

# RESEARCH BRIEFING

## ROUTES INTO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION: GOING MISSING, AGENCY AND VICTIMHOOD



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### WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

There is rapidly growing public and professional awareness about the extent and risks of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). Many of the young people involved have childhood histories of adversity. People who have experience of the care system and/or going missing from home or from care are more vulnerable to CSE. Understanding how those involved make sense of their experiences, particularly in terms of their sense of vulnerability (victimhood) or resilience (agency), is important in making improvements in services to protect them. This sense of self may influence the direction their pathways take and their willingness to accept help from safeguarding services.

### AIM OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to gain an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of young people involved in sexual exploitation, particularly those who have gone missing from care or home and are involved in substance misuse. This is so risk and protective factors can be identified in order to help Local Children's Safeguarding Boards (LCSBs) improve multi-agency safeguarding practices.

### HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

This was a qualitative study of participants' narratives generating data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This gave a retrospective, chronological picture of routes through childhood and, for some, adult experiences. The data was analysed through a grounded theory approach, using emerging themes inductively to draw conclusions. Fifteen interviews were conducted with one male and fourteen females aged 16 to 57. Twelve participants were white British, two mixed heritage British and one Asian British. Age of first experience of sexual exploitation ranged from 13 to 23. Seven were still involved in selling sex, eight had stopped involvement, and nine continued to be substance users.

### KEY FINDINGS

- The findings showed that participants with perceptions of victimhood/vulnerability leading to involvement in CSE were either still involved in selling sex and often misusing substances, or had stopped involvement

but still felt a sense of victimhood and were engaging in other risky behaviours.

- Participants with perceptions of agency/resilience despite involvement in CSE were either no longer involved in selling sex and exercising agency by following less risky pathways, or were still involved but with a sense of control over how this happens. Participants, at different stages in their lives, may move 'groups' depending on levels of support or their own developing sense of agency enabling them to see alternative possibilities.
- Adverse childhood histories served as a 'push' factor driving participants along negative pathways involving them in sexual exploitation.
- Feelings of isolation, confused identity, self-hate and fatalism, coupled with a strong sense of victimhood, pushed some towards more risk taking. For others, a sense of rebellion also 'pulled' them towards taking bigger risks.
- Alcohol and drugs played a significant part in being coerced into exploitation and/or were used to block out the experience.
- Some participants, lacking affection and approval in their lives, were pushed towards seeking these experiences in risky places - making them vulnerable to being 'groomed' for sexual exploitation.
- Going missing from home or care increased the risk of CSE for some, for others going missing was a way to escape it. For some participants, going missing led to sexual exploitation and sexual exploitation led to going missing and this appeared to be compounded by feelings of victimhood. For many of these participants the vicious cycle kept going round. For those who had a greater sense of personal agency, either through the way they made sense of their experiences or through support, alternative pathways were seen as possible, offering a way out of involvement in sexual exploitation.

Some participants said they needed support, someone to be there as a replacement 'family' or 'carer' they felt they never had.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Safeguarding agencies should recognise the significance of going missing as an indicator of the risk of sexual exploitation and act on this in a co-ordinated way. LCSBs must be proactive in developing effective joined-up policy and procedures that ensure no child or young person 'falls through the net' as had happened to several participants in the study. Agencies need clear information sharing practices to help identify and support those at risk and also to gather and share information about perpetrators.
- LCSBs must raise awareness in schools about the risks of going missing and of sexual exploitation. This awareness raising should also be available to parents and the wider community to enable people to recognise warning signs and understand what to do about them. As several participants suggested, the voices and perceptions of young people with experience of sexual exploitation must be a central part of multi-agency professional training and peer education programmes.
- What services currently lack is long-term relationship-based therapeutic intervention. Participants in this study consistently said this was vital to them. Lack of support and a continued sense of victimhood were found to be barriers to participants seeing an alternative, more positive pathway through life. Long-term support of this type would provide a 'secure base' which can help develop resilience and agency for young people and adults who are at risk of, involved in or experiencing the consequences of sexual exploitation and selling sex.

### STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

#### Strengths

A key objective has been to undertake research 'with', not 'on', participants that acknowledges their expertise in their own lives.

#### Limitations

It proved difficult to access young people willing to participate. The result was that several participants were older than had been anticipated.



### FIND OUT MORE

FULL REPORT [GOO.GL/KOMMA3](http://GOO.GL/KOMMA3)

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