

# Child sexual exploitation



Myth vs. reality

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## Background

In early 2013, the Local Government Association (LGA) ran a 'National Conversation' consultation exercise to gather views on raising awareness of child sexual exploitation (CSE). One of the key concerns raised by respondents was that stereotypes and myths about this crime could lead to a narrow focus on one particular form of CSE. The danger of this is that attention could be diverted from crimes which do not appear to match that model, and run the risk that victims do not receive the help they need. As a result, the LGA has worked with the charity NWG Network, Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation and the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) to produce this briefing. The examples found in this briefing are taken from the interim report of the OCC's inquiry into CSE in gangs and groups. Each story is real, but the victims' names have been changed.

This briefing forms part of a wider online resource produced by the LGA to help councils raise awareness of CSE. Further information, briefings and supporting materials can be found at: [www.local.gov.uk/cse](http://www.local.gov.uk/cse)

**Child sexual exploitation may involve...** young people receiving 'something' (for example, food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities. Those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Young people can be groomed and sexually exploited at a variety of premises and locations such as (but not exclusively): parks, shopping centres, taxi ranks, restaurants, takeaways, gyms, leisure centres, hotels, hostels, pubs/bars/clubs, or online and through instant messaging.

### **Myth #1: There are very few 'models' of CSE**

**Reality:** The grooming and sexual exploitation of young people can take many different forms. CSE can be carried out by individuals ("lone perpetrators"), by street gangs or by groups. It can be motivated by money, ie commercial sexual exploitation, which involves the exchange of a child (for sexual purposes) for the financial gain of the perpetrator or for non-commercial reasons such as sexual gratification or a belief in entitlement to sex. It can occur in a wide range of settings, but the common theme in all cases is the imbalance of power and the control exerted on young people. The stories below highlight just some of the different models that exist.

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#### Sophie's story

'Sophie's' mum, Linda, has been known to a local violence against women service for a number of years because of the violence she has experienced from multiple partners. Sophie is a White British young woman and she was 13 years old when Linda met Ray. Ray, who was also White British, moved in with Linda and was violent towards both her and her children. Ray began to invite his friends around to the house. They, in turn, were abusive to Linda and her children. Following this, Ray offered Sophie as a sexual commodity to his friends on a regular basis, and threatened Linda and Sophie with violence if Sophie did not comply.

*Site visit 4 evidence*

#### Teegan's story

'Teegan', a White British young woman, was sexually exploited from the age of 12 years old. From the age of 13 Teegan was taken by a Turkish man to a variety of 'parties' across England that she reports were in nice houses and in some cases described as 'mansions'. In these houses Teegan would be raped by several men, from a range of ethnicities, who were paying to use her. Teegan described a book being available with photographs and ages of all of the girls being sexually exploited by this particular group. Men could choose which girls they wanted. Teegan reported men paying those who were exploiting her up to £500 for an hour with her. Groups of men could also request one girl to share between them over a night, where the rape of the girl would be filmed. The operation involved men working the streets to pick up vulnerable girls, forming 'relationships' with them by grooming them and then passing them on to the men who controlled the business. If Teegan ever refused to comply, she would be beaten and her family threatened. Following the abuse, Teegan took several overdoses, was placed in secure accommodation, and self-harmed by cutting and ligaturing sometimes on a daily basis. Teegan described the abuse that she experienced as serious and organised, and is unwilling to make a formal complaint for fear of repercussions from those involved in the operation.

*Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups interview with a young person*

#### Sahida's story

'Sahida', a 17-year-old British Pakistani young woman, made an allegation of sexual abuse against a family member. As a result she was threatened with a forced marriage. Sahida's family claim they want to remove her from the country to curb her 'wild behaviour'. Following these threats Sahida began spending time with older males, described by professionals as 'Asian', and was moved to multiple locations by them. Sahida is now pregnant as a result of the sexual exploitation she has experienced. Family members have physically assaulted Sahida as a punishment for the pregnancy.

*Call for evidence submission*

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## **Myth #2: It only happens in certain ethnic/cultural communities**

**Reality:** Both perpetrators and victims are known to come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. CSE is not a crime restricted to British Pakistani Muslim males or White British girls, despite media coverage of high profile cases. Site visits carried out by the OCC inquiry identified perpetrators and victims of CSE from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. A thematic assessment by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre identified that '**Research tells us that the majority of known perpetrators in the UK of this crime are lone white males**'.

## **Myth #3: It only happens to children in care**

**Reality:** The majority of victims of CSE are living at home. However, looked after children account for a disproportionate number of victims and can be particularly vulnerable. An estimated 20-25 per cent of victims are looked after, compared with 1 per cent of the child population being in care.

## **Myth #4: It only happens to girls and young women**

**Reality:** Boys and young men are also targeted as victims of CSE by perpetrators. However, they may be less likely to disclose offences or seek support, often due to stigma, prejudice or embarrassment or the fear that they will not be believed. They may see themselves as able to protect themselves but in cases of CSE physical stature is irrelevant due to the coercion and manipulation used.

### Randall's story

'Randall' is a 15 year old boy, of mixed ethnic heritage, and described by professionals as 'exploring his sexuality'. He is said to be unaware of safe routes to meeting other gay young people.

Professionals report Randall has been seen hanging around at bus stops. He has disclosed to professionals that he has been targeted by groups of men who are grooming him to exchange sex for alcohol, cigarettes and acceptance. Professionals are working with Randall to try to keep him away from areas of risk, but they are aware he continues to go missing and are unable to account for his whereabouts on all occasions.

*Site visit 8 evidence*

## **Myth #5: It is only perpetrated by men**

**Reality:** There is evidence that women can be perpetrators of this crime too. They may use different grooming methods but are known to target both boys and girls. In relation to group and gang related CSE, the OCC inquiry found that the vast majority involved only men and, where women are involved, they are a small minority. Where women or girls were identified as perpetrators, their role was primarily, though not exclusively, to procure victims. Women and girls who were perpetrating were identified during the inquiry's site visits tended to be young, had histories of being sexually exploited themselves and of abusing others in tandem with the

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group or gang that had previously sexually exploited them. Women and girls directly involved in sexually exploiting children were either in relationships with men who were perpetrators or related to, or friends with, men and boys who were abusers.

### **Myth #6: It only happens to young teenagers by men**

**Reality:** Peer-on-peer child sexual exploitation happens too and this can also take various different forms. For example, young people are sometimes used to 'recruit' others, by inviting them to locations for parties where they will then be introduced to adults or forced to perform sexual acts on adults. Technology can also play a significant role, with young people known to use mobile technology as a way of distributing images of abuse.

#### Rebecca's story

Rebecca is a 15-year-old Black British girl, and has reported she was forced by a group of girls to have sex with a boy in the girls' toilets at their school; otherwise they would beat her up. The group of perpetrators were made up of three 14-year-old girls and one 14-year-old boy, all of whom were Black British. One of the girls is described as the 'instigator' of the assault. Another girl filmed the assault on her mobile phone. The assault took place as part of a pattern of ongoing bullying of Rebecca. She was anally raped by the 14-year-old boy. She had never had sex before this assault.

*Police case file submission*

### **Myth #7: This only happens in large towns and cities**

**Reality:** Evidence shows that CSE can and does happen in all parts of our country. CSE is not restricted to urban areas such as large towns and cities but does in fact happen in rural areas such as villages and coastal areas. Young people can also be transported between towns, cities, villages etc, for the purpose of being sexually exploited and this is known as trafficking within the UK (an offence punishable by up to 14 years imprisonment).

### **Myth #8: Some people can be both victims and perpetrators**

**Reality:** The OCC inquiry found that around 6 per cent of victims reported in their call for evidence were also identified as perpetrators. However, although victims may appear to be willing accomplices, this should be seen in the context of the controls exerted by the perpetrator.

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### Mitchell's story

'Mitchell' is a White British 17 year old boy, and has been known to the youth offending service for several years. From the age of 12 Mitchell was seen spending time with White British men, some of whom were believed to be sexually exploiting young women in the local area. Some of these older males bought Mitchell trainers, taught him how to comb his hair in particular ways and how to speak to girls. The older men also introduced Mitchell to some of the girls that they were sexually exploiting. At one point, he was found locked in a garage where one of the older males had brought young female victims of abuse. Mitchell gradually became involved in the sexual exploitation of young women in the local area, and would pass them onto his older peers.

*Site visit 2 evidence*

### **Myth #9: Parents should know what is happening and be able to stop it**

**Reality:** Parents may be unlikely to be able to identify what is happening: they may suspect that something is not right but may not be in a position to stop it due to the control, threats or fear of the perpetrators. There can be risks to parents when seeking to protect their children and they can need support as well as their children. In some cases, there can be an overlap with intra-familial abuse and this could be a reason why parents do not intervene.

### **Myth #10: Children and young people can consent to their own exploitation**

**Reality:** A child cannot consent to their own abuse. Firstly, the law sets down 16 as the age of consent to any form of sexual activity. Secondly, any child under-18 cannot consent to being trafficked for the purposes of exploitation. Thirdly, regardless of age a person's ability to give consent may be affected by a range of other issues including the influence of drugs, threats of violence, grooming, a power imbalance between victim and perpetrators. This is why a 16 or 17-year-old can be sexually exploited even though they are old enough to consent to sexual activity

## **Recognising the warning signs**

Children are groomed and exploited in different ways. It may be difficult for parents, carers and frontline practitioners to differentiate between ordinary teenage behaviour and the risk of or involvement in sexual exploitation. However there are some signs that may signify that children or young people are being groomed for sexual exploitation or actually being sexually exploited.

**Protecting children from CSE is everyone's responsibility and we would urge councils to disseminate the OCC warning signs checklist which can be found at [www.local.gov.uk/cse](http://www.local.gov.uk/cse) to all those in contact with children.**

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