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Coffey, Danielle

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# 'THERE ISN'T A TOWN, VILLAGE OR HAMLET IN WHICH CHILDREN ARE NOT BEING SEXUALLY EXPLOITED':

# SAFEGUARDING OUR CHILDREN: HOW EFFECTIVE ARE UK RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION?

***Danielle Coffey*[1]**

## Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to explore the effectiveness of UK responses to the crime of child sexual exploitation (CSE). In order to do this, I interviewed a number of professionals working on the frontline with varying degrees of experience from a range of perspectives. The data collected explored current responses to CSE, how effective these responses are, changes in how CSE manifests, multi-agency collaboration, as well as recommendations for improving responses. Recent high profile cases of CSE have moved exploitation to the peak of many agencies agendas; finally giving the thousands of children and young people the voice they deserve. The research found that despite some positive working practices in safeguarding our children, many responses remain inadequate to the task. Key areas that need to be addressed include: improving the availability of services and resources, increasing education and training around CSE, creating a more cohesive multi-agency response and reforming policy and legislation. The research highlighted how it is the task of all agencies responding to CSE, whether it is with victims or offenders, to improve and revise their responses to CSE to better safeguard children and young people.

**Keywords**: Sexual exploitation, Children and Young People, Partnership working, Responses.

## Introduction

The sexual exploitation of children and young people is a worldwide phenomenon, affecting boys and young men as well as girls and young women. It robs children of their childhood and can have a serious long-term impact on every aspect of their life. The most commonly accepted definition of child sexual exploitation is as follows:

[1] Danielle graduated with a first class BSc (Hons) Criminology and Criminal Justice Studies degree.

> 'Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post sexual images on the Internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain. In all cases, 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. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability.' (HM Government, 2015: 9).

CSE is a form of child abuse and is not a new crime, yet has risen to the top of the UK's agenda following recent extensive media coverage on high profile cases. In light of these revelations and the subsequent moral panic that is emerging, this project sought to research and analyse current responses to CSE. CSE is a complex crime by nature and is often just one of a multitude of issues a victim is facing. It is characterised by dedicated ongoing multi-agency support for victims and lengthy and complex cases for the criminal justice system. Until now CSE has largely been an invisible crime and one which has often failed to be recognised as serious within professional organisations responding to it. It has become apparent that local organisations with a duty of tackling the problem are often insufficiently developed, with a lack of education and training around this complex crime emerging as a key issue. Thus, this research project aimed to investigate the rise in recognition of CSE with the accompanying responses.

## 1 Literature Review

### *What is Child Sexual Exploitation?*

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) received 18,887 reports relating to child sexual exploitation between 2012-13 (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2016). This worrying statistic represents a mere fraction of the number of our children and young people at risk of exploitation in the UK. As the NSPCC (2015) explains, it is a broad crime which includes sexual grooming online, the trafficking of children or young people into or within the UK for sexual purposes, sexual exploitation within gangs or any exploitative relationship of anyone under the age of 18. It is an emerging realisation and concerns that children and adolescents are at risk from sexual predators, exploiters, and opportunists worldwide. Despite the term 'child sexual exploitation' being a fairly modern one, surrounding policies and legislation with the aim of protecting children have existed for decades.

The exploitation of children became directly recognised in law in 1989 with the amendment of the Children Act 1948 when children were finally given the right to protection from abuse and exploitation (Safeguarding Children e-Academy, 2016). Despite there being no specific offence of 'child sexual exploitation', the Sexual Offences Act 2003 introduced the most substantial changes to the law surrounding CSE in the UK for decades (Barnardo's, 2014). Changing levels of professional and public awareness have resulted from high profile investigations and criminal trials (Ofsted, 2014). Undoubtedly the subsequent moral panic (see below for high profile cases) forced our government to bring the often hidden crime of CSE to the forefront of changing policies and practices, resulting in a surge of responses from various organisations and agencies.

Whilst it is important to be mindful that CSE is by no means a new crime and has existed historically within society, it is crucial to understand the impact of the age of the internet. Since its rise from the end of the twentieth century a report by Ofcom (2014) revealed that 91% of children aged 5-15 had access to the internet at home in 2013. The rapid expansion of access to such social media and its parallel popularity has obvious benefits as well as holding worrying risks and threats. The rise of communication technologies, as Gillespie (2008) and Pearce (2009) explain, has posed a grave risk to children being abused or exploited through new means. Pearce (2009) highlighted that the emergence of social networking sites and new technologies have opened doors for abusive adults to contact and groom young people into exploitation.

The College of Policing (2015) adds how technology can facilitate CSE, stating that social networking tools and platforms bring new risks and increase the opportunity for offenders to target vulnerable young people. Everyday usage of the internet by 73% of our children has enabled new crimes to emerge, such as child pornography, online grooming, child procurement, sextortion and online child prostitution (UK Youth, 2015). Online grooming is one of the main methods through which children are exploited as this aspect of CSE often facilitates other crimes both online and in actuality. Positively however, CEOP was invented in 2006 in order to coordinate law enforcement's response to child sex abuse (Pearce, 2009). Despite many authors and publications acknowledging the influence of the internet in relation to CSE, this is still a very much under researched area worthy of greater attention.

McRedmond and Wylie (2010), Lee (2007), Stearman (2008) and Letherby (2008) make up some of the central authors on human trafficking. In terms of human trafficking for purposes of CSE within the UK, a report by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) (2012) found that of the 2,255 potential victims were encountered in 2012, 24% of which were

children. Additionally, SOCA (2012) found that sexual exploitation was the most prevalent exploitation type for children believed to have been trafficked. The report acknowledged that due to the nature of CSE some cases may not be recognised as trafficking and not referred to UKHTC, thus statistically not accurately reflecting the true scale of the crime (SOCA, 2012). CEOP (2013a) supported this by explaining that victims, especially those from vulnerable groups, often disengage from protective services as a result of their grooming and exploitation.

Despite the presence of the criminal underworld of child trafficking within the UK, the majority of CSE occurs within interpersonal relationships (SafeLives, 2015). Much like domestic abuse, exploitation is often not a one-off event but an ongoing process within a relationship that may change and go through different stages and structures (Pearce, 2009). In many cases young people are coerced into selling sex by an abusive adult who has manipulated the young person into believing they are in a loving relationship in order to achieve financial gain (Pearce, 2009). This is supported by Stockholm Syndrome, which theorises that victims of CSE and trafficking often develop strong bonds with their abuser, often not seeing themselves as victims at all (Jülich, 2005; Kendall and Funk, 2012).

***Current responses to child sexual exploitation***

At present, the UK responds to CSE in a variety of ways and throughout numerous settings. The overarching strategy in responding to CSE includes four key ingredients: identifying sexually exploited children, positively engaging with the young person, disrupting the actions of the abuser and prosecuting the abuser (Jago and Pearce, 2008). This overarching strategy extends across agencies to any organisation that comes into contact with CSE. The HM Government (2015a), the College of Policing (2015) as well as voluntary organisations like Barnardo's (2015a) all outline their angle of response to CSE.

The College of Policing (2015) highlights the need for a consistent approach in identifying risks and safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation. Furthermore, the College of Policing (2015) stresses that CSE investigations require a proactive approach to explore the nature and patterns of sexual exploitation locally and to share information with partner agencies about those at risk and potential offenders. Both the College of Policing (2015) and HM Government (2015a) agree that a child centred, integrated and interdisciplinary approach with tailored local prevention strategies are key in tackling CSE. HM Government (2015a) sets out a tiered approach to safeguarding: universal, targeted and responsive. Within that framework, tackling sexual exploitation requires a three-pronged approach: prevention, protection and prosecution.

The police and criminal justice agencies focus on the prosecution of offenders, whilst statutory children's social care centres upon the immediate and long term protection of victims. HM Government (2015a) develop the concept of 'protection' by suggesting that agencies should recognise the strength of the attachment and the time and difficulty there may be in breaking it and helping the young person to develop a meaningful relationship with appropriate adults. The government publishing of the 2015 Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance directly impacted the way in which agencies respond to CSE in the UK.

Whilst children's social care and the police largely focus on the aftermath of CSE, government strategies within education and youth work take a more preventative approach. The Department for Education (2011), HM Government (2015a), Christian (2013) and NSPCC (2013) all outline how the educational sector must respond to CSE. The Department for Education (2011) highlights the importance of educating children of the nature and dangers of CSE through Sex and Relationship Education within PSHE lessons. Additionally, the NSPCC (2013) and CEOP (2013b) have created specialist resources for both educational practitioners and young people with the aim of preventing CSE. Thus guidelines set out by the government inform responses to CSE in statutory sectors such as the police force, social services and education, many of which interlink.

As well as statutory responses to CSE, voluntary and community sector organisations have a duty of care to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. Barnardo's (2015a) is the largest provider of CSE support in the UK, since 2014 they have worked directly with 3,200 exploited or at-risk children. Barnardo's (2015a) mission statement focuses on raising awareness of CSE locally, working with schools to deliver preventative education programmes, as well as training professionals and members of community organisations. The responses outlined demonstrate how although different agencies take different angles in tackling CSE, ultimately they all adopt a degree of responsibility for the prevention, protection and prosecution of children and perpetrators.

***Multi-agency collaboration***

Davies and Ward (2012), Frost and Robinson (2007), Salmon (2004) and HM Government (2015a) agree that inter-professional work is needed at all stages of the child protection system. Salmon (2004) highlights the concept of joint working which acknowledges the inter-relatedness of family needs in the fields of health, social services, law enforcement, child welfare, housing and education. Key laws and policies that have been implemented which centre upon multi-agency working to end CSE including: the Green paper Every Child

Matters, the subsequent Children Act 2004, and Working Together to Safeguard Children (Frost and Robinson, 2007).

The Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda highlights the importance of a holistic approach being achieved through multi-agency work to successfully meet the needs of vulnerable young people (Department for Education and Skills, 2004). The agenda focuses on all jurisdictions achieving the five ECM outcomes: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic wellbeing. Although each outcome is relevant to CSE, a particular focus has been put on 'staying safe' with action plans being implemented to develop national service guidance on therapeutic and preventative interventions (Pearce, 2009). Additionally, the agenda focuses on coordinating responses from the police, health and child protection workers as well as education and voluntary organisations. Positively, the Every Child Matters agenda established a common assessment framework (CAF), improved information sharing between agencies and integrated professionals through multi-disciplinary teams (HM Treasury, 2003).

Tragically the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000 proved to be a catalyst for change in how the UK responds to CSE. The subsequent enquiry in 2003, the 2003 Every Child Matters green paper and the Sexual Offences Act 2003 all brought CSE to the forefront of the nation's attention as well as highlighting how crucial effective multi-agency working is in tackling it. Since this time multi-agency working is becoming increasingly recognised within policy and practice as an essential tool in ending CSE. Some key multi-agency models and procedures include MASH (multi-agency safeguarding hubs), MACSE (multi-agency child sexual exploitation) meetings, local authority multi-agency referral meetings and core group meetings for child protection, to name a few.

***Shortcomings and failings***

'UK children suffered sex abuse on 'industrial scale'' headlined BBC News back in 2015 as David Cameron criticised authorities for failing to tackle CSE (BBC News, 2015). Alarming headlines such as this, as well as high profile cases of CSE in the news such as Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford have all emphasised the extent of the crime in the UK. Despite the positive developments made to tackle CSE, Pearce (2009) highlights deficient intervention methods with vulnerable young children, inadequate training, irregular resource allocation as well as poor cooperation between agencies. The influential report by Berelowitz et al (2013) found that a lack of leadership greatly hindered responses to CSE. It unearthed confusion as to whether CSE is a children's social care or policing matter which, combined with non-cohesive multi-agency working, has resulted in ineffectual responses. Further research

conducted by Hallett (2013), Green et al (2014) and Jay (2014) demonstrate failings in responding to CSE, multi-agency work and how it continues to be a growing crime.

The unravelling of the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal was perhaps one of the most shocking crimes of the twenty first century. Jay (2014) investigated the shortcomings in Rotherham's response to CSE spanning from 1997-2013 which estimated that there were more than 1,400 victims throughout this period. The inquiry highlighted that despite having good procedures in place, in practice the police were largely disregarding these and showing a general lack of understanding around CSE and how to respond to it. The report unearthed that the seriousness and scale of the problem was downplayed and ignored at all levels from senior managers to police officers (Jay, 2014). Ofsted (2014) supported the findings from the Rotherham inquiry by highlighting that children and young people who were victims of CSE were wrongly labelled as promiscuous and were considered to have consented to sexual activity. This highlights a severe lack of education on CSE; the very people appointed to protect these children are failing to understand the complex nature of the crime.

Furthermore, a more recent publication by HM Government (2015b) suggests that even since the Alexis Jay report, many professionals in the council and its local partners had continued to deny the scale of the problem. Crucially, not enough action had been taken to stop the abuse. Several of the reports and inquiries into the failings on responding to CSE focus upon a number of consistent areas of improvement which urgently need addressing in policy and practice.

### *Recommendations*

Many reports and inquiries have suggested recommendations to improve the UK response to CSE. A key recommendation on tackling CSE centres on an increased focus on preventative work. At present there are a limited number of specialist services for sexually exploited children, with many of the existing services only receiving short-term funding limiting the positive changes they can make. Youth workers, researchers and specialist services within the UK argue that effective work with sexually exploited children is reliant on the ability to build trusting relationships with young people (Pearce, 2009). Therefore, changes in funding and resources are recommended to enable long term and consistent solutions to CSE to be implemented.

Berelowitz et al (2013) highlights that three elements must be addressed to better the response to CSE: preventing the sexual exploitation of children, identifying, protecting and

supporting the victims, disrupting and stopping perpetrators and securing justice for victims by obtaining convictions. Recent publications by HM Government (2015b) outline the introduction of a new whistleblowing national portal for child abuse related reports which will help to bring CSE to light and will be able to spot patterns of failure across the country. In terms of multi-agency working, HM Government (2015b) aim publish information sharing guidance to outline when and how personal information can and should be shared with other agencies for the purposes of child protection. Finally, Barnardo's (2014) published an inquiry suggesting that the outdated Sexual Offences Act 2003 is in need of replacement by a specific law focusing on child sexual exploitation.

## 2 Methodology

In order to explore the research question semi-structured interviews were conducted with various professionals from both statutory and voluntary sectors who work with children and young people that are vulnerable to CSE.

### *Qualitative semi-structured interviews*

I chose to conduct qualitative research for two central reasons. Firstly, I felt it the most appropriate way of obtaining and exploring workers' attitudes towards responses to CSE. Using quantitative methods would have been impractical for this research topic and would not have produced in-depth data. Secondly, due to the sensitive nature of the topic it was more ethical to conduct face-to-face interviews. Quantitative studies are often more impersonal as they typically work with numbers and statistics rather than with words and opinions. Positively, qualitative research allows the researcher to view events and the social world through the eyes of their participants. There are many varying research methods when conducting qualitative research; however, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews. As Seidman (2013: 9) highlights, 'at the heart of interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience'. Thus in-depth interviews were unlisted in order to fully engage with workers' attitudes, feelings and opinions on responses to CSE and to understand their lived experiences of the crime.

Semi-structured interviewing is most appropriate in small-scale projects when the researcher is also the interviewer (Robson, 2011). Semi-structured interviews are based around a pre-prepared interview schedule containing a list of topics and questions to be covered whilst having flexibility as to how they are asked and in what order they are presented (Finch and Fafinski, 2012). I decided to conduct five interviews ranging from thirty minutes to one hour

in length. Each interview addressed approximately twelve questions with additional probes outlined to support each one.

The interview schedule focused upon how the particular participant views their agency's responses to the growing issue of CSE. Specifically, themes that were discussed include: how that organisation is tackling CSE, how effective their responses are and how recent policy changes have affected their work, how successful multi-agency working has been in working to end CSE, experiences of growing CSE and the internet, how they feel the issue of CSE would be better tackled and any improvements that could be implemented to better respond to the crime. Positively, conducting a semi-structured interview outlines the aims and themes but does not constrict the interview which enables a degree of flexibility and scope to explore issues in greater depth (Thomas, 2013).

### *Participants and sample*

After establishing that qualitative semi-structured interviews were going to be utilised, an appropriate sample needed to be gathered. Professionals that were interviewed included a police officer, a Children's and Young People social worker, a child protection worker that works within safeguarding and representatives from voluntary organisations working with victims of CSE. I decided to interview these individuals as they all come into contact with CSE and respond to the crime within their organisations. By selecting this diverse group of professionals, I hoped to gain knowledge on the responses to CSE from a wide variety of perspectives, thus broadening my research findings.

#### *Recording and analysis*

Prior to commencing each interview I gained the consent to record the interview via a voice recording app on my iPhone. It was important to maintain informed consent at all stages of the interview in order to remain ethical. All of the five interviews were recorded so I was able to focus on and be alert to what was being said during the interview, rather than being distracted by note-taking (Bryman, 2012). It was important to record the interview in order to analyse and discuss the data later on in the research project. The recording and transcription of the data collected throughout the interviews allowed me to begin analysing and discussing my findings. In order to analyse my data I imported all five interview transcripts into NVivo 10 software. Positively, using NVivo opened new ways of seeing the data that were missed when managing the interviews without software (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013).

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethics tend to be based on moral obligations but with a professional spin. In relation to research, they refer to principles or rules of behaviour that act to dictate what is acceptable or allowed in undertaking research (O'Leary, 2005). Within criminological research it is particularly important to be ethically aware as many of the topics are sensitive in nature. In order to comply with the ethical codes of research outlined by the university, I completed an ethical approval of research form prior to commencing my interviews. Additionally, I consulted the British Society of Criminology statement of ethics which further informed me of how to stay ethically sound as a researcher. Overall, all of the ethical principles were effectively adhered to throughout this research project.

### *Research limitations*

Despite the success of the research, no project is without its flaws or room for improvement. This research project was restricted to a small city and made up of a few professionals' opinions. Varying professionals and organisations in other parts of the country may say something completely different, thus one cannot generalise the findings. Bryman (2012) supports this by suggesting that when qualitative interviews are conducted with a small number of individuals, it is impossible to know how the findings can be generalised to other settings. Additionally, the research was limited due to the complex nature of CSE as a crime. This small scale research has been conducted on such a huge and serious problem within our society. Therefore, in order to build up a full picture of responses to CSE, extensive nationwide research would be essential.

## 3 Findings and Analysis

The findings derived from my research project have been discussed in light of the literature and highlight key perspectives and points of interest throughout. The themes that have emerged from my research will be reported, analysed and discussed in light of the literature.

### *Responses*

CSE is an intrinsically complex criminal offence compromising of a hugely multifarious response. At present, the UK responds in a variety of ways and throughout numerous settings. CSE is a broad crime and can manifest itself in many ways.

Lalor and McElvaney (2010) highlight that incidence of CSE varies from time to place, on individual, familial and societal circumstances, yet still being a universal phenomenon. All participants spoke strongly about how the plummeting use of technology has opened doors for exploitation and abuse. This is supported by Pearce (2009) and Gillespie (2008) whom

highlight how the rise of communication technologies poses a grave new risk to children being exploited. One participant, the police officer, contextualised changes in CSE:

> "Gone are the days of approaching children directly or targeting them in parks. I think children are a lot more aware and certainly they get their stranger danger from many…the internet is a nice ghost for them really as they can pretend to be whoever they want to be."

The police force, along with all agencies responding to contemporary cases of CSE, recognises the influence the internet is having. This is supported by the College of Policing (2015) who agree that technology can facilitate CSE; social networking tools and platforms bring new risks and increase the opportunity for offenders to target vulnerable young people. In regards to the police response to CSE, it is their duty to focus on the prosecution of offenders whilst local authorities and voluntary agencies centre upon the immediate and long term identification, protection and support of victims. The police officer highlighted how sometimes the offender can also be a victim through a cycle of exploitation:

> "We come into contact with offenders generally. So people who've been grooming individuals, or even offenders who have been groomed themselves. For example the Vanessa George case, I was on duty when she came in and looking after her when she was here. Although she had been committing specific offences against children, she had been groomed online herself."

Research by Coxe and Holmes (2002) and Dhawan and Marshall (1996) found that a history of sexual abuse appears to be an important factor in the backgrounds of sexual offenders. This duality demonstrates the importance of the multi-agency approach as various agencies are needed to address a variety of angles in responding to CSE.

Despite the diverse selection of participants, all five highlighted the importance of an effective multi-agency approach in responding to CSE. The essentiality of multi-agency working in response to CSE is heavily supported in the literature with government guidelines, laws and policies all implementing inter-agency working (HM Government, 2015a; Home Office 2014; HM Treasury, 2003). Ultimately, my research established that responses to CSE are varied in their angle and focus, whilst retaining an element of interconnectedness throughout.

***Response effectiveness***

All of the participants agreed that despite the positive progress made in responding to CSE, there were improvements to be made. Whilst the participants all flagged up various elements that were both proactive and insufficient, three key concepts emerged: a lack of resources, training and education and multi-agency collaboration.

***Lack of resources***

A number of participants agreed that the resources available for tackling various elements of CSE were deficient in relation to the scale and extensive existence of the crime. The *CSE specific charity* pinpointed that, due to funding cuts and agency closure, a key issue was arising with a lack of support for those presenting an intermediate risk of CSE:

> "There is a huge gap, because our threshold is so high and because there is only two of us, between the low level stuff and what we do here. There's a lack of resources for that middle level."

Targeted youth support teams pick up a lot of the low level CSE risk, whilst the *CSE specific charity* focuses on the more serious cases, leaving many cases falling through the cracks. Pearce (2009) supports this by highlighting that there are deficient intervention methods with vulnerable young children, namely lacking resources and irregular resource allocation. Both the *CSE specific charity* and the *safeguarding lead* agree that service availability withers away for young people between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. From the perpetrators perspective, the *police officer* highlighted a lack of resources which often hinders the investigation and prosecution of the suspect. The rise of communication technologies has led to a shift to an online element of CSE, thus, effective computer analysing is key in building a case against offenders:

> "Normally after they've been interviewed the person will be bailed out for some considerable amount of time usually three to six months because the computer work is just so slow. We have such a small computer department in the force area that they're just inundated."

The lack of resources within the police computer analyst department presents a variety of issues. It limits the efficiency of apprehending offenders and extends their bail, which presents opportunities for re-offending and putting more young people at risk. Essentially, the lack of resources available surrounding CSE cases is leading to ineffective responses in supporting the victim and disrupting the offenders. Such shortcomings in responses can only be attributed to funding alterations and cuts of key agencies.

***Training and education***

All participants spoke of training and education as essential in delivering an effective response to CSE for young people affected. The *police officer* highlighted that CSE has only been recognised as a serious crime in the past eighteen months or so, whereas previously it was not taken seriously or responded to effectively. Alexis Jay's infamous inquiry into responses to CSE supported this, suggesting that despite having good procedures in place in practice the police were largely disregarding these and showing a general lack of

understanding around CSE and how to respond to it Jay (2014). The *officer,* who has worked with the police for over twenty years, proceeded to praise changes in policing CSE:

> "They've been rubbish in the past but it's getting better. Every officer now has gone on a CSE course last year which was force wide. It was an extensive full day course with lots of interactions so it has been recognised as something that needed upgrading significantly."

Despite these positive developments, the *CSE specific charity*, the *safeguarding lead* and a *local sexual violence support charity* agree that more education is needed to improve both professional practice and public attitudes and awareness.

***Multi-agency collaboration***

As with all safeguarding issues, effective multi-agency work is emerging as essential in delivering justice and support to victims. CSE is rarely the only issue and more often than not there are other issues with the young person, for example substance misuse, crime, housing, etc. Whilst in many areas effective multi-agency work takes place, with specific policies, procedures and practices addressing inter-agency CSE, the majority of professionals highlighted flaws in the collaboration. The *safeguarding lead* stressed inadequate inter-agency working across the UK:

> "Different local authorities respond differently so whose responsibility does it become? Is it your responsibility to share the information and then your job is done or it is your responsibility to make sure some action is taken, it can be very difficult. Some counties are better than others at responding but that's definitely a working progress trying to improve those links."

A cohesive response to CSE from the UK is essential as a significant amount of victims are trafficked around the country. SOCA (2012) found that sexual exploitation was the most prevalent type for children being trafficking, but due to the nature of CSE many cases may not be recognised as trafficking.

All of the professionals interviewed suggested ways in which multi-agency collaboration could be improved. Berelowitz et al (2013) agrees, theorising that in-cohesive multi-agency working has resulted in ineffectual responses. Despite some positive results from inter-disciplinary work, often the response is insufficient due to inconsistent agendas, a lack of support from partner agencies and a shortage of resources. Placing more emphasis on creating inter-disciplinary teams within services rather than agencies working alongside each other on different agendas surely would aid a more effective response to CSE.

***Recommendations***

A key element of my research focused upon finding out the thoughts and opinions of frontline professionals on how this often invisible crime could be better responded to. Thus, my research found three key recommendations to improve responses to CSE: more education and training, improving legislation and increased resources.

***Education and training***

The majority of participants highlighted how people need to aware of all the complexities around crimes such as CSE. The *safeguarding lead* and the *social worker* proposed that there needs to be general education around CSE as on a lot of occasion's old-fashioned attitudes of victim blaming form a barrier from effective work being done. This is nowhere more apparent than with children aged between sixteen and eighteen due to blurred lines around the age of consent and adulthood. In addition, the *social worker* recommended that more training is needed.

> "I think for all professionals that come into contact with children need to have some training about what to look out for in CSE. I think that it's everywhere but that no-one really recognises that it is going on until it gets really serious."

This is supported by the *police officer* who stated that often frontline officers respond to incidents and miss crucial opportunities to disrupt CSE:

> "Responding officers on the frontline need to be aware of the signs because the experts in the offices that deal with the investigation of it aren't there to see those signs so it can go unnoticed."

HM Government (2015a) agree that an increase in education on CSE for frontline professionals is needed in order to identify signs and action to be taken. Furthermore, it was highlighted that improved education amongst young people on CSE is required. Despite the positive work the *CSE specific charity* does on visiting schools and providing educational sessions to children on exploitation, more education is needed. Pearce (2009) supports this by highlighting the importance of preventative interventions and education which divert young people from dangerous situations and exploitative relationships. The *safeguarding lead* took a very different stance, instead supporting a shift towards the offender.

> "If we keep saying educate the young people then we are still putting the responsibility of the young person rather than the abuser. It is not acceptable to do that to children full stop."

The *safeguarding lead* raises a good point; by shifting the attention on to the abusers then attitudes will gradually shift away from blaming the children and young people. Improving education and training around safeguarding and child sexual exploitation ranges from raising public awareness and working on attitudes, to educating frontline professionals on the signs and what to look out for.

***Resources***

In order to better respond to CSE, it is recommended that more resources are put in place to identify, support and investigate cases of CSE. Essential to tackling CSE is effective preventative work and proactive support agencies. The *safeguarding lead* felt that the government needs to stop cutting funding to vital preventative services such as youth work and recognise their importance in keeping young people on the right track.

> "It's this government, their definition of youth work is the NCS stuff which is great for loads of young people but for lots of young people hanging around on street corners, smoking and drinking on a Friday night it's not enough."

The dire implications of funding cuts and a lack of resources are recognised by Unison (2014) who argues that it has caused disengagement, increased poverty and the marginalisation of young people by society. The *local sexual violence support charity* and the *CSE specific charity* agreed that the availability of support organisations for victims of CSE has been withering away over the past few years due to funding cuts. This is supported by Pearce (2009) who suggests that currently, there are a limited number of specialist services for sexually exploited children. Thus, changes in funding and resources are recommended to enable long term and consistent solutions to CSE to be implemented.

***Improved legislation***

A dominant area of discussion to improve the response to CSE centred on improving legislation around the crime. Both the *CSE specific charity* and the *safeguarding lead* feel that there are massive discrepancies within the law which are in dire need of reform. The *CSE specific charity* explains how differences between grooming laws and the age of consent have led to great confusion in responses to CSE:

> "The grooming laws don't apply to anyone over the age of sixteen however the Children's Act says that anyone under the age of eighteen is a child. I would like to see that extended. Just because the law states that at sixteen they can consent doesn't mean that they are no longer children."

This discrepancy between the age of consent and the law is causing confusion amongst the very professionals appointed to support these young people. The *safeguarding lead* highlights how these opposing laws are also affecting public attitudes towards CSE, often resulting in sixteen to eighteen year olds not being perceived as the victims that they are. Thus it is recommended that something is put in place that makes a clear distinction between a child and an adult and how exploitation occurs. Furthermore, the *police officer* suggested that grooming laws fail to safeguard young people online:

> "They brought CSE offences in under grooming etc but the law is too scared in putting legislation on the internet…. laws around grooming doesn't cover it enough."

Changes in how CSE manifests itself in our twenty-first century world need to be reflected within law and policy in order to effectively respond to the crime. At present, the Sexual Offences Act 2003 remains the key piece of legislation for prosecuting CSE offences. The majority of participants felt that this is outdated and does not adequately address CSE directly. This is supported by Barnardo's (2014) who suggest that the outdated Sexual Offences Act 2003 is in need of replacement by a specific law focusing on child sexual exploitation. In contrast, the *CSE specific charity* felt that a direct law would be lengthy and unmanageable due to the complex nature of the offence:

> "What would a direct law look like? I think if the existing laws were used properly there would be enough to safeguard them; I just think that they're not used as much as they could be."

In their view, the existing legislation would be sufficient in safeguarding children and young people if they were used as they should be. Instead, the *CSE specific charity* feels that a CSE amendment is needed, in which all the different types of related offences are explained. To conclude, the ideas and opinions of all five participants surrounding responses to CSE, the effectiveness of responses to CSE and recommendations in further improving the response were both insightful and perceptive.

## Conclusion

CSE has only been recognised in the past six/seven years and has only been taken seriously within many organisations in the past two due to high profile media cases. Bringing CSE to the peak of both public and agency agendas has positively improved understanding around the issue and subsequently influenced how it is responded to.

### *Current responses*

In this project I have investigated how, as a nation, we are safeguarding our children and young people from CSE. The frontline professionals interviewed gave detailed accounts and insightful opinions on how they respond to CSE, how effective they feel those responses are, and recommendations on improving those responses for tomorrows children. It was felt that CSE has gained recognition and momentum through recent high profile cases, which has positively acted as a catalyst for change in both practice and policy. The research found that specialist CSE training, emerging new multi-agency assessments and meetings, as well as specific CSE professionals, departments and organisations has all developed in recent years.

Crucially, however, the research unearthed that whilst positive responses were emerging within each organisation, many professionals felt that these are still in need of improvement.

***Response effectiveness***

The findings from this project reveal that although agencies are producing some good multi-agency practices in safeguarding young people, CSE remains a growing issue within society. These findings support much of the existing literature, which agrees that all organisations have failed to safeguard children to varying degrees. My research highlights that a severe shortage of resources is hindering both the protection and support of the victim, as well as the prosecution of the perpetrator. A lack of support services, funding cuts, agency closure and limited resources all have restricted the positive work being done. Effective resources and methods are in place, but the amount of these resources is deficient.

Furthermore, many professionals felt that varying organisational responses were in cohesive and a more integrated multi-agency response is needed. Both previous literature and the participants in my research agreed that inter-disciplinary work is at the core of effectively responding to CSE. Therefore improving this, along with other shortcomings and failings in the response, is vital to safeguarding children and young people.

**Recommendations**

Given the range of views around the issue of improving education and training, increasing resources and reforming legislation, the evidence from this research suggests that these are central areas in need of attention. In order to safeguard more effectively, there needs to be significant changes in the availability and range of services accessible from all angles of responding to CSE.

One key recommendation that emerged from my research was the support in reforming law and policy surrounding CSE. I would strongly urge the government to not only consider reforming related policy but also to introduce a law specifically addressing the crime of CSE. At present there is no specific offence of ‘child sexual exploitation’, the Sexual Offences Act 2003 introduced the most substantial changes to the law surrounding CSE in the UK, however at over thirteen years old this is in dire need of being updated. Moving forward from the devastating crimes that have taken place in Rotherham and throughout the country, I feel that it is essential to give victims the voice they deserve and raise awareness on CSE. In agreement with my participants, I feel such awareness can also be raised with improved training for anyone coming into contact with children and young people. I also feel it is

essential to establish PSHE education specifically on CSE within the National Curriculum in schools nationwide

**Further research**

CSE is an emotive issue but one in urgent need of research and recognition. The task of further research now is to delve deeper into CSE in the UK and how effectively it is responded to on a national scale. The biggest limitation of this research was tackling such a big issue with such a small scale project. Although producing some insightful results, I have merely scratched the surface on CSE in the UK. Thus, larger scale research in the field with professionals will give CSE the voice it deserves and will aid change. Additionally, research focusing upon the views and opinions of victims of CSE would be valuable to determine how it could be responded to more effectively.

Hidden crimes such as domestic abuse and child abuse are slow burners in terms of change, reform and recognition. Although CSE is not a new crime, it is new to policy, practice and the public. I agree with the *local sexual violence support charity* who predicts that real change surrounding responses to CSE, much like domestic abuse before it, will take years to come into effect. This dissertation has provided a clearer picture of the often invisible crime of CSE, unearthed some key areas for change and provided a direction of improvement in order to develop responses to CSE and safeguard children and young people.

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