

Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation: Police

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This briefing paper is for police officers. It brings together key messages from research on child sexual exploitation (CSE) and highlights implications for practice. It should be read in conjunction with guidance for professionals on tackling CSE [[Links to English guidance](#) and [Welsh guidance](#)].

Key messages

- Exploitation can happen to young people from all backgrounds. Whilst young women are the majority of victims, boys and young men are also exploited.
- Only a minority of sexually exploited young people approach the police directly.
- A proactive and intelligence-led approach to identifying victims and perpetrators is required.
- Relationships with young people need to be built on care and respect and recognition of the impacts of abuse.
- Young people require intensive support. Not only does this improve outcomes for them but also for criminal justice. Police should have close links with agencies that can provide this.
- Civil as well as criminal measures can be used to disrupt perpetrators.
- Awareness-raising in schools and youth projects can help police build positive relationships with young people, increasing their confidence to report concerns.

Child Sexual Exploitation

‘Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.’
([New England definition 2017](#))

There is no one way that CSE is perpetrated (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011; Berelowitz et al, 2012; Gohir, 2013). Grooming is common in some forms of CSE including online, but it is not always present (Beckett, 2011; Melrose, 2013). Online and offline (contact) exploitation can overlap (Fox and Kalkan, 2016). That children and young people may appear to co-operate cannot be taken as consent: they are legally minors and subject to many forms of coercion and control. These abuses of power are similar to those which are recognised in domestic violence.

Whilst all of the research evidence to date shows that girls and young women are the majority of victims, boys and young men are also exploited. The average age at which concerns are first identified is at 12 to 15 years but recent studies show increasing rates of referrals for 8 to 11 year olds, particularly in relation to online exploitation. Less is known about the exploitation of those from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) communities (Ward and Patel, 2006; Gohir, 2013; Coy, 2016; Sharp, 2015; Fox, 2016). It is important to remember that there is no ‘typical’ victim.

That said, some may be more vulnerable to being exploited than others, with a range of factors highlighted that professionals should be alert to. These include: prior abuse in the family;

deprivation; homelessness; misuse of substances; disability; being in care; running away/going missing; and gang association (Brown et al. 2016; Coy, 2009; Franklin, Raws and Smeaton, 2015; Harris and Robinson, 2007; Klatt et al. 2014; Jago et al. 2011; Smeaton, 2013). It is not known whether these also apply to young people where exploitation begins or wholly occurs online, although some factors appear to be involved in both contexts (Whittle et al, 2013).

Neither these, nor lists of indicators, are evidence that sexual exploitation has taken place. All they tell you is that you need to use your professional curiosity and judgement to explore what is going on for each young person. Information sharing between agencies is a first step. The next has to be sensitive but inquisitive conversations with young people.

Barriers to engagement

Sexually exploited young people rarely approach the police directly, unless they are in immediate danger. Police officers (including first responders) may instead come into contact with sexually exploited young people as a consequence of them: running away/going missing; becoming involved in criminal behaviours such as substance misuse, criminal activity, gang association, anti-social behaviour or drawing other young people into CSE (Bartlett, 2016; Berelowitz, et al. 2013).

Taking time to ask more searching questions can get underneath the immediate offence/situation, possibly revealing that the young person is also a victim (Beckett, 2011; Ghani, 2016).

Abuse may also be reported to the police by an adult to whom a young person has disclosed or through third party concerns, including those of parents or adults with a duty of care (Allnock, 2015; Beckett et al. 2015; Hughes and Thomas, 2016). In addition, referrals may come from other organisations such as a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC).

Young people may not think of themselves as victims and may believe they are in love (Pearce, 2009). This means that they may not think police engagement is necessary.

Children and young people's willingness to engage with the police is also linked to:

- previous experiences of police;
- whether the contact with the police is wanted;
- their confidence in the police's ability to make them safe;
- fear of negative repercussions for themselves or their family;
- feeling in some way to blame;
- fear of not being believed; and
- fear of being judged (All Party Parliamentary Group, 2014; Allnock and Miller, 2013; Beckett et al. 2015).

Showing that you are aware of these concerns is one way to begin a conversation and build trust with a young person.

There is a widespread perception among young people that the police do not treat children and young people fairly (Beckett et al. 2015). This is especially the case for those young people who: have been/are in care; come from a minority community; or have a disability (All Party

Parliamentary Group, 2014; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Horvath et al. 2014; Miller and Brown, 2014). Young people may therefore appear uncooperative or even aggressive when they are approached by or are engaging with the police (Coy, 2009; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Hickle, 2016; Leon and Raws, 2016).

Many accounts from young people describe their initial encounters as lacking in sensitivity and respect.

“My experience made me feel so bad... I feel like I can’t go to the police no more because I’ll just get laughed at; I’ll get judged and get hurt really deep down.”¹

In order to address this, individual police officers can work to develop a relationship that is based on care and respect, the foundations for establishing trust (Bartlett, 2016; Coy, 2009, 2016; Firmin, 2016; Sidebotham et al. 2016; Shuker, 2013).

Young people know when they are treated with respect and listened to carefully. They respond to professionals who are knowledgeable, friendly, approachable, kind, sensitive and caring and who keep their promises (Hughes and Thomas, 2016; Beckett et al. 2015; Cossar et al. 2013; Firmin, 2016; Gilligan 2016). Police can do this by:

- offering a choice of a female or male officer to talk with;
- ensuring consistency of officer over time;
- offering that a trusted adult can be present unless the young person would prefer to be seen privately;
- recognising and acknowledging the young person’s feelings;
- engaging in a non-judgemental manner and being careful not to inadvertently give cues of discomfort/shock, being in a hurry (e.g. looking at watch);
- asking the young person if they feel safe and if not, what their fears and concerns are;
- communicating what actions can be taken to address their concerns;
- giving due consideration to confidentiality, while being honest about its limits; and
- being aware that wearing uniforms/carrying police equipment may be perceived as threatening to young people and ‘make visible’ that there may be a problem to others.

(Bartlett, 2016; Beckett et al. 2015; Cossar et al. 2013; Drew, 2016; Gilligan, 2016; Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2015, 2016; Myers and Carmi, 2016).

Additional barriers to disclosure include ideas about masculinity (what it means to be a boy or young man), codes of ‘honour’ and previous criminal offending (Beckett et al. 2015; Brayley et al. 2014; Sharp, 2015).

Disrupting offenders

All the research evidence to date shows that the majority of offenders are men; whilst a minority are women. Young people may be exploited by adults and/or peers. There are different ways through which perpetrators can be removed from the lives of specific children and young people (Nelson, 2016).

¹ Young person C; Beckett and Warrington, 2015

Disruption activities can be planned on the basis of: regional ‘problem profiles’ produced by police analysts; linking intelligence across agencies and organisations working with young people (for example, from sexual health clinics, residential care homes, youth groups and schools); and using social media to identify networks of victims and abusers (Berelowitz et al. 2013). The police have a range of intervention tools available to disrupt CSE, including civil measures in the absence of sufficient evidence to mount a criminal prosecution. Young people may also be moved around different locations within the UK through internal trafficking (Brayley and Cockbain, 2014). [Guidance](#) on how to respond to trafficking through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) may therefore also be relevant.

Disruption should include consideration of the contexts which enable exploiters to operate. Safer neighbourhood policing activities can include working with other emergency services, local authority park wardens and street cleaners as well as taxi drivers, hotels, fast food outlets, shopping centres, door staff and concierges in the night time economy (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016; D’Arcy and Thomas, 2016; Firmin, 2016). The intent here is to invite such people to be local ‘eyes and ears’, to become part of developing a protective community network such as in [Operation Makesafe](#) (Nelson, 2016; Firmin, 2016).

Investigating CSE

Young people who have been sexually exploited are likely to have experienced multiple abuses (emotional, psychological, sexual and often physical) and breaches of trust, making it exceedingly difficult to speak about what is happening. This may be in part due to fear of reprisals, loyalty to the exploiters or fear of being disbelieved and/or blamed (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Gilligan, 2016; Hughes and Thomas, 2016). Anxiety, shame and guilt are powerful barriers to speaking out.

Where a child or young person may be a reluctant witness, disruption activities and victimless prosecutions benefit from valuable intelligence learned locally as well as from return home interviews and knowledge held by parents, family members, friends, carers and other agencies involved with the child. This may include: names - including nicknames; addresses; ‘hot spots’; mobile numbers; car registrations and information about the role played by local businesses (Hughes and Thomas, 2016; Drew, 2016; Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016; Myers and Carmi, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Palmer and Jenkins, 2014; Pona, 2016). Appreciating the intelligence that young people provide and acknowledging how hard it might be to tell their story also builds respect and care. Given the time it can take for a case to proceed through the criminal justice system, it is important that the police understand the [CPS guidelines](#) on access to counselling pre-trial (Beckett and Warrington, 2015).

Involvement with the criminal justice system can be both positive and negative for sexually exploited children and young people (Hickle, 2016). For instance, investigative processes can be distressing and create difficulties in relationships with family and friends and for engagement in education. Young people may have fears for their physical and emotional safety (Beckett and Warrington, 2015). Potential risks for the child must be addressed and monitored (Bartlett, 2016). To make it more positive, offer clear information about their rights; explain what is going to happen; and provide opportunities, whenever it is possible, for young people to have choice and control (Allnock, 2015; Beckett et al. 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Cossar et al. 2013).

“Investigations and all of that leave us feeling out of control, and we react emotionally to that by walking away as we’ve been out of control in the past and we don’t like it.”²

Early collaboration with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) in building the case will lead to quicker decisions about charging and reduce anxiety and reticence felt by young people about engaging with the criminal justice system (Beckett and Warrington, 2015).

Working with other services

“I had a good experience with the police, they helped me so much and I couldn’t have asked for a better experience of them... they helped me, they got me involved with [specialist voluntary sector project worker] so they were like giving me support, they just kept on keeping me updated with everything that’s happening.”³

Sexual exploitation is a process, and enabling young people to find a way out is similar to supporting victims of domestic violence. Only intensive support provides young people with the sense of security they need to act as a counterbalance to the ‘pull’ of exploiters (Coy, 2009; Gilligan, 2016; Shuker, 2013). Proactively connecting children and young people to specialist support services, as illustrated by the quote above, is crucial (Beckett et al. 2015; Cossar et al. 2013; Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2015, 2016; Myers and Carmi, 2016).

Effective multi-agency working (for example, through Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs and Missing and Child Exploitation meetings) assists the police in ensuring that the support needs of young people are met. Not only does this improve outcomes for young people but also for criminal justice (Allnock, 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Goddard et al., 2015; Her Majesty’s Government, 2015; Ministry of Justice, 2011).

That family members may also be subjected to threats, assaults and intimidation by perpetrators is often overlooked (Gibbons, 2014). Professionals may also mistakenly assume that parents are unwilling or unable to protecting their child from exploitation (Smeaton, 2013). Including parents in the police response is, therefore, important but only if it is safe (D’Arcy et al, 2015; Gibbons, 2014), since some parents may be involved in the exploitation or abuse (Itzin, 2001). In addition, some sexually exploited young people may be simultaneously navigating family and community contexts where knowledge of abuse could lead them to be at risk of other forms of harm, including forced marriage and ‘honour’ based violence (Sharp-Jeffs, 2016). This should be explored, with reference to forced marriage statutory guidance and discussed with a specialist organisation.

Preventing CSE and early identification

More child sexual abuse and exploitation happens than is recorded in official police statistics due to low levels of disclosure and missed opportunities for early identification (Beckett and Warrington, 2015). The police should assume that CSE is a national issue and take a proactive intelligence-led approach to identifying both victims and perpetrators and preventing abuse in their local area and across force boundaries (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016; Myers & Carmi, 2016).

² Cited in Drew, 2016

³ 15 year old young woman, cited in Beckett et al. 2015

Every interaction with a child or young person provides an opportunity to engage, listen, talk and gather intelligence that can be critical to early intervention (Waddell and Molloy, 2015). Sharing information with partner agencies can help identify what might be going on and ensure that appropriate support is put in place. This can greatly improve outcomes for young people and prevent them becoming (further) entrapped (Waddell and Molloy, 2015). However, information sharing is not in itself an intervention, and must be balanced with concern for young people's self-determination – at least in the short term.

Prevention activities can include raising awareness of CSE, consent and non-abusive relationships through involvement in school programmes delivered by specialists, to enable children to identify actions of exploiters, including requests for sexual images [\[see guidance\]](#) (College of Policing, 2016). The work that police do in schools helps to build positive relationships between the police and children so that they have more confidence to report concerns.

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Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation – also available

- Strategic commissioning of police services
- Social workers
- Strategic commissioning of children's services
- Staff working in health settings
- Commissioning health care services
- Professionals in school settings
- Multi-agency working

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