'Not a world away'

The sexual exploitation of children and young people in Northern Ireland

Believe in children

Barnardo's
Northern Ireland

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Executive summary

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A. Introduction and background

This paper summarises the key findings of exploratory research undertaken into the issue of child sexual exploitation[1] within Northern Ireland (NI) between 2009 and 2011. The full research report is available to download from the Barnardo's NI website.[2]

The research was conducted by Barnardo's NI and generously funded by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). While the research had a particular focus on the risks of sexual exploitation present for children in or missing from care, this was considered within the context of risk among the wider youth population.

Research objectives and definitions

The overall aim of the research was to increase knowledge and understanding of the sexual exploitation of children and young people within NI, in order to aid better prevention of, and responses to, the issue in the future. The primary research objectives were to:

- source and collate information on the 'known' extent and nature of the issue
- identify the risks for children in or missing from care
- explore stakeholder views on how statutory services can better respond to incidences of known or suspected sexual exploitation.

Sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse. It is an umbrella term that covers a number of different possible scenarios in which children or young people are exploited, coerced and/or manipulated into engaging in some form of sexual activity, in return for something they need

or desire and/or for the gain of a third person. For the purposes of the research, children and young people were defined as all those under 18 years of age.

Methodology

A multi-method approach was adopted that combined both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. This had five key elements, in addition to secondary data collection and a policy/literature review:

- Sexual exploitation risk assessments were used to determine prevalence/risk of sexual exploitation among looked-after children (LAC) and a sample of other young people known to social services. Health and Social Care (HSC) social work staff completed risk assessments on 1,102 young people aged 12-17 years inclusive who were known to social services. Almost three-quarters of all returns (70.7 per cent; n=779) related to LAC. This equates to approximately two-thirds of the overall LAC population of this age and as such offers confidence in the findings.

- Questions placed in the 2010 Young Life and Times Survey were used to determine the prevalence of sexually exploitative experiences among the general youth population. A total of 786 16-year-olds completed the survey (two-thirds female, one-third male).

- Case file reviews were conducted on social work case files of 29 young people known to have experienced or been at risk of sexual exploitation. Cases were purposively sampled to include males and females, young people of different ages and different placements, and different forms of sexual exploitation.

- Vignette-based individual interviews were undertaken with five young people aged 14 and above who were identified to be at particular risk of or abused through sexual exploitation.

- Semi-structured individual and group interviews were undertaken with 110 professional representatives from both the statutory and voluntary/community sectors. A broad spectrum of disciplines was represented, including social care, health, policing and justice, youth work and education.

Fieldwork was conducted across all five HSC Trusts within NI. The research received full ethical and governance approval.

B. The nature and extent of sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation is, by its very nature, extremely difficult to identify and evidence. This exploratory research clearly indicates however that (a) sexual exploitation does exist throughout NI; (b) it has existed for some time; and (c) what we are aware of is only 'the tip of the iceberg'.

A wide range of sexually exploitative situations were identified within the research, affecting both young males and females, those within and outside the care system, and those living in rural and urban areas. An overview of the nature and extent of these is presented below.

Sexual exploitation among LAC and other young people known to social services[3]

Two quantitative measures of sexual exploitation are available

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1 Hereafter referred to as sexual exploitation.
2 www.barnardos.org.uk/northernireland/
3 The LAC sample includes young people who are either on an (interim) care order or voluntary accommodated; this includes all placement types (foster, residential etc). The non-LAC cases (n=259) include young people who were placed on the child protection register within the year prior to inclusion in the study and/or those in receipt of services from an adolescent/intensive support team. While none were LAC, all were known to social services. Wider inferences cannot therefore be drawn for the general youth population. The overall sample also included young people who had left care (n=29) and those for whom LAC status was unknown (n=35), but these are excluded from any subsequent comparisons of LAC versus non-LAC.

in relation to this population of 12-17-year-olds (n=1,102): reported cases of concern (as identified by social workers) and assessed levels of risk (calculated via a sexual exploitation risk assessment tool).[4] The key findings of both are incorporated below, together with learning from the qualitative elements of the research:

Across the sample

- Social workers identified sexual exploitation to be an issue of concern for almost one in seven young people within the sample (13.3 per cent; n=147).

- Almost one in five of the same sample (17.9 per cent; n=197) was assessed to be at significant risk of sexual exploitation, on the basis of the risk assessment tool. While assessed risk does not necessarily equate with actual experience of sexual exploitation, it does signify serious risk of it. Consideration should therefore be given to whether the difference between the two counts (identification and assessed risk) may be indicating a degree of failure to identify cases of sexual exploitation.

By HSC Trust

- Cases of concern were identified in all five HSC Trusts, although identification rates ranged from 9.2 per cent to 18.0 per cent across different Trusts. Levels of assessed risk also varied across HSC Trusts. The reasons for this require further investigation.

By gender and age

- Sexual exploitation was identified as an issue of concern for one in five females (21.3 per cent) compared to one in 20 males (4.9 per cent) in

the sample. Professional interviewees also identified sexual exploitation to be an issue of greater concern for females, but reflected that this may, in part, be an issue of identification rather than prevalence.

- The vast majority (88.0 per cent) of young people were under the legal age of consent when concerns about sexual exploitation were first identified. Most were aged 12-15, with 14 years the most common age at which concerns were first identified.

By involvement in the youth justice system

- Sexual exploitation was identified as an issue of concern for significantly higher proportions of young people involved with the youth justice system at the point of inclusion in the study, compared to those with no reported involvement at that time (33.1 per cent versus 10.2 per cent). Whether one factor had a causal impact on the other cannot be determined on the basis of the information available at this point; this is something that merits further consideration.

By looked-after status and placement type

- Slightly higher rates of concern were reported within the LAC returns, compared to those for non-LAC young people (13.7 per cent versus 11.2 per cent). Substantially greater differences were observed in terms of assessed levels of risk, with 20.3 per cent of LAC cases assessed as at significant risk of sexual exploitation compared to 10.8 per cent of non-LAC cases.

- In half of all cases where this could be calculated (49.1 per cent), concerns about the sexual exploitation of looked-after young people emerged after their entry into care. In half of the remaining cases, concerns from the pre-care period continued after entry into care. This raises important questions as to whether, for some young people, entry into care may actually increase the risk of sexual exploitation. This is something that requires further investigation.

- Both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the research clearly indicate that risk and experience of sexual

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4   Based on a Welsh sexual exploitation risk assessment framework (see Clutton and Coles 2007)

exploitation are unequally distributed across the looked-after population, with young people in residential care at particular risk.[5] Sexual exploitation was identified to be an issue of concern for 40.5 per cent of this cohort, compared to 10.7 per cent of their peers in at-home placements and less than 5 per cent of those in kinship or non-familial foster care.

- Interviewees reported that young people in residential care were often specifically targeted by abusers from the local community and indeed further afield. Particular concerns were also raised about behavioural norms among young people in some residential units (substance misuse, going missing, spending time with unknown adults in the community etc) and the increased risk of sexual exploitation associated with such behaviours.

- Females in residential care were the group most frequently identified to be abused through sexual exploitation: concerns were identified for almost two-thirds (63.6 per cent) of this cohort. The degree of risk experienced by this group requires particular consideration.

Links with going missing

- The research revealed a clear link between going missing and risk of sexual exploitation. One of the risk indicators included in the risk assessment tool was 'missing overnight or longer' within the year prior to inclusion in the research. This indicator was four times more prevalent among cases in which sexual exploitation was identified to be an issue of concern, compared to those with no reported concerns.

- Almost one-quarter of LAC (23.4 per cent) were reported to have been missing overnight or longer within the last year. This rises to 59.2 per cent among those in residential care. Going missing was identified to be a greater issue of concern for young females than males. Its prevalence was also noted to increase with age.

- The qualitative elements of the research reveal that young people go missing for a complex mix of reasons. Irrespective of the reason, going missing was frequently noted to propel young people towards individuals who would harbour them, provide them with alcohol and/or drugs and subsequently exploit them.

Duration of concerns

- Concerns about sexual exploitation were frequently observed to continue over a prolonged period. In 46.7 per cent of sexual exploitation cases, the abuse lasted at least a year; in 16.8 per cent, it lasted three or more years. The extended period over which concerns continued (up to eight or ten years in a few cases) was also identified as an issue of concern within the qualitative phases of the research. This raises important questions about the adequacy of current responses to the issue.

Sexual exploitation among the general youth population

Although young people in or missing from care are observed to be at particular risk of sexual exploitation, it is important to emphasise that they are not the only young people at risk of this form of abuse. The qualitative findings of the research revealed many case examples of young

people, not known to social services, being abused through sexual exploitation within local communities. The general consensus among research participants was that the extent of sexual exploitation among this population was probably significantly greater than is currently known.

Young people's self-reported experiences, in response to questions placed in the 2010 Young Life and Times Survey, offer some initial insights into the potential extent of this issue:

- One in nine respondents (11.1 per cent) reported previous experience of an adult trying to groom them. Clear gender differences were apparent, with 15.1 per cent of females reporting this compared to 4.3 per cent of males.

- The initial approach occurred online in only 27.4 per cent of these grooming cases; the rest occurred in face-to-face settings (when hanging around in communities, through a friend/sibling, at a pub/club etc). Most (60.3 per cent) of the individuals who attempted to groom these young people were adults five or more years their senior.

- One in 15 respondents (6.5 per cent) said they had been given alcohol or drugs and been taken advantage of sexually while under their influence. Almost twice as many females as males reported this (7.7 per cent versus 4.3 per cent). Over two-thirds of these incidents (69.4 per cent) were perpetrated by a peer two or fewer years older or younger than the victim.

- One in 20 respondents (4.7 per cent) said they had been offered something (money, drugs, place to stay etc) in

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5 High rates of sexual exploitation were also identified for looked-after young people in secure care and semi/independent placements, but the sample sizes were too small to include in any statistical comparisons. Qualitative findings support the assertion that these groups also experience significant risk; indeed, for a number of young people, sexual exploitation was a stated reason for their entry into secure care.

return for taking part in some form of sexual activity. Most (61.8 per cent) did not tell a parent or anyone else in authority that this had happened to them.

- Most incidents occurred when under the legal age of consent, across each of the categories above.

The nature of sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation can take many different forms. The three most frequently identified across the different phases of the research were:

- **Abuse of a child through prostitution**, according to the legislative definition contained within Part 3 of the Sexual Offences (NI) Order 2008. This includes cases in which the agreement to exchange sex for money or other goods involves only two parties (the abuser and the victim), and cases in which a third party is known to be arranging and/or controlling the abuse:

She would be missing for weeks at a time and was misusing drugs. She told me that the young ones don't stand in streets, they stay in bed and breakfasts and the pimps bring people to them... She would have reported experiences like being in places with four different men having sexual relations with her (professional)

I was 12, maybe a wee bit older, and I remember I was completely blocked... My mummy run out of drink... there was fellas in the house and she says to one of them to take me up the stairs and she got me to go with this man for a bottle of vodka for her (young person)

- **The party house scenario.** This was the most frequently identified type of sexual exploitation within the research. The scenario shares many similarities with the abuse of a child through prostitution, but in these cases, the exchange is generally less apparent upfront, with 'payment' or 'trade off' demanded or forcefully taken retrospectively, after a period of grooming and fun at party houses with 'free' alcohol and/or drugs:

There was a guy running parties for sex. What was described to me was someone initially looking after you, taking you out, buying you clothes, looking after you, giving you lots of emotion and care. Then there were parties where other girls were there and it became a going upstairs with one person type thing, but then it came down to being the only girl with four or five men and it became quite frightening (professional)
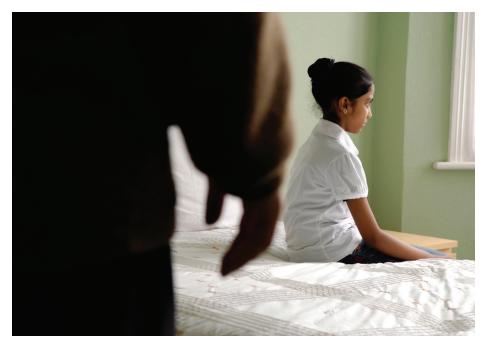
- **Sexually exploitative relationships.** The key distinguishing feature of these cases is that the young person believes the abuser to be their boyfriend or girlfriend, perceiving him/herself to be in a consensual romantic relationship with this individual. The perception and motives of the abuser may be many and varied:

[There was] a young girl in the community having a relationship with a much older man... She was 15 when I met them and he was in his forties... Talking to a number of youth workers in the area and expressing my concerns about younger girls with older males, I got a flood of stories (professional)

Internet exploitation and trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation were also identified as issues of concern, although less frequently than the three types cited above. Considerable overlap was observed between some of the forms of sexual exploitation, both in terms of the people perpetrating the abuse and their modus operandi, and the young people they were targeting. Many cases were identified in which young people experienced several different forms of sexual exploitation, either simultaneously or in succession, with one form of abuse sometimes leading into another.

Common factors observable across many of the different examples of sexual exploitation identified within the research include:

- the targeting of vulnerable and/or disenfranchised young people, often those with low self-esteem and low expectations for themselves

- an initial feeling of excitement or belonging on the part of a young person, fuelled by a manipulative grooming process
- the use of drugs and/or alcohol as an initial enticement and a means of ensuring continued access
- encouraging disassociation from home/care and existing relationships
- an initial feeling of control on the part of a young person, often replaced by dependency, fear and/or intimidation as the abuse escalates
- the provision and use of mobile phones to arrange abuse
- using a young person as a conduit for drawing other young people in
- low levels of disclosure and reporting.

As can be seen from the variety of factors cited above, the reasons why young people are vulnerable to sexual exploitation in the first place and the reasons why they may appear to allow themselves to continue to be exploited (often over a prolonged period) are highly complex. They can relate to developmental deficiencies that inhibit young people's ability to identify risk and establish their own needs and wishes within a situation, or to a lack of positive influences and options within their life at the time of the abuse. They can also relate to previous life experiences that leave young people with unmet foundational needs that they try to meet in other ways, and to the manipulative and calculated means used by abusers to entice and entrap. Young people's experiences of exploitative situations are also complicated by the fact that the negatives are generally tied up with some positives. There can be a sense of gain, or even some enjoyment or gratification, alongside the degradation and abuse. Consequently, many may not see themselves as victims until months or years later, when they are extricated from the situation and able to reflect on the manipulation and power imbalance at play.

Who is perpetrating this abuse?

Overall, comparatively little is known about the individuals perpetrating the abuse. This is something that requires further investigation. What we do know from the different elements of the research is that:

- Most abusers are adult males – those identified within the research ranged in age from 18-19 years through to those in their 40s or 50s.

- Although less prevalent, females are also known to be facilitating and directly abusing young people through sexual exploitation.

- Some abusers are operating as part of an organised network of abuse, involving the coordinated sexual exploitation of many different young people.

- Although most abuse is perpetrated by adults, peer exploitation is also emerging as a serious issue of concern. Identified concerns relate both to specific abusive incidents (rape, videoing and distribution of sexual activity etc) and to an apparent general acceptance of sexual violence and aggression within peer relationships. This has also been identified in other recent studies (Barter et al 2009; Firmin 2010) and is something that requires further investigation.

C. Responding to sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation is without doubt a challenging issue to identify and address. Like all forms of sexual abuse, the clandestine nature of the activity makes it difficult to identify. The frequent co-existence of many other presenting issues (drugs, alcohol, self-harm etc) can also cloud identification of risk, as can a general reluctance on the part of young people to disclose their experiences of abuse.

Because of a complex mix of push and pull factors, young people may appear resistant to statutory intervention, returning to their abusers in spite of professional attempts to 'rescue' them. In the midst of such challenges, it can be very difficult to extricate young people from the abusive situations and networks and to hold abusers to account for their actions (Pearce 2009; CEOP 2011).

Both research and practice evidence from elsewhere clearly indicate that effectively addressing the issue requires a proactive multi-agency response that focuses on three core areas:

- the prevention of sexual exploitation
- the protection of sexually exploited young people
- the prosecution of abusers (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009).

A number of examples of promising practice were identified within the research, in terms of starting to progress such an approach within NI. These include:

- the introduction of regional guidance on children going missing (including those at identified risk of sexual exploitation when missing)
- a number of local inter-agency forums considering risk of sexual exploitation in their local areas
- the work of the Public Protection Units within the Police Service for Northern

Ireland, and specifically the role of the Missing and Vulnerable Persons Liaison Officer in certain areas

- the use of harbouring notices and other disruption techniques
- statutory funding of a specialist missing service
- investment in staff/ resident relationships and therapeutic approaches within residential care
- the use of trafficking protocols to respond to more organised sexual exploitation.

However, in spite of these developments, the overriding message from the research is that significant progress is still required if we are to adequately prevent and respond to the sexual exploitation of children and young people in NI. In this respect, both the findings of the research and the increased awareness of the issue generated through it are very timely.

In collating what is known about sexual exploitation within NI, and in considering this in the light of best practice evidence

from elsewhere, the research has highlighted a number of important patterns and principles that can be used and further developed to inform a more effective response to this issue in the future. Key elements within this include:

- a holistic understanding of the nature and impact of sexual exploitation
- awareness raising (among young people, professionals and the wider society)
- targeting and addressing known vulnerabilities
- early identification of risk
- a dual focus on both victims and abusers
- identifying and learning from good practice (both within NI and elsewhere)
- collaborative working and information sharing
- common frameworks and accountability structures
- greater regional consistency
- increasing professional competency and capacity within this field.

Increasing awareness of and attention to the issue of sexual exploitation have been observable throughout the period of the research. The report is published in a climate of increasing engagement with the issue and a willingness to utilise its findings to help inform more effective responses in the future.

It is hoped therefore that, as agencies further progress their efforts to safeguard children and young people within the new safeguarding structures, the learning from the research will be incorporated into the work of both individual agencies and strategic inter-agency bodies. While it is recognised that appropriately responding to the findings of the research will require some initial investment from agencies, the long-term impacts that will ensue from a failure to adequately engage with this issue at this point, will be significantly more costly to address.

D. Recommendations

A number of different areas are identified within the full research report as requiring further investigation or consideration. The specific recommendations highlighted below present a strategic framework for beginning to progress more effective statutory responses to the issue of sexual exploitation:

1. When established, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) should, as part of its work plan, consider the issue of child sexual exploitation and the effectiveness of current responses to it.

2. DHSSPS should revise existing Safeguarding and Child Protection Guidance to explicitly reference the complex nature and impact of sexual exploitation. This should be supported by the development of detailed inter-agency procedural guidance for practitioners to assist them in responding appropriately to instances where the sexual exploitation of children or young people is confirmed or suspected. The latter will be a matter for the SBNI to consider when established.

3. The HSC Board should progress the development of a targeted and fully resourced action plan on sexual exploitation that includes, but is not limited to, consideration of the following issues:

   - data collection and monitoring
   - professional competency and capacity
   - best-practice models for responding to sexual exploitation, including the merits of a co-located inter-agency model of response
   - regional implementation of the sexual exploitation risk assessment tool
   - resourcing of a regional specialist support service.

4. The HSC Board should consider how best to coordinate and prioritise the provision of specialist (Tier 3) drug and alcohol counselling services to young people who display signs of drug and alcohol abuse which may make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation, in particular to children living in residential care.

5. The Public Health Agency should develop a campaign to raise public awareness of the sexual exploitation of children and young people.

6. The NI Policing Board should incorporate child protection (including sexual exploitation) as a priority in forthcoming Policing Plans, in reflection of the critical importance of this area of work.

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