

Practitioner Understandings of Child Sexual Exploitation

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Introduction

- A particular discourse & model of CSE has dominated policy and practice debates since late 1990s
- Leads to the development of an abstract model that individualises the issue and fails to account for concrete conditions in which CSE occurs
- Leads to refashioning of language: abuse through prostitution to commercial sexual exploitation to sexual exploitation
- Leads to greater confusion in practice

Definition

- *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 them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. 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)*

The Study

- 2009-2011: LSCB responses to CSE
- Postal Questionnaires (70% response rate)
- In depth interviews: 24 areas; 89 practitioners
- Less than 25% of LSCBs has implemented guidance
- This discussion – interviews with 11 practitioners, 3 areas
- Full report: Jago et. al., (2011) What's Going On to Safeguard Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation www.beds.ac.uk/iasr

Shifting Discourse

- Up to late 1990s 'drift' model dominated understandings: commercial sexual exchanges a 'survival strategy'
- Exercise of agency in severely constrained circumstances
- Law did not distinguish adult/child involvement
- 1995: 263 cautions & 101 convictions for 'loitering and soliciting' achieved against 10-17 year old young women

2000 Guidance

- Young people centrally positioned as victims of abuse
- Help and support not criminalisation
- Prostitution Triangle: Pimping and Grooming model
- Usurps the idea that young people may 'drift' as a result of peer networks or dire material circumstances or that young people may become involved under their own steam

Pimping and Grooming Model

- Gender neutral but applied primarily to girls
- Boys rendered virtually invisible
- Differences between young people obliterated by the fact of their 'exploitation'
- Cannot account for contextual and specific nature of entry or material realities that structure involvement (poverty)

Rebranding

- ‘Abuse through prostitution’ renamed ‘commercial sexual exploitation’
- The young person is always a passive victim/object
- Negates young person’s agency
- Obscures/prevents understanding of the institutional basis of exploitation – prostitution an institution founded on deeply unequal relations between sexes, age groups, ethnicity

Sexual Exploitation

- Shift in terminology from 'commercial sexual exploitation' to 'child sexual exploitation'
- Loss of 'commercial' element means the term can be applied to many different situations: these may be exploitative/abusive but do not necessarily mean that the abuse is taking place in the context of commercial sex markets/prostitution
- Arguably stretches the concept to the point of meaninglessness

Stretching the Concept

- 'Vague' and 'Ambiguous' (Asquith and Turner, 2008)
- Elasticity does not help practitioners to apply the concept in practice or identify when a child/young person may be being abused through prostitution from other (sexual) activity/practices

Practitioners

- Struggled to define what CSE means
- A 16 year girl in a relationship with a 21 year old boy
- Girls being promiscuous

Is this CSE?

- *'My niece was one of them. At 12 years old, 12-13 years old and she was having sex with blokes who were picking her up in cars, but they were known to her, so she thought it was OK. Was that sexual exploitation? But she would never, we couldn't get that information, so I think it's massive that. I think it's a massive issue'. She then went on to say of the LSCB, 'this is the bit we are not recording'.*

Why Correct Understanding is Important

- Resource implications of LSCBs intervening in cases where a girl is in a relationship with an older boyfriend and/or where young women are being promiscuous
- Those at risk of exploitation in commercial sex markets/being abused through prostitution may slip through the net

Forms of CSE Identified

- Several forms operating simultaneously in any one area and at any one time
- ‘Pimping and Grooming’ model most easily and readily identified
- Other forms emerged when practitioners were asked about them (i.e. they weren’t volunteered)
- Included: Gangs; Peer Recruitment; Organised Groups of Adults; Single Adults; Grooming via Internet; Trafficking from Abroad & within UK; Partying

Boys and Young Men

- When asked about CSE practitioners tended to talk about girls and/or seemed to assume they were only being asked about girls when they were talking about CSE
- Boys routes in different: Homophobic Bullying; Estrangement from families; Poverty (choose to sell sex)

Conclusion

- A complex picture: 'pimping and grooming' still applies but the model is not sophisticated enough to capture the variety of young people's experiences – 'partying' more common than 'grooming and pimping'
- We need fluid understandings rather than rigid 'models' to recognise situations where young people are at risk & to develop appropriate responses to different types of risk the face

Reference

- Melrose, M. (2012) 'Twenty-First Century Party People: Young People and Sexual Exploitation in the New Millennium', *Child Abuse Review*, Published on-line in 'Early View', www.wileyonlinelibrary.com
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