

CSE Research: Short films for practice Research Briefing Note #4



Gang associated sexual violence and exploitation Dr Helen Beckett

Text of the Film

"When we think about gangs we usually think about physical violence, but our research shows that sexual violence is also a very real concern.

This can take many forms. Some are unique to the gang environment – for example the rape of young women associated with rival gangs. Others replicate forms of sexual violence and exploitation that we see more generally in society.

Whilst the majority of gang-associated sexual violence is directed towards young women, we found that males are also experiencing similar forms of abuse.

And in some instances young people can be both perpetrator and victim at the same time - for example, a 14-year-old male forced into taking part in a multiple perpetrator rape against a young woman. In such a scenario, both can be victims if neither has given their free and informed consent.

What we see across all the forms of sexual violence we heard about in our research is that young people rarely report these. There are many reasons for this including: the normalisation of sexual violence within their social circles; fear of retaliation should they report; and a lack of confidence in our ability to protect them.

So what can we do? A good start would be to educate young men and young women about choice and consent, and, if working with a gang-involved male, actively consider risk for the females in their lives.

Ultimately though, we need to address the social inequalities that allow gangs to flourish and address the broader patterns of sexual violence in society as a whole."

Research Summary

The observations shared in this film are based on a two-year study into gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation (SVE), undertaken by a team of researchers at the International Centre from 2009-2011. The research was funded by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, as part of their inquiry into child sexual exploitation in groups and gangs (see <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/info/csegg1>).

The research was conducted in six different sites across England. Individual interviews were conducted with 150 young people, with a further 38 young people and 76 professionals sharing their views and experiences in focus groups.

Although the researchers identified a number of forms of SVE that are unique to the gang environment they also observed many other forms that replicate the experiences of young people within other settings (behaviours occurring within the gang environment, as opposed to gang-associated behaviours). Examples of SVE against young women were shared by virtually all participants, with young women's risk of SVE noted to vary according to their 'role' within the gang. Only one-quarter identified similar risks for young men, although these figures are likely to be affected by a particular reluctance to discuss young men's sexual victimisation.

Young women were much more likely to recognise the exploitative and violent nature of the sexual interaction being described than young men. Only half of the young men explicitly described these incidents as sexual victimisation. The other half discussed them as part and parcel of sexual activity within the gang environment. They did not recognise that they constituted rape or other forms of SVE.

In the main, cases of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation are not being proactively identified by professional services. Furthermore, only 1 in 12 interviewees felt that young people would be likely to report, or talk about, experiences of SVE and even where they felt a young person would talk, they thought this would be to a peer rather than a professional. There are a variety of reasons for this including:

- resignation to, or normalisation of sexual violence and related experiences;
- fear of judgement by others;
- fear of retribution or retaliation; and
- lack of confidence in services' ability to protect them.

Identified areas for improvement include:

- improved education for young men and young women around consent and SVE;
- greater cross-over between gangs and sexual violence work; and
- proactive identification of girls and young women associated with gang-involved males.

Questions for practice reflection

You may want to discuss or consider the following:

- Our research shows that the reach of gangs is extending beyond traditionally gang-impacted areas, with young people with no known exposure to gangs developing associations. Might this be an issue for any of the young people you are working with – how would you know and what can you do about it?
- What steps can you take to enhance understanding of consent and SVE amongst young people that you are working with?
- Are there actions you can take to promote disclosure of SVE, bearing in mind the additional challenges associated with young men?

**Is there someone you know who would benefit from seeing this short film?
If so, take a minute to pass it on http://youtu.be/_IjDMkNGCBM**

Further resources

You can download the full and summary report at <http://www.beds.ac.uk/ic/publications>

The research project was accompanied by a participatory film project with young people. You can view the films the young people made at <http://www.beds.ac.uk/research-ref/iasr/gasev>

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To cite this film

University of Bedfordshire (2015) *Gang associated sexual violence and exploitation*. Available at: http://youtu.be/_IjDMkNGCBM (Accessed day, month, year).

The International Centre

Increasing understanding of, and improving responses to, child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking

The International Centre at the University of Bedfordshire is committed to increasing understanding of, and improving responses to, child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking in local, national and international contexts. This is achieved through:

- academic rigour and research excellence
- collaborative and partnership based approaches to applied social research
- meaningful and ethical engagement of children and young people
- active dissemination and evidence-based engagement in theory, policy and practice



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Staff at the International Centre work collaboratively in teams with internal and external staff on applied research, evaluation, consultancy and training. We prioritise a focus on children and young people's participation, taking this seriously in all aspects of our work.

The University of Bedfordshire has been awarded the Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher and Further Education for The International Centre's pioneering research into child sexual exploitation. This prestigious prize is the highest form of national recognition open to higher and further education institutions in the UK.

What is Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)?

The following definition of CSE is that used in the government guidance 'Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation' (DCSF, 2009, p.9)

Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post sexual images on the Internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability.