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# Child Sexual Exploitation - A National Threat? – Bernard Gallagher



## Introduction: Child Sexual Exploitation – the latest ‘scandal’

Child protection has, over the past three to four decades in the UK, been dominated by ‘scandals’. These scandals include ‘Cleveland’, ‘Baby P’, ‘Soham’, abuse in the Catholic church and in children’s homes, abuse by Jimmy Savile and other celebrities, and by politicians (Morrison, 2016). One of the most recent of these scandals concerns child sexual exploitation (CSE). CSE is, according to the Department for Education (DfE, 2017), ‘a form of child sexual abuse’ but one where:

*an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. (p.5)*

*There has been massive media coverage, particularly during the last ten years or so, of major CSE cases in various parts of the country, including Bradford, Bristol, Coventry, Oxfordshire, Peterborough, Rochdale, Rotherham and Sussex (Meyer, 2015).*

There has been massive media coverage, particularly during the last ten years or so, of major CSE cases in various parts of the country, including Bradford, Bristol, Coventry, Oxfordshire, Peterborough, Rochdale, Rotherham and Sussex (Meyer, 2015).

## Criticisms of agencies

What appears to have most stoked the ire of large sections of the media - and many politicians - however, is not the experiences of victims but the alleged failings on the part of agencies, especially police and social services (Gill and Harrison, 2015). This opprobrium reached its peak, perhaps, with publication of the ‘Jay Report’, in 2014, on the response to concerns of CSE in, and around, the South Yorkshire town of Rotherham. Jay (2014) claimed that staff from a whole host of agencies had ‘failed’ children and young people (CYP). Political leaders, senior managers and practitioners were accused of ignoring or minimising widespread reports of CSE, and of embarking upon ineffectual investigations.

*Over the first twelve years covered by this [i]nquiry, the collective failures of political and officer leadership were blatant.*

*From the beginning, there was growing evidence that child sexual exploitation was a serious problem in Rotherham. This came from those working in residential care and from youth workers who knew the young people well. Within social care, the scale and seriousness of the problem was underplayed by senior managers. At an operational level, the [p]olice gave no priority to CSE, regarding many child victims with contempt and failing to act on their abuse as a crime. (p.1)*

This media furore has led, in turn, to a surge in anxiety over, and efforts to address, the problem of CSE, on the part of national and local politicians, and a host of statutory, voluntary and other agencies.

## Policy responses

The government has initiated a raft of measures, which include:

- guidance to a range of authorities on how they should tackle CSE (DfE, 2017)
- establishment of a *Child Sexual Exploitation Response Unit* (NWG, 2016) (which has instigated a *National Child Sexual Exploitation Awareness Day*)
- provision of an extra £10 million to the National Crime Agency’s *Child Exploitation & Online Protection* (CEOP) command ‘to nearly double their investigative capability’ (Home Office, 2017b, p.4)
- support for the setting up of a *CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub* (2016) (funded by the Home Office, the College of Policing and the Higher Education Funding Council for England)
- release of a ‘progress report’ on its own ‘achievements’ in addressing

### Practice initiatives

Changes in the practice response to CSE are most evident in the police, who have adopted a far more robust approach to the prevention, disruption and investigation of CSE (Home Office, 2017a). Practitioners from across the child safeguarding spectrum have been increasing their knowledge and skills, through dedicated courses, conferences and other training opportunities (Beckett *et al.*, 2014). There have also been numerous efforts by statutory organisations to ensure that a range of workers in the private sector - such as hoteliers, retailers and transport providers - are aware of the risk of CSE (see, for example, KNOW & SEE THE SIGNS, 2017 (Figure 1); and the 'zero tolerance of CSE' policy of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, 2017).

The University of Bedfordshire has set up an 'International Centre' for the purposes of 'increasing understanding of, and improving responses to, child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking' (University of Bedfordshire, 2017).

### Service users

A number of voluntary organisations have been set up to represent not only parents and carers of CSE victims (see, for example, Parents Against Child Sexual Exploitation, PACE, 2017) but also CSE survivors themselves (see, for example, REIGN Manchester, 2017).

### 'A national threat'

This dramatic escalation in fears over, and attempts to deal with, CSE could be seen as having reached some sort of crescendo with former prime minister David Cameron's announcement – driven largely by the CSE 'scandals'

experienced by victims of CSE and appalled by the failure of anyone in authority not to have done their utmost to protect these CYP. It is also the case, however, that many of those familiar with child protection - and more particularly the array of contexts in which children are maltreated – may be perplexed by the massive and unprecedented attention that has been directed at just one category of child maltreatment. I, for one, am perplexed and believe that the following critical questions have to be asked: Just how serious is CSE? and Is the current response to CSE proportionate?

The answers to these questions are, of course, heavily dependent on the criteria selected to measure 'seriousness'; a matter that is inevitably quite subjective. There are, though, three criteria that, arguably, most, if not all people, would agree are central to gauging the seriousness of CSE. These comprise the extent of CSE, the nature of the abuse to which victims are subject and the impact of this abuse on victims.

### The extent of CSE and other child maltreatment

There are numerous CSE reports that discuss the extent of this problem. Most of these reports - whether based on the number of victims, offenders or 'cases' - tend to suggest that CSE is a substantial challenge. The Children's Commissioner (England) found that '2,409 children were confirmed as victims of sexual exploitation in gangs and groups during the 14-month period from August 2010 to October 2011' and a further '16,500 children were identified as being at risk of child sexual exploitation during one year' (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2012, p. 9). Berelowitz *et al.* went on to add that 'in any given year the actual number of children being abused is far greater than the 2,409 that have been confirmed'. Alexis Jay (2014) revealed that, in Rotherham alone, 'our conservative estimate is that approximately 1400 children were sexually exploited over the full Inquiry period, from 1997 to 2013' (p. 29).

Figure 1. Transport-provider oriented anti-CSE campaign



Courtesy of Cheshire Constabulary ©

### Research

The concern over CSE has also resulted in a wave of research-based and more general publications from, among others, Barnardo's, the Children's Commissioner, the government and countless academics. The government, for instance, released three research reports on CSE in March 2017 alone (HM Government, 2017).

– that child sexual abuse (CSA) should be seen as 'a national threat' (Cameron, 2015) – which led some commentators to conclude that the government saw CSE as 'equivalent to terrorism' (Holehouse, 2015).

### Evaluating the relative seriousness of CSE

Most people are horrified by the abuse

Although such figures should be a source of much concern, it has to be recognised that there is a dearth of **reliable** information on the extent of CSE. All existing studies are based largely, if not exclusively, on 'known' cases and are, methodologically-speaking, of variable quality. There has not - as far as this author is aware - been any rigorous prevalence (i.e. population – based) study of CSE. There are, though, certain more general types of data that can provide some insight into the relative and absolute scale of CSE.

As part of its 2016 audit of children who had been assessed by children's social care as being 'in need' (under section 17 of the Children Act 1989), the DfE included an analysis of the major 'factors' (i.e. adversities) that had been identified in these children's lives (Table 1 - selected factors). Child safeguarding is, according to the most recent figures, dominated by the 'toxic trio' (Brandon et al., 2008) of (parental) domestic violence (49.6% of assessed 'episodes'), mental health (36.6%), and drug (19.3%) and alcohol misuse (18.4%). The most common form of maltreatment experienced by these children was emotional abuse (19.3%). CSA was a factor in a much small proportion of cases (6.4%) and CSE in a smaller proportion still (3.9%).

**Table 1 'Factors' in the lives of children assessed as being 'in need' (as a proportion of all episodes assessed by children's social care in England (1st Apr 2015 - 31st March 2016) (DfE, 2016)**

Factor	Episodes (%)
Domestic violence	49.6
Mental health	36.6
Drug misuse	19.3
Emotional abuse	19.3
Alcohol misuse	18.4
Neglect	17.5
Physical abuse	14.0
Sexual abuse	6.4
Child sexual exploitation	3.9

The above analysis, it has to be acknowledged, is also based upon 'known' cases and, as such, it is subject to the same limitations as were outlined for the above CSE reports. There are, though, a number of child maltreatment prevalence surveys that can also help in assessing the scale of CSE in a wider and more meaningful context. The most recent of these is the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2016). Participants, aged 16-59 years and drawn from the general population, were asked whether they had experienced certain major types of maltreatment (excluding neglect) before the age of 16 years. Although the survey revealed that 7% of the sample had experienced 'sexual assault' (which would likely have covered a very wide array of criminal scenarios), it also found that 9% of participants experienced 'psychological abuse' and 7% 'physical abuse' and that 8% had 'witnessed domestic violence'. In another study, Lorraine Radford and colleagues reported, via the NSPCC prevalence survey, that 16% of young adults had experienced neglect as children, perpetrated by their parent or guardian (Radford et al., 2011). Given that there are approximately 15 million CYP in the UK, this means that roughly 2.4 million of today's CYP will experience child neglect.

The strong indications, from all of the above figures, in terms of just some of the adversities that CYP have to face, are that: CSE is a relatively rare phenomenon; CSA is more common; and other child maltreatment and the 'toxic trio' are far more common still.

***The nature of CSE and other child maltreatment***

Although I have made the above points about the extent of CSE, I fully accept the argument, put by Alexis Jay (2014), that when assessing the seriousness of CSE, the focus should not be only on the scale of the problem; account also has to be taken of the experiences of victims.

Child victims of sexual exploitation make up a tiny proportion of contacts and referrals to children's social care, but they constitute a very significant proportion of the children at risk of serious injury and harm. (p.29)

It is evident that victims of CSE can be exposed to horrendous abuse. They may, in addition to being sexually abused – sometimes by multiple perpetrators - be subject to abduction, physical and psychological abuse, be given alcohol and illicit drugs, and be threatened and intimidated to deter them from disclosing their experiences (Beckett et al., 2013).

Again, though, and sadly, there are countless CYP who are subject to equally appalling maltreatment, be this in the context of emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect, or some combination of these. Four year old Hamzah Khan, for example, was starved to death by his mother at his home in Bradford (Bradford Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2013); 8 year old Victoria Climbié was burnt with cigarettes, beaten with a bicycle chain, and forced to sleep in her own urine and excrement, inside a bin liner and inside a bath (Laming, 2003); and the torture that 18 month 'Baby P' (Peter Connelly) endured included having his fingertips cut off and his nails pulled out (Gammell and Beckford, 2009).

***The consequences of CSE and other child maltreatment***

And, finally, the seriousness of CSE can also be assessed by the impact it has on its victims. It is clear that CSE can have devastating effects on the emotional, physical, psychological and social well-being of CYP (Christie, 2013; Firmin, 2010). Once, again, however, there are many, many, cases of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect, where CYP experience equally 'serious injury and harm'.

Some cases of CSE - mostly, it

appears, those where young people have first been contacted and then groomed via digital technology - have ended with the murder of the young people concerned, as was the case, for instance, with Ashleigh Hall (Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), 2010) and Breck Bednar (IPCC, 2014). I am not aware of any figures for the total number of CYP deaths through CSE, but my impression is that they are - thankfully - extremely low. By contrast, approximately three children are killed each month by their parents, in England and Wales, according to ONS data (Dorman and Fifield, 2016). The age group most at risk of 'serious injury' and death, through child abuse, is infants under the age of 12 months (Davies et al., 2015).

### So, just how serious is CSE?

However, it would be wrong, and would miss the point, to conclude that estimations of the seriousness of CSE - and the scale of the responses to CSE that have followed on from these estimations - are exaggerated. CSE is an extremely serious problem and it needs the most robust response possible. The point is, rather, not that the seriousness rating of, or the approach to, CSE should be downgraded but rather that all forms or manifestations of child maltreatment should receive the same enhanced level of concern and attention that have been given to CSE. To put it another way, there is, in my opinion, no case for escalating CSE above much more prevalent and equally harmful forms of child maltreatment as seems to have been the case in some media, political and other quarters.

This response to CSE prevails, moreover, in a context where resources available to tackle child maltreatment more generally are dwindling. Instances of this decline abound but one potent - and poignant - example is provided through school nursing. The government has, amongst its flurry of CSE outputs, issued a 'pathway' to help school nurses better tackle CSE

(Department of Health and Public Health England, 2015). School nurses are, moreover, increasingly being seen as a key service in the response to CSA more generally. However, the Royal College of Nursing has revealed that 'the number of NHS school nursing posts has plummeted by 13% since 2010 to just 2,606' (Ford, 2016).

### Conclusion - Protecting children everywhere

The theme lying at the heart of this article is that we should not focus upon just one group of CYP (who are experiencing one particular form of child maltreatment) but must, instead, be concerned about all CYP who are at risk of harm. And this does not apply only to children living in the UK.

We are becoming ever more aware of the plight of children in numerous conflict zones and other disaster areas across the globe - Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Myanmar, North Sudan, South Sudan and Syria, to name but a few. The scale and depth of these children's needs could not, perhaps, have been any more powerfully illustrated than by the image (Figure 2) of Alan Kurdi, the three year old Syrian refugee who drowned off the Turkish coast as his family were seeking to reach Greece by boat (Smith, 2015).

Despite their need, debates continue, in this country and abroad, as to whether, or to what extent, 'the West' should help these children (and their families). These debates have, most recently, in the UK, revolved around the acceptance of refugee children and the size of the foreign aid budget (Wintour, 2017).

It is, in light of these debates, ironic that one of the major concerns for children in, or from, the world's various emergency zones is that they will be subject to sexual or various other forms of exploitation (UNICEF UK, 2015). This fact should serve to underline the key message of this article that, ultimately, child protection has to be about all children, whatever form of abuse or adversity they experience, and wherever they are.

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**Figure 2. The body of 3 year old Alan Kurdi, washed up on Golden Beach, nr. Bodrum, Turkey on 2nd September 2015**



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