

# Young people at risk of child sexual exploitation

## Research briefing for professionals working with young people

Almost one in three (30%) of the young people supported by young people’s violence advisors (YPVAs) or other specialist practitioners were identified as either experiencing or at risk of experiencing child sexual exploitation (CSE). These young people were particularly vulnerable: many had mental health issues, misused substances, and the majority had been exposed to additional risks in the family home. In addition to these risks, the vast majority were experiencing current abuse and were at high risk of serious harm.

In the year to January 2015, caseholders supported 101 young people who were experiencing or at risk of experiencing child sexual exploitation.

54 young people (53%) were identified as at risk and 47 young people (47%) were currently experiencing sexual exploitation. The vast majority (99%) of young people identified were female. The remaining one young person (1%) was male and identified as transgender. They ranged in age from 12 to 20 years old. There were higher proportions of black or minority ethnic clients (22%) compared to young people who were not at risk of CSE (10%).

The majority (76%) of the young people were referred primarily as a result of intimate partner violence, with CSE identified during the caseholder’s assessment.

The vast majority (92%) of young people identified as at risk of CSE were experiencing current abuse. More than half of the young people were experiencing current emotional abuse (83%), jealous and controlling behaviours (68%), physical abuse (60%) and/or harassment and stalking (55%). The most frequently recorded perpetrator of each type of abuse was the young people’s current or ex-boyfriend.

In the majority of cases, child sexual exploitation was perpetrated by a person other than a partner or family member, many of whom were adults.

Barnardo’s identified that a common pattern in the sexual exploitation of young women is the presence of an older boyfriend.<sup>1</sup> In more than three-quarters (77%) of cases where young people were at risk of CSE and experiencing intimate partner violence, the caseholder recorded that the risk was increased because of the age of the perpetrator.

The most frequently recorded perpetrator of CSE was an adult other than the young person’s partner or family member (29%). One in four (29%) young people were at risk of CSE by multiple perpetrators. This suggests that young people experiencing intimate partner violence are also being targeted by other, often older, individuals who intent to exploit them sexually.

Perpetrator(s) of child sexual exploitation	n=	101
Other adult	29	29%
(Ex)-Boyfriend	24	24%
(Ex)-Boyfriend with other	23	23%
Other	16	16%
Other multiple perpetrators	8	8%

<sup>1</sup> Sexual exploitation risk assessment framework: a pilot study. Barnardo’s, 2007.

**Young people at risk of child sexual exploitation have a wide range of complex needs, with mental health issues and substance misuse particularly prevalent.**

Most (89%) of the young people at risk of child sexual exploitation were experiencing mental health issues, most frequently depression and anxiety. 42% had substance misuse issues.

They were also very likely to be exposed to familial complex needs. Two-thirds (63%) of young people at risk of CSE had had been exposed to domestic abuse in the family home and one in three (33%) had been exposed to parental substance misuse.

Additional vulnerabilities	n=	101
Depression/ anxiety	75	74%
Self-harm	65	64%
Sleep problems	54	53%
Drug misuse	37	37%
Eating problems	28	28%
Alcohol misuse	22	22%
Planned/ attempted suicide	19	19%
Other mental health	17	17%

**Historic abuse is particularly prevalent amongst young people at risk of child sexual exploitation.**

More than half (60%) of young people had experienced historic abuse. One in three (34%) young people at risk of CSE had experienced neglect in their childhood. 31% had been physically abused in the past. A quarter (24%) of the young people had experienced sexual abuse in childhood. Existing research by Barnardo’s suggests that childhood abuse affects young people’s self-worth and may make them more vulnerable to abuse in the future.<sup>2</sup>

**Caseholders worked alongside a wide range of agencies to help improve the safety and wellbeing of young people who had been at risk of child sexual exploitation.**

Prior to being referred to the caseholder, the majority (65%) of young people at risk of CSE had agency involvement from the police and almost half (48%) had children’s social care involvement. Agency involvement increased during the young people’s engagement with the caseholder. This demonstrates the importance of a YPVA or other specialist practitioner in ensuring a multi-agency response.

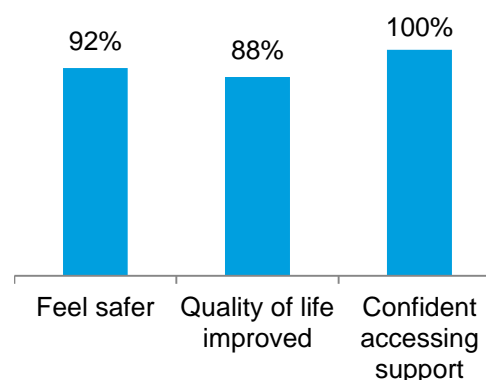
During their case, one in three (38%) young people had agency involvement from a sexual health service and 30% had involvement with child and adolescent mental health services (Cahms).

**The support of a YPVA or other specialist practitioner is effective in improving the safety and wellbeing of young people who were at risk of child sexual exploitation.**

The vast majority (95%) of young people were supported with their wellbeing, most frequently to improve their understanding of abusive relationships. At the point of case closure, two-thirds (66%) of the young people were no longer in a relationship with the perpetrator of the abuse.

At case closure, caseholders reported that there was a reduction in risk for three-quarters (75%) of young people who were identified as at risk of child sexual exploitation.

More than half (53%) of the young people reported that they were not experiencing any abuse at case closure. No young people were experiencing sexual abuse at case closure. There were improvements in all measures of the young people’s health and wellbeing, most noticeably in the proportion of young people who were experiencing feelings of blame or responsibility (73% reduction). The young people themselves reported positive changes in their safety and their quality of life.



<sup>2</sup> Sexual exploitation risk assessment framework: a pilot study. Barnardo’s, 2007.