

# Child Sexual Exploitation: A study of international comparisons

Desk Review for the Department for Education

Executive Summary

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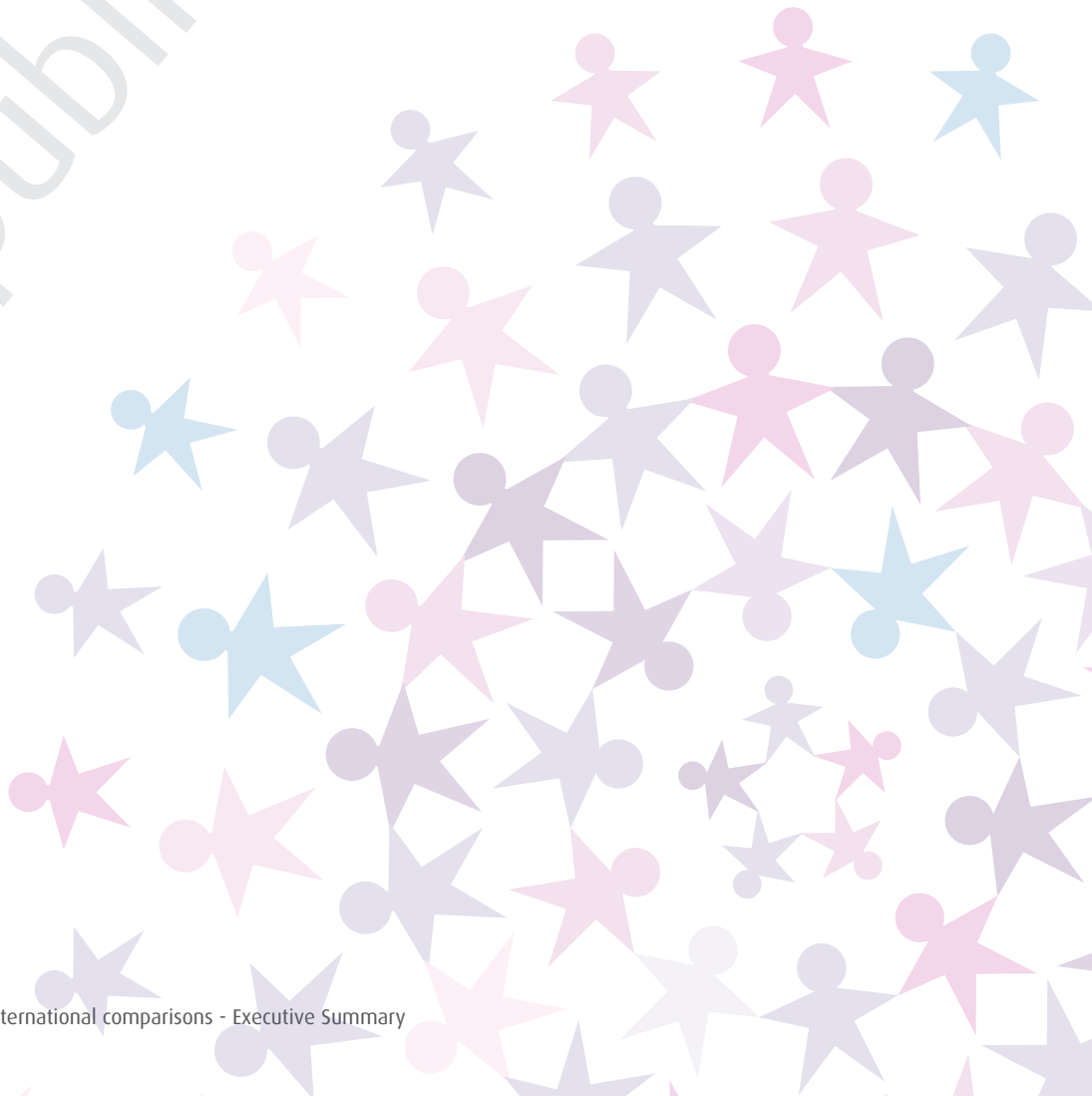
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## Introduction

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) has increasingly become the focus of intense discussion, debate and intervention in the UK. At a summit in March 2015, the Prime Minister described CSE as a 'national threat', and announced that it will be given the same priority by the police as serious and organised crime.

This report presents a rapid desk review of international comparisons of CSE, aiming to explore:

- How is Child Sexual Exploitation defined in selected countries?
- To what extent is there consistency in the response of public agencies around the world?
- What can the UK learn from experience elsewhere?

## The research approach

With funding support from the Department of Education, the Virtual Staff College coordinated the research through its Chief Executive, Anton Florek, advised by Dr David N Jones, former President of the International Federation of Social Workers and currently Chair of a Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). They jointly edited the report. The Office for Public Management was commissioned to undertake the evidence collection and desk review. The review team was guided by the following key research questions:

- How is CSE defined in each country?
- Is CSE a significant issue in the country?
- How are young people portrayed in the narrative around CSE?
- What is the national level/regional level response in the country?
- How are agencies responding at a local level?
- What is the media narrative around CSE in the country concerned?

The review has focussed on the European Union, the Council of Europe, Sweden, Ireland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. The work has been informed by awareness of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and, more specifically, by the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child prostitution and Child Pornography.

The short time available for this review limited the scope of the research: consequently, it does not purport to be a systematic evidence review of all the available literature for each country in question. Relevant documents were reviewed and analysed according to a framework which was also based on the questions listed above. In addition, the research team spoke to contacts in each country in order to sense check findings and identify relevant literature and policy responses that would be useful for the review.

## How is CSE defined in each country?

**European Union** - The EU does not use one definition for CSE, tending to outline the activities deemed to constitute the 'sexual exploitation of children'. The EU focuses on international dimensions where international collaboration is required, specifically trafficking and online sexual exploitation of children: Directive 2011/36/EU covers preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims and Directive 2011/93/EU concerns combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography. EU legislation consistently takes a children's rights approach, informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**Sweden** - The Declaration by the 1996 World Congress in Stockholm defined commercial sexual exploitation of children as *"sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person or persons. The child is treated as a sexual object and as a commercial object."* However, sexual exploitation is not always or necessarily commercial in character. The Government has accordingly resolved to widen its perspective and target the present Action Plan at the sexual exploitation of children, which also covers commercial exploitation.

**Ireland** - 'Sexual exploitation of a child' is included as an example of child sexual abuse and defined in national guidance as: inciting, encouraging, propositioning, requiring or permitting a child to solicit for, or to engage in, prostitution or other sexual acts. Sexual exploitation also occurs when a child is involved in the exhibition, modelling or posing for the purpose of sexual arousal, gratification or sexual act, including its recording (on film, video tape or other media) or the manipulation, for those purposes, of the image by computer or other means. It may also include showing sexually explicit material to children, which is often a feature of the 'grooming' process by perpetrators of abuse. (DCYA, 2011: 9).

**Australia** - There is no national official definition for 'child sexual exploitation', and it is not a term often used in government reports and publications. The Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Australian Government's key research body in the area of family wellbeing, provides an official definition for 'child sexual abuse' on its website: *"the use of a child for sexual gratification by an adult or significantly older child/adolescent"* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2012). Australia's 'National Plan of Action against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children' (2000) outlines four key areas of child commercial sexual exploitation; prostitution, pornography, trafficking and sex tourism (Department of Family and Community Services, 2000).

**Canada** - There are several offences related to the sexual exploitation of children including offences such as prostitution and child pornography. Section 153 in Canada's Criminal Code establishes a general offence of sexual exploitation, defined as: *"A crime when a person who is in a position of trust or authority towards a young person, who is a person with whom the young person is in a relationship of dependency or who is in a relationship with a young person that is exploitative of the young person then proceeds to touch, or have another person touch, any part of the young person's body for a sexual purpose."*

**New Zealand** - The National Plan of Action 'Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children' (Ministry of Justice, 2002) uses the term Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) to describe *"...the various activities that exploit children for their commercial value including child prostitution, child pornography, child sex tourism and child trafficking for sexual purposes."* The term implies that the child is not only sexually exploited but that there is a profit arising from the transaction, in cash or kind, where the child is considered to be a sexual and commercial object. The term Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children is occasionally used in relation to CSE among government and NGO circles but the umbrella term of child sexual abuse is far more common.

**USA** - Child sexual exploitation has been primarily framed within two key discussions in the US literature: commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) or trafficking, and internet sexual exploitation (including child pornography and online enticement). CSE is defined at the State level, rather than Federal, with each state implementing its own systems for identifying and addressing the issue.

**United Kingdom** - CSE tends to be viewed as a type of child sexual abuse. The 'official' definition of CSE has been developed by the National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People (NWG): *"The 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, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through use of technology without the child's immediate recognition, for example the persuasion to post sexual images on the internet/mobile phones with no immediate payment or gain. In all cases those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability."* (DCSF, 2009: 9).

**Summary** – Whilst there are differences in the words used in some national 'definitions', there is a broad consensus around the 1996 World Congress definition and a recognition that CSE involves an abuse of power by an adult who engages a young person in sexual behaviour. There is an emerging consensus that it is not appropriate to assume that a young person, even if over the legal age of consent, is able to make an informed decision about engaging in sexual activity with an older person.

## What is included in these definitions?

All of the countries and international bodies which were considered in this research included the same areas of activity within the scope of their national and local policies and action plans, including commercial sexual activity (whether or not for money or other rewards such as security), child trafficking, online grooming and abuse and sexual tourism involving children. Child sexual abuse within the family or 'circle of trust' is generally, but not always, seen as a different form of abuse requiring different responses.

## What impact does the wider cultural context in each country have on the definition of CSE or attitudes towards it?

The countries included in this study are primarily English speaking, with elements of shared culture and the literature review did not identify significant cultural differences between them. Sweden, as a Nordic country, is generally viewed as having a different attitude to sexuality, seen perhaps in the different attitude towards and legal status of prostitution: the 'sale' of sexual services is not illegal in Sweden but its purchase is an offence. A similar approach has recently been implemented in Northern Ireland.

## Is CSE a significant issue?

CSE is significant in all the countries included in this study and across Europe: the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights stated in 2011 that *“sexual assault against children is an urgent human rights issue and fighting it should be a political priority.”* All are parties to international conventions and agreements and co-operate across borders to counter criminal behaviour and support victims. Within this overall commitment, there are differences of emphasis however. Australia, Canada, Ireland and the USA, for example, have a particular focus on historical abuse within institutions, especially religious bodies and residential schools. The UK appears to be unique in having a major political and media focus on historic abuse by celebrities and authority figures, although, given the global nature of the entertainment business, it seems likely that this will increase elsewhere. International and internal trafficking is seen as significant by all countries in this study, although in Australia and New Zealand, this is seen as less significant than other forms of CSE. All countries have experienced significant media attention in recent years, focused on some aspect of CSE.

## What is the extent/scale of the problem?

This research suggests that there are difficulties estimating the true scale of the incidence of CSE in all of the studied countries because this is hidden behaviour. Consequently, it is highly likely that only a minority of cases come to public attention. All statistics of prevalence are therefore best seen as under-estimates.

**Europe** - The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates the prevalence of sexual abuse as 13.4% of girls and 5.7% of boys (WHO, 2013: 15). According to the Eurostat 2015 report on ‘Trafficking in Human Beings’, over 1,000 registered child victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation in the EU between 2010 and 2012 (Eurostat, 2015: 13). Victims of trafficking are predominantly women, 80% of those registered, including girls who make up 13% of the overall total (Eurostat, 2015: 10). Based on data from Member States, 17% of registered victims of trafficking were between the ages of 12 and 17 and 2% were aged 0-11 (Eurostat, 2015: 11).

**Sweden** - A 2007 report identified children under the age of 18 having sold sexual services in 34% of Swedish municipalities (ECPAT, 2011: 8). In a study of 17 year old students in Sweden, 11.2% of girls reported sexual abuse in childhood compared with 3.1% of boys (WHO, 2013: 42-3). Between 2009 and 2013, 50 child victims of inward trafficking were identified by Swedish authorities (GRETA, 2014: 11). In the human trafficking cases brought to justice in Sweden between July 2002 and March 2008, a narrow majority of the victims were minors (County Administrative Board of Stockholm, 2010).

**Ireland** - In common with other countries, the scale of child sexual abuse online is hard to measure, but the Irish Minister for Justice and Equality described it as ‘staggering’. The One in Four charity states that one in four children in Ireland will experience sexual abuse (within or outside the family) before the age of 18. Between 2009 and 11, 201 alleged victims of human trafficking were reported to the Garda and, in 2011, out of the 57 alleged victims of trafficking, 13 were minors, and 7 of these cases were identified as related to sexual exploitation. The Child and Family Agency reported that 8% of their cases were for sexual abuse in 2013.

**Australia** - Most of the data on the scale of CSE is under the umbrella term ‘child sexual abuse’ rather than referring specifically to CSE and, as a result, it is hard to quantify or estimate the number of children and young people involved in commercial or quasi-commercial or extra-familial sexual activity in Australia (Department of Family and Community Services, 2000). Australia’s National Plan of Action acknowledged that children and young people, male and female, participate in street solicitation in all Australian capital cities and major regional centres, but maintained that organised child prostitution was for the most part largely invisible (Department of Family and Community Services, 2000).

There is little evidence that children are trafficked to Australia for commercial sexual exploitation (Grant, Grabosky & David, 1999; Department of Family and Community Services, 2000; Anti- People Trafficking Interdepartmental Committee, 2009). In 2012 there was only one confirmed case involving charges under Australia's federal child trafficking offences (Human Trafficking Group, 2012). There was no available data or evidence for the prevalence of this in Australia.

**Canada** - CSE is an issue of serious national concern and said to be growing in scale. The organisation End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children (ECPAT) International alleges: *"The child sex trade is growing in Canada and especially in cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. The Canadian Council on social development claimed that 'Canada has become a world trade destination for people seeking children through the sex trade'"* (Hay 2004: 119). A 2009 report, Child Luring through the Internet, records that reported 'child luring' incidents have increased every year since the introduction of this offence in the Criminal Code (Loughlin & Andrea Taylor-Butts, 2009). Estimates regarding the percentage of Aboriginal girls involved commercial sexual exploitation range from 14% to 60% across various regions in Canada (Sethi, 2013).

**New Zealand** - There is a consensus in the voluntary sector, (from organisations like ECPAT NZ and Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa, ACYA), that CSE is a serious issue in New Zealand. Child trafficking is not seen as a big problem and the focus is more on child prostitution and child abuse more generally. One in four women in New Zealand are said to have been sexually abused as children. In 2008, an estimate was made that there were approximately 200 children involved in prostitution in New Zealand. The National Action Plan identified trafficking to New Zealand as a small but growing issue. There have been a number of successful convictions in New Zealand for the possession and distribution of child pornography, but not for the actual production of such material (ECPAT, 2012).

**USA** - Child sexual exploitation is recognised as a significant issue in the US and one that is probably growing in both prevalence and recognition. There has been a dramatic increase in formal action involving CSE cases since the 1990s. In 2006 U.S. attorneys handled 82.8% more child pornography cases than in 1994. ICAC Task Forces noted a more than 1,000% increase in complaints of child sex trafficking from 2004 to 2008. As of January 2015, the national CyberTipline had received more than 3.3 million reports of suspected CSE since it was launched in 1998. 1 in 6 endangered runaways reported to the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children in 2014 were thought to be sex trafficking victims. Stransky and Finkelhor, writing in 2008 reported that estimates of the number of young people exploited through prostitution in the USA ranged between 1,400 and 2.4 million. Between 1996 and 2007, the number of cases of online CSE grew from 113 to 2,443 and has continued to rise steadily since. In December 2013, the FBI had approximately 7,759 pending child pornography/child sexual exploitation investigations under this program. In contrast, Finkelhor (2004, 2015) reported that the incidence of sexual abuse with the family in the USA has been consistently falling over the past 20 years.

**Summary** - CSE is a 'hidden crime' and it is therefore difficult to quantify its prevalence. Estimates vary widely according to the approach adopted in respective countries. However, this research does suggest that the incidence of formal action (criminal or social) is increasing significantly in all of the countries which were included in the desk review.

## How are young people portrayed in the narrative around CSE?

All of the countries studied had witnessed a change in attitudes towards young people identified as victims or 'survivors' of child sexual exploitation. For example, young people who had been arrested for selling sexual services had been treated as prostitutes and criminals in all of the countries but there was a clear and increasing trend for them to be treated as victims of exploitation. The literature from all countries recognised that these young people may not see themselves as victims and may actively resist intervention; they may be challenging to those seeking to intervene and 'help' them. In general, Nordic (and European) cultures are more likely to instinctively see these young people as needing assistance whilst the first instinct in Anglo-Saxon cultures is to view young people with behaviour problems as deviant and needing punishment and 'correction'.

## What is the national level/regional level response in the country? What policies/responses are in place? What is the professional response? How are agencies responding at a local level?

All of the countries in this study have policies and arrangements for coordinating the response to CSE cases at national, federal, state or local levels. EU countries are bound by Directives and shared strategies, including the obligation for common action on judicial cooperation; aspects of child sexual exploitation are specifically included. The Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse 2007 (the Lanzarote Convention), requires the criminalisation of all kinds of sexual offences against children, as well as the adoption of specific legislation and measures to prevent them, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators. The 'Lanzarote Committee' (i.e. the Committee of the Parties to the Convention) monitors whether member states effectively implement the Convention (Council of Europe, 2015a).

Offenders who commit specified sexual crimes in another country ('sexual tourism') are liable to prosecution in the home country.

All countries are exploring how best to ensure an integrated response by law enforcement agencies and therapeutic/social services. The literature suggests that no country has found a settled and total effective solution and all face challenges in multi-agency and inter-professional working. This study has not set out to undertake a formal comparative evaluation of national systems, but a quick overview suggests that the English (UK) structures are probably more established and systematic than those found in most countries, for all their argued shortcomings, with the possible exception of Sweden.

## What is the media narrative around CSE in the country concerned? Who is involved in driving the debate?

International bodies such as the United Nations, Council of Europe and European Union have led awareness of CSE with research reports, conferences and international conventions which have shaped national debates. Analysis of media coverage as well as the professional literature reveals that the drivers for policy development in each country are varied. In some cases media coverage has contributed to heightened public and political awareness, leading for example to the establishment of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia, a formal enquiry into allegations of historic abuse and the Prime Minister's Summit in the UK and the Ryan Report in Ireland. This has not been observed everywhere, for example there has not been a national media campaign in the USA or Sweden. In all countries non-governmental agencies, campaign groups and professionals with specialist interests have advocated for more awareness of CSE and improved interventions, with some politicians and professional groups taking a high profile advocacy role.



# Implications for the UK

This research has been primarily desk-based, drawing on a range of academic sources, which have been reality checked in consultation with specialists working in each of the countries studied. The main focus has been on English speaking countries, which have to some extent a shared history and elements of a common culture. The inclusion of Sweden and references to the European Union has broadened the cultural scope of the study, which nevertheless still excludes a truly global comparative element.

The final section of the report reflects on the findings and highlights some provocations or challenges for the United Kingdom context and most specifically, for England. It draws on practice awareness in addition to the research findings and is structured around questions of significance in a UK context.

## The Global significance of child sexual exploitation – prevalence and strategy

Child sexual exploitation is recognised by the United Nations, Council of Europe, European Union and many other global and regional bodies as a significant international challenge (IFSW, 2014), although the terminology used in different national jurisdictions to describe the behaviours involved is not consistent. National governments have signed up to international treaties, conventions and practices but effective implementation remains a challenge.

There is world-wide agreement, also evident in the UK, that CSE refers to the way in which children and young people are drawn into sexual activity by adults or other young people (peers) to which they cannot reasonably consent, involving an abuse of power and including trafficking within and between countries, internet grooming and pornography, abuse within gangs, abuse by celebrities and other people in authority and the exchange of sex for reward in terms of money, survival and/or 'security'.

Research papers consulted for this study illustrate the problems in all of the countries in determining the incidence of CSE and other forms of sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 2015). The problem is usually hidden; health and education services have not been trained to identify the signs until recently and the young people may not identify themselves as being sexually exploited. The public attitude to investigation of sexuality in the UK, is also ambivalent. The negative response to the high profile investigations into allegations including sexual abuse in, for example, Cleveland (1988), Rochdale (Lewis, 2006) and Orkney (1991), all of which resulted in inquiries which criticised public authorities for over-zealous interventions, and resulted in changes in the law, probably resulted in a reluctance among social workers and doctors to take risks in identifying sexual abuse. It is possible that some cases of sexual abuse are labelled as 'emotional abuse' or 'neglect' to avoid the sensitivities around allegations of sexual abuse. Child abuse of all forms is highly emotionally charged and decisions are taken by professionals and the courts in this political context. This inevitably influences how the problem is approached and dealt with which, in turn, affects the way cases are categorised and recorded

More recently, in the UK, the publicity surrounding number of high profile cases and the publication of a report by the Children's Commissioner (Berelowitz, 2013) is, arguably re-shaping the public perception of CSE. Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century, the recognition of this form of abuse, as a significant social and moral concern, is evidence of a profound social change taking place across the world in our understanding of the place of young people in society and the exercise of power over others, whether by adults, peers, those in authority or those holding a celebrity status.

## Common challenges

All of the countries studied face similar challenges to those experienced in the United Kingdom. The public and professional challenges observed in the UK are entirely consistent with experiences elsewhere in the English-speaking world and, probably, more widely across the developed world; there is nothing unique about the problems experienced by UK agencies in their response to CSE. The sexual exploitation of children and young people has been continuing for centuries in full sight but only now is it being effectively challenged and those who abuse young people in this way called to account, whether they be organised criminal networks, gangs of young people or individuals in positions of authority who abuse their power.

It should not come as a surprise therefore, that this profound social change is causing disquiet and upheaval. It is a challenge to established power and authority relationships, in particular the perceived relationship between some aspects of male culture and expressions of sexuality towards those who are more vulnerable, specifically for this study towards children and young people. There are similar issues in relation to attitudes to women, which have not been explored as they are beyond the scope of this research project but must surely merit further study.

The international experience reported here show clearly that the evidence both from historic and more recent experience reveals too many cases in which a failure to protect children and young people has occurred and this failure is manifested as:

- A failure of professional values by those directly involved.
- A failure to provide appropriate care and safety and;
- A failure to respond appropriately when allegations were made.

However, more disturbingly, this recent history also reflects a failure by those in positions of authority, in some cases at the highest levels, to exercise control over those who were known to be using their authority to abuse children and young people, and widespread acquiescence in abusive behaviours within our culture. It is perhaps unsurprising, even if misguided, that the behaviour of professionals in public agencies mirrored that dominant culture. In several of the countries in this study, the major enquiries established to review this history and make recommendations should be able to bring about a change in our approach to young people in vulnerable situations and a more humane response to those in trouble. Professionals working with children and young people have a specific duty to lead this reform and demonstrate effective and ethical approaches to prevent CSE taking place and to support CSE survivors.

## Child sexual exploitation is a different form of child abuse

This study has focused on child sexual exploitation and has specifically excluded consideration of child sexual abuse within the family or 'circle of trust' and other forms of child abuse. The research suggests there are some distinctive differences between CSE from other forms of child abuse, which may be one of the reasons why it has taken child protection services around the world some time to come to terms with the reality of CSE and to develop appropriate and effective strategies for intervention. Child protection and safeguarding of children procedures tend to focus on the home environment, working with children and their parents and caregivers. Safeguarding arrangements are also designed to protect young people from abuses in schools and care settings, such as residential homes. Protocols, procedures and professional cultures have developed, based on experience of past tragedies, to facilitate taking decisive and often speedy action to protect vulnerable children, especially the youngest and most vulnerable.

In contrast, international experience shows that CSE frequently involves wider social networks outside the circle of family or those professionally engaged with young people, although parents

and professionals may also be involved by commission or omission. Children and young people may be involved at any age, but many forms of CSE involve sexually active teenagers who are at risk in social situations outside the family and often out of sight of the public services charged with keeping them safe. They are frequently manipulated by peer groups or criminal gangs and may not recognise that they are being abused and may actively resist suggestions that their 'friends' are undermining their best interests.

*"Victims are unlikely to present as victims of a sexual offence and are likely to be hostile to engagement. Agencies must be aware that the length of time between incidents of exploitation and disclosure to the authorities is not a symptom of unreliability but a direct result of exploitation."* (CEOP, 2011:11).

Disrupting, intervening in and closing down such activities will usually require traditional police methods which take time as intervention at a point when evidence is not sufficient may prevent a successful prosecution. Some forms of CSE may require urgent intervention, for example a young person about to meet up with an adult who has been grooming by internet, but other forms require a more patient approach if the prosecution of persecutors is to be successful.

The international comparisons in this study show that experience in all countries supports the need for multi-agency approaches to investigation of abuse and the support provided to the young people involved. In that sense, CSE is no different from other forms of child abuse. The emotional and behavioural implications of their abuse for the development of the young people are broadly comparable and their interests must come first. This study of international comparisons therefore supports the case for treating CSE as one of a number of different forms of child abuse, which should be managed within the well-established children's safeguarding arrangements in England, but applying practice methods which recognise the specific needs and interests of this group of young people, taking account of the evidence about effective practice (Hanson & Holmes, 2014).

Evidence from all of the countries in this study indicates that young people leaving the care system are especially vulnerable to exploitation. The UK appears to be ahead of many other countries in having legislation requiring local authorities to support young people who were already in care before they were eighteen until they are in their twenties, just as most parents would do. This extended period of support also applies in New Brunswick (Canada) and some other countries but the evidence of this research suggests that this is not yet the norm. What is clear is that continued and extended support for care leavers is essential in itself but, also, as part of a strategy to mitigate the risk of CSE for this particular group of young people.

Further research is needed on the different forms of intervention which are most effective to counter CSE and the extent to which they are similar to or different from interventions to prevent other forms of abuse, as identified in the Swedish national strategy mentioned in this research.

## Historic abuse

All of the English speaking countries in this study are immersed to different degrees in public debates, media investigations and in some cases formal enquiries into allegations of historic or 'non-recent' sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people by adults in positions of authority, including abuse in residential homes, schools and religious institutions.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia has given prominence to many individual stories. A statutory Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse has been established in the UK chaired by Hon. Justice Lowell Goddard. Ireland has seen several inquiries into different elements of the child protection system and the role of the church and other bodies. There are continuing concerns about the historic abuse of young people from indigenous communities in residential schools in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Notwithstanding these

inquiries, other countries have not seen the degree of media focus on abuse by celebrities which has been evident in the UK recently.

The cumulative force of these narratives seems to have had an impact on public and political understanding of CSE and the abuse of power inherent in these activities. This will continue to reverberate over the coming years as the respective inquiries report and international comparisons are made. The survivors have a right to be heard and the public needs to be confident that such abuses will be prevented in future.

However, the inevitable and repeated focus on these historic behaviours and system failures is of concern to current-day practitioners. The publicity inevitably detracts from information about, and awareness of, the effectiveness of modern, multi-professional intervention in cases of child abuse. There is a high risk, therefore, that historic accounts of abuse may well undermine public confidence in today's arrangements, which are often significantly more robust than was the case in the past. Current leaders in children's services recognise this and the need for effective communication and the development of a collective or systemic narrative which serves to persuade the media not to confuse past arrangements and failures with current practice.

## Vulnerability and risk: poverty, minorities and indigenous communities

The international evidence clearly demonstrates that vulnerable children and young people, for whatever reason, are most at risk of child sexual exploitation. This includes those in alternative care and those from minority communities. There is a long history of over representation of young people from indigenous communities in the care and justice systems in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. The UK does not have a minority aboriginal community as in those countries but other minorities do exist and are vulnerable to exploitation. Whilst there is evidence that young people from any background may be vulnerable to online grooming, this research suggests that there is little evidence that there is any change in the overall pattern that CSE tends to be associated with vulnerability.

These research findings show that those most at risk of sexual exploitation are those on the margins of society or who are in particularly vulnerable situations, such as in care away from home and family, experiencing disruption of family life, major disasters or living in poverty. This is reflected in the UK experience and appears to be consistent with research showing that the more unequal the society the more serious the social problems which emerge (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Marmot, 2012). The pessimistic conclusion to be drawn from these findings is that child sexual exploitation is unlikely to be curbed so long as there are young people who are vulnerable and adults in powerful positions who are willing to exploit them for personal gratification. The challenge for police, social workers and others is how to disrupt this relationship in a culture of increasing UK inequality and, therefore, of increasing vulnerability.

## Organised crime

The literature included in this research suggests that organised and informal criminal networks play a significant role in CSE, including trafficking, commercial and online sexual activity. Decisive disruption of, and intervention against organised crime and gangs, is at the heart of well-established police responses to criminal behaviour in general. This approach is also essential for effective intervention and prosecution of CSE, but not previously part of the repertoire of social workers and health professionals.

The techniques for investigating and disrupting organised crime can give rise to ethical questions for human service professionals, such as the extent to which it is ethical and appropriate to leave

young people at risk whilst gathering evidence over time. Evidence gathering and providing post-abuse support requires engagement with victims as people, in a respectful and humane manner, using techniques more familiar to social work and health. The best UK practice demonstrates effective partnerships between these different agencies but there is more to learn about how best to organise such cooperation. In this respect, the work being developed in the Australian State of Victoria provides a very positive example of what can be achieved through a concerted commitment to systemic multi and cross agency working.

## Move from criminal to multi-agency responses

All the societies in this study show evidence of a move away from primary reliance on criminal justice solutions to CSE to an understanding that effective responses to both offenders and victims requires a multi-agency, welfare orientated approach by the young person. This is also evident in the UK. All the studies confirm that effective intervention requires multi-agency coordination, blending criminal justice and social intervention strategies.

Practice experience shows that it is essential to understand the lived experience and context of the lives of abused and exploited young people and to evaluate the impact of this experience on their development and personality if intervention is to succeed. The evidence from the countries included in this research seems to replicate the findings of the Casey Report (2015) that some professionals appear to share the public view that young people with disturbed behaviour are responsible for their own misfortune, make a free choice about expressions of anger and disenchantment and can and should be controlled by punishment. UK studies and follow-up interviews with victims have highlighted the challenging behaviour of some young people involved in sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse, which leave them with profound emotional and behavioural disturbance (e.g. Bedford, 2015; O'Brien, 2015; NSPCC2). Many do not see themselves at the time as being exploited and actively resist intervention. It clearly takes professional determination to remain alongside such young people, despite their difficulties, to gain their trust and to work towards fundamental change. However, failure to do this can result in significant future problems for the individual and society. Research consistently suggests, for example, that a higher proportion of those in prisons than in the general population have experienced physical or sexual abuse in childhood (e.g. Harlow, 1999), which is likely to have contributed to their difficulties with anger management and relationship problems. In short, sympathy for the survivors of abusive experiences has to extend to empathy for their circumstances and support from professionals and others in helping them to reclaim lost childhoods and address their damaged capacity for relationships.

## Role of media

The media has played a significant role in raising public awareness about CSE, fuelling criticism of agency failures and identifying abusers and their practices. This study shows that media coverage has also given voice to victims and contributed to changing public attitudes about both victims and offenders. Inevitably, public disquiet about CSE will continue to be reflected in media coverage including lively debates in social media. The fact that a New Zealand High Court Judge has been engaged to chair the UK inquiry into non-recent abuse illustrates the globalisation of CSE awareness. It seems probable that media coverage will increasingly draw parallels and contrasts between coverage across the English-speaking world. Responding to understandable public concern, reflected in the media, and providing assurance about the quality of services for victims and the prosecution of offenders will continue to be a major challenge for those in leadership positions whether politicians or professionals. Addressing the prevailing and currently generally negative discourse in the UK about the response of public agencies to CSE is clearly a significant challenge for those public service leaders, but one that has to be met if we are to create the conditions for a more open recognition of the complexity of the factors which underpin CSE.

# Conclusion

The overwhelming conclusion from this comparative study is that all the countries studied, including the UK, recognise the complexity and multi-factorial character of child sexual exploitation. All recognise that this has been an under-reported problem and that services need to gear-up to provide a more effective response. All show evidence of past failures to protect children. All recognise the need for improved multi-agency coordination.

The countries included in this study are experimenting with a range of multi-agency responses to these challenges, some formal and statutory, others informal and discretionary. Agencies and leaders in all the countries studied have faced political and public criticism for short-comings and no country has devised a fail-safe system for prevention and intervention.

Sweden has been engaged with this challenge for many years and took the lead in hosting the first international conference on CSE. The most recent action plan identifies the need for a comparative study of effective methods of intervention and 'treatment'. This also appears to be needed in the UK where there is a need for wider professional understanding of the skills and activities which are essential if there is to be an effective challenge to CSE. This comparative study reveals the potential for shared learning across borders but also the need for more research into the skills needed for effective work with young people at risk of being drawn into or already immersed in CSE cultures.

The abiding impression from the UK studies, mirrored in the experience in the other countries, is of a cultural suspicion of vulnerable young people, especially when they appear to be colluding in their own sexual exploitation and resisting intervention. The former behaviour of the State institutions in the English-speaking countries suggests a view that these young people do not deserve respect and may well be the architects of their own misfortunes. This is entirely consistent with the treatment given to such people in other situations of vulnerability. Furthermore, it is clear from this research that there is still much to do to create the supportive conditions which genuinely transcend professional boundaries in order that those best placed to work with the victims of CSE are given the time and space to do.

As previously noted, the UK Prime Minister has said that child sexual exploitation is a prime national threat. This comparative study suggests that the UK shares this threat with other countries and is following a similar route to the development of effective protection for children and young people. Our evolving practice experience and research both show that addressing CSE is work which is multi-factorial, complex and challenging; there are no simple answers. Our agency dilemmas are therefore not unique and our challenges just as formidable.

Perhaps our greatest challenge is to recognise that CSE is a symptom of deeper social challenges. Building a national culture of mutual respect for human dignity is probably the foundation of an effective CSE strategy in the UK and around the world. This presents a real challenge, demanding political and professional leaders with vision and integrity – and a determination to build a culture of respect for those who are vulnerable and at risk.

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