

CSE Research: Short Practice Films for the Police

Research Briefing

Child Sexual Exploitation and the Victim-Perpetrator Overlap

Dr Carlene Firmin¹

Text of the film

Consider these two quotes:

'I've done it to kids before, I've been saying 'go in there, what's up with him, here's a girl'... 'I'm finished so you can go in' and he's like 'I'll go in there in a minute' and then you notice 'em , like you can see in their eyes that they don't want to go in ... when I first like beat a girl and that, I got like not peer pressure but it was like, that was, that was how I ever lost mine innit like' (Young Man, 16)

'You learn not to care cos there's no point. If you care too much it makes you weak and that's why most girls don't last in this way of life, cos they can't take it. Hold another girl down while your boys do stuff to her...; you have to just think -whatever. If you care you're finished' (Young Woman, 15)

Two statements made by two young people that we've interviewed over the past 5 years. And when I use these in training some practitioners ask me 'so are they are perpetrators or are they victims'? but it can be more helpful for us to just suspend these labels when dealing with cases of CSE that are complicated. It is important that services are able to see a young person who may have been victimised and/or have experiences of perpetration rather than insisting they are one or the other. This can absolutely be a challenge but it is not impossible.

¹ [Dr Carlene Firmin](#) is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre and is providing expertise on peer-to-peer abuse and contextual safeguarding to the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub.

When a young person is arrested for exploiting a peer, for example, it is critical that the police who are involved make a referral to social care and push for an assessment of that child's welfare alongside any enforcement response that they may have to take.

Or, consider a young person who has been identified as someone that has been exploited. If when giving their statement it emerges that they have also been involved in the harm of other children this shouldn't be used to undermine the legitimacy of their own experiences and the victimisation they have suffered.

Taking these types of approaches ensure that we don't enforce a divide between victim and perpetrators when there simply isn't one. Sexual exploitation involves situations, contexts and relationships where young people struggle to survive and stay safe– and for some survival involves the abuse of others. If we want to address their harmful behaviours and prevent exploitation we have to address their welfare alongside any enforcement response.

Research Summary

1. BACKGROUND, INTRODUCTION AND STRUCTURE

This briefing outlines the ways in which young people affected by child sexual exploitation (CSE) can be victimised while also victimising others – sometimes simultaneously - and explores the implications of this for the policing of CSE. This information is relevant for frontline officers, those involved in interviewing young people and those who make investigative decisions or set the direction of proactive investigations.

CSE can involve situations, contexts and relationships in which young people's choices are constrained or limited (Pearce, 2013). By limiting young people's choices, through coercion, normalisation of abusive contexts or the use of structural or situational inequalities (such as poverty, homophobia, community violence or social isolation) a power imbalance is created between young people who are exploited and those who exploit them (Beckett, 2013; Brodie, 2013; Firmin, Warrington and Pearce, 2016; Melrose, 2013). For example if a young person is

living in poverty, or is homeless, they can be offered somewhere to live, money or material goods in exchange for sex (i.e. Melrose, 2013). Or if a young person is living in a neighbourhood, or encounters a peer network, in which they are at risk of physical violence, robbery or intimidation they can be offered protection or status in exchange for sex (i.e. Beckett et al., 2013). In each of these situations a power imbalance is created in which young people can be sexually exploited.

However, in these same situations young people can also be exploited into the abuse or harm of others (Beckett et al. 2013; Cockbain and Brayley, 2012; Firmin, 2013). This briefing will outline the way in which the exploitative contexts and dynamics outlined above can result in young people perpetrating harm against others, before considering how the police may encounter and address this dynamic.

2. THE VICTIM-PERPETRATOR OVERLAP

As outlined above when young people are living or socialising in environments where: they feel unsafe; or sexual violence is normalised; or they are socially isolated; or they have an unmet need; they make decisions, albeit constrained, in order to survive (Melrose, 2013; Pearce, 2013; Pitts, 2013). Research clearly articulates how these choices can feature the sexual exploitation of young people. However this evidence base also illustrates how, for some young people, survival can feature harm towards others and thus create an overlap between victim-perpetrator identities.

In some scenarios this overlap can be quite explicit. Young people who have already been sexually exploited can be groomed or coerced into involving their peers or younger children into abusive relationships or networks. For some young people this will mean that they won't be sexually assaulted on a particular day as others that they have drawn in have taken their place (Berelowitz et al., 2013; Firmin, 2011). In others cases, young people may be coerced into direct

involvement in the sexual abuse of their peers- sometimes as a result of explicit threats and in other cases in accordance with the social rules or expectations of their social network. Examples of young people who are coerced into the exploitation of their peers have been found in cases of peer-on-peer abuse as well as CSE that is organised by groups of adults (Ashurst and McAlinden, 2015; Beckett et al., 2013; Firmin, 2015).

In other instances examples of young people who instigate the exploitation of their peers are less explicit or pre-meditated. Young people can be vulnerable to CSE by association with peers or siblings who are already being exploited. By spending time with their peers or older siblings young people can be informally introduced into exploitative situations and networks. Young people who have been groomed into CSE can also serve to normalise abuse for their peers, and create pathways unintentionally for those that they spend their time with to also be exploited.

Aside from involvement in the perpetration or instigation of CSE, young people who have experienced CSE can also be involved in other offending or anti-social behaviours (i.e. Cockbain and Brayley, 2012). Young people can be involved in theft, robbery and drug-related offences as part of the grooming process, with those who are exploiting them engaging them directly in offending to isolate them from supportive services. Offending can also occur as a direct consequence of impact that CSE can have on young people's emotional well-being and mental health: case reviews have documented young people displaying violent behaviours towards parents or carers, committing acts of criminal damage or misusing drugs and alcohol following experience of CSE. Finally, young people already involved in offending behaviour are vulnerable to CSE – they are already isolated from services, not perceived as 'victims' and may have challenging relationships with families or professionals – all of which can be used as a means to exploit them.

The various ways in which young people's victimisation can overlap with their involvement in offending, harmful or exploitative behaviours have been well-documented in case reviews, inquiries and wider research studies (Beckett et al, 2013; Cockbain and Brayley, 2012; Jay, 2015). Examples of professionals who struggle to recognise the victimisation of young people who they also characterise as 'perpetrators' have been evidenced across all of these publications (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Jay, 2015; Firmin, 2015). A need to refer to a young person as a victim or perpetrator in order to: determine a service for them; make charging or investigation decisions; assess the risk they face or pose; and prioritise interventions have all been evidenced. While these are multi-agency challenges, and far from issues only encountered by the police service, there are particular ways in which police experience victim-perpetrator overlaps and struggle to respond.

3. HOW MIGHT POLICE ENCOUNTER A VICTIM-PERPETRATOR OVERLAP

Police officers may come into contact with young people who cross the victim-perpetrator divide in three key ways.

Firstly, when a young person is talking to a police officer about their experiences of CSE, either in a formal interview or in other settings such as during safe and well checks after they have gone missing, they may describe situations or behaviours where they have also posed a risk to others. For example they may have invited other young people from the residential unit where they are staying to go with them to a party house where they are being abused. Or during an exploitative experience they may have provided drugs or alcohol to other young people who were with them, and in doing increased the vulnerability of their peers to abuse. When this occurs a young person who has presented to the police service as a victim may have also provided information about the ways in which they have posed a risk to others.

If a young person is aware of this potential conflict in the information that they provide they may withhold important information. For example, they may tell a version of events that excludes any reference to harm they may have posed to others in order to be perceived by the police and others as a more convincing 'victim'. I remember such an example when I was interviewing a young person in a refuge back in 2010 for a study into young women who were gang-affiliated. She had told professionals about the physical abuse she had experienced in her relationship but she didn't tell anyone about the fact that her partner had also used her to settle drug debts by sexually exploiting her to others in his network. She stated:

'I'll tell the nurses and like my counsellor about the domestic violence and that, but I won't tell them about the rest of it, cos they can tell other people and they won't understand, they'll think oh she deserved it, she's a criminal'
(Firmin, 2011:33)

In this case the young woman felt that in order to explain the CSE she had experienced she would also need to talk about the drugs that had been stored at her property and the drugs that her partner had given her. It was her perception that if she did this then she wouldn't be seen as a 'victim' anymore and wouldn't be entitled to the support of services. However, by not fully disclosing her experiences the practitioners involved in this case, including the police, were ill-equipped to assess the level of risk that she faced and identify the most suitable approach to keeping her safe.

In addition, to identify perpetration amongst those identified as victims, police officers may also come into contact with young people due to the offences that they have committed while being unaware of the experiences of CSE, or other forms of victimisation, that have contributed to those offending behaviours. For

example, they may arrest a young person for criminal damage, having smashed the window of their residential unit in order to get to the people who are exploiting them. Or they may arrest a young person for robbery or drugs possession who is committing offences alongside those who are exploiting them in a bid to avoid sexual violence. What the police officer will see is a young person who has smashed a window, stolen a phone or sold drugs, rather than a young person who has been sexually exploited. Research indicates that this is a particular issue for boys and young men (Berelowitz et al., 2013; McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2014) as well as black and minority ethnic young people (Berelowitz et al, 2013; Bernard and Harris, 2016; Firmin and Pearce, 2016). For both these groups it appears that services are more likely to identify the problematic or harmful behaviour that these young people are displaying, rather than see them as vulnerable and in need of protection.

Finally, young people may be identified as those who are exploiting others. National figures indicate that a third of identified CSE cases are peer-on-peer and in London this figure rises to 50%. Research into young people who display harmful sexual behaviours or who commit sexual offences indicate that a number will have also experienced significant levels of victimisation – whether that is with their families, communities or schools. While this will not be true of all young people who sexually harm or exploit others, some studies have identified that his cohort of young people are more likely to have experienced bullying at school, social isolation from peers, early childhood victimisation and/or experiences of familial abuse (including, but not exclusively, sexual abuse) (Hackett, 2014; Latchford, et al., 2016). For young people who do not have these vulnerabilities in their backgrounds a number may also be coerced or groomed into harmful sexual behaviours by their peers or adults with whom they spend their time. In all of these occasions the police will encounter a young person who has perpetrated

abuse, and will not necessarily recognise the experiences of victimisation which may have informed that exploitative behaviour.

4. WHAT CAN THE POLICE DO WHEN ENGAGING WITH A YOUNG PERSON WHO HAS BEEN BOTH VICTIMISED AND VICTIMISED OTHERS

In these situations there are a number of things that police officers can do to recognise and address the fact that a young person has been harmed as well as caused harm to others.

The first step is to always avoid trying to put young people into either a victim or perpetrator category. Rather, all services, including the police, need to engage with a young person as a young person, and then seek to address the behaviours they display and experiences they have had.

Secondly, if a young person discloses their own involvement in offending and/or abusive behaviours during an interview or other form of contact with the police this should not be seen as undermining their experiences of victimisation. The exploitation that the young person has experienced should be explored and where possible addressed. If the offending behaviours they describe are directly associated to their abuse, a multi-agency group of professionals should work together, with the police, to identify whether it is in the best interests of that young person, and other young people, for those matters to be pursued. For example, if a young person stole a bottle of vodka for the people who had groomed him and was then made to drink it prior to being taken to a party for the means of exploitation it would not be in that young person's interest, or the interest of others, for them to be charged with a shoplifting offence. If a young person was to be charged with that offence it would actually be to the benefit of those who had exploited them, and would send a message to other young people

that they were unable to disclose their abusive experiences as it may also lead to be them being arrested.

In other instances where the offending behaviour poses a direct risk to other young people, then it is critical that a partnership decision is taken as to whether a safeguarding intervention may reduce the risk that this young person poses to others while also addressing the victimisation they have faced. While this will not always be possible it is an important option to consider prior to taking an enforcement decision. Regardless of the offending behaviour however it is important that what is disclosed is not used, or perceived as being used, to undermine any recognition of the abuse that young person has experienced.

Finally, if a young person is identified for their offending first, it is always important that the police make a social care referral. It is not necessarily the job of police forces to identify the safeguarding issues that may be driving a young person's offending behaviour, including CSE. However, it is important that police forces are alert to the fact that most young people do not commit criminal offences and when they do, this should always be considered as a safeguarding issue alongside any enforcement activity that needs to take place. Beyond making a referral to children's social care, police forces could follow up with their safeguarding partners, and raise questions at multi-agency meetings, to establish what protective action is being taken to investigate and address the social drivers of that offending behaviour. Adopting this advocacy role will ensure that the police play a role within a wider partnership in recognising that some young people who victimise others will also have been victimised themselves.

REFERENCES

Ashurst, L. & McAlinden, A.-M., 2015. Young People, Peer-to-Peer Grooming and Sexual Offending: Understanding and Responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviour within a Social Media Society. *Probation Journal*, 62(4), p. 374–388.

Beckett, H. et al., 2013. *It's wrong but you get used to it: A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and sexual exploitation of, young people in England*, London: Office of the Children's Commissioner.

Beckett, H. & Warrington, C., 2015. *Making Justice Work: Experiences of criminal justice for children and young people affected by sexual exploitation as victims and witnesses*, Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

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

Bernard, C. & Harris, P., 2016. *Safeguarding Black Children: Good Practice in Child Protection*. First ed. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Brodie, I., 2013. Young People, Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation: A View from Scotland. In: *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 83-95.

Cockbain, E. & Brayley, H., 2012. Child sexual exploitation and youth offending: A research note. *European Journal of Criminology*, 9(6), p. 689–700.

Firmin, C., 2011. *This is it. This is my life...Female Voice in Violence Final Report*, London: ROTA.

Firmin, C., 2013a. Something Old or Something New: Do Pre-Existing Conceptualisations of Abuse Enable a Sufficient Response to Abuse in Young People's Relationships and Peer Groups?. In: *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 38-51.

Firmin, C., 2015. *Peer-on-Peer Abuse: Safeguarding Implications of Conceptualising Abuse between Young People within Social Fields*, Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

Firmin, C. & Pearce, J., 2016. Living in Gang-Affected Neighbourhoods. In: C. Bernard & P. Harris, eds. *Safeguarding Black Children*. London: Jessica Kingsley, pp. 76-91.

Firmin, C., Warrington, C. & Pearce, J., 2016. Sexual Exploitation and Its Impact on Developing Sexualities and Sexual Relationships: The Need for Contextual Social Work Interventions. *British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 46, p. 2318–2337.

Hackett, S., 2014. *Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours*. Dartington: Research in Practice.

Jay, A., 2014. *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (1997 – 2013)*, Rotherham: s.n.

Latchford, L., Firmin, C., Fritz, D. & Hackett, S., 2016. *Young people who sexually harm in groups*, Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

McNaughton Nicholls, C. et al., 2014. *Research on the sexual exploitation of boys and young men: A UK Scoping Study Summary of Findings*, Barkingside: Barnardo's.

Melrose, M., 2013. Young People and Sexual Exploitation: A Critical Discourse Analysis. In: *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 9-22.

Pearce, J., 2013. A Social Model of 'Abused Consent'. In: *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 52-68.

Pitts, J., 2013. Drifting into Trouble: Sexual Exploitation and Gang Affiliation. In: *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 23-37.

Is there someone you know who would benefit from seeing this short film?

If so, take a minute to pass it on: <https://www.uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk/responding-to-cse/videos>.

To cite this film

Firmin, C. (2016) *Child Sexual Exploitation and the Victim-Perpetrator Overlap*. Luton:

University of Bedfordshire. Available at:

<https://www.uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk/responding-to-cse/videos>. (Accessed day, month, year).

This briefing has been produced as part of the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub, funded by the College of Policing, Hefce and the Home Office. For more information, visit the website at: <https://www.uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk/>

