

RESEARCH BRIEFING

AN EXAMINATION OF THE PERSPECTIVE AND EXPERIENCES OF POLICE OFFICERS WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK OF, OR INVOLVED IN, CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION



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WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

There has been much recent research, and increasing awareness, amongst professionals and the wider public, about Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). In particular there has been a shift in thinking of those children and young people involved in sexual exploitation as victims of abuse rather than criminals. There is also growing awareness of the need for professionals to recognise early warning signs and potential routes into sexual exploitation. Recent research studies have aimed to understand the experiences of young people at risk of, or involved in CSE and their views of the agencies involved in their care and wellbeing. The police force is a key agency in safeguarding this vulnerable group. There is, however, less research on the perspectives of police officers involved in working with these children and young people.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of police officers working in Norfolk with young people involved in, or at risk of, involvement in sexual exploitation. The objective was to increase understanding of what works well, what works less well and to identify any gaps in policy, procedure or practice.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

A qualitative grounded theory approach was taken to data collection and analysis to ensure that the findings were grounded in the experiences and expertise of the participants. These participants were; senior officers responsible for policy and management, frontline specialist officers directly involved in working in this area, and uniformed officers who may be the first officer in contact with the child or young person. In-depth, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a total of eleven specialist and six uniformed officers. Two focus groups were also conducted, one with specialist officers (twelve officers) and one with uniformed officers (five officers). The focus group participants were different to the interviewees to ensure that a wide range of views and experiences were gained. Telephone interviews were also conducted with four key senior officers to explore their views on child

sexual exploitation, on how policy underpins practice, on training issues and on officer support.

KEY FINDINGS

Four areas stood out as particular strengths in police work with children and young people involved in CSE. These included:

- A sense of commitment to and passion for CSE work.
- An awareness of the vulnerability of young people involved in CSE. These young people are more vulnerable to peer pressure, coercion into CSE, and involvement in drug misuse and petty crime. Officers showed an understanding of these links between victimisation and criminal activity and that becoming a victim of CSE might sometimes first begin through a young person's involvement in criminal activity at the prompting of their abusers.
- Understanding that prevention and proactive early intervention is key.
- Recognition of three categories of young people involved in internet abuse;
 - 'naïve' victims who had no understanding of the risks;
 - 'wise' victims who understood the risks, thought they could handle them but found themselves in situations out of their control;
 - and 'naïve offenders' who were drawn into the criminal justice system for engaging in adolescent sexual experimentation with girls they knew, after exchanging pictures on the internet, not understanding that age differences meant they were committing criminal acts.

Four areas for development were identified:

- Supervision - officers described great variation in the quality of supervision. Officers regarded good quality supervision

as important due the stressful nature of the work.

- Training - given the complex nature of CSE, officers preferred in-depth face to face learning as opposed to the online learning packages offered. Many officers supplemented their learning at home by reading the latest research.
- Joint working between specialist and non-specialist workers – uniformed officers felt under pressure to correctly identify CSE citing difficulties contacting specialist units. Officers saw the availability of female officers to work with female victims as crucial. The number of female officers is currently limited.
- Multi-agency working and information sharing – officers reported that Children’s Services and Health were the agencies where the most information sharing difficulties arose. Some officers felt that other agencies think CSE is ‘mainly a police responsibility’.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The study makes recommendations based on the areas for development above;

1. Supervisors need to improve the quality of supervision. Supervisors could enhance morale and performance by checking on well-being, reviewing difficult cases, and considering if there is a need for further input, advice or counselling.
2. Management could facilitate relationship building between specialist and uniformed officers by finding opportunities for the sharing of ideas and expertise.
3. Managers need to continue the development of multi-agency working and information sharing.
4. There needs to be greater awareness of the impact of police officers’ gender on CSE victims and staffing needs to reflect this.

5. Training could include multi-agency input to share expertise and more training on technology as the medium of CSE. The nomination of a ‘CSE champion’ in each team, who accesses all available training, would help to cascade knowledge down to fellow officers.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Strengths

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to consider the range of experiences and perceptions and to ensure that, whilst the central themes were covered, there was scope for personal stories to emerge. This provided rich data on participants’ experiences and perspectives which indicate a growing awareness by police officers in Norfolk of the seriousness and wide ranging nature of the issue of CSE.

Limitations

A larger study is needed to compare practice and perspectives nationally to identify and build upon good practice. Additionally, there is a need to examine the perspectives of young people about their experiences of engaging with the police to ensure that their voices remain central.



FIND OUT MORE

FULL REPORT [GOO.GL/QDRJZK](https://goo.gl/QDRJZK)

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