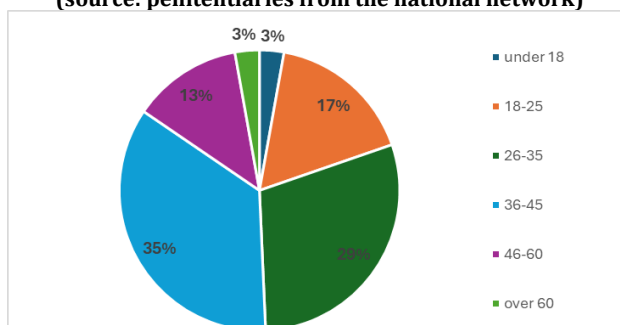
The number of cases where the offenders acted within their own family is relatively low. However, compared to the previous year, an increase in such cases is noted: 13 cases in 2022, compared to 5 cases in 2021.

**Table 2: The proportion of suspects who acted within the family (source: IGPR)**

Year	Total number of suspects	Suspects who acted within the family	Percentage
2022	251	13	2.38
2021	263	5	2.58

The information on the socio-economic characteristics of offenders is based on the data provided by the penitentiaries. Most offenders convicted of child pornography were between 26 and 45 years old. The number of offenders coming from rural areas (36) is approximately equal to that of offenders coming from urban areas (35).

**Figure 1: Distribution of offenders by age (source: penitentiaries from the national network)**



When correlating the age of the offenders with their residence area, a higher proportion of very young people and, also, of older people, is noted in rural areas. While no offenders under the age of 18

were recorded in urban areas, two such cases were identified in rural areas. Additionally, the number of individuals who are over 46 years old is higher in rural areas, while the number of individuals aged 26-45 years is bigger in urban areas.

**Table 3: Number of offenders by age and residence  
(source: penitentiaries from the national network)**

Age group	Urban	Rural
Under 18	0	2
18-25	7	5
26-35	12	9
36-45	14	11
46-60	3	6
Over 60	0	2

Out of the 58 offenders for whom marital status information was available, most were involved in a family-type relationship: 19 were married, and another 18 were in a concubinage relationship. However, the number of single offenders is still significant: 18. Three other individuals were involved in other types of relationships at the time they committed the offence (were divorced or had a non-committal relationship). The number of unmarried offenders decreases with age (the situation in which the convicts were under 18 was not taken into account). Offenders aged between 26 and 60 were, in most cases, in a family-type relationship (married or concubinage). However, a significant proportion of unmarried individuals is noted across all age categories.

**Table 4: Number of offenders by age and marital status  
(source: penitentiaries from the national network)**

Age group	Single	Married	Concubinage	Other situations
Under 18	2	0	0	0
18-25	6	6	0	0
26-35	5	5	6	0
36-45	3	6	8	3
46-60	2	3	3	0
Over 60	1	0	1	0

For 41 offenders, data related to their living situation was available: most (19) lived with their nuclear family (parents in the case of minors and spouse or partner in the other cases). A significant number of individuals analysed lived with their extended family (13), while 9 lived alone at the time they committed the crime. A high proportion of offenders had a low level of schooling. Out of the 71 individuals, 40 had completed secondary school at most. Another 24 were high school graduates, while 7 had completed university education. Most of the offenders for whom data regarding occupation was available, did not have a stable job at the time of committing the offence. However, there is also a significant proportion of convicts who were employed at the time. A small number of subjects were self-employed. The available information on the convicts' incomes is limited. Data were collected for 21 individuals. Of these, two-thirds had an income below the threshold required for a decent living. The remaining 7 individuals had an average or above average income. In rural areas, a higher number of offenders had incomes below the threshold necessary for a decent living, while in urban areas, more offenders had medium incomes.

**Table 5: Number of offenders by income category  
(source: penitentiaries from the national network)**

	Up to 2500 lei/adult <sup>1</sup>	2500-4500 /adult	No data
Urb	3	6	27
Rur	11	1	23

<sup>1</sup> The value of 2,500 lei/adult in the household was established based on the ICCV's 2021 analyses regarding the value of a consumption basket corresponding to the minimum of decent living and subsistence: 2,708 lei per month for a single adult. In assessing the average income of over 2,500 lei/adult, I took into account the INS data which shows that the average monthly income was in the second quarter of 2022, 2,481 lei per person.

Most offenders had prior criminal records. Out of the 66 individuals for whom data regarding their criminal history was available, 37 had previous convictions. Most of them had been previously convicted of theft and rape. There were also individuals convicted of human trafficking, robbery, assault, manslaughter, or driving without a license.

Offenders from rural areas had prior convictions to a greater extent than those from urban areas. While in urban areas, the number of offenders with or without prior convictions was equal, in rural areas, the number of those with prior convictions was significantly higher: 12 compared to 3.

A significant proportion of offenders had multiple victims. Of the 62 offenders for which data on the number of victims was available, 34 had a single victim, while the remaining 28 had at least two victims. Among the 28 offenders who abused more than one minor, most (11) had two victims. The highest number of minors abused by a single offender was 30.

As the age of offenders increases, the proportion of those who abused more than one victim also increases. Out of the 8 offenders aged between 45 and 60, 5 abused at least two minors. Additionally, both individuals over 60 years of age abused at least two victims.

**Table 6: Number of offenders by number of victims  
(source: penitentiaries from the national network)**

	1 victim	2 or More Victims
under 18	2	0
18-25	8	3
26-35	11	7
36-45	10	10
46-60	3	5
Over 60	0	2

When comparing the number of victims, slight differences between urban and rural areas were noted. The number of offenders who abused more than one minor was higher in urban areas (15) compared to rural areas (13).

With regard to the relationship between the victim and the offender, data provided by penitentiaries show a different situation from the one reflected in police statistics. More than one-third of the offenders (16 out of 41 for whom data is available regarding the relationship with the victim) had abused a minor from their own family.

The information regarding individuals convicted of child pornography offences could be representative of the prison population. Given the low number of inmates compared to the total number of child pornography offences reported to the police, I cannot generalise the conclusions to all perpetrators of such crimes. Observing the very high proportions of offenders who abused at least two victims, who abused family members or who had prior criminal records, I can hypothesise that custodial sentences are more likely to be imposed in cases involving a higher degree of social danger.

## 6. Conclusions

The results obtained in the present research show that individuals convicted of child pornography offences have the following characteristics:

- Most of them are men aged between 26 and 45 years.
- Most had their own families or were involved in family-type relationships at the time they committed the crime. However, the number of unmarried offenders is still significant.
- There is a high proportion of offenders with a low level of education (most of them are secondary school graduates).
- Most of them did not have stable employment. There is still a significant percentage of those who were employed at that time.
- In terms of standard of living, two-thirds of the offenders had an income below the one necessary for a decent living.
- The majority of the analysed offenders had prior criminal records.
- There is a high proportion of offenders with multiple victims. As the age of the offenders increases, so does the percentage of offenders who had more than one victim.
- More than a third abused minors within their own families.

Compared to the results of studies conducted in other countries on the same topic, the present research highlights the following particularities of Romanian offenders:

➤ **A higher proportion of female offenders:** 11.6% in the present study compared to 5% of female offenders among sexual offenders identified by Finkelhor and 0.5% of those convicted of child pornography identified by Seto and Eke (2005).

➤ **A lower level of education:** The majority (40 out of 71) had completed at most 8 grades, compared to the results obtained by Howitt and Sheldon (2007), which indicate an average education level of 13.8 years for individuals convicted of child pornography only and 12.7 years for those convicted for both pornography and contact sexual offence. The education level from this analysis is lower than that identified by McCarthy, who showed that 37% of the offenders attended university. At the same time, the data confirm the conclusions of L. Reijnen, E. Bulten, and H. Nijman (2009), who indicated that most offenders had completed primary or secondary education.

➤ **A higher proportion of individuals without a job:** Most offenders analysed in this study did not have a job at the time they committed the crime, while studies analyzed by McCarthy (2010) indicated that most were employed at that moment.

➤ The study contradicts the conclusions of Reijnen, Bulten, and Nijman (2009) and McCarthy (2010), who found that online sexual offenders are more likely to live alone and be unmarried. In this research, **more than half of the offenders for whom family data was available (37 out of 58) were married or in a concubinage relationship.** Additionally, only 9 out of the 41 subjects for whom data on housing were available lived alone at the time of the offence.

#### **Similarities with other studies relate to age and prior criminal records of the offenders.**

Thus, according to this study, most child pornography offenders are aged between 26 and 45, which is consistent with the findings of Seto and Eke (2005) and McCarthy (2010). More than half of the subjects in this study (37 out of 66 for whom data is available) had prior criminal records at the time of the offence, a situation similar to that identified by Seto and Eke (2005), who established that 56% of offenders had a criminal history. This percentage is, at the same time, significantly higher than that identified by McCarthy (2010), who established that 37% of offenders had a criminal history.

The proportion of offenders who, at the time of the child pornography offence, had a history of sexual aggression (of any type) is 19% in this study, compared to 15% found by McCarthy (2010) and 10% identified by Finkelhor (2012).

The results of this study provide a general socio-economic portrait of child pornography offenders in Romania. However, since there are different forms of child pornography, with different motivations (acts committed for material gain, acts committed to satisfy the sexual fantasies of the offenders, or acts committed to humiliate or seek revenge on the victim) and different forms of manifestation (acts that do not involve physical contact with the victim, acts that involve the physical assault of the minor), it would be useful to initiate studies that highlight the particularities of different categories of offenders.

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