

## The sexual exploitation of children by groups and gangs: part one

The Office of the Children's Commissioner's has completed a two year inquiry into the sexual exploitation of children. In total, the Inquiry has now published six reports with a specific focus on children in care. It found that in the 14 months from August 2010 to October 2011, a total of 2,409 children and young people were known to be victims of CSE by gangs and groups with 16,500 children and young people identified as being at risk of CSE.

Recent research into 'multiple-perpetrator' (more than one person involved) rape, and other forms of group-based sexual offending has highlighted the importance of better understanding the impact of the group, both on the behaviour of offenders and the experience of the victim.

Compared with sexual violence which is carried out by a single perpetrator, group-based sexual offending is committed more frequently by offenders in their teens and early twenties. It typically involves older perpetrators ordering younger ones to offend or some group members instigating abuse in which the rest of the group then take part. The levels of physical violence are usually more serious than that perpetrated by smaller groups.

In part one we look at the different patterns of abuse and a range of identified victim vulnerabilities and risk factors. Part two details the inter-agency framework proposed by the inquiry.

### Patterns of child sexual exploitation in gangs and other groups:

Although there are some similarities there are also clear differences between abuse perpetrated by groups and that carried out by gangs.

### Group-associated child sexual exploitation:

Group-associated child sexual exploitation involves a group or network of individuals who come together to sexually exploit children, they may never meet but are likely to be connected through the victims that they abuse, the taxi firms or bus shelters they use, the take-away shops they frequent or the organised 'parties' they go to where they pay to abuse children and young people.

However, they might also be peer-groups, or known through families, neighbourhood or other connections. Some groups are highly organised while others are ad hoc and opportunistic. Some groups are making commercial and financial profit from the exploitation of children and young people while others make no obvious financial gain. 1325 cases involved group-associated sexual exploitation.



### **Sole-perpetrator linked to a network of individuals:**

A child is groomed for the purposes of sexual exploitation by a man who then either takes the child to the homes of 'friends', or invites them to his own property. There may be small financial exchanges.

### **Networks of individuals using transport hubs:**

Bus and coach stations are used by perpetrators to spot and recruit vulnerable children for sexual exploitation, often those who have run away from home. They are offered a room for the night in exchange for sex, often returning each evening when different men would make the same offer. Sometimes bus or taxi drivers offer lifts, in exchange for sex,

### **Online sole-perpetrator linked to wider group/network:**

Individuals who find and groom children using social networking sites, meet them in person, and then circulate them among their friends, merging online and face-to-face recruitment. The children might be connected through school and then used to recruit their peers.

### **Linked to abuse within families:**

Often the primary groomer belongs to or is connected to, a victim's family. In these cases, the relative or family friend often sexually abuses the victim themselves, before passing him or her around their wider friendship networks. Sometimes the primary groomer makes a financial profit, but not always. This behaviour is sometimes associated with domestic abuse or 'honour'-based violence within the immediate and extended family.

### **Linked to adult prostitution:**

Adults who organise the prostitution of adult women may also sexually exploit the children and young people connected to those women. Adult women living in hostels are coerced by their pimps to recruit 16 and 17 year-olds living in the same accommodation or the children of women who are involved in prostitution are either abused by the men who are paying for sex with their mother or exploited by the pimps.

### **Organised crime groups and networks:**

Groups of men, who are part of a profit making organisation, groom vulnerable girls who are then taken to private properties and hotels where men of different ages pay to rape them. Girls can be locked in the properties for days at a time and are sometimes given alcohol or drugs to subdue them. They are expected to take part in humiliating and physically damaging sexual practices. Some girls are also trafficked and sold to men in other parts of the country. The exploitation is linked to businesses and private accommodation.

Teenage boys are groomed by men in their early twenties to recruit and abuse girls in their school. Different methods are used to control the boys. Sometimes young women with a history of sexual exploitation are also used to recruit victims who are abused and then passed on to older men who arrange 'parties' locally or in other parts of the country, where they are given alcohol and/or drugs and trafficked in cars (sometimes taxis) to private homes or warehouses. Adult men, who are rarely identified, attend these parties and pay organisers to rape the victims.

### **Peer-on-peer child sexual exploitation**

Typically peer on peer child sexual exploitation takes place in school or within neighbourhoods, the inquiry found that almost 30% of perpetrators were under the age of 19, and the youngest was 12.

### **School-based peer on peer child sexual exploitation**

In most cases there is little or no evidence of a connection to organised or commercial sexual exploitation involving adult perpetrators; instead it normally involves a victim who is sexually assaulted and harassed over an extended period by a group within school. Sometimes this is because the victim has been involved in a relationship with a boy, or has been videoed or photographed in a sexual act and the images have then been circulated, or the victim is told she has to take part in sexual activity in order to get back a possession that has been taken from her.

### **Neighbourhood-based peer on peer child sexual exploitation**

Peer-groups are routinely involved in sexually assaulting girls who live near them, often in public places such as stairwells and alleyways, as well as in their own homes. In some cases, boys use text messages or the Internet to invite their friends to join them. On other occasions this type of group-based activity takes place in parks and involves the use of alcohol.



### **Gang-associated child sexual exploitation:**

Gang-associated child sexual exploitation is committed by street gangs who have come together for purposes other than sexual exploitation, usually to protect their territory, to sell drugs, to commit robbery or to carry out other crimes. However, sexual violence may well occur within or between street gangs although it is not usually seen as sexual exploitation by either the gang members, their associates or by professionals.

While gang-associated sexual exploitation has much in common with sexual violence outside of gangs, it has several characteristics of its own. For example, rape is used as a weapon within gang conflict or as a punishment. Young girls will offer sex, particularly to a gang leader, to achieve some kind of status within the gang, to gain protection against sexual violence by other gang members or as an act of initiation into the gang. Sexual relationships might be used to 'set-up' rival members or associates to be attacked. Within street gangs, therefore, sexual violence and exploitation plays a specific role, directly linked to gang-associated violence and conflict.

Some 433 cases of gang associated child sexual exploitation were identified out of 2,498 victims reported to the inquiry; compared with group-associated abuse they were not easily identified by professionals. The majority of cases are peer-on-peer, as opposed to adult-on-child. The inquiry identified the following categories:

#### **Inter-gang exploitation-** threats or retribution:

Here sexual violence is used against gang associated females as a means of threatening or punishing a member of a rival gang to whom they are linked (siblings, girlfriends, friends of gang members). This often involves the targeting of female siblings when their brothers are in custody. These assaults are directed at someone who is simply connected, however loosely, to the rival gang member.

#### **Intra-Gang exploitation** – ad hoc and opportunistic:

Many cases involve casual exploitation of young women linked to street gangs through 'friendships' or 'relationships'. Often, it is a means of gaining acceptance to the gang, giving them a sense of belonging. Neither the perpetrator nor the victim appear to consider the question of consent or coercion, particularly so in cases of young women who have been involved in some form of sexual relationship with a gang member. Once this ended she is then expected to take part in sexual activity with other members and if she is seen as sexually available (based on previous sexual behaviour) her right to give or withhold consent to sexual activity is totally disregarded.



Some young women are also expected to commit offences alongside their male peers. If they appear tough and masculine this can reduce the risk of becoming a sexual target of other male gang members.

### **Intra-Gang exploitation – punishment of males:**

On occasions males have been stripped or required to perform humiliating sexual acts as a form of punishment by the gang to whom they owe allegiance. This might be to settle disputes involving disrespect or when a drugs sale or other criminal activity goes wrong.

### **Intra-Gang exploitation – punishment of females:**

Rape is used as a means of punishing young women who have ‘let down’ their gang – either by associating with rival gangs/individuals, or by failing to play their part in a criminal offence (for example, messing up a drugs sale or not providing an alibi for someone). Social networking often plays a role in these cases, for instance if a young woman is photographed or discovered holding online conversations with rivals. In other cases young women who try either to leave a gang or to end a relationship with a gang member might be punished.

### **Inter-gang exploitation – ‘set-up’ scenarios:**

There is extensive evidence of girls and young women starting a sexual relationship with a male member of a rival gang in order to set them up for an attack. A girl is planted and ordered to offer sex to the rival gang member to gain their trust and gather information on them. This information is then passed back to the gang who have arranged the set-up. If these girls are uncovered as plants, they are subjected to physical and sexual violence. Sometimes young women are wrongly suspected of being part of a set-up and assaulted.

### **Intra-gang exploitation – initiation of males:**

Professionals are more likely to be alerted to the initiation of young men through the rape of young women. In these situations boys and young men might be required to rape a rival or, more commonly, to take part in group-based sexual activity with a young woman (who might be forced to join in a ‘line-up’ for example) as a means of demonstrating solidarity with the gang to which they are associated.



## **Warning signs and vulnerabilities checklist:**

It is important to create the conditions at school, at home and in the wider social context in which everyone is alert to the signs that a child may be at risk or is a victim and that there is a climate of belief and respect that gives the child or young person the confidence to tell a trusted person about their experience.

The following are typical vulnerabilities in children prior to abuse:

- Children who are living in a chaotic or dysfunctional household (including parental substance use, domestic violence, parental mental health issues, parental criminality), have a history of abuse (including familial child sexual abuse, risk of forced marriage, risk of honour-based violence, physical and emotional abuse and neglect), have learning disabilities or have experienced a recent bereavement or loss,
- Children who have gang-association either through relatives, peers or intimate relationships (in cases of gang-associated child sexual exploitation only), those who attend school with children and young people who are already sexually exploited or are friends with young people who are sexually exploited,
- Children who are homeless, living in a gang neighbourhood, living in residential care or living in hostel, bed and breakfast accommodation or a foyer,
- Children who lack friends from the same age group, have low self-esteem or self-confidence, are unsure about their sexual orientation or unable to disclose sexual orientation to their families or are young carers.

Any child displaying several of these vulnerabilities should be considered to be at high risk of sexual exploitation and the risk assessed, and preventative and protective action taken.

The following signs and behaviour are generally seen in children who are already being sexually exploited:

- Missing from home or care, absent from school or estranged from their family
- Physical injuries, a change in physical appearance or repeat sexually-transmitted infections, pregnancy and terminations,
- Drug or alcohol misuse or involvement in offending,
- Evidence of sexual bullying and/or vulnerability through the internet and/or social networking sites,
- Receipt of gifts from unknown sources,
- Recruiting others into exploitative situations,
- Poor mental health, self-harm or thoughts of or attempts at suicide,

Any child showing risk indicators in the second list, but none of the vulnerabilities in the first, should also be considered as a potential victim.



**Refs:**

“If only someone had listened” Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups Final Report November 2013 [http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content\\_743](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_743)

**Further reading:**

All the reports are available at [www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)

