

Findings:

- In **1 in 5** cases of rape and sexual assault against children reported to the police the victim is male
- In 70% of reported offences of rape and sexual assault against boys under 18 the victim's age is recorded as being under 13. In comparison, only 40% of reported offences of sexual assault and rape where the victim was a girl under 18 have the victims age as being under 13. These numbers may indicate that older boys are less likely to report offences against them to the police.
- Reported rape and sexual assault offences against males aged 13 to 15 are slightly higher than the proportion of boys of that age in the male child population. This is in sharp contrast to distribution of offences against girls – the proportion of offences of rape and sexual assault where victims are females 13-17 is much higher than the proportion of girls of these ages in the female child population.

Recommendations:

- The training and recruitment of police officers and staff who work with victims of sexual offences should take account the demographics of victims, for example for conducting Achieving Best Evidence interviews (ABE) and liaising with victims.
- The analysis of the numbers of reported sexual offences by victim's age and gender should inform the commissioning and availability of therapeutic support to help children of different ages recover from trauma.
- Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and police forces need to monitor gender and age distribution in reported sexual offences and outcomes to ensure that appropriate support is provided.
- Greater awareness of sexual abuse of boys is needed and clear referral pathways to support available for boys, particularly within the context of criminal exploitation.

Introduction

A child or a young person of any gender can become a victim of sexual offence. Yet, many policies and activities to tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse are traditionally more focussed on girls. One example of this is the government strategy on tackling violence against women and girls that has been implemented in recent years.

The prevalence of sexual offending against boys is not fully understood. UK-based studies that focused on CSE found that males made up between 11% (NWG Network, 2010) and 29% (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), 2011) of known or suspected victims.

A review of the sexual exploitation of boys conducted by Barnardo's highlighted a number of tendencies in sexual offending against boys such as: boys coming to attention of services at younger age than female, complex links between sexual abuse and offending, boys who are disabled and those who identify as LGBTQ being more at risk of sexual abuse. It also highlighted that perpetrators of sexual abuse against boys could be older males as well as females in positions of trusts in relation to their victims¹.

Research from The Children's Society, *Boy's Don't Cry*ⁱⁱ, highlighted how little is known about the experiences of trafficked boys and young men in London. A lack of understanding of the experiences of trafficking and sexual exploitation amongst boys and young men was identified. In the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)ⁱⁱⁱ figures, cases of boys trafficked where sexual exploitation had occurred formed a small minority (around 1 in 20) of all trafficked young males in 2014. However, it was acknowledged that these figures are likely to be underestimated as multiple barriers stand in the way of young boys being identified as victims of CSE. Moreover, it was found that sexual exploitation of boys rarely happens in isolation, with young boys are frequently exploited in a range of different ways

There are many commonalities in how sexual abuse of children of both genders happens. Both boys and girls, who have other vulnerabilities, such as those experiencing conflict and violence at home, going missing or using substances, are specifically targeted. Research suggests, though, that safeguarding professionals often overlook signs of a male child being at risk of sexual abuse due to the lack of awareness of sexual abuse of boys and particularly of adolescent boys.

Practitioners also report that boys often do not seek help themselves due to societal pressure on boys to be seen as strong, able to protect themselves and not to complain. They may only come to the attention of services because of their own offending behaviour and what would be treated as sexual abuse in the case of female victim is often not seen as such if the victim is male.

Reports from practitioners suggest that where support services are open to children of both genders, female child victims of sexual offences are more likely to be referred into services unless the services specifically raise awareness among local professionals of sexual abuse of boys and help them understand indicators of risk.

Case study of Craig¹

Craig, **16**, came to attention of The Children's Society's services because he was going missing on a regular basis. Some missing episodes span several months. Through one to one work it was established that Craig was going missing because he was exploited by adults to deal drugs. It was suspected that he was made to transport drugs in a way that amounted to sexual abuse – by 'plugging' drugs in his rectum. In addition, he was often found in CSE hotspots.

¹ Not his real name

Despite clear indicators that Craig was exploited, the statutory agencies' interventions with Craig predominantly focussed on drug dealing which was interpreted as offending behaviour. He was made subject to YOT orders. Due to his missing episodes, he was also always in breach of YOT orders, which then meant he received longer YOT orders with more and more requirements.

Craig's experiences of exploitation, criminal and sexual, surfaced only when The Children's Society's worker in one to one work started to explore with Craig his experiences while he was missing, things he witnessed while away from home and the reasons behind his missing episodes. Helping him find the way to talk about these issues gave him an opportunity to raise issues and make a disclosure to the police. The need for therapeutic support was discussed with Craig and he was supported into a positive creative activity as a way of addressing feelings he had about his experiences.

At the time of the case study, Craig was in custody for breach of order. However, positive plans have been made for his release.

Reflecting on this story the practitioner working with Craig noted:

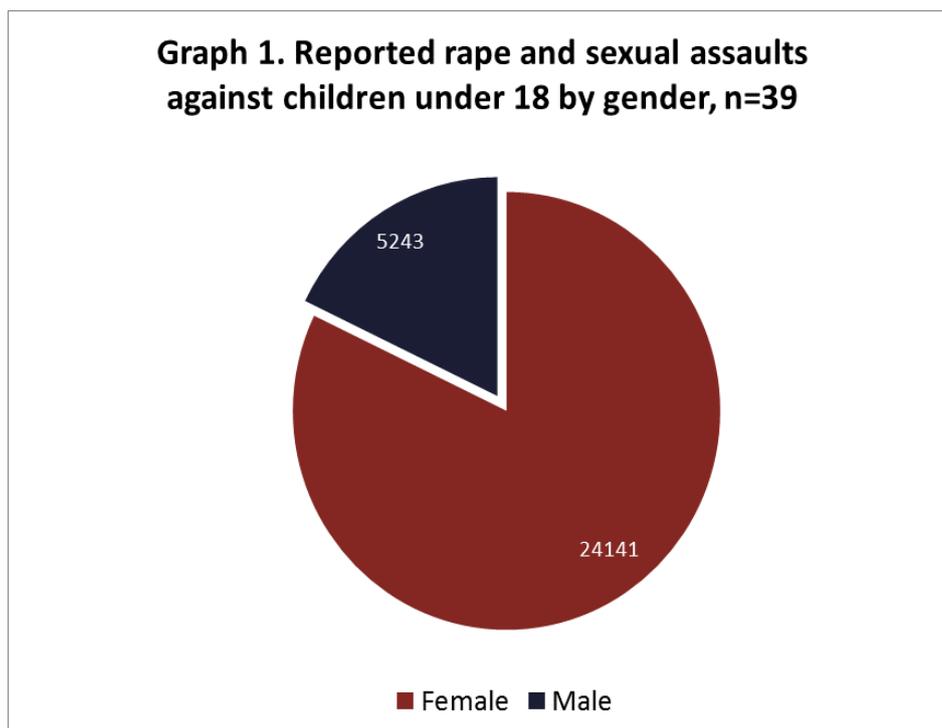
'When I first attended the strategy meeting it was evident that his offending behaviour was the priority and he often was viewed as making 'choices' about his exploitation. I feel this case shows why boys may not come forward to disclose- they are criminalised, they are not given opportunity to explore their experiences, they are not given opportunity to be removed from their exploitation. His breaches were often directly linked to his exploitation, due to his offending it was more around what placement would take him. Boys are not given opportunity to report their experiences to police and often are not seen as vulnerable as girls. If a girl was missing for 3 months I feel professionals would have been more concerned.'

Our FOI to police forces which covered a year ending 31 September 2016 asked police forces about the number of offences reported to them of rape and sexual assault by gender and by the victim's age, focusing on three age groups – children under 13, children aged 13 to 15 and children aged 16 and 17.

The age groupings reflect how the Sexual Offences Act 2003 approaches the issue of sexual offending against children in sexual activity and how some data is currently collected by police forces^{ivv}.

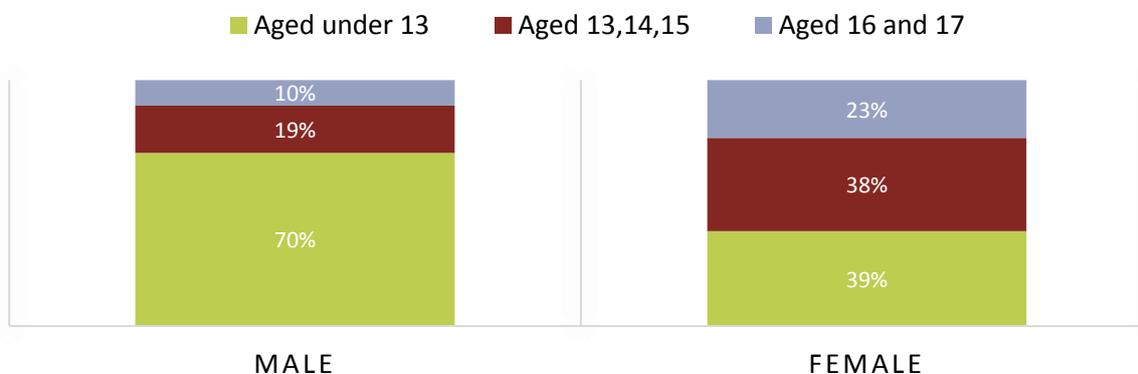
Findings

The FOI responses show that just over 1 in 5 victims of rape and sexual assaults offences reported to the police where the victim's age was under 18 was male.



The data tells us that in around 70% of cases of rape and sexual assault against boys under the age of 18, the victim's age was under 13, as compared to just under 40% in reported offences of rape and sexual assault against girls under the age of 18 (see Graph 2). Further research is needed to understand these findings. These numbers may reflect anecdotal evidence that we hear from practitioners that adolescent boys are less likely to be seen as victims of sexual abuse and therefore may be less likely to disclose these crimes to the police. They may also indicate that boys under the age of 13 are more likely to become a victim of rape or sexual abuse while sexual offending against teenage girls is more predominant.

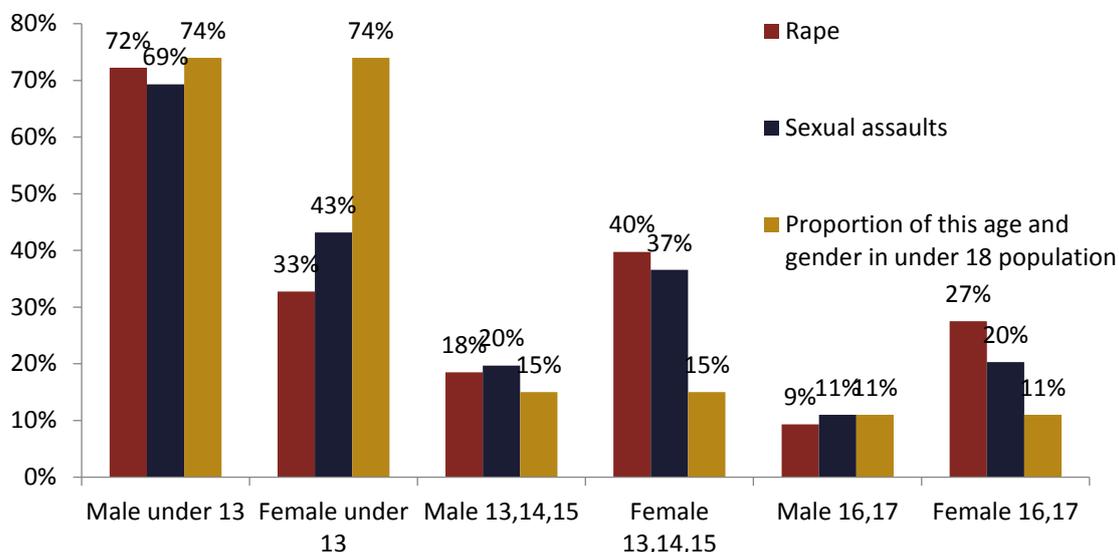
Graph 2. Distribution of reported offences of rape and sexual assault by age groups and gender, n=39



If the numbers of reported crimes are compared to the proportion of children in different age groups and gender in the child population, they show that reported rape and sexual assault offences against males 13 to 15 are slightly higher than the proportion of boys of that age in the male child population. This is in sharp contrast to distribution of offences against girls – the proportion of offences of rape and sexual assault

where victims are females 13-17 is much higher than the proportion of girls of these ages in the female child population. (See Graph 3).

Graph 3. Distribution of reported rape and sexual offences against children by age groups and gender as compared to the age groups' proportion in child population, n=39



Further research is needed to understand these findings better. The possible explanations for such distribution of offences by gender can include different levels of offending against children by their age, and gender or different levels of confidence to report crimes that are determined by the victims age or gender. The findings do highlight that the police and PCCs need to consider age and gender distribution in reported sexual offences to ensure correct level of support through investigations and to help with recovery.

This data may need to be considered in the context of adequate staff of both genders, and skills staff need to have to work with children of different ages and different gender, for example for conducting ABE interviews (Achieving Best Evidence) and liaising with victims. Young people who have been involved through our projects often speak of the importance of being able to choose a police person of the same gender when making disclosure and how that choice is often not available, making disclosure more traumatic and upsetting. The data also suggests that there is a need to raise awareness among safeguarding professional of sexual abuse of boys to ensure better identification and earlier support to prevent the risks to boys escalating.

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ⁱ Barnardo's report on boys as victims of CSE
ⁱⁱ The Children's Society, *Boy's Don't Cry* (2016)
ⁱⁱⁱ The 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
^{iv} MOJ guidance on police data recording
^v Sexual Offences Act 2003