



# JDiBrief – Crime

## Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation: SUMMARY (1 of 5)

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Contact sexual crimes against children have traditionally been thought of as lone perpetrator offences. Research suggests that just 8% of child sex offenders knowingly met another offender prior to conviction and only 5% committed an offence with another person. Recent developments in the UK suggest group-based child sex offending may be more common than previously thought.

A series of high-profile child sexual exploitation (CSE) cases involving large groups of offenders and victims have highlighted the need for better understanding of and responses to this phenomenon. Systems traditionally geared towards tackling solo offending and familial abuse must now be adapted to improve the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of group-based child sex offending.

Group-based CSE has attracted increasing media, public, policy and practitioner attention since late 2010. It has been referred to by many different names, including on-street grooming; localised grooming; internal child sex trafficking (when movement is involved) and complex CSE.

**DEFINITION:** Children can be sexually exploited by various different groups, both online and offline. This document focuses on offline offending perpetrated by groups who are neither related to their victims, nor occupy a position of trust (e.g. teacher). Groups are defined here as two or more offenders operating together.

**OFFENDERS:** The overwhelming majority of offenders have been male, ranging in age from their late-teens to early-60s. Offending groups may comprise strangers joined by a mutual interest in children, or from pre-existing social networks, such as relatives, friends or colleagues.

**VICTIMS:** Most victims have been female and aged in their early to mid-teens, although they may have already been abused for several months, even years, by the time of detection. Victims have been predominantly white but disclosure rates are thought to be even lower among victims from minority ethnicities. There is a worrying trend of victims being used in the recruitment and grooming process.

**PLACES:** Abuse can occur at a wide variety of locations. Often these are places with low levels of formal and natural surveillance, such as private flats, cheap hotel rooms, moving cars, parks and isolated beauty spots.

**LEGAL:** Group-based CSE is a pattern of abuse, rather than a single offence. The distinct offences it encompasses can include rape, sexual activity with a child, false imprisonment and, if there is an element of movement, internal sex trafficking.

**HARMS:** Victims can suffer immediate and prolonged trauma. Abuse also carries societal costs in terms of education, healthcare and the criminal justice system.

**KEY PLAYERS:** CSE cannot be dealt with by police alone. It requires multi-agency collaboration from a range of services.



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## Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation: CRIME OVERVIEW (2 of 5)

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**DEFINITION:** The UK Department of Schools, Children and Families guidance states that:

*'Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, drugs, alcohol, accommodation, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities.'*

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) can be broken down into the four general categories; online, peer-on-peer, institutional and community-based. Familial offences are not normally considered CSE. This document addresses community-based CSE, which includes the sex trafficking of children within the UK. As the exploitation of UK and foreign victims differs greatly, we focus here on British children. The following UK police operations have employed innovative methods in their investigation of CSE crimes and evidence-gathering for prosecution.

Landmark UK police operations		
<b>Retriever (Derbyshire)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 14 offenders, 27 victims</li><li>• Successful use of covert tactics</li></ul>	<b>Span (Greater Manchester)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 9 offenders, 5 victims</li><li>• 1st conviction for internal sex trafficking of Britons</li></ul>	<b>Engage (Lancashire)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• On-going since 2006</li><li>• 1st use of a co-located multi-agency team</li></ul>

**CRIME CHARACTERISTICS:** In simplified terms, this crime consists of three stages: 'find', 'groom' and 'abuse'. When not recruiting new victims via existing ones, offenders typically search for targets in public places. After initiating conversation, they obtain the child's name, age and contact details. Grooming starts immediately and can continue during and after abuse. Both positive and negative grooming manipulations are used, such as flattering victims, providing free drink, insulting and threatening them. The actual abuse occurs at various locations, including parks, cheap hotels and 'party' flats. Victims may be abused by a single offender, multiple offenders at once, or numerous men in quick succession. Levels of repeat victimisation are high, leaving many victims embroiled in the cycle of abuse for weeks, months, even years.

**LEGAL:** Group-based CSE is a pattern of abuse, not a distinct criminal offence. It can include a wide range of offences, such as rape, sexual activity with a child, false imprisonment and internal sex trafficking.

**HARMS:** CSE carries high costs both to individuals and to society, in the short, medium and long term. Alongside immediate trauma to victims, CSE puts strain on the healthcare, education, benefit and criminal justice systems.

**RISK FACTORS:** Barnardo's have identified key indicators to help recognise when a child may be at risk of sexual exploitation. Individually, many are part of 'normal' teenage behaviour, which can impede detection of CSE. They include: going missing; disengagement from school; unexplained gifts; associating with other victims; negative changes in behaviour; drugs/alcohol misuse; highly sexualised behaviour.



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## Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation: ANALYSIS (3 of 5)

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Initial research into and analysis of group-based child sexual exploitation (CSE) from academia, government, police and the third sector have found a number of emerging trends:

**OFFENDER:** In the largest study of community-based CSE to date, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) found that almost one in three of all offenders were operating in groups. Nationwide, CEOP identified 230 such groups, primarily duos and trios. Yet one in ten groups had seven or more offenders. As with most crime, the groups were largely ethnically similar. The most common single ethnicity group was Asian. When all suspects (group and solo offenders) were considered, 49% were white, 46% Asian, and 5% black. Elsewhere, research has found:

- Offenders are predominantly male, ranging in age from late-teens to early-60s.
- Many have jobs which provide ready access to victims and easy grooming opportunities, such as in taxi firms and takeaways.
- Groups may form from strangers with a shared interest in children, or from pre-existing social networks, including relatives, friends or colleagues.
- Certain offenders play a pure facilitation role, providing flats for 'parties', driving victims around or supplying alcohol or drugs.

**VICTIM:** According to CEOP's study, 88% of suspected victims were female. To date there have been no prosecutions against community-based groups for their abuse of male victims. Other research has found:

- The age of victims identified by CEOP is shown on the right in Figure 1. The appeal of victims' young ages appears to stem from the fact that they are easily manipulated.
- Many victims believe that they are in a relationship with their abusers. These and other victims may not recognise themselves as such, which can affect disclosure.
- Victims may be re-abused by the same offender multiple times and/or many offenders. Sometimes they are sold for sex, for as little as £20.
- The transition from victim to abuser is a major concern: in recent cases victims have been used to recruit, groom and arrange abuse.

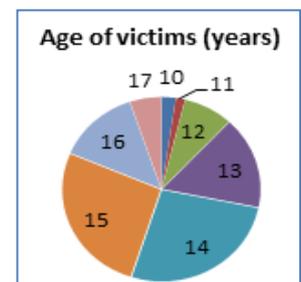


Figure 1: victim by age

**PLACES:** Child sex offences require a certain degree of privacy. Offenders have shown themselves to be opportunistic and creative across the crime commission process. Any place with a low level of natural and/or formal surveillance could form a potential abuse location, such as private 'party' flats, cheap hotel rooms, moving cars, parks and isolated beauty spots. In a group-based CSE case there will often be many crime scenes to be examined.

**MODUS OPERANDI:** To create the situations conducive to abuse and re-abuse, offenders groom victims before, during and after abuse. Grooming can be a cumulative process, whereby the action of one group member may influence a victim's response to another. Victims are also used to manipulate their peers into compliance. Grooming covers a wide range of psychological manipulations, both positive and negative. Grooming in itself is not illegal and the behaviours involved can be hard to detect.



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## Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation: IMPLEMENTING RESPONSES (4 of 5)

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The behaviour involved in community-based child sexual exploitation (CSE) has in all likelihood been around for generations. The major change in recent years has been in the responses to the crime, rather than the crime itself. Once viewed as child prostitution and/or 'promiscuous and street-wise' children going missing, this is now treated as a serious offence. Consequently, public agencies are under growing pressure to deal with the issues involved. Police forces are increasingly initiating proactive investigations into community-based CSE. At a time of resource constraints it is important to act in a targeted and effective manner.

**NATIONAL SCOPING STUDY:** Faced with mounting concern around community-based CSE, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) launched a major nationwide investigation in 2011. While this study went a long way to redress the major knowledge gaps around the prevalence and nature of the crime, the data it drew upon were patchy and inconsistent. Based on responses from police, children's services and the third sector, over 2000 potential suspects and almost as many victims were identified. Many of the offenders have never been formally identified, let alone charged or prosecuted. Almost one in three was operating as part of a group. While this is currently the best national picture available, a clear definition of the crime's parameters needs to be agreed across agencies to improve the consistency of data collection for future studies.

**NEW APPROACHES:** Government guidance on CSE is yet to be sufficiently implemented across the UK. Nonetheless, a number of innovative and effective initiatives have been implemented in individual areas. Examples include:

- Creation of new units to deal with complex sex crimes;
- Co-located multi-agency teams, including police, children's services & third sector;
- Better dissemination of information between forces and across agencies;
- Successful use of covert strategies to improve evidence collection;
- Increased attention to situational crime prevention, such as hotspot mapping;
- Improved training for police, especially child protection officers and front-line officers dealing with missing children;
- Centralised 'best practice' resources;
- A government action plan and active parliamentary involvement.

**KEY PLAYERS:** Many different statutory and non-statutory agencies can contribute to successfully tackling this complex crime and its far-reaching implications. The key players here include:

### Law Enforcement

- Police, especially public protection & child abuse investigation teams
- Specialist law enforcement
- Youth Offending Service
- Crown Prosecution Service

### Health

- Sexual health centres
- School nurses
- Hospitals

### Social Services

- Social workers
- Care homes
- Local Safeguarding Children Boards

### Education

- Teachers
- Counsellors
- Administration (truancy records etc.)

### Third Sector

- Collectives e.g. National Working Group
- Large charities e.g. Barnardo's, Children's Society & NSPCC
- Local agencies e.g. Safe and Sound Derby

### Parents

- Parents & carers
- CROP - parental support group



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## Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation: RESOURCES (5 of 5)

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### THIRD SECTOR REPORTS

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