UNDERSTANDING GROUP-LOCALISED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

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Abstract

The abuse and exploitation of children and young people by Muslim men has provoked considerable public controversy in recent years, leading to a great deal of commentary in popular media and the development of policy and practice on child sexual exploitation. In order to respond to the concern about the level of attention being directed at Muslim men, we collected press reports on the available group-localised child sexual exploitation (GLCSE) prosecutions and scrutinised the relevant literature, Government documents and official case reviews.

Our data covers press reports on 498 defendants in 73 prosecutions between the years 1997 and 2017, of which 83 per cent have Muslim names. From the data available, we found a correlation between the ethnic origin and religion of offenders and a crime we define as group-localised child sexual exploitation. We conclude that there is a statistically positive relationship between GLCSE and Muslims, particularly Pakistanis. The involvement of Muslim men suggests a disproportionate link with underage sex with young white girls, but this correlation may be affected by a sampling error due to the excessive publicity given to a small number of cases.

The review of literature resulted in the thematic analysis of selected documents, written between 2012 and 2016, on child sexual exploitation (CSE) cases. GLCSE is a sub-set of CSE. The findings from this project have been used to extract suggestions and recommendations for professionals engaged in court-related work, who may also be involved in decision-making, post-investigative work and supporting children and young people through recovery.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine concerns about the sensationalised reporting, in popular media, of Muslim men prosecuted for CSE-related offences and to offer professionals, working in the criminal justice system, an insight into GLCSE as a crime with specific characteristics.

The UK Government defines key terminology in the 2018 *Working Together* document (HM Government, July 2018, p 104). Sexual abuse is described as forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activity (regardless of whether the child is aware of what is happening), which may or may not include high levels of violence. CSE involves an individual or group

with the power to coerce, manipulate or deceive in exchange for something a child or young person may need or want. All the definitions in the guidance include further information on abusive acts. The 2018 document has a new section on extremism, which suggests that CSE is an extremist activity that can divide communities on grounds of race, faith and denomination. The definition also implies that extremists actively discriminate against women and girls, target the vulnerable and oppose tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. There is also an out-of-place reference to the 2015 Counter Extremism Strategy and a statement about the importance of democracy and the rule of law in British society (HM Government, July 2018, p 105).

Relevant literature, Government documents and serious case reviews have been thematically analysed, along with newspaper reports, on 498 defendants in 73 prosecutions between the years 1997 and 2017, 83 per cent of whom have names that are recognisably Muslim in origin.

A thematic analysis of key documents produced on CSE cases, between 2012 and 2016, is used to inform recommendations on court-related work, particularly investigative work, decision-making and support work for those recovering from abuse.

We conclude from our findings that there is a significant correlation between the offenders' ethnic origin, religion and a group-based crime we define as: group-localised child sexual exploitation (GLCSE). The involvement of Muslim men suggests a disproportionate link with underage sex with young white girls.

However, we propose that this may, at least in part, be a sampling error due to the high level of publicity given to a small number of cases, such as those in Rochdale and Rotherham (Cockbain, 2013).

We also found that GLCSE cases are over-reported in news media and Muslim men are over-represented in the prosecution figures (Cockbain, 2013). Press reports misrepresented Muslim men and ethnic minority communities (Drew, 2016) in a manner which may have led to the under-reporting of cases taking place elsewhere (Coffey and Lloyd, 2014) and involving other groups such as boys (McNaughton Nicholls, et al., 2014).

Official documents suggest an over-association with towns with large Asian populations and hotspots such as takeaways (Jay, 2014 and Berelowitz et al., 2015) seen to ease access to victims and provide opportunities for offending.

The news reports were analysed statistically but we also used critical discourse analysis (Yates, 2005) to explore the idea that social structures and relations can be created through verbal and written interactions found in popular (and increasingly) on-line media. The premise is that widely available written materials form an important body of knowledge, which contributes to the development of powerful ideological positions (Warner, 2015). The reporting in some newspapers can represent people, events or concepts in a manner that can promulgate and endorse stereotypes. Writers make moral judgments (Warner,

2015), which not only reinforce the dominant media and political narrative, but also confirm the belief that GLCSE is a crime perpetrated against white, working-class children exclusively by Muslim men (Cockbain, 2013).

The more general concern about CSE was highlighted by non-profit-making organisations such as the Children's Society and Barnado's in the early 2000s. Prosecutions have taken place mainly in England so the identification of Muslim or Pakistani men as the main offenders, largely occurred in towns such as Rochdale and Rotherham. CSE has been considered in some detail in reports (Pearce, 2009, Jay, 2014, Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013, Coffey and Lloyd, 2014, Champion, 2014, Trilling, 2014), but there has been remarkably little critical analysis of issues of race and religion beyond the link with extremism (HM Government, July 2018). This is particularly unhelpful for practitioners, who may be left with little more to inform their practice than their own perceptions of threat posed by the male, Muslim 'other' (Warner, 2015). Notable exceptions in the paucity of complex analysis include Gilligan and Akhtar (2006) and Orr (2014), who dealt with the sexual mores of Asian communities and how they are perceived by the general public and the press.

A number of official reports, linked to CSE case investigations, synthesised information and provided an oversight of learning, for example, the *Working Together* (HM Government, 2018) consultation defined extremism in its final iteration. A great deal of literature has, regrettably, focused on the failure of organisations to protect victims and, in our view, missed opportunities to systematically gather knowledge on abusive processes and perpetrator profiles (Casey, 2015).

Our findings suggest that ethnicity and religion appear to be significant factors, but this is conditional upon the representativeness, reliability and availability of data. The combination of reporting and prosecution of Muslim men has had a snowballing effect, which, fed and nourished over time, has confirmed bias and prejudice against this group (Jones and Florek, 2015). However, we suggest that GLCSE is a criminal offence and perpetrators have complex characteristics, needs and desires.

Background

The National Police Chiefs Council (Centre of Expertise on CSA, April 2018) states that 8,995 CSE victims and 6,107 CSE offenders were recorded in 2017. Although it is unclear whether these were offences or prosecutions, it is an increase on 498 prosecutions for CSE offences between 1997–2007 (National Crime Agency, 2016), which may be a result of targeted detection and intervention.

There are many interconnected ways to abuse and exploit children (Barnado's, Jan 2017), but the processes used by GLCSE perpetrators to engage young people are different from those used by child sexual abuse (CSA) and CSE offenders.

GLCSE perpetrators often groom in family/kinship groups on local streets and act like 'boyfriends' to draw children (aged mostly between 11–17) into secret locations, sometimes through the use of intermediaries, such as older victims or their friends, who may later become complicit in abusive processes.

Offenders work in a manner which minimises detection, for example, children are located and persuaded to get into cars on streets close to familiar gathering places such as takeaways. Known localities lend an air of normality to a potentially dangerous situation, when young people are being introduced to adult sexual experiences. Victims are offered drinks, food and drugs to disinhibit responses and encourage amorous interactions. Gifts such as mobile phones are used to ease further contact and encourage greater involvement with the victim, friends and peers.

GLCSE perpetrators who work in family and kinship groups often do so without the knowledge of their wives and children, suggesting that such groups bond because they share views about sexualised violence (Pearce, 2009), codes of honour and group secrecy (Salter and Dagistanli, 2015). We propose that the motivation of perpetrators may be discerned in the internalised drivers of misogyny, power and control operating within a cultural construction of childhood, adolescence, sexual behaviour and age of consent. Vandiver *et al.*. (2017) point out that understandings about the age of consent relating to sexual activity and what constitutes a sex crime vary according to place and culture. It is perhaps telling that GLCSE perpetrators do not appear to regard underage sex as a crime or even morally wrong.

In addition, reports on court proceedings suggest that many defendants, their families and friends demonstrated contempt for the judicial process and belittled the experience of victims. A sense of entitlement and an openness about their criminal activity often resulted in not-guilty pleas. This, along with disregard for children's rights and legal provisions, such as the 1989 Children Act, added to the sense of outrage reflected in media and official reports (Cockbain, 2013). Arguably, race, culture and the perpetrators' lack of remorse intersect to fuel a moral panic in the portrayal of Muslim men as predatory sex offenders. Within this context, where moral panic combines with the paucity of complex analysis of the offenders' motivations and behaviours, there is a risk of ineffective preventative responses to GLCSE.

Within a discourse dominated by 'race' and culture, a comparatively overlooked element is the issue of class. Specifically, the extent to which the social class of the victims contributed to the warning signals of abuse being ignored, or downplayed by child protection agencies remains underexplored. An understanding of how the psychological and institutional processes of class discrimination may have featured in GLCSE cases is a prerequisite for designing more effective protective systems. Consequently, the frequent citing of 'political correctness' as the reason for professional inaction may, at best, be only a partial

explanation. British social policy and legislation embodies an aspiration to protect every vulnerable child in the country. However, vulnerable children disadvantaged by factors such as class, race, age and gender may not be afforded equal treatment, protection or concern. Similarly, policy and legislation are driven by a selective focus on the often reductionist interpretations of a limited number of high-profile cases (Ferguson, 2011).

Warner (2015) suggests that political motives drive child protection and that politicians and reporters are all too aware of the public need for simplification of complex issues. Opportunistic news organisations allow writers to cherry-pick the facts, fix on culprits and relay a moral position that fits their readership and sales figures. The highly sensitive nature of GLCSE cases appears to be one reason why the focus on the Muslim man has remained potent over many years, without sufficient consideration of class and the role it may have played in delaying effective professional interventions. The focus on the Muslim, male 'other' is fed by contemporary debates about extremism and the importance of upholding fundamental British values (HM Government, July 2018). GLCSE cases can therefore be mobilised by the media, and by some politicians, as proxy political battlegrounds. The possibility that white working-class women may have been failed, at least in part, because of their class, carries no such political capital (Warner, 2015).

The populist press are not remarkable in their partial representation of GLCSE. The selective reporting of facts is common amongst credible news organisations, which routinely present stories, rooted in ideology, as unbiased facts (Warner, 2015). Within the UK there is evidence that BBC news editorial decisions as to what is deemed newsworthy is largely triggered by a limited number of newspapers. In short, a select number of publications have a significant influence on the news agenda and content of an avowedly neutral broadcasting organisation. The cycle is completed by policy makers and commentators who reproduce the accepted understanding of the problem, often seen as received wisdom, in official documents and procedures (Casey, 2015).

Developing practice

Findings from a desk-based review of evidence from five European countries, New Zealand, Australia and the USA suggests that victims are often adolescent young people who are aged 11–17 (Jones and Florek, 2015). This is important, because legal and policy provisions in the UK have in general been applied to children under 11 and official guidance often lacks detail on working with adolescents who, for example, are still developing physically, psychologically and socially (Beckett, *et al.*, 2017).

The 1989 Children Act (and subsequent legislation) has left professionals ill-equipped to assess maturity and predict behaviour of victims who demonstrate independent thought and a desire to explore sexuality in a risky and outwardly

consensual manner (Beckett, *et al.*, 2017). Drew (2016) suggests that professionals need to be more curious and better trained in order to improve understanding and knowledge of the developing needs of young people. For example, a key feature of agencies criticised in CSE inquiries has been the apparent confusion around issues of power and consent; specifically, a failure to understand the manner in which 'consenting' young women may be vulnerable to manipulation and coercion by older, more powerful men. A further area of complexity relates to the feelings of love and empathy felt by victims towards the perpetrators. This phenomenon is widely understood within child protection practice; however, further research is needed on the motivation and behaviour of perpetrators who desire and encourage such feelings from children and young people.

Drew (2016) recommends expert consideration of the boundaries around sexual behaviour and children's capacity to choose, direct and apply their rights to any given situation, depending on the age and capacity of the child or young person. This implies that professionals require greater understanding of what is acceptable, what is exploitative and what is abusive in the context of CSE.

Knowledge such as this is particularly relevant to those involved in any part of referral, response, investigation and intervention responsibilities. Barnado's (2017) model of practice emphasises the importance of assertive outreach, advocacy, attention and access because young people may be hard to reach, missing for periods and reluctant to engage. This adds to the compelling argument for a better understanding of contextual safeguarding (HM Government, July 2018, p 23) in relation to the situational threats faced by young people involved in GLCSE, particularly those who rely on professionals such as the police to properly investigate, assess risk and make referrals.

Institutions such as those within which court professionals, function are steeped in historical structures and systems that can appear discriminatory. Many press reports cite perpetrators accusing criminal justice professionals of racism. Child protection laws and procedures are child-centred by design, but they must be balanced with the civil and human rights of the alleged offender. In an ideal world, professional duties should be founded on ethical codes and culturally sensitive methods which take account of preconceived notions or biases. However, for the reasons highlighted above, it may be difficult to consider individual GLCSE cases divorced from their highly emotive and politicised context. That the media and policy responses to GLCSE may be partial in their understanding of the issue creates further cause for caution on the part of individual practitioners.

Investigative work
Understanding victims who may be outwardly acting normally as adolescents (that is, rebellious or disobedient) is key to effective contact and investigation, particularly in the early stages of grooming and exploitation. Profiling such

young people can add to the existing disadvantages. In general terms, victims are mainly girls (Jay, 2014), use alcohol and drugs and often see perpetrators as boyfriends rather than offenders (House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, 2013). Looked-after children are three times more likely, than those not in care, to have absent and missing episodes, as evidenced by the 29 per cent increase in children missing from foster care in 2014/15 (HMIC, 2016a), and are, therefore, deemed to be more vulnerable to GLCSE.

Income and class appear to be important and so an analysis of the socio-economic context within which such crimes take place will offer valuable information about the possible correlation between vulnerability and social and economic deprivation. Child protection professionals may wish to consider how they perceive such vulnerabilities and if they are capable of making judgments which add an extra layer of disadvantage.

In relation to the location of abuse, Bedford (2015) suggests that training on signs of grooming is offered to local taxi and transport staff. Community-based initiatives, better mapping and profiling of hotspots, use of alert signs, notices and orders to close premises are seen as important developments (Casey, 2015).

The Government (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2013) recommends children be interviewed after missing episodes and that there is an increase in covert surveillance, telephone monitoring, use of informants and corroborative evidence to identify and prosecute perpetrators. Champion (2014) supports the deletion of 'child prostitution' from laws and the creation of a 'sexualised contact' and grooming offences. She also promotes better use of child abduction warning notices under the Child Abduction Act 1984 or Section 49 of the Children's Act 1989.

Sexual offenders are part of every community, so different models of community policing and watchfulness are recommended, along with greater use of legal provisions such as injunctions against perpetrators who may be grooming the child and her family (Casey, 2015). Processes relating to GLCSE are constantly evolving and critics warn against limiting definitions of a complex, multi-layered problem (Coffey and Lloyd, 2014 and Drew, 2016).

Decision-making
The reports under review offered a great deal of information on professional competence in CSE cases. Sarah Champion (2014) recommends that professionals show more interest in the experiences of young people as child victims rather than as complicit criminals (Coffey and Lloyd, 2014). In order that they are better equipped to identify signs of abuse in assessment and decision-making processes (Champion, 2014), child protection officers should be asking for further training on advocacy, empathy and compassion with victims who are hard to relate to (Drew, 2016). Advocates are also directed to carry out evidence-based assessment using appropriate decision-making tools (HM Government, 2015).

Our findings suggest that decision-making is informed by the individual and institutionalised biases in child protection systems. Victims are seen as precocious and over-sexualised, and their families as neglectful or unfit by middle-class professionals with preconceived notions of parenting and child rearing. Risky behaviour is a common trait for teenagers from all backgrounds and, depending on individual capacity and resilience, can reach dangerous levels when they are involved with CSE perpetrators. Other experiences in childhood can add to this, for example, being looked-after (Bedford, 2015) can jeopardise their chances of full recovery. The combination of stress on their bodies and minds, over and above those associated with normal physical and psychological growth (Beckett, *et al.*, 2017), may explain the behaviour of CSE victims who avoid or delay reporting and testifying (Casey, 2015) and normalise abusive relationships (Coffey and Lloyd, 2014).

Engaging with and retaining the attention of victims requires expert knowledge of child development and empathy with adolescent behaviour. A concerned, attentive style is an important prerequisite for those wishing to respond appropriately and sensitively to such victims. However, this requires a high level of self-awareness about the impact of personal bias on the selection and processing of information, for example, critics have suggested that the fear of appearing racist is leading to inaction by professionals and their employers (Jay, 2014). We recommend follow-up research on the root causes of this anxiety, particularly on the extent to which it impacts on the processing and filtering of uncomfortable information and whether such feelings increase the likelihood of implausible professional explanations.

Further attention also needs to be paid to engagement processes with young people who are emotionally influenced or have developed an unhealthy attachment to perpetrators. Victims may appear to act for go-betweens, entice other young people through use of social media and take part in surveillance. They may support the use of drugs and drink and maintain secrecy on details such as the names of offenders (often nicknames rather than given names), venues and cars. Perpetrators use such young people to control other victims and deliberately to ensure that they are seen to be either too involved or too hazy about specifics and, therefore, unable to consent, testify or be seen as credible witnesses (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2015, p 8).

In order to work confidently with such complex cases, Coffey and Lloyd (2014) recommend treating children always as victims first, cross-referencing information, collecting good quality third-party intelligence from relevant agencies, showing professional curiosity in assessment/decision-making processes, lowering the thresholds on need and policing through injunctions against perpetrators and obtaining mobile phone and DNA evidence (Casey, 2015).

Post-investigative work

Knowledge on child abuse (particularly with young children in familial contexts) is deeper and more developed than street-based CSE. It is therefore important to learn and develop good practice with children who are older, independent (Drew, 2016) and in need of support with post-traumatic stress, resilience, dealing with unhealthy attachments, severing bonds and ending relationships. Victims involved in legal proceedings may also need help to overcome experiences in courts, the many hours of interview and video-recorded evidence (Raynes, 2016) and the long-term effects of criminalisation.

Beckett, *et al.* (2017) propose that professionals are required to identify and work with experiences in order to support traumatised children in the process of recovery. Empathy from adults is critical to building a trusting relationship, particularly with young people who may have seen little adult love and care from anyone except the perpetrator. Even with caring parents or family in the background, victims may have experienced affection, tenderness and passion for the first time and this may be enough to maintain such relationships.

Professionals who understand the victims' strength of feelings and emotional ties to the perpetrators are more likely to gain their long-term trust, resulting in better outcomes at all levels of the process, including prosecutions. Grooming and abuse may also involve the victims' siblings, peers and parents, who may not be able to access services for themselves, but nevertheless require professional input.

The proper limits to sexual activity by children are particularly relevant during a time when they are developing their own rights and self-direction (Drew, 2016). Children may experience girlfriend-like behaviour as loving and caring, rather than as abusive and exploitative.

Although the majority of perpetrators appear to be from Asian backgrounds, Jay (2014), Gohir (2013) and Roshni (2015) express concern about the racialisation of CSE and its continuing influence on professional understanding. Services are not fairly distributed to groups such as black and ethnic minority children who may also be victims. Gohir (2013) proposes that ethnic minority communities who are colluding in silencing children, using influences based on stigma, shame and honour, are not being challenged by child protection professionals (Gohir, 2013).

In view of the above, professionals are advised to seek training and develop skills on the differences between the following:

- normal and abnormal behaviour
- healthy and unhealthy attachments
- legal and illegal behaviour
- attendance/non-attendance at school and education
- absences which can be explained and missing episodes which cannot.

Further areas for attention include consideration of:

- the attraction between white girls and Muslim men
- adolescent sexuality
- teenage risk-taking
- the links between regular absences, missing episodes and contact with strangers
- physical and sexual health
- involvement of carers or peers in grooming
- social media and Internet methods such as sexting and revenge porn
- the long-term effects of GLCSE on children's sexual and mental health
- loss and grief as a result of ending relationships and severing bonds
- the impact of GLCSE on victim families, friends and peers
- learning derived from prior to, within and post investigation of CSE cases.

Conclusions

Findings from this study suggest that adolescent children continue to be the main victims of GLCSE crimes and are perceived by their perpetrators as young adults and girlfriends. Complicity in criminal behaviour is not possible, because children lack sexual experience and can, therefore, interpret abuse as love and care. They cannot give consent to activities rooted in emotional and psychological need (Raynes, 2016).

Victims may be vulnerable and subject to social disadvantages such as poverty, care responsibilities, chaotic family situations, care homes and bullying at school (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2015). The burden for victims and their families/carers can be overwhelming and so they may require support as units, while those responsible for care such as foster parents may need training and provision.

Professionals concerned about being labelled racist are, in general, motivated by the need to avoid victimisation of Asian communities, but the protection of children is paramount. Politically correct responses must be highlighted and responded to in a manner which involves those directly affected by racism such as Asian communities. Practitioners may need support from such groups in developing knowledge, skills and confidence with children who are involved in advocacy and court processes (Jay, 2015).

Advocates in particular can ask for such support in the proper use of assessment and decision-making tools, Police powers can be aided by culturally sensitive community information on sexual harm prevention or sexual risk orders and, at a practical level, how best to close an establishment (HM Government, 2015).

Sensitive practice is important in the public sector, but so is accountability for implementing equality laws on the grounds of gender, age, race and disability for victims and their families and for perpetrators and their families. The four countries of the UK have their own legal and policy approaches to CSE and a

great deal of evidence has been collected on CSE cases in England (Department for Education, 2012). More information on how CSE cases are processed through official channels in Scotland, Ireland and Wales may generate knowledge beyond England, refocus attention on the needs of victims and generate greater interest in training for all professionals on CSE, anti-racism and culturally sensitive child-centred practice.

There is also limited research on young men who are gay, bisexual and trans-spectrum, with an interest in exploring sexuality, who are attracted to places targeted by potential perpetrators. McNaughton Nicholls, *et al.* (2014) examined professional perceptions of CSE of boys and young men in the UK and suggest that boys and girls are recruited differently and that sometimes young men can get involved in gangs and criminal activity whilst being abused and exploited.

The lack of data in a standardised form and poor cross-referencing is of concern to many commentators who would like better profiling of perpetrators and clearer signs and indicators of abuse. Finally, we propose that more research is needed on many issues covered in this paper, including, for example, the proper limits of sexual behaviour and the pull factors inherent in relationships between adolescent victims and (sometimes younger) perpetrators (HMIC, 2016a).

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