



**The
Children's
Society**

Boys Don't Cry

**Improving identification and disclosure of sexual exploitation
among boys and young men trafficked to the UK**

Executive Summary
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By Lucy Leon and Phil Raws



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Introduction

Official figures on the scale of child trafficking suggest that it has increased by 55% between 2012 and 2014.¹ During the same period the number of boys and young men recorded as having been trafficked has more than doubled. In 2014, 2,340 potential victims (including 671 children and young people aged under 18) were referred in to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)², although the Home Office (which manages the NRM) itself believes

that there may be 10,000–13,000 victims in the UK.³

These figures offer some indication of the scale of trafficking and the Government acknowledged its significance with the introduction of Modern Slavery Act in 2015 – but there remains a danger that attention and action will focus on some aspects of the phenomenon to the detriment of others.

One concern is a lack of understanding of the experiences of trafficking and sexual exploitation amongst boys and young men. This research provides some initial findings on this to start a broader debate and makes practice and policy recommendations to better support this group.

Description of the research project

This research, commissioned by Comic Relief and the Samworth Foundation – alongside their funding of a pilot service⁴ to support trafficked boys and young men in London – was undertaken with a number of key aims, including to find out more about how many boys and young men are sexually exploited, to identify barriers to self-identification of sexual exploitation and to look at how practitioners could better support disclosure.

To do this, a brief review of literature was conducted, semi-structured interviews with 22 professional stakeholders (eg from the police, social care, the voluntary sector and legal services) were undertaken, and seven case studies were collected through review of case files from The Children's Society.

A full report on the study is available on The Children's Society's website.⁵

¹National Crime Agency: National Referral Mechanism statistics (2014)

²The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the framework set up for identifying victims of human trafficking and slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate protection and support.

³<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modern-slavery-an-application-of-multiple-systems-estimation>

⁴<http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-children/trafficking-services>

⁵<http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/publications-library>

Key Findings

The scale of sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men

Published research has mostly focused on trafficking and sexual exploitation of females, and little is known about the experiences of boys and young men (Friedman and Willis, 2013).

In the NRM figures, cases of boys trafficked where there had been a disclosure of sexual exploitation formed a small minority: 16 (or around 1 in 20) of all trafficked young males in 2014. However it has been acknowledged that available figures on child trafficking are likely to be an underestimate. This is for many reasons, including that victims tend to be controlled and hidden away and that children in particular may not understand what has happened to them (and may trust or, in some instances, be related to their traffickers). There is also evidence to suggest that this is compounded for boys because they are less likely to be identified as having been trafficked, and because the type of exploitation they have suffered is rarely known (CEOP, 2007; Pearce et al, 2009).

Some of the professionals interviewed for the research had worked directly with trafficked boys or young men, and gave examples of the reticence they had shown to disclosing that they had been sexually exploited:

'With boys, it's much, much more difficult to get any information in relation to sexual assaults on them. Particularly for boys from other continents like Africa and Asia, it is very difficult to talk about any kind of sexual assault on them.'

Police Officer

These issues, combined with the more general known difficulties around identifying sexual exploitation among young people, especially boys (Lilywhite and Skidmore, 2007; Cockbain et al, 2014), suggest that there may be a significant number of trafficked boys and young men who have been sexually exploited.

Some of the professionals who were interviewed also noted the importance of considering young people who self-identify as being transgender (male to female) in work around sexual exploitation of trafficked young men. Information on transgender young people who have been trafficked is scarce. The NRM statistics have only recently included a specific category for 'transgender', reporting two cases of transgender victims of trafficking and exploitation in 2014.

Barriers to disclosure of sexual exploitation

Interviewees for the study described two main types of barrier to trafficked young men disclosing sexual exploitation. The first of these related to the norms and cultural values which they had – for example, one specialist practitioner from a trafficking service explained that:

'For young men, there is more sense of shame, their manhood is diminished – and if they are from a more religious background, it could feel like it has gone against all their religious beliefs.'

Other interviewees said that some young men did not want to be seen as being victims or that their sexual abuse may have become normalised as part of their journey towards a better life. Some professionals indicated that taboos around sex and homosexuality played a part in deterring young men from disclosing:

'There is often confusion and stigma ie "if I have been raped by a man that must mean I am gay". That can be quite difficult for young men.'

Solicitor

The second set of barriers described by interviewees was due to systemic issues. These included a lack of awareness among professionals about trafficking and sexual exploitation, and gendered expectations about sexual exploitation. As one worker explained:

'Professionals need to look at cases in more detail. [I had] one example of a young person who had been brought over to the UK by his "boyfriend" but none of the professionals had asked what the age difference was, or questioned whether it had been an appropriate relationship.'

Migrant Children Subject Specialist

Interviewees talked about how the short timescale for some intervention work with young people could inhibit disclosure, and how the insensitivity of the legal process for applying for asylum offered little support for disclosure. Some also spoke of the pervasiveness of negative attitudes towards young people who may have been trafficked:

'The general culture of disbelief is something that permeates lots of different organisations, especially social services, even more than the Home Office. The attitude, the kind of questions, the tone of voice, are often to try and catch people out. It's really shocking. Young people feel massively alienated.'

Trafficked Young Person's Adviser

Features of the sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men

The majority of professionals agreed that sexual exploitation of boys rarely happened as the only form of exploitation. They explained that boys were seen

by traffickers as being more versatile than girls, able to be exploited in a variety of ways (through forced labour, forced criminality or domestic servitude, and sometimes these things in combination). Several of the case studies evidenced how boys and young men initially presented as having experienced labour exploitation or forced criminality and it was not until months later, once they had established a trusting relationship with a worker, that they disclosed the sexual exploitation element.

Sexual exploitation was sometimes regarded by traffickers as an additional way to gain profit by maximising the income they could make out of their victims.

In some cases the boys concerned had been subject to sexual exploitation during their journey to the UK, as well as after arrival. Sexual abuse had been used as a form of ongoing repression and control employed by traffickers to prevent escape or detection.

Worryingly, the criminalisation of boys and young men – for activities they had been forced into as part of their exploitation – had sometimes shifted the focus of interventions away from inquiry into potential trafficking or sexual exploitation, towards a criminal justice response.



Effective work with trafficked boys and young men who may have been sexually exploited

Core principles

Analysis of the professional stakeholder interviews revealed a core set of principles for effective practice with young men who may have been sexually exploited.

These were:

- taking time
- building trust
- having patience
- providing consistency and stability of input from the professionals working with a young person
- working in a safe environment, being flexible and employing a variety of activities.

There was also a need for workers to work in a way that was self-assured and empathetic.

Developing interventions

Specific issues identified by practitioners to consider when developing interventions included:

- the need for a detailed initial assessment
- the benefits of introducing the topic of sexual health and healthy relationships in one-to-one work
- ensuring access to specialist trauma services that can meet boys and young men's particular needs
- including empowerment work around self-esteem and confidence, focusing on acknowledging young people's strengths, resilience and abilities – to help them regain control of their lives and restore the decision-making capacity they may feel they have lost
- remembering the importance of peer support networks and including or linking to youth groups which can offer a sense of belonging, as well as a chance to experience healthy relationships, including healthy conflict.

Wider systems improvements

Interviewees also stressed that interventions to support boys and young men in relation to sexual exploitation were dependent on wider improvements in systems and support for trafficked young men in general such as:

- the provision of more safe accommodation (in the short term the main tool to prevent young people from going missing but also a way 'to bring some stability and to prevent any further criminalisation')
- the promotion of good information sharing and inter-agency working.

Several interviewees also highlighted the strength of the child trafficking advocate model (which was piloted in 2014–2015) where an independent adult acts as a consistent and trusted adult for a trafficked young person, guiding them through complex legal systems, liaising with all the different professionals in their lives and helping them to build a network of support.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated something of the scale of sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men – but also highlighted the degree to which this is hidden and currently unknowable, partly because of the limited number of trafficked young men who are engaged with support services and their reticence to disclose their experiences.

It also revealed a deep concern about the extreme vulnerability of trafficked boys and young men to sexual exploitation, and about the failure to appropriately consider their needs in the development of policy and practice.

To improve this situation policymakers and professionals must respond better to the sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men. For many this means heightened awareness of the indicators which may point to sexual exploitation. And for specialists working directly with potentially trafficked boys and young men it begins with sensitivity to the messages that individuals may only give piecemeal, indirectly or gradually about the exploitation they have experienced:

'I don't feel disclosure is always essential. I don't think we need the full story all the time. Sometimes you just need to be able to pick up on clues, which can help you work with the young person to help them to feel safe...sometimes professionals can get obsessed with getting disclosure... [but] you can still do good preventative work around safety and risk with a young person without an official disclosure, and that work in turn can help facilitate disclosure in the long term.'

Trafficking Practitioner

For these workers, and those who entrust the care and safeguarding of children to them, it also means having the confidence that their intervention can improve a young man's life. This confidence will only come about when practitioners know that there are services and other forms of assistance available to ensure that boys and young men will be safe, secure and able to thrive after making a disclosure.

Key recommendations

Evidence from the research has informed a set of key recommendations as to what needs to change to facilitate the identification of sexual exploitation of boys and young men who have been trafficked, or to increase the chances of victims making disclosures to professionals in the field:

- 1.** Local authorities, the police, the Home Office, health workers and schools need to invest in training for frontline staff and managers. This will improve their understanding of the situations faced by trafficked boys and young men, including the possibility they are (or have been) experiencing sexual exploitation, in order to recognise indicators earlier and provide better support.
- 2.** Practitioners supporting young people who have been trafficked, as well as other young refugees and migrants, should ensure they are trained in recognising the indicators of sexual exploitation, that they are aware that boys as well as girls may have experienced this form of exploitation, and that they may have experienced sexual exploitation amongst other forms of exploitation.
- 3.** The Government should make provision for an independent legal guardian for all separated children – including potential victims of trafficking – to ensure that every child receives the continuous care they need and is able to build a relationship with a trusted adult. This would facilitate disclosure of sexual exploitation for many boys and young men by guaranteeing the consistent support of one adult throughout their childhood. It could be done by extending the child trafficking advocate model nationally to all separated children.⁶
- 4.** Access to specialist mental health provision for children who have experienced trauma should be guaranteed – too often trauma victims, including victims of sexual exploitation, do not get the support they need to recover from their experiences. This may be particularly important in helping boys and young men to overcome feelings of shame associated with their exploitation.
- 5.** Local authorities, the police and the Home Office need to be trained in using a trauma-informed approach to ensure that interviews of vulnerable young people about their experiences of sexual abuse and rape are conducted in a sensitive manner and that appropriate adults are consistently provided.

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⁶The Child Trafficking Advocates service was piloted in 2014–2015 in certain local authorities and was only offered to young people that professionals suspected may have been trafficked. This assumes that the young person has already been identified as having been trafficked, a situation which, as the research has shown, will often not be the case.

It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect.

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs crucial local services and campaigns to change the law to help this country's most vulnerable children and young people.

Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children and young people they are on their side.

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For the full report go to childrenssociety.org.uk/publications

For more information on this report, please contact:

Lucy Leon

Service Manager – Trafficking, The Children's Society

e: lucy.leon@childrenssociety.org.uk

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Names used in this report have been changed to maintain anonymity. All photographs posed by models.

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