

Localised grooming: a study of child sexual exploitation

This study was carried out by CEOP (the Child Exploitation Online Protection centre) to investigate the extent of localised grooming, to look at any patterns of offending profile or victim experience, to see what support is, or is not working and recommend action to reduce the risk to vulnerable children.

Localised grooming is the term used by CEOP and is defined as:

'a form of sexual exploitation – previously referred to as 'on street grooming' - where children have been groomed and sexually exploited by an offender, having initially met in a location outside their home, usually in public, such as a park, cinema, on the street or at a friend's house. Offenders often act together, establishing a relationship with a child or children before sexually exploiting them. Victims may believe that the offender is an older 'boyfriend'; these victims introduce their peers to the offender group who might then go on to be sexually exploited as well. Abuse may occur at a number of locations within a region and on several occasions.'

Localised grooming does not include online grooming, trafficking of children into the UK, peer-on-peer abuse or other forms of sexual exploitation but there are many overlaps. Where police, children's services and voluntary sector agencies work well together, coordinated by the LSCBs, many cases have come to light, victims have been identified and supported and offenders prosecuted. But the wider picture is of agencies which do not proactively look for child sexual exploitation and, as a result, the majority of incidents of child sexual exploitation in the UK are unrecognised and unknown.

Offender profiles and behaviour:

The vast majority of offenders are men, with almost half aged under 25; this is a distinct difference from the common profile of the older male abuser. Data about ethnicity is inconsistent, with the ethnicity of a large number of offenders unknown or poorly recorded, however approximately one third are identified as white, and a quarter as Asian, with 3 percent Black.

CEOP identified 230 networks of offenders ranging in size from just two offenders to much larger groups, some were core members, responsible for identifying and grooming victims for exploitation, others were less involved and more opportunistic. Grooming is often used to manipulate victims, distance them from families and friends, and place them under the control of the offender. Offenders use flattery and attention offenders to persuade their victims to view them as a 'boyfriend', they exerting control over their victims through coercive and manipulative behaviour, which they appear to enjoy in a similar way to perpetrators of domestic abuse.

Victim data:

Most children come to attention of statutory or non-statutory agencies between the ages of 14 to 15. Much of the detailed data about the 2083 victims of child sexual exploitation reported to CEOP was unknown or poorly recorded, the majority were female but the gender of the victim was unknown in 31% of cases and boys and young men are likely to have been under represented. Two thirds were

white with the majority of the remainder unknown and just 3% recorded as Asian, and 1% Black, again minority ethnic groups are likely to be under-represented.

Out of the 1,014 cases where information on going missing was recorded, 842 children were known to have been reported missing on at least one occasion and of the 896 children whose living situation was known, 311 were already in care at the time of the exploitation and a further 43 children were moved into care following intervention.

Victim behaviour and experience:

Some common themes emerge about the victims' background which often includes periods of going missing from home or running away and many victims are in the looked-after system before or during exploitation. A lack of interest in school, poor behaviour, bullying peers and truanting are all common, many victims are also themselves victims of bullying. Victims often fail to recognise that they are being exploited and hold a negative perception or fear of authorities which makes it difficult to work closely with them. Many victims fear violence from if they don't do as demanded or if they were to cooperate with the police; their friends are also used to exert peer pressure if a victim tries to avoid or desist from risky situations.

Victims are often targeted by perpetrators in public places, including town or city centres, particularly shops, restaurants and takeaways and local parks. Taxi firms have been implicated in a number of cases and offenders may pick up victims from near their homes, on the street or from parks and then drive them to other locations. In some cases victims are moved around and between large towns. Offenders will use one victim to gain access to others, asking victims about their friends and encouraging them to bring their friends to pre-arranged meetings.

Offenders often deliberately create and exploit any vulnerabilities that victims may have, such as family difficulties or challenging or criminal behaviour, so that they can retain exclusive control. Overall, victims are unlikely to disclose exploitation voluntarily, as a result of fear or loyalty to perpetrators, a failure to recognise that they have been exploited or a fear of the authorities. Victims need proactive engagement from workers to help them to tell and to support them over the long-term. Investigative and court processes can increase the pressure and distress they experience.

Potential indicators:

- adults or older youths loitering outside the child's home
- child persistently missing, staying out overnight or returning late with no plausible explanation
- leaving home/care setting in unusual clothing (inappropriate for age, borrowing clothing from others)
- acquisition of expensive clothes, mobile phones or other possessions without plausible explanation
- truancy/disengagement with education or considerable change in performance at school

- volatile behaviour with extreme mood swings or use of abusive language
- getting involved in petty crime such as shoplifting, stealing
- entering or leaving vehicles driven by unknown adults
- hostility in relationship with parents/carers and other family members
- returning after having been missing, looking well cared for in spite of having no known home base
- injuries as a result of physical/sexual assault during the exploitation
- problematic sexual behaviour, including unwanted pregnancies and STI s
- chaotic and at times, aggressive behaviour
- seen as a risk to other children by the police and social services.

Front line awareness and multi-agency working:

There is a continuing lack of practitioner awareness of the signs and symptoms of child sexual exploitation; workers from sexual health clinics, child and adolescent mental health services, GPs, youth workers, teachers in schools and in pupil referral units, school nurses, YOTs, specialist services for homeless or drug abusing young people, as well as various police teams all need to develop a greater understanding of the vulnerabilities and experiences of victims and the symptoms of abuse.

It can be difficult for the police and social workers to get close to victims of child sexual exploitation and victims themselves talk about their poor experiences of statutory services, but the voluntary sector agencies tend to be more successful, usually through intensive outreach work. Working closely with other agencies brings a better chance of an initial disclosure of exploitation to a project worker which may then lead to a police investigation.

Recommendations:

- Front line agencies should develop ways of capturing and recording data relating to known or suspected cases of sexual exploitation.
- The stories of victims should be used as a way of designing prevention messages and providing early interventions through to the set up of specialist support.

The role of LSCB's:

Most LSCBs have not implemented the key aspects of the national guidance 'Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation' (DCSF, 2009) which states that all LSCBs should make sure they have specific procedures in place, setting out the roles and responsibilities of local agencies and professionals; with a sub-group to lead on child sexual exploitation and lead professionals in each agency.

Recommendations:

LSCBs need to:

- identify children at risk at an early stage across all agencies,
- provide clear protocols for sharing information
- ensure that children at risk have a full assessment of their needs and referral to relevant services for intervention and support
- ensure that all those working with children understand the signs of exploitation and where to refer for help, especially foster carers and residential care staff, as well as all front line workers who come into contact with missing children
- support the development of specialist multi-agency teams
- ensure that there is sufficient specialist training available

LSCBs should coordinate the development of a template for capturing information which can be used both police and services for sexually exploited children.

Investigations and evidence:

Children vulnerable to child sexual exploitation often fail to meet children's services thresholds for intervention or the terms of reference for police Child Abuse Investigation Units (CAIU's), which generally deal with cases of familial child abuse. Cases are then passed to CID teams which may lack the capacity and expertise to investigate them. The police experience major challenges in compiling sufficient evidence to prosecute and convict perpetrators of child sexual exploitation and there is a need to improve the quality of their work with, and evidence gathering from, victims as well as their offender interview techniques.

Recommendations:

- All policing teams which come into contact with victims or offenders, including CAIU's, CID, PPU's and community policing, need to have an understanding of child sexual exploitation and relevant training. Police forces should also develop a strategy so that cases of child sexual exploitation are identified and taken forward appropriately.
- Police forces should proactively gather intelligence and develop regular problem profiles of child sexual exploitation.

Prosecutions and court proceedings:

CPS solicitors are often reluctant to take up cases of child sexual exploitation because victims are often perceived as unreliable, uncooperative and difficult to work with. Victims find the court processes traumatic and difficult, particularly the aggressive and intrusive line of questioning pursued by many defence barristers. Acquittal of the defendant is extremely distressing for victims.

Practice points:

- work with a regular CPS solicitor who understands the context and complexities
- make sure all agencies work together to support victims and their families before, during and after court appearances
- understand that the risks remain beyond the court process

Recommendations:

The CPS should review all prosecutions in child sexual exploitation and:

- identify the barriers to taking cases forward
- outline best practice in relation to the support available for victims
- identify key aspects of the investigation and criminal justice process that lead to successful prosecution outcomes.

Refs:

Out of mind, out of sight: breaking down the barriers to child sexual exploitation June 2011

UK National Centre for Child Protection (CEOP)

http://www.ceop.police.uk/Documents/ceopdocs/ceop_thematic_assessment_executive_summary.pdf

Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation: Supplementary guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00689-2009>

Puppet on a string: The urgent need to cut children free from sexual exploitation, Barnardos 2011

http://www.barnardos.org.uk/ctf_puppetonastring_report_final.pdf