

Tipping the Iceberg

A pan Sussex study of young people at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking

Executive Summary

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Julie Harris and Barbara Robinson



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“The issue (of sexual exploitation) is definitely emerging but people still lack awareness. What has emerged is just the tip of the iceberg.”
(Practitioner)

Key messages:

- 1. Sexual exploitation of young people is poorly recognised because of:**
 - *its hidden nature*
 - *low awareness amongst practitioners of the indicators of sexual exploitation*
 - *an absence of screening for this issue*
 - *inadequate systems for recording and monitoring occurrence*
 - *high threshold criteria for services for vulnerable young people.*
- 2. Geographical location, an experience of being in care and being homeless or living in temporary accommodation were all seen as increasing the risk of sexual exploitation.**
- 3. A high proportion of young people at risk of trafficking go missing from the care of social services, despite comprehensive needs assessment and support. These young people can remain undetected and highly vulnerable to exploitation.**
- 4. Limited resources mean that service responses to sexual exploitation are poor. Services operate high threshold criteria and young people over the age of 16 who are being sexually exploited are unlikely to receive a child protection response. There is inadequate support available for vulnerable young people aged between 14 and 18.**

A. Introduction

This summary presents the findings of a year-long research study mapping the service needs of young people at risk of sexual exploitation across Sussex. The research was commissioned and funded by Barnardo's LEaSE¹ Children's Services and the three Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) of Brighton and Hove, East Sussex and West Sussex. The study was carried out by researchers from Barnardo's Policy and Research Unit between December 2005 and December 2006.

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 Sussex. The report is for those charged with responsibilities for safeguarding children through their LSCB's, from service planners and commissioners, to the practitioners providing support and services to vulnerable young people. It aims to identify gaps and make recommendations for future service planning and provision.

Because of the hidden nature of sexual exploitation and the differences in definitions between services, the study did not aim to provide a 'definitive' picture of the

¹ London, East and South East

incidence of sexual exploitation of young people in Sussex. Instead, it focused on providing an overview of the following areas:

- Young people likely to be vulnerable to sexual exploitation and/or trafficking
- The risk indicators for involvement in these activities
- The range of sexually exploitative activities that young people are involved in
- Awareness of these issues among organisations engaging with young people and current service responses.

Data was gathered via interviews with 120 informants:

Service represented	No. of respondents
Health (including CAMHS services)	30
Police	7
Children’s social care services (including safeguarding & child protection)	30
Children’s services (education) including youth services, Youth Inclusion & Support Panels, Connexions	11
Schools	7
Youth Offending Teams	4
Voluntary sector services	23
Independent accommodation providers	4
Gatwick Immigration and Intelligence Services	4

In addition, a case study exercise was carried out, which involved informants returning anonymised forms to Barnardo’s, detailing known and suspected cases of sexual exploitation. This resulted in 43 case studies describing examples of sexual exploitation and 50 reports of suspected cases of trafficking.

B. Main findings

1. Concepts of sexual exploitation

Overall, there was a low level of awareness of sexual exploitation as an issue, and varying definitions of sexual exploitation amongst informants. These ranged from 'child abuse', to straightforward descriptions involving exchanges of sex for money, through to the clear identification of power imbalance and the coercive and manipulative aspects of sexually exploitative situations.

There was also considerable variation in services' interpretation of situations that might give cause for concern, with some relationships described as 'inappropriate' that the researchers would have identified as clearly exploitative. However, through engaging with the research, many practitioners experienced a growing recognition of sexual exploitation, and expressed the feeling that they had been 'staring the issue in the face' without recognising it.

2. The nature of sexual exploitation in Sussex

Because sexual exploitation in Sussex tends to be hidden, some services found it hard to identify where it was happening and who was being affected. However, through anecdotal evidence provided by services and the case study collection exercise, a number of different forms of sexual exploitation were identified. These included situations involving:

- exploitation by family members
- sexually exploitative relationships with older men or peers
- informal exchanges of sex for money, drugs, accommodation and other favours.

The vast majority of young people described in the case studies as ‘known’ or ‘suspected’ examples of sexual exploitation were aged between 16 and 18 years and were of White British origin. One quarter was male and the majority of these young men identified as gay.

<p>Informants perceived a range of factors that increase young people’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ social and economic deprivation ▪ chaotic family backgrounds ▪ a history of sexual abuse ▪ low self-esteem ▪ a history of being in care ▪ disengagement from education. 	<p>Key indicators that triggered concerns included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ inappropriate relationships (usually with older partners) ▪ sudden changes in attitudes and behaviour ▪ unexplained money or gifts ▪ high levels of drug/alcohol use ▪ repeated missing incidents.
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Three factors emerged strongly as significantly increasing the vulnerability of young people to sexual exploitation:

- **Location and deprivation:** Anecdotal evidence from services and other indicators for sexual exploitation supported a higher level of risk for young people in Brighton, Crawley and the coastal towns of Eastbourne and Hastings. No evidence emerged of a street scene existing in any part of Sussex. Instead, organised prostitution – usually involving adult sex workers – was concentrated in flats and massage parlours in Brighton. A key risk indicator for sexual exploitation was deprivation, in association with living in particular areas such as the estates of Crawley, Eastbourne and East Brighton.
- **Looked-after children and those leaving care.** Concerns centred on their additional vulnerability caused by instability and frequent placement moves, chaotic family history and childhood abuse, an absence of caring consistent adults, increased levels of substance and alcohol use, repeat missing episodes and feelings of low self-worth. Practitioners expressed particular concerns about young people living in private fostering and residential care, about whom less is known.
- **Homeless and vulnerably-housed young people.** Vulnerability factors included histories of family breakdown, substance and alcohol use, disengagement from education and lack of social supports. Exchanging sex for somewhere to stay was a frequent form of sexual exploitation; services expressed concern that the true extent of youth homelessness was being hidden by a 'sofa surfing' culture, sometimes involving unspoken sex-for-shelter agreements. In Brighton and Hove, young migrants to the city, attracted by its reputation as 'London by the sea' and the opportunity to experience a vibrant gay culture, were being forced into risky situations because of a lack of affordable and appropriate accommodation.

3. Special focus areas

Three areas prioritised by the individual local authorities were investigated in more detail, with the aim of establishing levels of need and identifying barriers and opportunities for service provision:

- **Substance and alcohol misuse.** High levels of alcohol use were evident in urban centres and young people binge drinking on the streets of Brighton were reported to be at increased risk of physical and sexual assault. Many young people appeared to be introduced to Class A drugs through their relationships with older boyfriends. Substance use can act as a route into sexual exploitation, and evidence emerged of young people being coerced into sex by predatory adults in this way. Young people with experience of being in care presented particular cause for concern and were over-represented in relation to substance and alcohol use in the case studies.
- **Young men and boys.** Where services were aware of it, the sexual exploitation of young men was described as a hidden problem, and there was concern that the internet was driving the cruising scene underground so that vulnerable young men become harder for services to identify and to reach. Young men were regarded as difficult to engage with and reluctant to disclose exploitation, either because of feelings of embarrassment or shame, or from fear of being labelled as gay. Young men involved in or at risk of sexual exploitation tended to have a history of sexual abuse, family conflict or domestic violence. As described above, accommodation problems increased their vulnerability.
- **Young people at risk of trafficking.** This may involve exploitation through domestic slavery, benefit fraud or forced labour in addition to sexual exploitation. Any young person who has been trafficked is highly vulnerable, so the study was not limited to those at risk of sexual exploitation. The research addressed the level of practitioner awareness of trafficking, the key issues that arose in identifying and meeting the needs of trafficked children and how the trafficking agenda related to the wider pan Sussex safeguarding agenda. The identification of a young person as a victim of trafficking presents real challenges as young people are usually unaware of the process they are involved in, and may believe they are coming to the UK for work or education. They are therefore unlikely to show any signs of distress initially.

Fifty cases of suspected trafficking were reported and involved young people who had gone missing from children's services since January 2003. The majority were of Chinese origin, with others coming from Nigeria, Liberia and India. Most of the young people were identified as separated minors, and over half had gone missing within a week of arrival in the UK. Between January 2004 and August 2006, 36 young people at risk of trafficking went missing and at the time of the study, 30 were still missing. The case studies illustrate the considerable distress and confusion experienced by the young people, as well as the constraints under which they were forced to act.

4. Service responses to young people at risk of sexual exploitation

In December 2006, the three LSCBs launched pan-Sussex Child Protection and Safeguarding procedures, drawing on the Department of Health's guidance

Safeguarding Young People Involved in Prostitution (SCIP). The guidelines were developed by representatives from the three authorities in consultation with practitioners, and aimed to produce a consistent and effective response from all agencies in Sussex that contribute to the prevention, detection and investigation of abuse or neglect of children and young people. The procedures contain a dedicated section on children involved in prostitution.

Police

The Sussex procedures make explicit the role of the police in identifying and prosecuting adults involved in the coercion or abuse of a child or young person, and the importance of police collaboration in inter-agency work.

Police perceptions were that this was not an issue affecting young people in Sussex, and this was matched by an absence of prosecutions and data. Some police felt that this was unlikely to be indicative of the true level of incidence of sexual exploitation; its invisibility may be partly due to the absence of any obvious street sex-work scene.

Service providers expressed less confidence in the police response to sexual exploitation than in their response to child protection, and they also believed that the police exercised a less proactive response to young people over the age of 16 in relation to exploitation. The absence of data shows the current failure of IT systems effectively to identify and link risk indicators for missing young people or those believed to be at risk of trafficking. Twelve of the young people identified as being victims of sexual exploitation in this research were described as having been involved with the police. An additional seven young people had involvement with a Young Offenders Team and fourteen had a history of repeat missing incidents.

Children's services

The Sussex procedures state that referrals should be made to Children's Social Care or Child Protection Teams and a discussion held within 24 hours to determine whether the child is at risk of sexual exploitation and if immediate protective action is required.

Because of its low visibility, and the fact that it is rarely the primary issue, social workers tended to believe that the sexual exploitation of young people was not a major problem. This could be compounded by practitioners' low awareness of the associated risk indicators and a lack of services to support young people in the 14+ age group. Informants stated that, in practice, an age cut-off of 16 was applied, beyond which a child protection response was unlikely. However, practitioners outlined a range of concerns, including the vulnerability of young people with learning difficulties, under 16s who 'sofa-surf' with friends or older boyfriends, young single mothers living in temporary accommodation and vulnerable young men in specific locations (such as Brighton Pier).

There was some evidence that the guidelines given by the Sexual Offences Act (2003) had been used to identify exploitative relationships at an earlier stage because of the emphasis on the offence of grooming, but duty staff felt that most cases offered little hard evidence to take forward to the police.

Other agencies expressed frustration at the high threshold criteria for intervention, probably brought about by pressures on resources and resulting in a poor service response to young people over the age of 16, and in some cases, between the ages

of 14 and 16. We were told that this acted as a disincentive for other services to refer and further hid true levels of sexual exploitation.

Education

Teachers and other school staff have an important role in the identification of sexual exploitation given their close and regular contact with young people who may be at risk. Schools also have a preventative role in providing education through vehicles such as the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) curriculum. There was a low awareness of sexual exploitation among education professionals who contributed to the research, which could be explained in part by the 'visibility' issue as those at most risk may not be attending school.

Youth services and Connexions

Youth and Connexions services displayed a higher level of awareness of sexual exploitation. While sexual exploitation rarely presented as the primary issue, it typically emerged through discussions over a period of time once a relationship had been established. Youth Information Shops and Connexions provided effective direct access gateways for young people, through which they could be referred to more intensive support and statutory and housing services, if necessary.

Health

Many different health services engage with young people at risk, including school nurses, looked-after children's nurses, teenage pregnancy services and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and a higher level of awareness of sexual exploitation was evident amongst health professionals. Access to services emerged as a key issue, particularly with regard to sexual health services. Services that made special arrangements for young people, such as a walk-in clinic for under-18s in Brighton, seemed particularly successful in building relationships and helping young people exit exploitative situations, and indeed, saw this as part of their role. Under-resourcing limited the capacity of many health professionals, and also greatly undermined the preventative role of school nurses in particular.

We were told that young people being sexually exploited often express feelings of fear and shame as a result of their experiences, which can impact upon self-identity and esteem and cause nightmares, flashbacks and symptoms of depression. Staff felt that there was little support for practitioners in dealing with these issues. Long waiting lists and high threshold criteria were a barrier to young people accessing counselling through CAMHS services.

Voluntary sector

Voluntary services (substance misuse, counselling, drop-ins, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, adult sex worker and homelessness support) demonstrated a high awareness of sexual exploitation, because their roles allowed for more time to engage with young people and build trusting relationships which enabled them to disclose exploitation. However, funding is an ongoing problem for voluntary sector organisations, especially for counselling services forced to close due to lack of resources. Voluntary services identified the need for more street and outreach services to reach the most isolated and vulnerable young people.

5. Responding to young people at risk of trafficking

Sophisticated intelligence gathering from the Gatwick Border and Immigration Agency (BIA) and the development of profiling has greatly improved the identification of vulnerable young people who are at risk of trafficking. At Gatwick Airport, some 45 officers are trained in interviewing minors and awareness is high. Examples were provided of the success of co-ordinated activity between services and shared intelligence in disrupting trafficking activity and achieving prosecutions. The BIA maintains records of trends, numbers and origins of minors and of 'risky' sponsors meeting minors off flights and details of recurring addresses.

There is currently no police child protection presence at Gatwick; this would require several posts to ensure a 24-hour response, which is a considerable resource issue. Instead, local police child protection teams provided a child protection response. A detective sergeant and a specialist intelligence officer have recently been appointed for trafficking. The Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) team provides a high level of support for young people who are seeking asylum and have been identified as at risk of trafficking, and can arrange placement in safe accommodation and a full needs assessment, as well as development of a safety protection plan with the cooperation of the young person.

We heard from all agencies that great improvements have already been made in respect of meeting and identifying the needs of young people at risk of trafficking and this has mostly been brought about by improved inter-agency cooperation and increased partnership working. A new Gatwick Children's Team brings together the UASC and Unaccompanied Minors children's services into one comprehensive service to be based at the airport.

Despite the protection and support measures put in place, young people still go missing and this reflects the powerful leverage that traffickers have over the young people and/or their families.

C. Recommendations

The following recommendations are divided into two sections. The first is addressed to the collective LSCBs of East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove for the development of a county-wide approach to safeguarding young people involved in sexual exploitation and trafficking and are dependent on collaboration between those LSCBs. The second section describes arrangements that should be made at a local level to ensure an appropriate service response to the issues outlined.

Appendix One of the full report presents three alternative models for delivery based upon Barnardo's and other service providers' experience of delivery of anti-sexual exploitation services. These may assist the Sussex LSCBs with service planning and development.

Sussex-wide recommendations

LSCBs have responsibility for the strategic planning of services to safeguard children, for the development and dissemination of policies and procedures for prevention and protection, and for the monitoring of effectiveness of inter-agency arrangements to safeguard and protect the welfare of children.

1. The activities involved in the sexual exploitation and trafficking of vulnerable young people typically involve movement across geographical borders. This should be recognised by a coordinated and collective response from the LSCBs, involving the development of mechanisms for cross-authority information sharing and the pooling and dedication of resources where appropriate.
2. Given the likely movement of children between local authority boundaries, the Sussex LSCBs should look at the use of Contact Point to liaise with other local authorities, in order to improve responses to missing children.
3. The guidance contained in the pan Sussex safeguarding procedures should be revised to reflect the revision of the supplementary guidance to *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (SCIP guidance), and any new arrangements made as a result of these recommendations. Similarly, the new Sussex trafficking safeguarding procedures should reflect the government's supplementary guidance for the safeguarding of young people at risk of trafficking (published for consultation in July 2007) and the UK National Action Plan for the Prevention of Human Trafficking. Guidance and procedures addressing sexual exploitation and trafficking should clearly locate these issues within the child protection agenda.

Intelligence gathering

4. Successfully identifying the activities of traffickers and the perpetrators of sexual exploitation requires significant cooperation across both statutory and voluntary sectors. There should be a proactive and intelligence-led approach to policing and an emphasis on the prosecution of offenders, as well as a needs-led, properly resourced children's social services response that is able to prioritise the needs of 14 to 18 year olds.
5. Sussex Police should consider developing their current IT systems to improve the identification and collation of intelligence relating to the sexual exploitation and trafficking of young people. This should include adults who are known or believed to pose a risk to young people.
6. The issue of young people going missing has been strongly linked to an increased risk of sexual exploitation, and this is especially the case for young people in care and young people who are at risk of trafficking. The current enhancement of the Force Missing Person IT system should include the capability to help identify those young people who are considered at risk.

Missing children

7. The pan Sussex 'missing' protocol should be extended to address those reported missing from home; this would ensure that young people are able to access the appropriate support and help the police in the monitoring of missing episodes. This protocol should be incorporated into the pan Sussex safeguarding procedures;² it should include procedures for the risk assessment and reporting of missing episodes, and arrangements for interviews with young people on their return to establish if they are at risk and need further support. This initiative should be led by the Sussex Police and involve both statutory and voluntary sector services.

Communication and awareness

8. This research has identified a variety of issues that obscure the activities of sexual exploitation and trafficking and the needs of the young people involved in them. In order to increase the visibility and effectively 'surface' these issues, there should be an awareness-raising 'eyes and ears' campaign to improve public knowledge and alertness of these issues. Information should be specifically targeted at young people and preferably designed with their help; it should describe young people's rights in relation to sexual activity, highlight the dangers of becoming involved in sexual exploitation and provide contact details and a helpline number for the police and/or other supporting agencies.

² The pan London missing protocol may provide a useful for model for this development.

Recommendations for local authority children's service departments

9. The issues of sexual exploitation, trafficking and missing young people should be incorporated into the local needs assessment that informs the Children and Young People's Service Plan (CYPSP) within each Children's Trust.
10. Within each local authority a strategy should be developed to engage organisations and agencies working with young people across all sectors, in order to raise awareness and coordinate proactive safeguarding activity. This should make clear links to existing structures and frameworks for inter-agency working within children's trusts, such as the Common Assessment Framework. It should also link clearly with other key strategies that aim to provide early intervention and improve outcomes for young people, such as targeted youth support, the teenage pregnancy strategy, alcohol reduction strategies, the drugs strategy, the local homelessness strategy and the prostitution strategy. It should also take account of the programmes for vulnerable young people being developed by the Youth Justice Board and Connexions.
11. Services engaging with vulnerable young people should explore the possibilities for developing appropriate data management systems for the identification of sexual exploitation and provide that information to the Sussex Police on a regular basis.
12. Barnardo's experience has been that there is a need for dedicated and targeted services for young people at risk of sexual exploitation. These should be based on proven approaches to the intervention and support of these young people. The Barnardo's '4 A's' (Access, Attention, Assertive outreach and Advocacy) is one such evaluated model that might inform this development.³

Education and training

13. The Sex Education Forum has recently published guidance entitled *Addressing healthy relationships and sexual exploitation within PSHE in schools* (NCB and Sex Education Forum. Factsheet no. 37). LSCBs should encourage schools to incorporate this in the PSHE curriculum as part of a wider programme giving advice about safe and equal relationships.
14. Standard child protection training should include the risk indicators for, and appropriate responses to, the sexual exploitation and trafficking of young people, in addition to those of familial abuse.
15. Each LSCB should ensure that its training programme includes training for partner agencies providing universal services, especially health and education services, youth services, counselling services and accommodation providers regarding the risk indicators and appropriate service responses to these issues, as well as information about the Sexual Offences Act 2003. More targeted training should be provided for services providing specialist support services to vulnerable young people such as YOTs or substance misuse services.

Vulnerable groups

16. This research has clearly identified certain groups of young people that are more vulnerable to and at risk of sexual exploitation. These include:
 - young people living in both rural and city areas linked to deprivation
 - young people who are in care, including private fostering and residential care and care leavers
 - young people who are homeless or living in temporary accommodation
 - young people who misuse substances and alcohol.
17. The risk indicators for sexual exploitation should be clearly communicated to services supporting these groups. In addition, these services should:
 - introduce screening techniques to ensure that concerns about individual young people are highlighted and their needs properly assessed.
 - develop close informal links with the Sussex Police in order to ensure soft information exchange, to highlight issues and keep young people safe.
 - be able to assist young people in identifying and accessing the appropriate support services.

Full report available from www.barnardos.org.uk/tipping_the_iceberg

³ Scott and Skidmore, 2006