

Meeting the needs of sexually exploited young people in London

Summary Report

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Meeting the needs of sexually exploited young people in London

This summary presents the findings of a two-year research study mapping the service needs of young people at risk of sexual exploitation in London. The research was commissioned and funded by the Bridge House Trust and carried out by researchers from Barnardo's Policy and Research Unit between September 2003 and April 2005.

The objective of the research was to establish the level and nature of current need for services amongst young people at risk of sexual exploitation in London. This involved both investigating the nature and extent of sexual exploitation known in London, and exploring the experiences of services and young people, to identify promising practice and gaps in service provision.

Data was collected primarily through interviews with over 100 informants including child protection co-ordinators and lead officers for sexual exploitation from 30 London boroughs; representatives from the police, health services and education services; representatives from specialist sexual exploitation services and other voluntary sector services; as well as with young people themselves.

The nature of sexual exploitation in London

Sexual exploitation identified in London took a variety of forms, including situations where young people were exploited by family members; the involvement of young people in sexually exploitative relationships with older men or peers; the informal exchange of sex for favours, money, drugs, accommodation or other commodities; more 'formal' forms of prostitution; organised abuse; and trafficking.

Sexual exploitation occurs in a social context of normalised sexual violence towards women. This is most acutely experienced by young women, who are at highest risk of rape, sexual assault and domestic violence. Violence, coercion and intimidation were frequently present in situations of sexual exploitation. However, sexual exploitation primarily occurred as a result of young people making constrained choices against a background of social, economic and emotional vulnerability. Where young women were making constrained choices in relation to their circumstances, there was a danger that services saw this as a 'free choice' leading to a lack of protective action. The continued existence of legal provisions to arrest and prosecute young people for 'persistent and voluntary return' to prostitution may play a role in this perception.

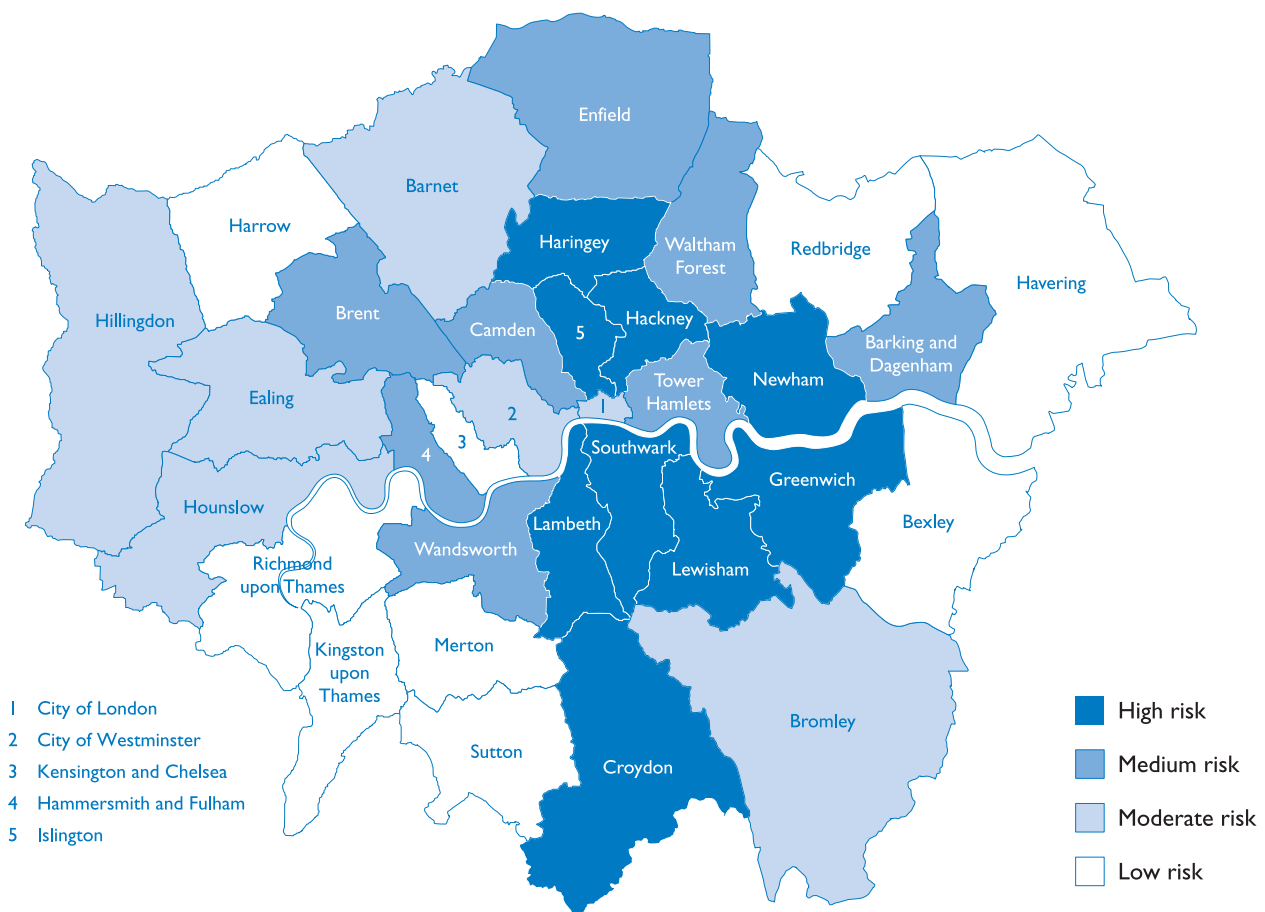
As the sexual exploitation of young people is not limited to formal 'prostitution', it is important for services to understand and be aware of the full spectrum of sexually exploitative situations to identify and protect young people at risk. Talking about 'prostitution' or 'commercial sexual exploitation' of young people is therefore unhelpful.

The extent of sexual exploitation in London

The number of cases identified by informants to the research related directly to the level of awareness and proactive work within different local authorities. However, figures from local authority social services departments provide evidence of the minimum number of sexually exploited young people known to services. A total of 507 separate cases of young people were identified in London where sexual exploitation was known or indicated¹. In approximately one third of cases (n=175), sexual exploitation was 'known' rather than 'indicated'. Cases were identified in every borough in London. The vast majority of cases involved young women (n=490). Young men at risk of sexual exploitation were rarely identified by interviewees. Practitioners acknowledged that they do not focus their concerns on young men.

Statistical techniques were used to estimate the risk of sexual exploitation for each borough in London based on a set of proxy indicators for exploitation including: the numbers of young people going missing, the numbers of children in local authority care, the numbers of children in residential homes, rates of school absence, levels of sexually transmitted infections and teenage pregnancy, levels of youth homelessness, and levels of drug use in the community. The map below shows the estimated risk of sexual exploitation for individual boroughs in London:

Estimated risk of sexual exploitation for individual boroughs in London



¹ Information relates to 31 boroughs as additional information was provided by a specialist service in one borough where the social services lead officer was not interviewed.

The total number of young people estimated to be at risk across London was 1,002. This is double the number of young people currently being identified by services. This figure does not represent 'true' prevalence, but the numbers of young people who would be identified if all boroughs worked as proactively to identify young people as the most proactive boroughs do. The statistical estimates suggest that some London boroughs may be under-identifying young people at risk by up to 80 per cent.

Responding to young people at risk of sexual exploitation

The research found considerable support for an approach based on the *prevention* of sexual exploitation, the *protection* of sexually exploited young people and the *prosecution* of perpetrators of this abuse.

Prevention should involve primary prevention work in schools to tackle a culture of normalised violence towards young women and to equip young people with the skills and confidence to assert themselves against sexually aggressive behaviour. Many young people who became at risk of sexual exploitation in adolescence had been failed by services at earlier stages of their lives, so improving the quality of services, particularly social services, is another important aspect of prevention.

Early identification of young people at risk, and targetting early intervention work through the provision of services, is also necessary in order to prevent risk escalating. Young people do not readily disclose this form of abuse, so practitioners must be able to respond to indications of possible sexual exploitation. Training and awareness-raising for practitioners is needed to enable them to proactively identify young people at risk.

Protection requires a *multi-agency approach* co-ordinated by social services under specific protocols for sexual exploitation. Services need to be able to respond quickly and flexibly to young people at risk. *Intensive support* is required to provide young people with a high level of relational security to counter the 'pull' of sexually exploitative relationships. As far as possible, a therapeutic approach needs to support and empower young people in achieving change on their own behalf.

Continuity of care and *safe accommodation* which promote stability and enable young people to remain in their community is also required. Therapeutic approaches should support and build on protective factors such as relationships with carers, friendship networks and educational opportunities. As sexual exploitation occurs within a context of constrained choices, providing more and better choices for young people is necessary. The provision of *specialist services* within a multi-agency partnership appears to be the best way to engage with and provide protection for this particularly vulnerable group. Sexually exploited young people from abroad may also need protection against removal from the UK to situations where they may be at risk.

Responses to young people at risk have been undermined by severe resource constraints. These were experienced by all agencies involved in the research. No additional funding has been given to local authorities or other agencies to implement the Department of Health guidance *Safeguarding children involved in prostitution* (2000) so implementation has relied on already over-stretched resources.

Police

Proactive police work is essential to gather and co-ordinate intelligence on exploitation. There has been some promising practice in the work undertaken by Clubs & Vice and through the North London CATSE Pilot Project. However, there is an overall lack of proactive work on sexual exploitation, and social services departments report struggling to engage the police in multi-agency responses to sexually exploited young people.

Preventative work and intelligence gathering about young people who run away is crucial, but this is under-resourced across London. In addition, the Metropolitan Police currently have no way to monitor the numbers of children who run away, either across London or within individual boroughs.

Police action has been undermined by a lack of clarity about which team in the Metropolitan Police has the remit and lead for co-ordinating intelligence and responding to sexual exploitation across London. Levels of resourcing in the police for work on sexual exploitation also limit their ability to proactively identify and respond to young people at risk.

To date, there has been an extremely low level of prosecutions achieved. The police identified the problem of being reliant on young people to give testimony when they are mostly unable or unwilling to do so.

Social Services

There is good practice in social services departments in London, but awareness and response to sexual exploitation varies across and within boroughs in London.

Identifying young people at risk relies on practitioners' awareness of the issue, their proactive work to identify indicators of risk, their preparedness to work with situations where sexual exploitation is indicated rather than definitely known to be occurring, and the availability of services to support young people. These are linked – practitioners are reluctant to proactively identify young people in danger without the availability of services to refer them to. The training of practitioners to proactively identify sexual exploitation was highlighted by interviewees as a need both within social services and across other agencies. Requiring evidence of sexual exploitation as a 'local' problem before taking action to address it leads to inaction, and ensures that sexual exploitation remains unrecognised.

The adoption of detailed procedures is key in enabling practitioners to identify and respond to sexual exploitation. Many boroughs are relying exclusively on the sexual exploitation section of the London Child Protection Procedures to respond to this issue, but the procedures are not sufficiently detailed to support them to do so adequately. The London procedures have been an important step towards harmonising child protection procedures across London and delineating cross-borough and inter-agency responsibilities. Updating these in line with current best practice around sexual exploitation would be a useful way of improving practice across London.

Resource pressures within social services lead to 'gatekeeping' in access to services. This may prevent the identification of young people at risk and has led to young people as young as 14 not being offered a service. Resource constraints also resulted in high thresholds for intervention. As a result, prevention and early intervention work was rare.

Engagement with young people was highlighted as a difficulty by many services. Successful engagement often requires assertive outreach work, which social workers did not have the time or resources to provide.

Secure accommodation is widely used by local authorities as a crisis response for young women experiencing sexual exploitation, even though many practitioners acknowledge that it is unhelpful, and despite evidence of the damaging impact it has on this group of young people. The local authority that had the best level of awareness and response to sexual exploitation was able to avoid the use of secure accommodation completely.

The local authorities undertaking the most proactive work had a senior child protection officer taking a co-ordinating role, were working to an active protocol, and were working with cases where exploitation was 'indicated' as well as 'known'. Commitment from senior management within social services is needed in order to replicate this level of support across London.

Health

Many different health services come across young people at risk, including looked-after children's health services, Accident and Emergency departments, sexual health clinics, and teenage pregnancy services, and all need to be aware of protocols. The level of practitioner awareness and proactive work around sexual exploitation varied between Primary Care Trusts and within different parts of PCTs. Young people experienced difficulties in accessing services, particularly CAMHS support, though there was good practice in relation to co-ordination between social services and CAMHS in one local authority. There were instances where health services were important in identifying young people from abroad who had been trafficked.

Education

Disengagement from school is an early indicator of risk. The development of a protective and pastoral ethos within schools to enable young people to disclose difficulties including possible abuse or exploitation is necessary. Schools need to identify those young people who are absenting themselves from education, with education welfare services addressing concerns and assisting young people to re-engage with education. School staff also need to be aware of risk indicators to actively identify them among young people in their care, and be able to refer to services to ensure the protection of young people. Staff need to be alert to young people being targeted at, or outside, school. Informants to the research also identified the need for services to effectively re-engage sexually exploited young people with education.

Youth Offending Teams

Some YOT teams had low levels of awareness about sexual exploitation and could do more to identify young people at risk. This is true for young people of both genders, but it was identified that YOTs could play a particular role in identifying young men at risk.

Specialist sexual exploitation services

Where specialist services exist, they play a vital role in engaging this hard-to-reach and vulnerable group of young people; facilitating access to other services; and in developing and disseminating expertise in working with sexually exploited young people.

Services need resources. If all agencies proactively identified sexually exploited young people as they should, current services would need to expand to meet the demand. Some services are already having to prioritise referrals in order to meet current need. Only seven boroughs in London had access to a specialist service. Specialist services are particularly needed in high risk areas of London where there are currently no services.

It was widely acknowledged that working to change the circumstances of sexually exploited young people can take time. Long term funding needs to be provided in order to offer stability of service to young people.

Vulnerable groups of young people

Certain groups of young people suffer additional barriers to accessing protection. Young people aged 16-18 experience particular difficulties because they are vulnerable to their exploitation being viewed as an 'adult' choice, which has an impact on the readiness of statutory services to offer continued support and protection. Continuity of services for young people when they reach the age of 18 is also needed.

Homeless young people are a further category of young people at risk who experience difficulty in accessing services. As they are often older young people, they are vulnerable to not being offered a service by social services. This is compounded by the likelihood that, through being homeless, they have crossed borough boundaries and the host or home local authority may not accept responsibility for them.

Young people from abroad also face specific barriers to protection. Difficulties in disclosing their abuse can be compounded by the fear and insecurity they face as a result of their insecure immigration status and lack of awareness of, and access to, protective services. Identification of exploited young people is made more difficult as they are not necessarily included in protective networks such as schools and other services which could identify their abuse. They also suffer difficulties in accessing services, particularly where their status as immigrants or asylum seekers is considered before their needs as young people in need of protection. There are often disputes over the age of young people from abroad which denies them all access to services and leaves them particularly vulnerable.

Recommendations

Government

- The government should provide ring-fenced resources to assist services to take forward the measures outlined in the guidance, *Safeguarding children involved in prostitution*.
- The government should issue guidance that discourages the use of secure accommodation and promotes a model of care that includes prevention, early intervention, safe accommodation, continuity of care, intensive support, and multi-agency co-ordination, including police action against perpetrators.
- The government should remove provisions to arrest and prosecute young people who are considered to 'persistently and voluntarily return' to prostitution. These undermine approaches acknowledging the vulnerability of young people and the need to offer persistent and long term support to young people to disengage them from abusive networks.

London Child Protection Committee

- The London Child Protection Procedures should be updated in line with current best practice around sexual exploitation. This would assist boroughs to develop local coterminous protocols and to improve their work in line with current best practice.
- The London Child Protection Committee should also update the procedures to include guidance on young people who run away or go missing to ensure London-wide service responses to such young people. The protocols developed as part of the Safe in the City programme provide a useful model.

Social Services

- Local authorities should develop and disseminate a detailed protocol on sexual exploitation, work actively to promote it among agencies within the borough and encourage proactive identification of young people at risk.
- Local authorities should organise regular inter-agency training and awareness-raising around the use of protocols to identify and respond to young people at risk of sexual exploitation.
- Local authorities should support lead officers in taking a proactive role in supporting protocols work. In boroughs where there are high levels of risk, this should be through making the lead officer role a full-time post.
- Social services departments should avoid the use of secure accommodation as a response to sexually exploited young people. Resources should instead be deployed to provide community based responses involving early intervention, intensive support, safe accommodation and continuity of care.

- Local authorities should consider providing funding for a specialist service to provide targeted services to young people at risk of sexual exploitation. Where levels of risk in an individual authority do not justify a whole service in the borough, consideration should be given to setting up joint services with neighbouring boroughs. The North London model is a useful template.

Police

- The Metropolitan Police should identify a lead team to take responsibility for co-ordinating police work on sexual exploitation.
- The Metropolitan Police team holding the remit for sexual exploitation should be adequately resourced to work proactively across the whole of London to protect young people and to prosecute abusers.
- The Metropolitan Police should adopt proactive approaches to identifying sexual exploitation, including the gathering and co-ordination of intelligence; increased partnership working with social services departments and other agencies; and the development of further work with young people who run away or go missing. Sufficient resources should be allocated to these areas of work.
- The Metropolitan Police should identify a means of monitoring young people who go missing or run away.
- Training around issues of sexual exploitation should also be provided to police officers likely to come into contact with this issue.
- Creative approaches to securing prosecutions against perpetrators should be explored. These may involve approaches that do not rely on the evidence of the young person; proactive use of the Sexual Offences Act; and the creative use of other existing legislation.

Health

- Primary Care Trusts should support the role of the identified lead officer within health to provide guidance and training to health professionals around issues of sexual exploitation.
- Health services should be provided in forms that are flexible and accessible to young people at risk of sexual exploitation.

Education

- Schools and education services should play a greater role in identifying young people at risk of sexual exploitation. This involves being alert to indicators of risk, identifying young people who disengage from education, and providing a pastoral and protective school ethos which facilitates disclosure of abuse.

- Issues of sexual exploitation should be included in standard training to school child protection leads and other educational staff.
- The PSHE curriculum should pay attention to issues of violence against women and equip young people with the knowledge and skills to enjoy more equal relationships.
- Educational provision should also be developed to assist young people suffering sexual exploitation to re-engage with education.

Youth Offending Teams

- Youth Offending Teams should play a greater role in identifying young people at risk of sexual exploitation. Indicators of risk need to be included in their assessments of young people.

Additional measures to protect young people from abroad

- Multi-agency safeguarding teams should operate at ports of entry to identify young people where there are concerns relating to their protection.
- Measures should be put in place to prevent young people from being age disputed. Young people whose age is disputed should be treated as minors and provided specialist and protective support and accommodation whilst they are awaiting independent assessments of their age.
- All services need to ensure that they are accessible to young people from abroad and work proactively to ensure their protection.
- The ongoing protection needs of young people from abroad who have been trafficked and sexually exploited should be acknowledged, and safe accommodation and intensive support provided under protocols for sexual exploitation.
- Funding should be provided to ensure that all young people from abroad are able to access free legal advice from a high-quality and specialist legal representative.

Potential funders

- This area of work needs more resources. Funding is needed for new specialist services in high risk areas of London where there are currently no services. Funding is also needed to enable existing services to expand to meet demand.
- Long term funding needs to be provided in order to offer stability of service to young people. It is important to acknowledge that working to change the circumstances of sexually exploited young people can take time.

The full report is available from Barnardo's website:
www.barnardos.org.uk/resources/researchpublications/protection

This summary report presents the findings of a two-year research study into the needs of young people at risk of sexual exploitation in London. The research was commissioned and funded by the Bridge House Trust and carried out by researchers from Barnardo's Policy and Research Unit between September 2003 and April 2005.

The objective was to establish the nature and level of current need for services amongst young people at risk of sexual exploitation in London. The research suggests that only half of those young people likely to be at risk in London are currently being identified. The roles of social services, the police, education and health services are explored and proactive approaches to early identification and intervention are recommended based on current best practice.

It is essential reading for policy makers and service providers across the statutory and voluntary sectors.

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