

“It’s wrong... but you get used to it” A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England

Summary

A summary of *“It’s wrong... but you get used to it” A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England* Beckett, H, Brodie, I; Factor, F; Melrose, M; Pearce, J; Pitts, J; Shuker, L and Warrington, C. (University of Bedfordshire and Office of the Children’s Commissioner, November 2013)

Practice Areas:

For all practitioners, managers and senior manager working with children and young people.

Status:

Research Report from University of Bedfordshire and Office of the Children’s Commissioner.

Related Briefings:

79: Interim Report from the Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (http://www.trixonline.co.uk/website/news/pdf/policy_briefing_No-79.pdf)

103: Final Report from the Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (http://www.trixonline.co.uk/website/news/pdf/policy_briefing_No-103.pdf)

104: See Me, Hear Me Framework for Action from the Final Report from the Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (http://www.trixonline.co.uk/website/news/pdf/policy_briefing_No-104.pdf)

Introduction

The information in this briefing is from the research report commissioned by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England as part of its Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups. The research aimed to consider: the scale and nature of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation in six areas of England; the main pathways into gang-related sexual violence and exploitation for young people living in these neighbourhoods; and potential models for an effective multi-agency response to the issue. Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with 188 young people and focus groups with 76 professionals, from across the six research sites. The young people who participated in the research interviews were aged 13 to 28 years, with half under the age of 18 and 21% under 16 years. There was an approximately equal gender split and a range of ethnicities were represented, reflecting the demography of the different research sites.

Findings

Gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation does not occur in a vacuum; it is influenced both by the wider gang environment and wider patterns of sexual violence and exploitation in society. Like sexual violence more generally:

- Gender power dynamics influence young men's and young women's risk of sexual victimisation against young women;
- Young men are given freedom to be sexually active and receive credibility for this while young women are judged for, and frequently harmed as a result of, the same;
- Nine out of ten interviewees identified male only, or predominantly male, gangs. Risks of sexual violence and exploitation are heightened within the hyper-masculine environment of these gangs;
- Most incidents take place between young people who are known to each other within the gang environment, rather than involving strangers within the wider community;
- Victimisation occurs both on and off line.

Young people are rarely reporting these experiences or accessing any formal support services for these. This is particularly pertinent for young men.

Examples of sexual violence towards, and/or sexual exploitation of, young women were shared by virtually all of the participants who discussed incidents of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation. Only one-quarter identified similar risks for young men, although these figures are likely affected by a particular reluctance to discuss young men's sexual victimisation.

Young women were much more likely to recognise the exploitative and violent nature of the sexual interaction being described than young men. Only half of the young men explicitly described these incidents as sexual victimisation. The other half discussed them as part and parcel of sexual activity within the gang environment. They did not recognise that they constituted rape or other forms of sexual violence or exploitation.

Young people identified many different forms of sexual victimisation within the gang environment:

- 65% shared examples of young women being pressurised or coerced into sexual activity. As noted by an 18 year old young man: "once they've implemented that fear into them it's easy to get what you want";
- 50% identified examples of sex in return for status or protection. Whilst this is not unique to the gang environment, in a world where 'respect' and 'status' are seen as essential, the need to achieve these is acutely heightened;
- 41% shared examples of individual perpetrator rape; 34% shared examples of multiple perpetrator rape. Some were explicitly conceptualised as rape, and noted to be motivated by a desire for retribution or control. Many others were viewed as 'normal' sexual behaviours with little recognition of the fact that the absence of consent constituted a sexual offence. As noted by a 15 year old young woman: "He feels in control of the streets anyway ...so he'll want things to go his way, so he won't be thinking 'oh this is rape', when it actually is";
- 39% identified examples of the exchange of sex for tangible goods such as drugs and/or alcohol or the discharge of an associated debt; 23% noted exchange of sex for money;
- 31% noted examples of young women being used to attract and then 'set up' males from rival gangs to be assaulted;

- 30% shared examples of a young man having sex with a young woman (usually a familial relative of a rival gang-involved young man) to 'disrespect' a rival gang member. As noted by a 17 year old male: "You're kind of like fucking his sister just to violate him, just to take the piss out of him really";
- 11% identified examples of rape or other sexual assaults under threat of a weapon;
- 7% shared examples of young women having to have sex with more than one gang member to become part of the gang: "She had sex with every boy in a gang just to be part of their gang...I think it was probably under pressure, because she wanted to be part of them" (15 year old young woman).

There are often blurred boundaries between young people's experiences of being either a victim or a perpetrator of sexual violence, with many young people (including young men) experiencing both. Parallels can be seen with other forms of peer-on-peer sexual violence in this regard.

Young women's exposure to sexual violence and exploitation varied according to their status and role within the gang. Five different roles were identified for young women, although it was noted that they may be in several different roles at any one time, or move between these over time:

- 'Gangster girls': young women who adopt male personas, and as a result, are generally protected from sexual victimisation;
- Female family members: seemingly protected within the gang but at risk from rival gangs because of their relationship with a gang-involved male;
- 'Wifeys' (girlfriends): often protected within the gang so long as the relationship lasted, but frequently exposed to domestic violence and at high risk of sexual victimisation should a relationship end. Also at risk from rival gangs;
- Baby-mothers' (young women who have children with gang-involved males): similar risks to 'wifey's and 'links' depending on their original status;
- 'Links' (young women associated through 'casual' sex with one or more members of the gang). This was the group most at risk of sexual victimisation both within the gang and from rival gangs: "She goes in narrow-mindedly thinking these people are going to look after me and they care about me... but they just want to sleep with her... and [she] usually ends up getting a name... whore, sket, dirty girl, smig" (27 year old young man) "Your main girlfriend you go for meals with... then you'll have other girlfriends... selling weed, holding stuff... sleeping with them and stuff" (24 year old young man).

Young women spoke of their safety and reputation being dependent upon distancing themselves from 'links'. They were fearful of being 'vulnerable by association', thus further isolating 'links' from female support.

Many young women are both harmed and blamed by both young men and other young women for their experiences of sexual victimisation. Asked to consider reasons for sexual violence, 46% said that they, or others, thought the victim in some way 'deserved it' or 'asked for it'. For example, describing a young woman as wearing revealing clothing, an 18 year old young man explained "to some people that would be begging to say 'come and get me, I'm open for it.'"

This was particularly true of young women who were sexually active with more than one person. They were viewed as having less right to withhold consent, and seen to bring harm upon themselves because of their presentation or previous sexual experiences. This is despite the fact that many interviewees said that sex with these young women often took place under pressure or coercion. As noted by a 17 year old young man: "If she looks like a ho then the boys will treat her like a ho... and she has no choice but to accept how they're treating her."

Many young people viewed rape and sexual assault as 'normal' sexual behaviour with, as noted, little recognition of the meaning of a sexual offence: "They might be saying no, but they don't have the power to push them off, and I think sometimes a lot of guys don't realise in their minds that it is actually rape" (19 year old young woman).

Young women's responses to such sexual victimisation were, for the most part, fatalistic: "I'm used to it...It's normal...It's wrong, but you get used to it...Welcome to our generation" (young women's focus group).

Only 1 in 12 interviewees felt that young people would be likely to report, or talk about, experiences of sexual violence or exploitation and even where they felt a young person would talk, they thought this would be to a peer rather than a professional. There are a variety of reasons for this including:

- Resignation to, or normalisation of, sexual violence and related experiences;
- Fear of judgement by others;
- Fear of retribution or retaliation; and
- A lack of confidence in services' ability to protect them.

In the main, cases of gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation are not being proactively identified by professional services. This is, in part, because of young people's acceptance of violence as inevitable, and the difficulties they face in reporting it. It is also because of a lack of processes for proactive identification.

Summary Recommendations

Every school, education and health provider, youth service and other relevant universal service needs to promote understanding of healthy relationships, the concept of consent and the harm caused by rape and sexual assault.

Every school and education provider must develop and implement whole school approaches to address all forms of sexual violence and exploitation, including sexualised bullying and coercive behaviour.

All 'Ending Gang and Youth Violence' areas should profile their street gangs with reference to sexual exploitation; identify girls and women associated with gang members; and link strategies that tackle serious youth and/or gang violence with those combating child sexual exploitation. (See Home Office Ending Gang and Youth Violence Strategy – <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ending-gang-and-youth-violence>).

As part of their multi-agency gang work, every local authority with a gang-affected neighbourhood should have trained and supported mentors and advocates to support young people who are at risk of becoming, or are, gang-involved or affected by gang-associated sexual violence or exploitation.

Contact Us

Kensington House, 50-52 Albany Road, Earlsdon, Coventry, CV5 6JU

www.trixonline.co.uk

T: 024 7667 8053

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