

Briefing Paper No. 3

# The association between youth offending and the recognition of child sexual exploitation in young males

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# What is child sexual exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs 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) the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.**

The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

(Co-operating to Safeguard Children, 2017, p.55).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, 2017, section 3.3.2



## Youth offending

Youth offending is the commission of crimes by individuals between the legal age of criminal responsibility and the age of maturity. The minimum age of criminal responsibility in Northern Ireland is currently 10 years old.<sup>2</sup> The youth justice system deals with children and young people aged 10 to 17 who offend, working with them, their families and carers to help prevent reoffending behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) can affect both young males and females. However, the traditional discourse on CSE has primarily been female-centric despite some attempts to raise the plight of young males as victims of this phenomenon. Only in recent years has research on the sexual exploitation of young males begun to gain prominence, with an increasing appreciation of difficulties in relation to the recognition, and hence the low rate of known cases (Beckett, 2011; Berelowitz *et al.* 2013). While there has been a greater focus on this form of abuse, an absence of specific research into barriers to disclosure and the impediments to identification meant that fundamental gaps in knowledge and understanding have limited the degree to which boys and young men can be effectively protected. Gohir (2013), in particular, questioned why certain groups of children and young people remain under-represented in those identified as at risk, including boys and young people involved in offending behaviour.

In response, the author undertook research, across the UK, to achieve an understanding of factors inhibiting recognition of young males as victims of CSE (Montgomery-Devlin, 2019). The central focus of the study was to:

- Identify inhibitors to disclosure by young males and potential solutions;
- Identify impediments to identification by professionals and potential solutions; and
- Explore the existence of any relationship between inhibitors to disclosure and impediments to identification.

From the literature review there appeared to be two existing arguments supporting the inclusion of youth offending as a subject matter in this research:

- (i) Strong correlations found between youth offending and child abuse generally (Day *et al.* 2008) and a clear demonstration, in a series of other studies, of the specific links between CSE and youth offending (Clutton and Coles, 2007; Pearce, 2009; Beckett, 2011; CEOP, 2011; Cockbain and Brayley, 2012; Rigby and Murie, 2013; Smeaton, 2013; McNaughton Nicholls *et al.* 2014; Cockbain *et al.* 2015; Fox, 2016).
- (ii) Youth offending is found to be more likely associated with the sexual exploitation of young males than females (Cockbain and Brayley, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> England, Wales & Northern Ireland: 10–17 years old; Scotland: 8–17 years old.

<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2020



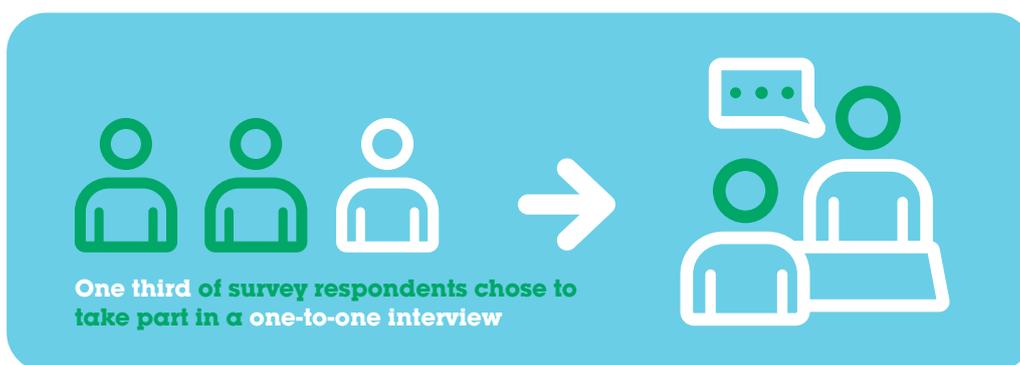
### About this paper

This paper is the third in a series of briefings on learning arising from the research on potential impediments to recognising the sexual exploitation of young males (Montgomery-Devlin, 2019).<sup>4</sup> It summarises and explores the complexity of youth offending in relation to the sexual exploitation of young males; specifically, how it impacts on the recognition of CSE. Five particular themes that emerged from the fieldwork are highlighted, and a number of recommendations made to inform policy and practice relating to CSE and youth justice.

### Research methodology

The overall study utilised a mixed methods approach to achieve a valuable range of data, including:

- A detailed policy and literature review;
- Surveys and interviews with more than 90 professionals working within the field of CSE, or related fields across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors and throughout the UK:
- 91 survey respondents;
- 30 one-to-one interviews<sup>5</sup>
- Interviews with **10** young males who had experienced CSE or who had knowledge of it in their past or present social circles
- A survey completed by **1,158** young people within the general public.<sup>6</sup>



4 Briefing paper No.1: Potential impediments to the recognition of the sexual exploitation of young males under 18. June 2020. Briefing paper No. 2: The influence of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland on the recognition of child sexual exploitation in young males, November 2020.

5 One third of survey respondents chose to take part in a one-to-one interview.

6 This method of data collection was a series of questions placed in the ARK Young Life and Times Survey (YLT) 2015, in NI. The administration of the mail out for the YLT survey was undertaken by an independent mailing company on behalf of ARK. An initial letter was sent in September 2015 to all eligible 16 year olds in NI which introduced the survey. The entire survey consisted of seven topics, of which CSE was one. The overall sample of eligible respondents was 3753. The survey achieved a 31 per cent response rate, yielding a total of 1,158 responses. Not all respondents answered every question.



## Legal and policy context

The expansion of “*interventions and modes of governance*” within youth justice systems across the UK has resulted in “*multiple, contradictory and competing discourses*” (Fergusson, 2007; Muncie, 2004, 2006; Muncie and Goldson, 2006, cited in McAlister and Carr, 2014, p.2). As a consequence, the different UK jurisdictions have their own particular models of youth justice, ranging from risk, welfare, rights and restoration.

In Northern Ireland, restorative practice has been central to the work of the Youth Justice Agency (YJA). McAlister and Carr (2014) highlight that, whilst Northern Ireland has traditionally favoured the model of restoration, its practice could be experienced by young people as “*shameful or punitive*” (p.16). In such circumstances their own possible traumatic experiences such as poverty, abuse or victimisation through paramilitary punishments can be left unaddressed unless the young person is willing to divulge this.

As outlined in ‘Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young people in Northern Ireland’ (CSCNI) (2017) the aim of the YJA is to make communities safer through the delivery of services which “*help children address their offending behaviour, divert them from crime, [and] assist their integration into the community..*” (p.22). The CSCNI also states that both the YJA and Probation Board for NI (PBNi) must have clear procedures in place which outline their role and responsibilities with regards child safeguarding; including how they work with health and social care professionals and other agencies involved in safeguarding children and young people.

The Justice Act (NI) 2015<sup>7</sup> states the aim of the youth justice system also includes the best interests of children as a primary consideration. However, in its most recent examination of the UK government’s compliance with the UNCRC, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that: “*the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration is still not reflected in all legislative and policy matters and judicial decisions*”

7 Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 (legislation.gov.uk)



*affecting children, especially in the area of alternative care, child welfare, immigration, asylum and refugee status, **criminal justice** and in the armed forces” (2016, p.5).<sup>8</sup>*

A study undertaken by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) in 2017<sup>9</sup> highlighted progress required in relation to the responsibilities of the Department of Justice (DoJ) and the YJA within the following three strategic areas:

- (i) a specific strategy to coordinate the delivery of youth justice services, policy and interventions;
- (ii) a better measurement and reporting on the impact that the services delivered by YJA had on the young people it worked with; and
- (iii) development of capacity to identify and apportion the costs of different services delivered by YJA.

A follow-up review by the NIAO in 2020 revealed the youth justice system is still in the early stages of implementing a new strategic plan ‘Transitioning Youth Justice’ which presents a vision of how youth justice should work; and is also developing new ways of working with children and young people who offend.

Briefing paper No.2 in this series focussed on the influence of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland on the recognition of child sexual exploitation in young males. In this document, reference was made to the 2015 Fresh Start agreement which sets out the Northern Ireland Executive’s commitment to tackling paramilitary activity and associated criminality. The subsequent Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime (Northern Ireland Executive, 2016) referred to a range of initiatives underway to deliver on commitments aimed at supporting young people highly vulnerable to paramilitary threat and coercion, as well as other activities to support young men who have offended and are at risk of being drawn into crime and paramilitarism.

8 Committee on the Rights of the Child. Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2016

9 Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2017



### Key findings

#### 1. Literature review

The review highlighted evidence as to why it is important to examine the role of criminality in relation to the recognition of CSE in males.

#### ► The underlying vulnerabilities of young people within the criminal justice system

A Barnardo’s report into children and young people in the criminal justice system highlighted the existing vulnerabilities of children serving custodial sentences. It said they were ‘suffering disproportionate levels of disruption including inadequate parenting, abuse and neglect, learning difficulties and mental health problems’ (Glover and Hibbert, 2009, p.24), with their homes described as ‘at best chaotic and at worst abusive’ (Glover and Hibbert, 2009, p.18).

Much research has established that childhood trauma, and associated vulnerabilities, disproportionately affects young people whose lives intersect with the justice system (Miller *et al.*, 2011; Kerig and Becker, 2010) and that their response to traumatic experience can increase their chances of arrest through their coping strategies, for example, drug use (DeHart and Moran, 2015; Ford *et al.*, 2006; Kerig and Becker, 2010). Furthermore, there are higher rates of suicide attempts, school dropout, dual diagnosis and recidivism amongst young offenders with histories of trauma. (Cauffman *et al.*, 2015; Haynie *et al* 2009; Wasserman and McReynolds, 2011; Wolff *et al.*, 2015, cited in Bunting *et al*, 2019).

Given this correlation between youth offending and childhood adversities, it follows that the

#### Other studies of young people within custodial settings have reinforced the links between youth offending and other problems, citing inherent vulnerabilities:

living in a deprived household <sup>10</sup>
having a learning disability <sup>11</sup>
experience of the care system and/or being on the child protection register <sup>12</sup>
having experienced the death of a parent or sibling <sup>13</sup>
having experienced school exclusion, attendance at a special school or a diagnosis of special educational needs <sup>14</sup>
self-harm or attempted suicide <sup>15</sup>
having experienced abuse <sup>16</sup>
having a low or extremely low IQ <sup>17</sup>
mental health concerns <sup>18</sup>
bullying at school or in the local community <sup>19</sup>
living in areas of poverty <sup>20</sup>

offending behaviour of young people should be set in the context of their psychological needs and well-being. The ‘Sequential Intercept Model’<sup>21</sup> provides an effective framework for dealing with criminal behaviour that takes account of past trauma and aids development of more positive strategies and good practice to improve the life chances of young people with complex needs and who interface with the criminal justice system.

#### ► The correlations between youth offending and CSE

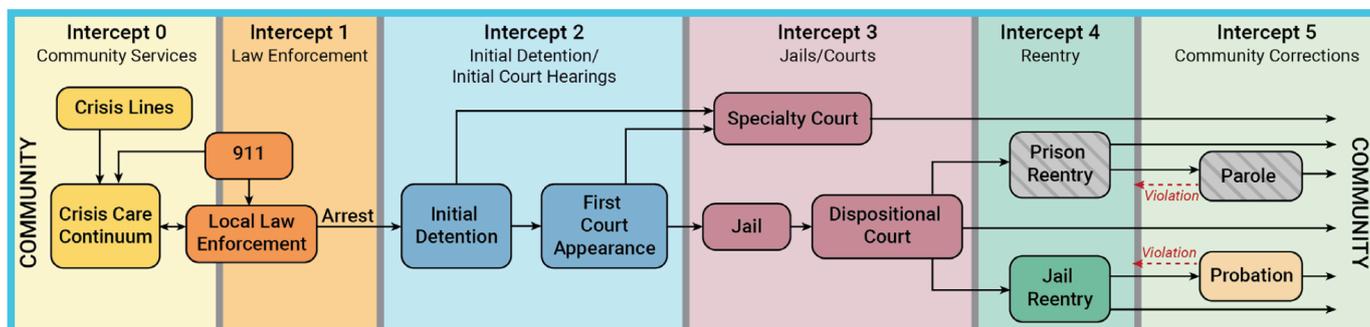
Despite the complexity and ambiguity of interactions between CSE and youth offending, as stated above, previous research (Cockbain *et al.* 2014; Fox, 2016;) has revealed two primary reasons for CSE experienced young males to be involved in criminal activity:

- coercion into criminality by exploiters as a means of initiation into and control over their sexual exploitation; and
- criminal behaviour as a manifestation of trauma, experienced as a result of sexual exploitation.

10 House of Commons Justice Committee, 2013  
 11 Firmin and Lloyd, 2017  
 12 Glover and Hibbert, 2009  
 13 Bateman *et al.*, 2013  
 14 Glover and Hibbert, 2009  
 15 The Centre for Social Justice, 2009; Jacobson *et al.*, 2010  
 16 Arnull *et al.*, 2005  
 17 Harrington and Bailey, 2005  
 18 The Centre for Social Justice, 2009  
 19 Firmin and Lloyd, 2017  
 20 The Centre for Social Justice, 2009  
 21 Policy Research Associates, 2018. <https://www.safeguardingni.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Applying%20the%20Sequential%20Intercept%20Model%20to%20the%20NI%20Context%20%28Summary%20Report%29.pdf>



Figure 1: The Sequential Intercept Model (Policy Research Associates, 2018)



However, criminal behaviour as a manifestation of CSE is not always recognised by professionals (Fox, 2016) or indeed by young male victims themselves. It is possible to understand reasons as to how offending behaviour can mask CSE amongst young males. One reason may evolve from the reluctance of young males to report experiences of exploitation if he is also involved in offending, believing he may lack credibility given his criminal reputation or he may not want to draw attention to his criminal behaviour. Research evidence showed young male victims of CSE, with criminal behaviour, to be likely to receive, perceive or expect a negative response from professionals (Cockbain and Brayley, 2012; McNaughton Nicholls *et al.* 2014).

In a briefing document on youth offending and CSE, University College London (2011) identified that nearly 40% of CSE victims were involved in offending, with aggression and dishonesty offences being the most common. Although this figure does not distinguish between male and female, Cockbain and Brayley state '*male victims are significantly more likely to offend than their female counterparts*' (2012, p.691). Several studies refer to the externalisation of anger and feelings of shame, as a result of exploitation, which can be manifested in outward aggression and other anti-social or destructive behaviours, whilst at the same time, avoiding disclosure (Garnefski and Arends, 1998; Romano and De Luca, 2001; Allnock and Hynes, 2011; McNaughton Nicholls *et al.* 2014; Fox, 2016). In contrast, many of these authors suggested females tended to exhibit internalising behaviours such as guilt and depression. However, Coohy (2010) contests this, stating there is mixed

evidence in relation to the internalising behaviour of male and female victims of abuse.

### Correlations between victim offending and inhibitors to recognition of CSE

There are a number of reasons why it is important to examine the role of criminality in relation to the recognition of CSE in males. Positive correlations have been found, by several authors, between CSE victimisation and youth offending (Day *et al.* 2008; Cockbain and Brayley 2012; Rigby and Murie, 2013).

Studies of children accessing CSE support services show that males were more likely than females to have a youth offending history and a criminal record.

- 55% of boys vs 35% of girls (youth offending history)<sup>22</sup>



- 48% of boys vs 28% of girls (criminal record)<sup>23</sup>



<sup>22</sup> Cockbain and Brayley, 2012

<sup>23</sup> Cockbain *et al.* 2015



The study by Cockbain *et al.* (2015) also noted young males were almost twice as likely as girls to be referred by criminal justice agencies to services for CSE issues, whereas referrals of males by social services were more than half as likely as those of females. Arguably, this can be viewed as a young males' offending behaviour being given priority over support required as a victim of CSE, whilst their criminal behaviour could be a manifestation of their exploitation.

Smeaton also noted how professionals identified boys and young men who ran away and experienced CSE as *'often criminalised for engaging in anti-social behaviour rather than being recognised as being exploited and/or relying upon criminal survival strategies'* (Smeaton, 2013, p.48).

Cockbain and Brayley (2012) suggest that the interactions between CSE and criminal activity are complex and ambiguous and that it is, therefore, difficult to determine the impact of CSE on youth offending and vice versa, concluding that *'for many children CSE and youth offending seem to coexist in a state of twisted symbiosis'* (Cockbain and Brayley, 2012, p.699). However, the literature does highlight a consistent message regarding the presence of inherent vulnerabilities for children and young people, male and female, within the criminal justice system. It is, therefore, important, first and foremost, to set this part of the discourse in the context of social, health and educational problems already facing young people before they enter the criminal justice system; young lives *'replete with examples of vulnerability'* (Bateman, 2017, p. 22).

#### **Gang culture**

An additional dimension to the lives of young people living in economically and socially deprived areas is the high level of organised crime and gang affiliation (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009). The pull towards being part of a gang culture, and with it, organised criminal activity, surfaces a further element of complexity for young

people where activities such as violence and drug-dealing may become, or have always been, the norm for them (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009). As highlighted by Beckett *et al* (2013), for some young people, membership of a 'gang' might be the only way to secure their safety. For many, brought up in a life of poverty and marginalised within their own schools, the gang provides an alternative route to achieve respect and status. Under these conditions, young people's vulnerabilities are unlikely to be observed, even for those *'young people whose affiliation is reluctant: a product of fear, constraint or coercion'* (Pitts, 2008, p.84). The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2007) and the Centre for Social Justice (2009) both described young people who were most likely to become gang affiliated as predominantly male.

Several of these issues were documented in the second briefing paper in this series,<sup>24</sup> highlighting an additional inhibiting factor in young males disclosing experiences of CSE, that is, the influence of paramilitaries within their communities. Guilty of offending and subject to paramilitary punishment attacks as a result, they remain prohibited from disclosing their victimhood on two levels - either as a victim of CSE or paramilitary punishment (Montgomery-Devlin, 2019).

#### **BME communities**

A further factor for consideration is the interrelatedness between the high proportion of young people from BME communities living within poverty-stricken areas and also found within the criminal justice system (The Centre for Social Justice, 2009; Bateman, 2017). As Bateman noted, *'direct and indirect forms of discrimination, on the basis of ethnicity'*, then serve to *'exacerbate the impact of disadvantage'* (2017, p.22). Such connections between race and poverty are by no means a new phenomenon, as highlighted by Gilroy in the late 1980s when he referred to a social movement *'created out of poverty, exploitation and racial subordination'* (Gilroy, 1987, p.37).

24 The influence of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland on the recognition of child sexual exploitation in young males, 2020.



### Perpetrators and victims of crime

An additional factor related to young people within the criminal justice system is what Beckett *et al* describe as the *'blurred boundaries between young people's experiences of being either a victim or a perpetrator of sexual violence, with many young people (including young men) experiencing both'* (Beckett *et al*, 2013, p.7). Relating again to the issue of poverty, Bateman (2017) highlights the tendency in economically deprived areas to find an overlap between young people who are both perpetrators and victims of crime. The literature has highlighted this particularly where young people present with harmful sexual behaviour, either alone or in groups, where, in fact, young people had been identified as being coerced into this behaviour, to have followed the lead of others, to have been sexually abused in extrafamilial settings and/or to have witnessed sexual activity or materials in their own home (Firmin and Lloyd, 2017). More general connections between young people as victims of CSE and their criminal behaviour were also acknowledged in the 2020 Criminal Justice Inspection NI.<sup>25</sup>

An appreciation of these potentially inherent vulnerabilities of young people in the criminal justice system alongside their experience of CSE, and the relatively low identification rate of CSE among known offenders, serves to highlight the level to which their victim status can extend. This is crucial to fully understanding the context of youth offending in the lives of young males who have also experienced CSE, and the impact of this upon the non-recognition of them as victims.

## 2. Fieldwork

Of the 60% of respondents to the professionals' survey who believed there were particular groups of young males less likely to disclose experiences of sexual exploitation, the most frequently cited group was those involved in criminality (13%). Although young males from BME backgrounds

and those with a learning disability were also rated as significant groups,<sup>26</sup> the narrative from both interviewee cohorts, regarding youth offending and CSE and its impact on recognition, warranted further analysis.

The following five themes emerged from the fieldwork with regards CSE and youth offending.

### (i) **A perceived predisposition of professionals to focus on the offending behaviour of young males, rather than considering other behavioural motivators for the crime**

This study presented how stereotypical assumptions regarding masculinity and, in particular, the stereotypical view of the male as a perpetrator rather than a victim, can be a significant barrier to both young males disclosing their experiences of CSE and to professionals' identification of them as victims. Similarly, a theme amongst professional interviewees, was others' tendency to concentrate on the offending or anti-social behaviour of young males, to the exclusion of potential motivating factors for it:

*"...a lot of criminality coming up, especially with boys and young men, where they maybe have the history of committing crimes. I have spoken to colleagues in other professions where there are young males committing offences and it's not really looked at properly." (PI 3, Police).<sup>27</sup>*

Several professional interviewees alluded to the difficulties in identifying experiences of CSE amidst the offending behaviour of a young male. Despite this, they acknowledged the existence of it in many cases of their work with young men who had offended:

*"I know we get a lot of referrals for young males where there are offending issues and other stuff going on and one of the challenges is to pick through to see if there is CSE. It's difficult because everyone else is focussed on their offending." (PI 4, Voluntary, CSE specialist).*

<sup>25</sup> CJINI - Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland - Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland, 2020

<sup>26</sup> Those with a learning disability (11%); those from Black and Minority Ethnic communities (11%).

<sup>27</sup> Quotations from respondents to the professionals' survey will be referred to as 'PS', followed by the number of their survey and sector (if provided). Quotations from professional interviewees will be referred to as 'PI', followed by the number of their interview and agency.



*"What you get is a lot of acting out...and so you get young males who are then involved in YOT [Youth Offending Teams] – coming up through because of their behaviour, and it might be that they are stealing for someone they got involved with or their behaviour is being acted out and they get noticed. I think you do see a correlation with young men who've, by the time they are picked up, something has happened and then CSE is discovered." (PI 1, Voluntary, specialist).*

*"Services need to understand that boys' response to dealing with trauma is often displayed by challenging behaviour; services need to see beyond the behaviours." (PS 28, Voluntary CSE specialist).*

Even where there was acknowledgement of potential CSE, one professional perceived such concerns as being overshadowed by other behaviours:

*"Niggles and concerns may be quickly forgotten for the usually criminal/aggressive young man in the chaos of a children's home." (PS 51, Voluntary, non-CSE specialist).*

**(ii) The perception that a previous poor negative response has the potential to impede disclosures**

Professionals referenced how a young male's involvement in criminal activity was likely to result in his dissociation from the police, assuming a lack of credibility because of criminal offending, or the expectation of blame:

*"...sometimes they have a negative opinion of the police. If it's the only time you ever come into contact with the police...if we are arresting you for car crime or stuff like that, you have a bad experience...I do think you are not going to come forward and speak to the police." (PI 3, Police).*

*"Those who have been perceived to have been engaging in criminality at that time, for example, substance misuse, or who*

*have a history of criminal type behaviour. This group...either feel they won't be believed; fear they will be blamed for their engagement in criminal behaviour..." (PS 52, Police).*

The following case example demonstrated three particular points in relation to a negative response from professionals: the disparity in responses between young males and females in a criminal context; reinforcement of the ideological status of male as offender and female as victim; and how assignment of an offender status can disable disclosure of oneself as a victim of CSE:

*"...I worked with a young guy who was groomed when he was younger...everyone thought this man was grooming him and he would say 'no, no he's a mate...Eventually he got a girlfriend who was the same age as him...He mentioned in passing to his social worker that he and his girlfriend were sending each other naked pictures. There's no violence, no coercion, no pressure... the social worker heard it, freaked out, told the police, the police came and recorded a crime in his name..." (CSE specialist).*

This professional interviewee was reflecting upon the disparity in response between both young people who were equally involved in this activity; the young male was criminalised; however, the young female was not:

*"In the future he wanted to be a [named profession]. He had a DBS<sup>28</sup> check and it showed on his DBS, and he didn't get the job because of that. The really sad thing about that is him and his girlfriend split up... and the man that everyone suspected of grooming him raped him, and because of the police's overzealous response to the images, he did not want to engage with police and he did not want to give a statement and he said to me 'if they hadn't criminalised me for those images I would probably have spoken to the police'". (Voluntary, CSE specialist).*

28 DBS: Disclosure and Barring Service.



This point emphasised how the young man’s offender status, the circumstances in which he received this status, and his negative perception of the police response as a result of this, all served as inhibitors to disclosure about his own exploitation. The professional interviewee, providing this example, believed an alternative course of action may have resulted in a more positive outcome:

*“...if he had had education and support rather than be criminalised, when this man did rape him, he would probably have engaged with the police and help get a conviction. But he didn’t do that, so this man has got away with it.” (PI 27, Voluntary, CSE specialist).*

### **(iii) The perception that male youth offending behaviours can be manifestations of CSE related trauma**

A majority of professional participants in the survey and interviews demonstrated their own personal understanding of offending behaviour as a possible manifestation of CSE related trauma in young males:

*“There may be more acting out of the trauma through involvement in offending behaviour in the community. This behaviour may take the form of criminal damage, assaultive behaviour and possible fire setting, combined with risk taking behaviours linked to substance misuse.” (PS 34, Police).*

The following two quotes connect the manifestation of CSE related trauma and offending in males to their inability or unwillingness to verbally communicate about their experiences:

*“My fear is, they don’t talk about this, they keep it to themselves, can’t see any way out of their situation and sometimes the only way out is looking to end their life or to harm themselves in some way or to get involved in criminal activity...” (PI 23, Voluntary CSE specialist).*

*“They’ve no outlet and they can’t talk about it and I think that’s the biggest part of the impact and the difference of impact for a young man because they hold onto it...”*

*nowhere to put all that trauma, no-one to trust or no way of expressing it and most of them do finally implode and do something very serious to themselves or end up in prison. There’s an awful lot of young men in prison who have been in our house.” (PI 8, Voluntary non-CSE specialist).*

However, they perceived other professionals as not sharing this same understanding, which they viewed as an impediment to identification of CSE:

*“...generally, out there amongst professionals there is less awareness in terms of young males being exploited and even how we interpret the behaviour of young males... I think there still is that reluctance to describe young males’ experiences as being potentially sexually exploited and probably more of a focus on their criminal behaviour and coming into conflict with the law and not maybe understanding that this could be the out workings of trauma and their experience.” (PI 21, Voluntary, CSE Specialist).*

*“Years ago, probably up until quite recently the whole issue of CSE would have been ‘they are difficult children’ and other choice phrases as well but I think that still lingers in terms of boys. Whether they are seen as offenders, getting themselves in trouble and so forth, I think they continue to be seen as that.” (PI 18, Police).*

Over two-thirds (69%; n=63) of respondents to the professional survey believed the criminal behaviour of young males masked their victimhood and saw this as an impediment to professionals’ identification of them as victims.



Moreover, it was seen as the second highest reason, with almost two thirds (64%; n=40) believing this to be one of the three most likely reasons for non-identification.



The strong perception that criminal behaviour of young males may mask their victimhood was echoed in narratives from professional interviewees where they viewed offending or anti-social behaviour by young males as inviting negative responses from other professionals:

*...“oh, here comes trouble’ as opposed to ‘here comes a troubled young person.”*  
(PI 23, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

*“Often, we don’t scratch back and look at the cause and just look at their behaviour.”*  
(PI 21, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

Professionals also observed that, when the same risk indicators are seen in young females and males, CSE is an immediate conclusion drawn by professionals in relation to the female whilst there is greater hesitancy in recognising the males’ victimhood, or instead, more emphasis placed on his possible involvement in criminal activity:

*“When a boy displays a number of CSE risk indicators some professionals say, ‘this is a boy being a boy; it’s youth offending behaviour or drugs running’ or ‘we need more risk indicators to consider CSE.”* (PS 32, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

*“...the resulting behaviours in relation to the trauma of CSE that are seen in young men are more often criminalised than supported through social care routes...boys expressing anger by causing criminal damage is not generally responded to by a social care referral, but by police intervention.”* (PS 23, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

The strong perception that criminal behaviour of young males may mask their victimhood was echoed in narratives from professional interviewees where they viewed offending or anti-social behaviour by young males as inviting negative responses from other professionals:

*“Boys will tend to respond to trauma by acting out through negative or anti-social behaviour which tends to be criminalised as opposed to seeing them as a victim.”* (PS 88, Social Services).

Two particular aspects of offending behaviour in young males were viewed, by professionals and young male interviewees, as manifestations of CSE related trauma, or behaviour that simply masked CSE in males; these related to aggressive behaviour and criminality through drugs:

*“...in particular with young men, aggression and substance misuse are the two biggies that I can think of in all the young men that I have known who have been sexually exploited.”* (PI 8, Voluntary, non CSE specialist).

#### ► Offending behaviour through aggression

The literature review and theoretical framework for this study highlighted how, for the male victim of CSE, the trauma from the experience, feelings of shame, and an inability to communicate emotions, can manifest in outward aggression and other anti-social or destructive behaviours. There were several accounts by professionals and young males, indicating a young males’ inability or unwillingness to disclose the exploitation, with a resultant display of aggression:

*“A common response to trauma from boys is to manifest distress as physical aggression and rage. This is where I think more criminal behaviours are seen and labelled in boys who have or are experiencing trauma, alongside addiction to drink and drugs.”* (PS 23, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

*“Young men will damage themselves considerably by fighting or punching walls and so on.”* (PS 51, Voluntary, non CSE specialist).

During interview, Adam revealed visible scars on his fists from punching walls, a manifestation of the anger he felt as a result of exploitation:

*“I still have anger, but it was a lot worse last year. A lot has gone now...I know that because I haven’t hit a wall recently.”*  
(Adam, aged 17).

Simon, a young male interviewee, also demonstrated his insight into the consequences for



him of being unable to communicate his feelings as a victim of sexual exploitation. He shared his experience:

*"I think the problem is for somebody who doesn't talk, that build things up, and when things build up you finally explode, and you go down two different roads – you go down taking drugs to get rid of everything or you end up being a nasty person towards everybody. I experienced both of those."* (Simon, aged 21).

Simon's perception of professionals' failure to respond to his disclosures resulted in his display of anger and frustration through aggression. This was specifically in relation to his sexual exploitation by a police officer, against whom he felt particularly powerless:

*"...they use their power as something, so you feel you have to do something to them or they are going to do something to you, and the problem is, when I've taken action because no-one else was listening, I get arrested. That's because I've had enough, and I take things into my own hands. But if no-one else is talking what do you do?"* (Simon, aged 21).

A professional interviewee described a similar act of aggression by a young male victim towards his abuser resulting in the young male being criminalised:

*"I know of one young person... where he broke a window and was arrested, and he*

*actually told his youth worker; he didn't tell the police, but the reason he broke the window was cause the person had touched him up. So, it's perhaps looking differently at certain trigger offences like damage, assault..."* (PI 3, Police).

These descriptors of aggressive reaction demonstrate the potential for some male victims of CSE to externalise their trauma through aggressive, violent means and be labelled as such. In addition, for the young male victim exploited by another male, and potentially posing a threat to his masculinity, his own aggressive behaviour can serve to fulfil masculine ideology of him as the aggressor. Attempting to maintain this image can become a priority for the young male over and above seeking help:

*"...young males, particularly those who may display macho/aggressive behaviours may find it difficult to come forward, be believed and accept support to manage their situation."* (PS 87, Voluntary CSE specialist).

### ► Offending behaviour through drugs

As shown in the literature review, there can be a number of factors associating CSE and drugs. By focusing on young males, the study is not negating the fact that drugs are also a factor linked to the sexual exploitation of young females and may influence the recognition of them as victims. Previous research on CSE attests to this. The difference for young males relates back to earlier points regarding the additional and often unique inhibitors to disclosure for them which



may compound their involvement in drugs, For example, Simon described his drug use as a coping strategy during his exploitation:

*"...you go down taking drugs to get rid of everything...before, I would just shove 12 grams down my nose in one night...Drugs are often used as a pain relief just as a normal person takes paracetamol to try to take away a headache." (Simon, aged 21).*

One professional interviewee observed that, for young male victims who become drug dependent through using drugs as a coping strategy, disclosure of exploitation jeopardises exposure of their drug use, threatening this coping mechanism. This was viewed as a significant inhibitor to their disclosure:

*"...are you going to take away their drugs, and if you do, how are they going to cope? You are going to basically strip their parachute of how they cope with life." (PI 12, Social Services).*

Pete was clear his substance misuse was one reason for not disclosing his exploitation:

*"I was taking drugs and drinking so I don't know if I would have told anyone." (Pete, aged 30).*

This corresponds with discussion in the literature review about male victims of CSE who are also involved in offending behaviour. They may assume a lack of credibility as a victim, through their own offending behaviour or may not wish to draw attention to it. This has the potential to reduce the likelihood of them disclosing experiences of exploitation. Irrespective of the original reason for involvement with drugs, professional participants believed the young males' feeling of complicity in this illegal activity was another factor in reducing the chances of him disclosing his experiences of CSE. There was also the perception that professionals may believe the young male to be fully responsible for his drug use, thus influencing their decision on how to respond:

*"If they are also doing drugs, then people think they are making a choice." (PI 1, Voluntary, CSE specialist).*

*"...and that whole description of, and you still hear it... 'he deserved it because he was out getting drugs or getting alcohol'... They don't recognise what was behind it all." (PI 12, Social Services).*

In the context of the use of secure accommodation for young males, one professional interviewee saw a tendency for a professionals' focus to remain solely on the young male victims' criminal behaviour when he is also involved with drugs:

*"The boys who get placed there are generally there on a youth justice order rather than a welfare order because of a criminal act that got them in there. So, the route in is that they are described as 'drugs runners' when they have actually been exploited in that context and some of their exploitation has been sexual in nature." (PI 22, Voluntary, CSE specialist).*

It is in this respect that there may be differentiation in the professionals' response between the young male and female victims, in relation to drugs, which may also impact on how policies on the use of secure care are administered.

Accounts from both professionals and young males regarding a young male victims' links with drugs suggested potential consequences for both disclosure and identification simultaneously, demonstrating a potential interplay between the two. Simon's account of his drug use is one example of this. To Simon, his perceived lack of response from professionals indicated normalisation of the abuse, impacting likelihood of disclosure and, as such, he saw drugs as his only coping strategy:

*"Because when you are telling these people, and nothing is being done, well you think 'It's got to be normal, hasn't it?'... kept myself stimulated to forget about everything. It was also an easier way to deal with the abuse, so I didn't feel any pain at the time and after." (Simon, aged 21).*



#### (iv) **Imprisonment versus disclosure – a constrained choice**

The following example aptly reflects the complexities surrounding male victims of CSE, including many of the potential inhibitors to recognition that have been discussed. In particular, this relates to the young males' expectation of himself as 'protector', experiencing

fear and a sense of helplessness in perceiving his failure in this and seeking alternative, negative coping mechanisms:

*"Some of them are just dying to be in prison. Some of my young men would do anything to keep themselves in prison and get that break [from CSE]." (PI 8, Voluntary, non-CSE specialist).*

#### **Case study – 'Richie'<sup>29</sup>**

A voluntary non CSE specialist interviewed for the research described the situation experienced by Richie who was sexually exploited as a boy in his local community. The resulting trauma led to battles with addiction and time spent in prison as a young man. The exploitation became very embedded, and he struggled to escape it and identify an alternative life for himself. Such was his shame and fear about disclosing, Richie did not get the professional support he needed and continued in a cycle of substance misuse, homelessness, criminal behaviour and prison.

*"He turned up at the house one day and he had a yellow box...and he was just weeping... He was just saying 'look at this, look at this'... and it was an injection that, if you found this young man lying on the street... you had to snap open the box and put it into his heart. I mean that was how far gone with substance misuse he was, and this had really shocked him and upset him that the doctor had given him this, and he said, 'look at what my life has come to, I've got to get myself back inside...'"*

At his lowest point, feeling unsafe and with nowhere else to go, a very traumatised Richie felt that prison was his only viable option.

*"... and he's able to say 'I can't live...I'm going to die...I've got to get off the streets' and he did it, he got himself off the streets... And, of course, he did the most heinous thing, he attacked two paramedics, two people who were trying to help him..."*

*"...of course, you cannot share and understand that he didn't just turn like this ... this isn't just the way he was brought up and this just didn't happen... I would honestly believe I will be at this young man's funeral eventually to be honest, and he, I think, knows that too and then buys himself that time inside...there's supervision, there's food, there's a locked cell and I think those things must be precious to that young man..."*

Richie's experience highlights one consequence of CSE related trauma - a passive acceptance of death and increased risk of suicide (Barnardo's 2014; 2018). While also relevant to young female victims, this may be more likely for young males given the greater tendency to deal with traumatic events in a more destructive manner, and the general higher rates of suicides amongst males, compared to females, in the UK.<sup>30</sup> Richie's experience also highlights the importance of earlier identification of male CSE by professionals to prevent it becoming embedded and compounding the likelihood of non-disclosure.

<sup>29</sup> Not his real name.

<sup>30</sup> Samaritans (2019) Suicide Statistics Report.



This same professional explained how, for one young male victim, imprisonment served three functions: as his only perceived means of escape from his exploitative situation; his only method of concealing his experiences of CSE; and as a way for him to avoid potential negative repercussions of disclosure from his perpetrator and others. This interviewee illustrated their perception of how the same young man appeared to escalate the seriousness of his crime, as he got older, to ensure his incarceration:

*"There's one young man in particular stands out... and just from he was 16, every time he came out [of prison], he was maybe out a couple of weeks and he just did something, and he made sure it was the right amount to get back in. Not a really aggressive young man in any shape or form and now he's 21 he has to work harder to make sure he's inside you know; a wee petty theft isn't going to do it... so he has to up the game."* (PI 8, Voluntary, non-specialist).

**(v) Professionals' misinterpretation of CSE related behaviours can impact both identification and disclosure**

Greg, one of the young male interviewees, gave his account of a range of professionals' responses to his exploitation, all indicative of 'condoned consent'. Whether it was through a lack of awareness or purposeful action, professionals failed to recognise his experiences as abusive. A lack of awareness appeared to account for the misinterpretation of his behaviours as that of being a gang member rather than as symptoms of exploitation:<sup>31</sup>

*"Because of all the risk indicators of my CSE really... where I was coming home with injuries and bruises and things like that; I had the use of 2 mobile phones and I was very secretive about calls, I had new trainers, new clothes, anything I wanted I had and that was interpreted as being in criminal activity with other young people which wasn't the case."* (Greg, aged 22).

Having been referred to a project for gang members, the project worker assessed Greg as an inappropriate referral, recognising behaviours indicative of CSE rather than those of gang membership. The perceptive skills of this worker facilitated Greg's disclosure to her. However, despite her referral of Greg on to social services, he reflected how no action was taken by social services:

*"I think that the project worker, because she works with young people in gangs every day, I think she could see from how I was that it was unlikely that I was in a gang, and it was her I told I was in a relationship with an 18-year-old man. She passed it on to social services, but nothing was done."* (Greg, aged 22).

A consequence of the initial misinterpretation of Greg's victimisation, and subsequent failures by social services to respond appropriately once his exploitation was recognised, resulted in Greg enduring sexual exploitation for a period of 18 months.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented the specific theme of youth offending in the context of sexual exploitation of young males; specifically, how youth offending impacts on recognition of CSE, and explored the complexities surrounding this. It has provided evidence to support links between youth offending and the sexual exploitation of young males, but more specifically how this impacts recognition of males as victims of CSE. The findings illustrated youth offending (or the perception of it) presents a variety of challenges to the recognition of CSE in males, all of which necessitate addressing if young males are to be safeguarded. This should involve awareness, by professionals and young male victims, of the complexities surrounding manifestations of trauma as well as the facilitation of more positive coping mechanisms for victims.

<sup>31</sup> Greg has spoken about his experiences in other forums; his account can be found on the Blast website: <http://www.mesmac.co.uk/projects/blast/for-boys-and-young-men/real-life-stories>



## Recommendations

Consideration should be given to the correlations between CSE, trauma/childhood adversities and youth offending in young males in relation to youth justice at all levels:

- Strategy
- Policy
- Practice
- Training

A review should be undertaken of practice innovations at different stages of the criminal justice process as a means to identify good practice to improve the life chances of young people with complex needs who interface with the criminal justice system.

Both practice and policy development on youth offending should be informed by the experiences of young people to ensure the complexities surrounding offending and CSE are addressed.

Prosecution Services should have staff instruction for prosecutors on their approach to children and young people who are, or suspected to be, victims of CSE. This should include formal processes, for information sharing, between them and others such as the YJA and Police Service, as recommended by the Criminal Justice Northern Ireland report, 2020.

There should be an evaluation of whether existing risk assessments are effective at identifying the duality of offender/victim status amongst young people, specifically young males.





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