

Child sexual exploitation, victimisation and vulnerability

Issues concerning the sexual exploitation of children and young people remain the subject of considerable political, media, public and professional concern. As we go to press with this issue, child sexual exploitation is again at the forefront of media attention with the publication of the Centre for Social Justice (2014) report *Girls and Gangs*, which has closely followed the Nationwide Enquiry into Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups conducted by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013), and in January the publication of the Health Working Group Report on Child Sexual Exploitation (Department of Health, 2014). This latter report has reiterated the important responsibilities that healthcare staff have as part of the wider multiagency response to child sexual exploitation, and also highlighted a need for better evidence on the health consequences for young people of child sexual exploitation (CSE). Three of the five papers in this issue directly consider aspects of child sexual exploitation, and two further papers examine related issues of children and young people’s victimisation and vulnerability.

This issue begins with Jenny Pearce’s paper which draws on data from a research study examining how national UK guidance on *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation* (DCSF, 2009) has been implemented by Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs). Data were collected through a questionnaire distributed in 2010 to all 144 LSCBs in England with a response rate of 100 (70%), followed by semi-structured interviews with 104 professionals in 24 of the LSCBs identified as “the most proactive” (Pearce, 2014: XXXX), to look at how LSCBs were responding to the report’s principles. A data monitoring

and self-assessment checklist were also developed to record the prevalence and “nature of CSE” in each LSCB locality.

A key finding of the research was that at the time of data collection, despite some excellent practice examples, “approximately three-quarters of LSCBs [were] not proactive in implementing” the dual aim of the 2009 guidance of protecting children and young people and prosecuting abusers. While 59 per cent reported that they did not record data on child sexual exploitation. Pearce (2014: XXXX) reports “the reasons for this lack of activity were often put down to limited resources and a lack of awareness of the harm caused by CSE.” The research also highlighted issues of consent and blame. Pearce (2014: page number) reports that “instead of being understood as victims of abuse, sexually exploited young people (particularly the 16 to 18 age group) were invariably perceived to be consenting active agents making choices, albeit constrained, about their relationships. As, such they were seen to carry responsibility for what happened to them, and consequently, the blame for the abuse that follows....”

Importantly, the data monitoring aspect of the research also revealed new forms of child sexual exploitation, including peer-on-peer through recruitment to CSE and exploitation within gangs. New models of sexual exploitation were also discussed in a recent issue of *Child Abuse Review* by Melrose (2013), and Pearce (2014: add page number) notes that these new forms of CSE raise questions about how to both engage and “work with young people who may be both victims and perpetrators of CSE.” Over half of the practitioners interviewed, were concerned about the ‘internal trafficking’ of young people for child sexual exploitation which Pearce (2014) suggests “support[s] calls for a better understanding of the changing forms of exploitation.”

The need for further clarity around the issue of 'internal child sex trafficking' is picked up in the second paper by Helen Brayley and Ella Cockbain (2014) in an elegant exposition of the ongoing debates around whether Britons can be considered victims of internal trafficking. These authors draw on a range of evidence, including legal statute, parliamentary debates, research, government and third-sector reports to provide counter-arguments against four of the most commonly presented "arguments against accepting Britons as internal child sex trafficking victims" (Brayley and Cockbain, 2014: XXXX). Brayley and Cockbain (2014; XXXX) argue that, "both internal sex trafficking law and associated legislative intent readily accommodate British victims" and that, "there are practical and theoretical flaws in the most common arguments against labelling Britons as trafficked." These authors propose a cyclical model of sex trafficking in which young people are "recruited, moved, exploited and then released, only to be picked up again, re-moved and re-exploited on subsequent occasions." Brayley and Cockbain (2014: XXXX) conclude their paper by proposing the following definition of internal child sex trafficking "A repeated process involving two or more adults in which a child is recruited and transferred to a location in order to be sexually exploited" (Brayley and Cockbain, 2014: XXXX). They argue that a consensual definition is required to further discourse/critical debate, to clarify policy, practice and for systematic data monitoring and analysis. This seems important as the National Crime Agency (2014) reported receiving referrals for 56 UK national minors who were identified as potential victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, an increase of 155 per cent from 2102.

Jane Dodsworth's (2014; XXX) paper on a qualitative research study examining women's involvement in sex work in the UK, draws on data from young women who became involved in sexual exploitation under the age of 18 "or, what some of them saw as, selling or

swapping sex for non-monetary ‘payment’”. A key focus of the research was, “to develop an understanding of how the meaning ascribed to risk and protective factors influenced perceptions of victimhood and agency”, as some young people did not regard themselves as victims of exploitation. This resonates with a recent *Child Abuse Review Editorial* when Peter Sidebotham (2013; 152) talked about agency and exploitation, “The fact that a young person may exercise some agency in engaging in sexual activity does not mean that they may not also be the victim of sexual exploitation, nor that they are necessarily culpable for any harm they may suffer as a result.”

Twelve participants who were interviewed about their experiences of selling sex and sexual exploitation are the focus of Dodsworth’s (2014) paper. The study findings suggested that the meaning women gave to their earlier experiences impacted on their further feelings of victimhood or agency in later childhood and adulthood, and had an impact on their “perceptions of choice” and future pathways. Dodsworth’s (2014; XXXX) findings suggest that a number of different factors determine pathway outcomes including, “the presence, or lack of, a secure base relationship”; whether strategies for coping were adaptive or maladaptive; how the search for affection and approval was resolved or not, and; when feeling different led to a sense of defeat or a strengthening of personal resolve. The paper outlines a transactional lifespan model which examines the risk and protective factors for those involved in sexual exploitation. Dodsworth (2014: XXXX) concludes by arguing that “policy and service provision must acknowledge the agency, expertise and views of the young people involved in sexual exploitation.”

The paper by Lisa Bunting (2014) looks at a broader aspect of abuse and victimisation in a very useful analysis of recorded crime committed against children. Bunting (2014; XXXX)

reports that, “in the UK there has been a strong tendency to focus on child protection statistics even though police data of England and Wales confirm that considerably more children are in contact with criminal justice agencies as victims of crime than are in contact with social services in relation to maltreatment.” She argues that crimes committed against children and young people are “largely invisible” in annual crime statistics, as data “are not routinely disaggregated by victim age” (Bunting, 2014; XXXX).

In this paper, Bunting (2104) reports on an analysis of a national sample of crime data from the Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI), recorded between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2010. The analysis revealed 11 927 violent offences recorded against children in this time period, including both physically violent and sexual offences. As well as abuse patterns and victimisation the PSNI data set was analysed to examine case outcomes. The paper illustrates how detection rates varied depending on different case characteristics and “how violent crime differentially impacts on older children” (Bunting, 2014; XXX). The study also found as in previous research that, “reporting delay was common in sexual offences with close to half involving a degree of delay, in many cases, only coming to the attention of the police years after the offence occurred” (Bunting, 2014; XXXX). Bunting (2014;XXXX) presents a powerful case for the further development of “recorded crime practice” to examine the reasons why cases are not detected and to make children and young people as the “victims of crime more visible.”

The paper by Autumn Roesch-Marsh (2014) examines how gender impacts on social work discourses and risk assessment practices with young people in secure accommodation in Scotland. In a small scale study, but drawing on data from a number of sources: including

referral data to the study authority's secure service in the previous year; observations of 15 case discussions by the secure referral group; focus groups, and; interviews with 34 residential and social work professionals and interviews with seven young people, the research examined secure accommodation decision making for young people. A key finding of the study was that the central focus of discussions of risk centre on young people's behaviour, with less analysis around the impact of environmental factors. It is interesting to note that an analysis of the background experiences of the young people being referred to secure accommodation showed few gender differences, apart from rates of sexual abuse being much higher for young women. However, professional sources tended to focus on young women being "vulnerable to exploitation" and at risk sexually, while young men were "most likely to be seen as 'offenders' who primarily pose a risk to others" (Roesch-Marsh, 2014; XXXX). Drawing on Hooper (2010), Roesch-Marsh (2014; XXXX) argues that "victimisation continues to be culturally 'feminized' while 'offending is masculinised' and this impacts on how social workers and other professionals frame the risks and needs presented by males and females."

The training update in this issue returns to the subject of child sexual exploitation. Tony Griffin and Caroline Vost (Griffin and Vost, 2014) review the 20 minute training film *The Sexual Exploitation of Children: Can you Recognise the Signs?* produced by The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA). While aimed at a police audience, Griffin and Vost (2014) suggest that the film with its "condensed version" of a BBC East Enders' storyline, could be used to "augment" a single or multiagency training session, 'the film...could be used to "augment" a single or multiagency training session'] "on implementing local safeguarding children board CSE protocols".

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