Sexual violence and exploitation in gangs

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University of Bedfordshire

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• Achieved through:
  - academic rigour and research excellence
  - collaborative and partnership based approaches to applied social research
  - meaningful and ethical engagement of children and young people
  - Active dissemination and evidence-based engagement in theory, policy and practice
Today

• Context

• Key terms: peer-on-peer abuse; gangs; sexual exploitation/violence

• Sexual violence and exploitation in gangs – key themes from a UK based study

• Lunch

• Discussion – implications of these key findings and relevance in different contexts
Context - UK

- A survey of adult survivors of child sexual abuse in England in Wales in 2011 founds that around two thirds had been abused by a young person and not an adult (Radford, et al., 2011).

- Between 30 and 70% of young women report encountering sexual harassment in school (EVAW, 2010; GirlGuiding UK, 2014)

- 10-15 year olds in 2013 were estimated to have experienced 465,000 incidents of violent crime, 79% of which had been perpetrated by someone also aged 10-15 (ONS, 2015)

- More than four in ten teenage schoolgirls aged between 13 and 17 in England have experienced sexual coercion, including rape (University of Bristol and University of Central Lancashire, 2015)

- Recorded cases of children committing sexual offences against other children has risen by 78% in England and Wales between 2013 and 2016 (Barnardo’s, 2017)
What is peer-on-peer abuse?

- “Peer-on-peer abuse features physical, sexual and emotional abuse between young people, and may occur within their friendship groups or intimate relationships” (Firmin and Curtis, 2015)
Peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin 2016)

- Harmful Sexual Behaviour
- Domestic Abuse / Teenage relationship abuse
- Multiple Perpetrator Rape
- Child Sexual Exploitation
- Gang-associated violence
- Serious Youth Violence
Young people’s social fields (Firmin 2013)

1. Child
2. Home
3. Peer group
4. School
5. Neighbourhood
6. Society
Peer-on-peer abuse

- Social norms and behaviours can offer young people protection, and also heighten their risk of experiencing peer-on-peer abuse

- Young people are more likely to offend in groups

- Young people are more likely to tell their friends about experiences of abuse – reactions to this can normalise abusive behaviours and stop young people’s propensity to come forward

- Young people often experience peer-on-peer abuse within public/social spaces
Gang: relatively durable, predominantly street-based, group of young people who (i) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; (ii) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence; (iii) identify with, or lay claim over, territory; (iv) have some form of identifying structural feature and (v) are in conflict with other similar gangs.

Pitts, J. (2008) CSJ/ACPO 2013
What is sexual violence/exploitation?

**Sexual Violence:** Any behaviour that is perceived to be of a sexual nature, which is unwanted or takes place without consent or understanding. (DHSSPSNI 2008)

- **Child Sexual Exploitation:** Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs 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) the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. (Department for Education, 2017)
DO THESE CONCEPTS RESONATE WITH THE WORK THAT YOU DO?
“It’s wrong….but you get used to it”


Beckett, H with Brodie, I; Factor, F; Melrose, M; Pearce, J; Pitts, J; Shuker, L and Warrington, C.
The research:

- Commissioned as part of OCC CSEGG Inquiry
- Conducted by the International Centre: Researching Child Sexual Exploitation, Violence and Trafficking 2011-2013
- Aimed to consider:
  1. Scale and nature of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation
  2. Routes into this
  3. Potential responses to it
Methodology:

- In-depth study in 6 research sites (anonymised)
- Multi-method approach:
  - Direct engagement with 188 young people: 150 individual interviews & focus groups with 38
  - Focus groups with 76 professionals
  - Lit/policy/secondary data
The reports:

- “It’s wrong …but you get used to it”
  University of Bedfordshire

- “If only someone had listened”
  Office of the Children’s Commissioner

- “Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape”
  London Metropolitan University

Published November 2013
Why was it needed?

- Increasing issue of concern for practitioners but little knowledge base
- Two distinct sets of research exist – gangs & CSE – little overlap
- CSE research has not generally explored risks within gangs
- Gangs research has tended to be:
  - Focused on physical violence;
  - Little consideration of sexual violence
  - Male focused; little consideration of the risks to young women
We also made some films....

IC and young people’s voices......

4 films to accompany the report and to be used with young people and professionals as discussion tools.

- **Misunderstood** – Enthusiasm, Derby
- **I Define Me** – Manchester Active Voices
- **Just a link?** – City United and St George’s Hub, Birmingham
- **Love, Sex and Conflict** – Jigsaw 4U, NSPCC and Alford House - London
Context:

• Gang-associated SVE does not occur in a vacuum.

   It reflects wider patterns of SVE

   BUT is uniquely manifested and experienced in hyper-masculine, violence-permeated gang environment
Ethical considerations:

1. Welfare of participants
   - Risk assessment prior to approach about study
   - Identified follow up after
   - Power differential – how to offset this
   - Conversational and flexible approach in interviewing
   - No probing on personal experience – only share if they actively choose to do so
   - Use their language
   - Encouraged to pass on anything they don’t want to talk about
   - Reminders about limits to confidentiality
   - Check at end if they want to withdraw anything, talk about anything else or access support
Ethical considerations:

2. Why take part/what do they get out of it?

- Reciprocity – voucher – but how to make sure this doesn’t influence decision to take part
- Be realistic about what you promise
- Create other opportunities for those who want to do more
- Risk v. benefit
Ethical considerations:

3. How to speak to young people about SVE?

• How to speak to marginalised young people about sensitive topic AND illegality?

• Embarrassment around talking about sex, let alone sexual violence

• Not appropriate to use term ‘sexual exploitation’

• Talked about ‘relationships, sex and gangs – the good and the bad’

• Don’t want anyone to unwittingly incriminate themselves – working young people who are both victims and perpetrators

• Talk about issues in 3^{rd} person – time spent explaining how to do this

Ethical considerations:

4. Sharing the learning

- Shocking findings
- Welfare of reader v. reality of experiences
- Do you censor language?
- How to involve young people in dissemination
- Young people’s films
Key findings:

1. There is a lot of sexual violence and exploitation happening in gangs, but this doesn’t just happen in gangs. It happens between other groups of young people – and adults - as well.

2. There are lots of different types of SVE.

3. It is mostly young women who experience SVE but young men can experience it too.

4. The amount of sexual violence that a young woman is at risk of can vary depending on her role or status in the gang.

5. Young women are often wrongly blamed for the harm they experience.

6. Incidents rarely reported.

7. Many young people think that sexual violence and exploitation is just a normal part of life.
1. There is a lot of sexual violence and exploitation happening in gangs, but this doesn’t just happen in gangs.

- It reflects wider patterns of SVE and how women are viewed in society as sexual objects.
- Mostly happens between young people who know each other (peer on peer abuse.)
- More scary in the gang because of the hyper-masculine, violence-permeated environment and fear of retaliation.
“Within gangs they don’t treat women as women. They’re just objects...You’ve got to understand like girls, to males in gangs, are commodities. They’re just like going and picking a pair of shoes off the shelf and putting them on...the girls are not that special to them, but they have to have ‘em around. They’re easy come, they’re easy go. As quick as they found her, if they went, they’d find someone else.”

(23 year old young woman)
2. There are lots of different types of SVE

1. Being pressured into having sex, with one or more people, sometimes under the threat of a weapon
2. Having sex in return for goods, status or protection – often misguided
3. Rape by an individual or group
4. Sex used to pay for goods such as drugs or alcohol.
5. Being used to ‘set up’ other young men in a rival gang
6. Having sex with more than one gang member to become part of the gang.
7. Being used to disrespect a rival gang member
8. Being photographed or filmed and the images distributed via social media, like Facebook. or through phone messaging
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of gang-associated SVE against young women</th>
<th>Proportion identified by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to engage in sexual activity</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution of sexual images</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex in exchange for (perceived) status or protection</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual perpetrator rape</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex in exchange for ‘other’ tangible goods (not money)</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple perpetrator rape</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young women being used to set up males in rival gangs</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeting young women for sexual relationships or sexually assaulting a young women as a means of getting at a rival gang</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual activity with multiple males</td>
<td>29%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other sexual assault</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex in exchange for money</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual assault with a weapon</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex as a means of initiation into the gang</td>
<td>7%</td>
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Sexual assaults motivated by inter-gang rivalry…..

“I remember a girl. She weren’t going out with anyone, but she like used to sleep with just one gang… and this other gang… they seen her on the bus, dragged her off the bus, took her to… someone’s house or whatever.

I remember seeing her in like local, and all the lads from the area were like switching her, and she was like crying like do you know what I mean? They made me do it, they had a knife to me and everything, and I was like, I could tell that she weren’t lying anyway”

(19 year old female)
Setting up rival-gang members...

- ‘Set up chicks’/’honey pots’
- Degree of individual agency: victim or perpetrator?
- Sexual violence as punishment
“It’s like my best friend who had a relationship with someone and they didn’t know that he was in a gang... he was getting her to do things like sleep with this person to see what he does, “see if he says anything about me. Get him to trust you and everything”...I was just really shocked when she told me that she actually did it because she was scared in case he did something to her. She said that she did it about three times with the same person and then came back and like this guy she slept with and her boyfriend ended up having a massive fight, like because obviously he’d begin to trust her and he was saying things about her boyfriend, so then she went back and told him what he was saying, they ended up fighting...I think this guy ended up getting stabbed or something but he’s still alive...(14 year old female)
Sex in exchange for...

- 23% identified cases of sex for money;
- 39% sex for other tangible goods (usually drugs/alcohol or discharge of debt re this)
- 50% identified sex/relationships as a route to (anticipated) status and/or protection, or other non-tangible benefits
“That happens a lot. If you are a high profile gang member, you could be the ugliest guy and I don’t know how, this girl will still like you. I don’t know if she feels safe around you or what but I’ve seen some high profile guys who are ugly as hell but they’ve got the nicest girls…I just think obviously she wants that reputation, she likes his reputation, she knows 400 per cent that with that reputation comes money, comes protection, ain’t no-one gonna mess with her. She could walk down the road in his block and they’ll be like that’s [name’s] girl, don’t mess with her”

(23 year old male)
Sex with multiple individuals....

- Passing young women around/line-ups:
- Assumed transferability of consent
- Failure to recognise impact of group environment on ability to provide free and informed consent
Rape and other sexual assaults

- Individual rape usually attributed to personal deviance
- Multiple perpetrator rape/sexual assaults more likely to be linked to gang influences

_Boys go to meet, like, tell the girl to come meet them, and when they’re there, he doesn’t tell her that he’s with the other people, and so when she comes in the house and then, like, basically have sex with her, then he tells his friend to go in as well to have sex with the girl as well, and then they just start taking turns and that, and then sometimes the girl says stop, but they just carry on” (17 year old male)_
3. It is mostly young women who experience SVE but young men can experience it too

- 23% identified examples
- Usually identified by third parties, rather than those who experienced it
- Rarely identified without specific prompting
- Incidents of rape or sexual assault occur, but seen as discrete incidents with a clear gang-related motivation, rather than a wider social pattern of sexual violence
- Portrayed more as acts of humiliation and control, than sexual acts
- Young men reported being targeted by young women because of their status
- Also, pressure to engage in sexual activity – particularly in group scenarios – can simultaneously be victim and perpetrator
4: The amount of sexual violence that a young woman is at risk of can vary depending on her role or status in the gang.

- Gang-involved young women (‘gangster girls’)

- Females related to gang members seem to have some level of protection from SVE from other members of the gang.

- Girlfriends (‘wifeys’)

- Young women in casual sexual ‘relationships’ (‘links’)

- Young women who have children with gang-involved males (‘baby-mothers’).
5. Young women are often wrongly blamed for the harm they experience

- Double-standards around male and female sexualisation:

  “Boys get rated, girls get slated” (14 year old female)

- Lack of understanding of consent: assumed unless clear indications otherwise

- Gradients of consent dependent on perceived sexual reputation:

  “Depends on what kind of name she has. If she has a name and someone tries to sleep with her and she won’t let them, and they know that she’s slept with loads of other people, they’ll force her into it. They would rape her, if you class that as rape” (21 year old male)

- Loss of consent by association

- ‘Deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ victims (by both males and females)
6. Incidents rarely reported

- Low levels of reporting of sexual violence in general
- Confusion about what constitutes SVE
- Resignation to, or normalisation of, such experiences
- Fear of judgement
- Fear of retribution or retaliation
- Lack of confidence in the ability of police and other statutory services to offer adequate protection following a disclosure:
Let me give you an example of why people don’t [go to the police]. Because if you go to the police station and say ‘this gang member raped me’ that gang member might be found guilty and go to jail, but remember he’s part of a gang. So all the ones in the gang, 500 people, 400 people, will come back to you, to your house. Could go to your family’s house, you know. So you might as well keep it on the low and move on with your life innit...If you go to the police, that’s the wrong move. That’s the worst thing a person could do...It’ll come back cos with gangsters they got to win innit. They never give up” (17 year female)
7. Many young people think that sexual violence and exploitation is just a normal part of life

“It’s normal, like... say if I told someone I had to call the police on my baby-father because he pulled a knife out, this is true, it happened, they would go, ‘oh’ - not at the fact that he pulled a knife out on me, but because I called the police. That’s how normal it is.”

(24 year old young woman)
Responding:

- Some examples of promising practice, but not systemic or consistent
- More reactive than proactive

Challenges include:
- Lack of info flow into/out of gang-affected communities
- Insufficient awareness of issue and identification of risk
- Inadequate data collection and monitoring
- Silo working: ‘gangs work’ and ‘SVE work’
- Inadequate partnership working and info sharing between agencies
- Lack of clarity as to best policy fit (CSE, DV, VAWG etc)
- Short-term funding initiatives
Recommendations:

1. **Acknowledge and map the issue**
   - Map risk for girls and young women associated with gang-involved males
   - Inter-agency assessment of patterns of risk (address existing silos)
   - Cross-reference policies and procedures

2. **Enhance preventative initiatives**
   - Whole school approach to safeguarding – PSHE and bullying
   - Preventative work with young men and young women
   - Credibility of people delivering messages (mentors/advocates)
   - Awareness raising for professionals (multi-agency training)
   - Engage parents/carers and wider community
Recommendations cont.

3. **Respond to risk**
   - Effective inter-agency working
   - Common risk assessment and thresholds of intervention
   - Engaging young people as active partners
   - Sustainability
   - Prevention, identification and early intervention
   - Clear pathways into support services for victims and perpetrators
   - Recognise complexity of victim/perpetrator dynamic
   - Long-term support and advocacy
Learning from Brazil, Australia and New Zealand

- Community-based responses and bystander interventions
- Creating safe spaces
- Youth leadership/peer education

(Firmin 2015)
Contextual safeguarding
Contextual safeguarding

Discussion

1. How would you identify this issue in your context?
2. How would you respond to the risk?
3. Who would be your contextual safeguarding partners?
4. What would be the key challenges for you and your organisation?
5. Does peer-on-peer abuse feature in child protection policies/plans in your organisations or your partner organisations?
‘It seems like girls have to either fight the boys, have sex with them, or not turn up at all.’

Frontline practitioner on the subject of safe spaces for gang-associated young women and girls, Home Office academic roundtable event, September 2012
‘For me it was like that was my way to keep in with the boys without having to beat them. Like me, I‘m this little Asian girl, what police is gonna think to stop me. I was running stuff from Birmingham to London and back again for time and never got caught, even though I had a record of my own’
Love, Sex, Conflict

Jigsaw 4U, Alford House, NSPCC, London

A film by a group of young people from different areas in London shot over two weeks in August 2013. *Love, Sex, Conflict* is their response to issues associated with young women and men, gangs, sex and relationships.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiPA2gB5xyk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiPA2gB5xyk)
References


For more information and resources visit our website www.beds.ac.uk/ic or our blog https://uniofbedscse.com/

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