



Organised crime and child sexual exploitation in local communities

BRIEFING 3

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Key Messages

- *Two years of police crime and intelligence records for a single city were examined to identify the victims and perpetrators of child sexual exploitation (CSE) and assess the links to organised crime.*
- *Perpetrators that appeared to operate as a group had victimised or presented a risk to over half (58 per cent) of all young people known by local police to be at risk of CSE.*
- *There were an estimated 43 groups linked to child sexual exploitation (CSE) perpetrated in the city, many more than the six organised crime groups (OCGs) mapped by the local police force. This meant specialist resources were not always made available to tackle them.*
- *There was a high degree of interconnectivity between CSE and other types of serious and organised crime such as drugs supply, criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation for financial gain, and violence.*

- *Knowledge of CSE among frontline practitioners was poor and there was a lack of understanding at all levels of what constitutes an OCG involved in this area of crime.*
- *Support agencies in communities are the frontlines for identifying and tackling the threat of CSE but information was not systematically shared between them to produce a single consolidated assessment of the threat.*

Introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a high priority for politicians and policy-makers and a prominent feature of government¹ and National Crime Agency² strategic documents for serious and organised crime. A string of well-publicised cases in areas like Rochdale and Rotherham have led to an increased recognition and prioritisation of the problem.

Currently, knowledge of OCGs and the children and young people they exploit is limited. One study found gangs and groups were responsible for

¹ HM Government (2013) *Serious and Organised Crime Strategy*. London: TSO.

² National Crime Agency (2016) *National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2016*. London: NCA.

exploiting 2,400 victims in England over a 14-month period, however much less was known about the perpetrators involved.³ The true scale of organised CSE remains unclear, largely because it incorporates offenders, offending, and importantly victims, that tend to remain hidden to the authorities. Consequently, official crime statistics and other recorded data are unlikely to represent the true extent of the problem.

Focusing on the city of Bristol as a case study, the aim of this research was to examine the links between CSE and organised crime and the response to them by:

- Analysing the characteristics of the groups that perpetrate CSE and how they operate.
- Assessing the scale and impact of CSE linked to organised crime.
- Assessing the response from local police and partner agencies.

The findings are considered unlikely to be unique to Bristol.

Approach

Data were extracted from Avon and Somerset Police crime and intelligence records⁴. All children and young people in Bristol flagged as a victim, or about whom a CSE concern had been raised, within a two year period (2013 and 2014), were incorporated into a dataset, and details of each offence or risk were recorded⁵. In each case information on the (*suspected, alleged or convicted*) perpetrators was extracted and all cases that involved two or more perpetrators working together were classified as a group and examined.

Characteristics of the groups linked to child sexual exploitation

Across 2013 and 2014, 371 CSE perpetrators (including the very few convicted offenders) were identified from police records, of whom 192 (52 per cent) were linked to CSE that involved at least one

other perpetrator (that is, they were part of a group). In total 43 groups were identified with an average of five perpetrators in each, of which 17 were comprised of two perpetrators, while four had 10 or more. Only six of the 43 groups had been formally recognised and *mapped* by the police force⁶, four of which had been the target of large-scale police operations in Bristol. These groups were among the largest identified in this study.

Some groups included perpetrators connected by family but most consisted of loose networks of associates, often from similar ethnic backgrounds. Those from minority ethnic backgrounds were over-represented, but it remains unclear if that is an accurate representation or skewed by reporting patterns.

The quality and volume of information recorded for each group showed wide variation, with police knowledge in some cases limited to a small number of intelligence records. Specialist practitioners interviewed for the research cautioned that the problem was much more widespread than police data suggests, particularly because groups and locations outside of the traditional focus for the police (such as those with strong links to drug supply) continued to be a blind-spot.

How do groups operate?

The majority of perpetrators lived in the same communities as the children or young people they exploited and were linked to multiple victims or those at-risk. Four of the 43 groups groomed and exploited victims from outside of the police force area. Both local and external groups commonly used online communications to sustain contact with victims and coordinate the exploitation.

The groups displayed a range of methods to perpetrate CSE and many used more than one. The analysis also revealed how group-based CSE overlaps with other (more conventional) types of organised crime, some of which acted as an enabler for establishing contact with and exploiting victims:

- Of the 43 groups, 16 included perpetrators who appeared to be in a relationship with a victim.

³ Berelowitz, S.M., Firmin, C., Edwards, G., and Gulvurtlu, S. (2012). *"I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world."* Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, Interim Report. London: The Office of the Children's Commissioner.

⁴ Including crime-related incidents.

⁵ Cases involving abuse that occurred exclusively online or by peers of the same age were excluded.

⁶ Organised Crime Group Mapping is a national database used by all police forces to chart OCGs in their area.

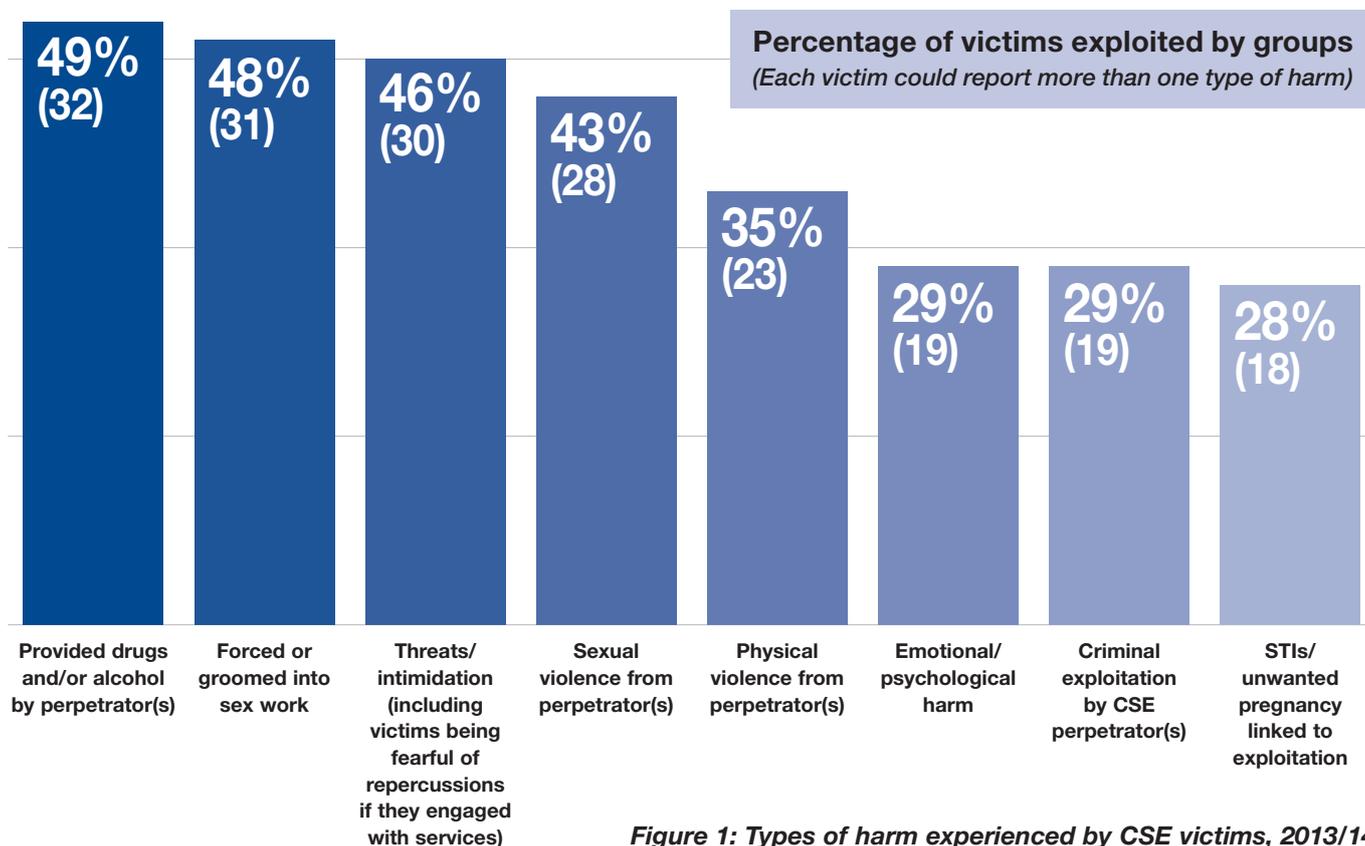


Figure 1: Types of harm experienced by CSE victims, 2013/14

- In the case of 11 groups, perpetrators lived at addresses that were visited regularly by young people enticed by inducements including free drugs and alcohol.
- 11 groups were linked to local drugs supply.
- Six groups (many of which overlapped with those above) were criminally exploiting young people, for example using them to carry or deal drugs.
- Nine groups were sexually exploiting young people for financial gain while often also engaging in the sexual abuse. At least three groups consisted of a small group of perpetrators who coordinated and profited from the exploitation, and others who took the role of 'clients' and abused the victims. This was evident for a number of groups that arranged sex parties involving large numbers of adult males and young females. Four groups that exploited children at sex parties were among the largest groups identified.
- Eight groups kidnapped or used extreme threats and violence to sexually exploit victims, in some cases involving firearms.

The impact of child sexual exploitation perpetrated by groups

In total 310 children and young people⁷ were identified as victims or had been flagged by practitioners as a CSE concern. Of these, 179 (58 per cent) had at some stage been victimised or were at risk of sexual exploitation from a group of perpetrators. Each group was linked to an average of five young victims, though there was wide variation with one linked to as many as 54. Organised crime was described by one practitioner as presenting a risk to a greater number of children than that posed by lone offenders.

Two-thirds of the children and young people linked to groups of perpetrators (114 young people, 64 per cent) had not disclosed victimisation but practitioners had concerns they presented a risk or were a victim of CSE. There had been a disclosure of victimisation in over a third of the 179 cases (65 cases 36 per cent) and a wide range of harms had been recorded (see Figure 1 above).

⁷ A small number of young adults (n=46), exploited through similar means, were also included in the analysis.

The data on harms in Figure 1 illustrates the range of serious crimes that enabled perpetrators to commit CSE, as well as the social, psychological and physical harms experienced by victims. Half (49 per cent) of victims were provided with drugs or alcohol and in some cases this was by coercion. Threatening behaviour was evident in nearly half of cases, which in some cases deterred the young person from seeking help from the police or other services.

CSE commonly involved repeated exposure to exploitation over prolonged periods of time, and many children and young people were exploited by multiple perpetrators (in some cases multiple groups) within the time period analysed. For some the risk of abuse continued into young adulthood, with the same perpetrators and/or methods also used to exploit vulnerable adults.

Many of the identified victims or children at risk came from disadvantaged backgrounds, including having experienced neglect or violence at home or having lived at some stage in the care system. As with perpetrators, practitioners expressed some concern about blind spots in relation to children at risk who were not already known to services or living in neighbourhoods that had been a focus for the police.

Responding to child sexual exploitation

Recording groups on the national Organised Crime Group Mapping (OCGM) database is the primary means by which local police can obtain specialist investigative resources for tackling serious and organised crime. CSE is nearly always a complex crime to investigate but it deviates somewhat from the traditional notions of organised crime, and the basis for formally classifying a group as such was not clear; there was wide variation among practitioners about what constitutes organised CSE. This creates inconsistency and leaves open the risk that certain groups will continue to evade law enforcement, especially those who operate in locations and social circles that have not traditionally been a focus for the police.

A number of questions were raised by police practitioners around the suitability of existing resources for tackling and improving knowledge of CSE. Traditional techniques for evidence-gathering are less effective for OCGs involved in CSE

because the priority must be to protect the child from harm over and above developing intelligence through surveillance; this in turn hinders the ability to prosecute or disrupt perpetrators. Further, there were few police informants from networks linked to CSE, and there were also significant barriers to obtaining information from children who were often highly disengaged from services. The police relied heavily on victim testimony to proceed with cases and many were discontinued because the victim was unwilling to engage. Undertaking prosecutions in the absence of a victim was described as an alternative, but presented significant challenges and was far from established practice. In the interest of safeguarding children at risk, a more immediate option was in some cases to disrupt a group in other ways, for example by targeting their involvement in other crimes such as drug supply.

At the time the research was conducted, local support services played a crucial role in engaging and safeguarding young people at risk and to a large degree were the gatekeepers of information concerning victims, perpetrators and risk and vulnerability within the communities; however, most were unaccustomed to gathering and developing intelligence, let alone sharing it. Arguably, a structured approach to mapping (often highly interconnected) victims or children at risk, that draws on the information held by support agencies in the communities, would be more revealing than a map of suspected offenders and groups. This would require systematic information-sharing and consistent recording processes across agencies, which does not currently happen.

Data relating to CSE are scattered (both within police systems and across agencies), and are disparate and often unstructured, which impedes both the view of the problem and effective decision-making. Police data suffer from a lack of consistency in recording, in part because systems are not configured to capture much of the information that signifies a risk of CSE. Information on children at risk needs to be supplemented with rigorous processes for recording the suspects, locations and the links between identified children. Identifying risk based on the behaviour and circumstances of the child is critical, but many concerns were also raised by frontline practitioners on the basis of whom or where the child was visiting but these were often not flagged on police systems.

Finally, practitioners (including within local police teams) did not have a clear general understanding of the overlap between CSE and organised crime. There was a tendency to view both CSE and organised crime as something remote or for specialists to deal with, but this research shows the majority of groups lived in and were a part of the affected communities. The reality is that practitioners in schools, local police teams, youth centres and children's homes (among many others) are the crucial frontlines for spotting the signs of CSE during their day-to-day interactions with children in the community.

Conclusions and recommendations

By consolidating information within police crime and intelligence systems this research presents a rather stark picture and highlights a potentially wide gap between the established organised CSE picture recorded on the OCGM and the true scale of the problem. That said, there needs to be a clearer understanding of which groups merit an OCG classification, and when, not least to ensure that where local police teams lack the necessary capabilities OCGs do not go unacknowledged.

The research raises questions about the way information is managed and used, both within the police service and between agencies. CSE is largely absent from recorded crimes due to the low levels of reporting, therefore uncovering perpetrators to investigate depends on applying effective proactive methods for identifying children at risk. Developing a fuller understanding of the local CSE problem requires the pooling of knowledge, expertise and information held by enforcement and safeguarding agencies working in this area, including local authorities, health and the third sector. The response needs to become more agile and make use of the full array of investigative, disruptive and safeguarding options, especially in cases where no victim is willing to report a crime.

Recommendation 1

Multi-agency approaches to addressing CSE need to be enhanced by better use of data and more sophisticated analysis for identifying those at risk of CSE.

Recommendation 2

The police and other local agencies need to do more to identify the hidden victims of organised crime and facilitate investigations for which no victim comes forward.

The scale and complexity of CSE cases threatens to overwhelm local agencies and for this reason it cannot be viewed as the exclusive remit of specialist investigative or support teams. However police and other practitioners working in communities lack understanding of both CSE and their role in tackling it.

Recommendation 3

Specialist training should be given to front line officers and other practitioners to increase their awareness of CSE, including how to recognise, record and act upon potential concerns.

So-called 'new' crimes such as CSE, along with the pervasive use of enabling technologies, have led to a seismic shift in the serious and organised crime landscape that local police teams are faced with. This research shows that a high proportion of CSE offending is perpetrated by groups and while there is unlikely to be the capacity to map and investigate all concurrently, failing to act is not an option either. The resources of local agencies need to be harnessed and coordinated in order to identify and protect children from harm. The government has for some years insisted that pursuing offenders is just one answer to the serious and organised crime threat, to be considered among others such as protecting and building the resilience of communities and victims. It is time for practitioners to catch up and make these ideas a reality.

This work is one component of a wider research project looking at organised crime and its impact on local communities. Further papers, as well as a single consolidated report, are scheduled for publication this year.

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