

# Research on the sexual exploitation of boys and young men

A UK scoping study  
Summary of findings

**Believe in  
children**



**Barnardo's**

August 2014

In partnership with

**NatCen**

Social Research that works for society

**UCL**



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## Acknowledgements

**We gratefully acknowledge the support of our funders – the Nuffield Foundation – and the members of our project advisory group. The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social wellbeing in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.**

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**This research would not have been possible without the generosity of all those who contributed through their participation in interviews, data provision or focus groups – and we particularly thank the young people involved.**



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# Introduction

Despite growing interest in the UK and internationally in child sexual exploitation (CSE), policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and the media have tended to focus primarily on female victims. Consequently, the sexual exploitation of young males has been largely overlooked:<sup>1</sup> remarkably little is known about this group, their experiences, vulnerabilities or support needs.

The purpose of this document is to provide a brief synthesis of key findings from recent exploratory research on the sexual exploitation of young males in the UK. This multi-method study incorporated three complementary strands, together addressing four overarching research objectives:

1. To identify characteristics of known and suspected CSE cases involving male victims and to compare these, where possible, with those of cases involving female victims
2. To explore professionals' views on perpetration and victimisation processes in cases of male-victim CSE
3. To assess male victims' perceived support needs and the nature of existing service provision
4. To help inform future research, policy and practice.

While this research represents an important contribution to the limited knowledge base on male-victim CSE, it remains an early exploration of a complex issue. Consequently, the recommendations made are necessarily tentative. These suggestions relate primarily to:

- ways in which practitioners might better identify and respond to male CSE victims
- future research priorities and how these might be addressed.

In the UK, recognition and understanding of, and responses to, CSE – a form of child sexual abuse (CSA) – have gained momentum in recent years (Barnardo's, 2011; Berelowitz et al, 2013; Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), 2011; Home Affairs Committee, 2013). In England and Northern Ireland, one widely used definition of CSE is that it 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' (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2009, p 9).*

This definition is used in statutory safeguarding guidance in England and based on the definition developed by the National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People (now known as the NWG Network). Scotland and Wales have their own definitions, which focus more explicitly on the concept of 'exchange'. Wales has its own statutory guidance, which defines CSE specifically as 'involving an exchange of some form of payment' (Welsh Government, 2010). Similarly, Scotland defines CSE as 'sexual activity for which remuneration of cash or in kind is given' (Scottish Executive, 2003).

Despite an increased focus in the UK on CSE in recent years, the evidence base remains underdeveloped. In order to contextualise the current study, it is important to understand the barriers that exist to CSE research, some of which are summarised here. First, CSE is in itself a complex issue and individual cases can span multiple victims and offenders, long periods, different geographical

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1. There is even less evidence regarding the experiences of trans-spectrum identified young people (trans\*). Within this report we use the written convention of trans\* to include transsexual, transgender and other trans-spectrum identities.



locations and numerous different criminal offences. Second, identifying whether or not a case constitutes CSE is not always straightforward. The above-cited definition appears deceptively simple – however, it could be applied to other forms of CSA, thereby raising the question of which features are distinctive to CSE. Third, where older children (16-year-olds or, in the case of certain behaviour, 17-year-olds) are concerned, challenges can arise in determining whether the sexual contact in question is exploitative and/or illegal. Fourth, there is no centralised national record of CSE cases held by a statutory agency – probably due at least in part to CSE’s complexity and the definitional challenges just outlined (Cockbain, 2013). This has obvious implications for the collection of data that can be used for research purposes. Fifth, CSE is a highly sensitive topic and those involved are, in research terms, a ‘hidden population’ (Lillywhite and Skidmore, 2006; Palmer, 2001). Important logistical and ethical considerations can constrain data collection, meaning that analysis is often necessarily based on cases known to the authorities. Researchers must often – as indeed was the case here – rely on administrative data or service providers’ perspectives that may not fully reflect the realities of CSE. External factors including funding, capacity, local priorities and interagency relationships can all affect the cases that do and do not come to the authorities’ attention. Whether unidentified cases differ systematically from identified ones is as yet unclear, and the true scale of CSE in the UK remains unknown (Bereelowitz et al, 2013; NWG Network, 2010).

While these barriers may seem formidable, research into CSE is both possible and vital. Robust, empirical evidence around the phenomenon of male-victim CSE is one neglected area needed to inform policy and

practice. This multi-method research project was designed, therefore, to help develop the limited evidence base on male-victim CSE in the UK. The study combined three complementary approaches:

1. **A rapid evidence assessment** of relevant national and international literature on CSA in general – and CSE in particular (Brayley et al, 2014). The assessment covered both academic and non-academic sources and focused primarily on the past two decades. The core aim was to assess the existing knowledge base on the relationship(s) between victim gender and the characteristics, processes and impacts of CSA/CSE. It informed the conduct and interpretation of the other two aspects of our study by highlighting key patterns and divergences in the literature, and its strengths and weaknesses, coverage and knowledge gaps.
2. **A large-scale comparative analysis** of more than 9,000 eight to 17-year-olds supported by Barnardo’s for CSE or risk of CSE (Cockbain et al, 2014). The cases derived primarily from the period 2008-13 and covered services across England, Northern Ireland and Scotland.<sup>2</sup> The dataset is thought to represent the most substantial single source of individual-level data on children affected by CSE in the UK. The aim of the quantitative analysis conducted was to establish whether statistically significant differences existed between male and female service users’ cases. Diverse factors were assessed, including service users’ characteristics (e.g. age, disability) and official responses to their (suspected) CSE (e.g. from the referral agency).
3. **Qualitative in-depth interviews** (or online responses) with 50 professionals working in sectors that respond to sexual

2. Services in Wales do not use the same data management system that the dataset was derived from.

3. As a scoping study, the aim of the research was to bring together existing knowledge. We recognise that young people who have experienced CSE should be included in research focusing on the issue. Due to funding constraints, there was not further scope to do so in this instance.

exploitation across the four UK nations (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). Interviewees included representatives from specialist CSE services, police and social services, men's sexual violence support services, black and minority ethnic youth services, young people's substance misuse services, and services for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans\*(LGBT\*) young people. The aim of the interviews was to understand professionals' perspectives on male-victim CSE and how to respond to the needs of male victims.

The initial findings from each strand were explored in a day-long workshop with 16 young people (male and female) who have experienced sexual exploitation, and a two-hour roundtable discussion with 12 representatives from LGBT\* organisations. The purpose of these events was to gather feedback on the findings.<sup>3</sup>

Separate reports from each strand of the research are available, and readers are encouraged to access these for a more nuanced and detailed discussion of the respective methods, findings and implications. Future users of the research are kindly requested to reference, where possible and appropriate, the full reports rather than this summary.

The research team was made up of representatives from three organisations with expertise in conducting research on CSE: the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen); UCL (University College London); and Barnardo's. This core team was supported by a project reference group comprised of 10 representatives from the police, government agencies and NGOs. The research was approved by NatCen's Research Ethics Committee and UCL's Data Protection Team.



# Key themes

In this section, we discuss three key themes from the research, each with associated sub-themes: the characteristics of male and female victims and ‘at risk’ children; perpetration and victimisation processes; and boys’ and young men’s support needs and the existing service provision.

## The characteristics of male and female CSE victims and ‘at risk’ children

Quantitative comparative analysis of the Barnardo’s service user database highlighted both differences and commonalities between male and female service users’ cases, depending on the factor examined (Cockbain et al, 2014). This combination of similarities and differences between males and females was also highlighted in the interviews with professionals (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014) and review of prior-published research (Brayley et al, 2014).

### Male service users make up a sizeable minority of cases

- It was stressed in the rapid evidence assessment that trying to establish the true scale of any type of sexual offence is difficult, and all the more so when faced with the definitional challenges of child sexual exploitation (CSE) (Brayley et al, 2014). Recent UK-based studies that focused on CSE (or subsets thereof – such as ‘localised grooming’) found that males made up between 11% (NWG Network, 2010) and 29% (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), 2011) of known or suspected victims. In the research interviews, professionals working within specialist CSE services reported a wide range (from 50% to just 2%) of the caseload being male service users (not including male-only projects, such as the BLAST Project (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014)). Similarly, the analysis of the Barnardo’s database showed that while males accounted for 33% of CSE service users

overall, the percentage of service users varied substantially, both by individual service (5-57%) and by region (6-47%) (Cockbain et al, 2014).

- It was not possible to ascertain from the data the reasons behind such variations, although possible explanations include variations in: services’ funding structures (for example, whether they have specific funding to work with boys and young men); awareness of male-victim CSE; and local demographic factors or patterns of exploitation.
- Taken as a whole, the results of our three studies would suggest that boys and young men constitute a sizeable minority of CSE cases – making the need for targeted research, policy and practice responses all the more pressing.

## Characteristics that differ by gender

Our findings indicated that male CSE victims/at risk children and young people may differ from their female counterparts in some key respects, outlined below.

### Males identified by services as being at risk of CSE tended to be slightly younger than females

- The rapid evidence assessment showed that little is known about the average age of onset for CSE – but that different forms of child sexual abuse (CSA) have been associated with different age profiles (Brayley et al, 2014). Comparative analysis of the Barnardo’s data showed statistically significant differences between male and female service users in terms of age. Males were, on average, slightly younger than females at both referral (average of 13.9 years versus 14.6 years) and start of support services (14.5 years versus 15.3 years) (Cockbain et al, 2014).



### **More males identified by services as being at risk of CSE were reported to present with disabilities than females**

- The professionals interviewed reported that, of those young people they worked with, more males than females presented with disabilities – particularly autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). This finding was supported by the comparative analysis of Barnardo's service users, which found disability rates to be significantly higher among male than among female service users (35% versus 13%). The most commonly reported disability types for the males were: learning disabilities; behaviour-based disabilities; and autism spectrum disorder (Cockbain et al, 2014).
- Such variations could be explained – in part – by gender-based differences in prevalence rates for specific disorders. Very little previous research was identified as existing on this topic within the research literature (Brayley et al, 2014).

### **There is a complex relationship between gender, patterns of youth offending and risk of CSE**

- The comparative analysis showed significant differences between male and female service users in terms of youth offending: 48% of males had a youth offending record, compared with 28% of females (Cockbain et al, 2014). These results fit with findings from prior research on links between youth offending and CSE victimisation (Brayley et al, 2014). Perhaps counter-intuitively, the proportion of females with youth offending records is a striking factor – as the vast majority of offenders in the general population (youth offenders included) are male. The professionals interviewed also highlighted perceived

links between CSE and youth offending, with interviewees suggesting that young males involved in criminal activity may be viewed as a potential risk to others rather than – as would be the case with females – their criminal behaviour being assessed as an indicator of other vulnerabilities such as experiencing CSE (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). Overall, the results would suggest an important but complex relationship between CSE, youth offending and official responses.

### **Characteristics comparable by gender**

Together with the differences detailed above, there were also some broad-based commonalities found between males and females.

### **Experience of homelessness, running away and being in care**

- Homelessness, episodes missing from home and being in local authority care were all found to have been highlighted in published literature as risk factors and/or indicators for CSE (Brayley et al, 2014). The comparative analysis showed that a substantial but similar proportion (both 18%) of male and female service users were looked-after children<sup>4</sup> (Cockbain et al, 2014). The professionals interviewed also reported that the young people they worked with – both males and females – were often in care and/or had a history of going missing and/or homelessness (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). It seems that such factors may serve in some cases as indicators of CSE and in others as risk or vulnerability factors. For example, running away may be a means for a young person to escape abusive situations, but having no accommodation may render them vulnerable to would-be offenders (Brayley et al, 2014; McNaughton Nicholls

4. Includes, among others, foster placements, secure units, children's homes and living at home with parents under a care order. As a point of comparison in 2011 only 0.6% of under 18-year-olds in England were looked after (59 per 10,000) (House of Commons, 2012).

et al, 2014). They may also leave home at the encouragement of the person who is exploiting them (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014; Smeaton, 2013).

### Experiences of non-CSE-related violence

- The comparative analysis showed both male and female service users had experienced violence in addition to that associated with CSE (e.g. other sexual abuse, domestic abuse and violence towards others): 54% for males and 57% for females (Cockbain et al, 2014). Professionals also noted that young people (both males and females) they worked with presented with a suspected or known history of experiencing not only CSE but other forms of sexual or physical abuse or neglect (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014).

## Other characteristics: complex intersections

### Ethnicity

- The professionals interviewed did not suggest that young people of particular ethnicities were disproportionately vulnerable to CSE – with two exceptions. First, it was suggested that victims (especially male ones) may be particularly hidden in communities where young people would be ‘shamed’ by disclosing sexual victimisation (for example, due to the stigma of same-sex sexual contact or of sexual contact outside of marriage). Second, it was suggested that young refugees or asylum seekers (both male and female) may be particularly vulnerable to CSE, as the promise of goods or money in exchange for sexual acts may hold greater sway when the young person has very few possessions (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). While these considerations are no doubt important ones – and it may be the case that young black and minority ethnic (BME) people who are victims of CSE are identified by specialist BME agencies – the Barnardo’s data indicated an ethnic profile for both genders that was broadly

in line with national demographics (Cockbain et al, 2014). Around 80% of service users of both genders were white, although the proportion of BME victims fluctuated by region – perhaps indicative of variation in local service provision and/or local demographics.

### Sexual and gender orientation

- Professionals felt that the risk of CSE could interact in a complex way with some young men’s exploration of same-sex relationships or questioning of their gender identity/sexual orientation (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). The findings from published literature on this topic were contradictory. For example, homophobic attitudes were cited as protecting males from peer-on-peer gang sexual abuse, with potential perpetrators fearing being stigmatised for being gay (Brayley et al, 2014). Research published since the review has also highlighted the complex intersection of gender and sexuality that can influence the experiences of CSE reported by lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans-spectrum-identified (LGBT\*) young people, and the fact that this may not be confined to the experiences of boys and young men (Donovan, 2014).

## Perpetration and victimisation processes

CSE can be perpetrated, and categorised, in a wide variety of ways – such as by location or relationship between perpetrator and victim (Brayley et al, 2014). Professionals were able to provide further details on the perpetration process through their work with male victims (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). There is little empirical evidence to suggest ways in which male and female victims’ pathways differ; however, for female victims of CSE, perhaps the best documented type of initial relationship between victims and

perpetrators is that based on romantic heterosexual interests (Barnardo's, 2011). Social stereotypes may also reinforce the belief that this is the type of victim/perpetrator relationship where risk of CSE occurs. As is outlined below, there do appear to be particular pathways for male victims relating to gender (of perpetrator) and sexual orientation. However, reports were also made by professionals of female perpetrators targeting female victims and, as noted above, gender and sexuality may intersect in complex ways in different pathways to CSE for young people identifying as male, female or trans\*. Therefore, while the research interviews with professionals led to the identification of some prominent examples of male-victim CSE, these are not definitive or the only ways in which exploitation can occur. It is important to stress that young people entering into same-sex relationships, exploring their gender or sexuality, or becoming friends with men or women through shared interests, is of course not inherently problematic or harmful. The examples demonstrate scenarios that professionals felt could be used by perpetrators to facilitate exploitation, often because they are hidden or seem 'normal' and routine.

### Examples of male-victim CSE and routes to exploitation

#### ■ **'Trusted friend'/shared interests:**

Professionals reported that for young male victims of male perpetrators identifying as heterosexual, the initial relationship could take the form of the perpetrator being perceived as a 'trusted friend'. This could be based on shared (stereotypically masculine) interests such as sports or online gaming. This 'shared interest' and friendship network could extend to belonging to a criminal gang. Professionals reported that young males may have become involved in criminal acts with or for the perpetrator, such as drug dealing, and this could then be

used as leverage to discourage them from disclosing CSE (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014).

#### ■ **Exploitation of vulnerable GBT and curious young men:**

Professionals suggested that hetero-normal social environments meant that there may be fewer 'safe spaces' for young people to explore healthy same-sex relationships than there are for those exploring different-sex relationships. Experience of harassment when 'coming out' was thought to push some young gay men towards a more secretive approach to sexual contact with others, which could mean exploitative same-sex relationships could be facilitated and hidden. The stigma faced by some gay, bisexual or trans\* (GBT) young people was also reported by professionals and young people in the workshop as a potential for exacerbating vulnerability – for example, being asked to leave home and/or experiencing violence due to their sexuality or gender identity.

#### ■ **Female perpetrators:**

Existing evidence shows that, while males still make up the greater proportion of abusers overall, when males as victims are examined, a higher proportion of males than females are abused by female offenders (Brayley et al, 2014). From the limited research into this area, it appears that female offenders known to the authorities are, on average, younger than their male counterparts and come into contact with victims via roles of responsibility or caring professions (e.g. babysitter, teacher). The professionals interviewed identified cases where young males were being sexually exploited by women – including, for example, older women acting as their 'girlfriend', and encouraging them to move in with them and leave their care home when they were under 16 years old. There were also examples of women paying the male victim for sex or exchanging sex for drugs. Professionals (and young people involved



in the workshop) also noted that the relationship between a female offender and male victim was still generally not viewed as being as problematic as those scenarios involving female victims and male perpetrators, or male victims and male perpetrators. However, it was felt that if the relationship was exploitative, it was, by definition, potentially harmful and should be seen as such, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator and victim (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). Professionals reported that female-perpetrated CSE may still be a particularly hidden and unacknowledged issue.

- **Commercial sexual exploitation:** The involvement of young men in commercial sexual activity was found, with only a small number of exceptions, to have been particularly overlooked within the published literature (Brayley et al, 2014). Professionals identified that, historically, male-victim CSE was associated with ‘rent boys’ – a term now inappropriate and not widely used – paid for sex by other men. This type of exploitation still occurs, but was felt to be diversifying from traditional ‘street sites’ to more hidden forms of commercial sexual exploitation supported by Internet and mobile phone communication (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014).

- **Institutional abuse:** Institutional settings such as schools and youth offending facilities were cited in the literature as sites of contact for the sexual abuse of young males, perpetrated by both adults and peers (Brayley et al, 2014). However, there is a lack of evidence on whether institutional settings are particularly conducive to CSE, or these settings have been the particular focus of research on the issue.

## Enablers of male-victim CSE

- **Trafficking:** Confusion around what

constitutes trafficking may mean that cases are not identified as such, and existing records and research regarding trafficking for sexual exploitation in the UK lacks information on the profile and experiences of male victims (Brayley et al, 2014). This omission was further highlighted by the professionals interviewed. They rarely identified cases of trafficked male victims. The explanation that professionals gave for this was not that it is not occurring, but rather that there was less awareness and recognition of trafficking of male victims. For example, it was felt that a young male being driven to a party by older males would be interpreted differently from the same situation involving a young female, and not necessarily viewed as a potential indicator of CSE (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014).

- **Technology:** Different forms of technology can create new ways in which sexual abuse can be facilitated and perpetrated (Brayley et al, 2014). While both females and males may use new technology, the types of site or technology that facilitates CSE was felt by professionals to differ by gender – with, for example, perpetrators reportedly targeting males via interactive gaming, such as Xbox Live, FIFA or World of Warcraft (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014).

- **Sexualised content aimed at men:** Professionals also noted concerns about young males accessing pornography sites or using apps (such as Grindr) that could facilitate age-inappropriate contact with people seeking sexual interactions. The highly sexualised nature of some online content and its accessibility was also cited as a facilitator of CSE. Young men (and women) were reported to be exposed to very explicit material or websites/groups where overtly sexual online content is viewed (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014).

■ **Gendered bias regarding how the risk of becoming a victim is perceived:**

Professionals reported that perpetrators could use gender stereotypes to develop and maintain relationships with young people – for example, female perpetrators presenting themselves in the role of a caring adult or male perpetrators encouraging young men to view

pornography because ‘that is what men do’. How, or whether, this contact was flagged as risky by people who could potentially intervene would then differ depending on the gender of the young person, due to gender stereotypes or biases of those involved (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014).





## Support needs and existing service provision

The existing evidence provides a mixed picture of whether CSE impacts on males and females differently, and whether this results in gender differences in support needs (Brayley et al, 2014). The comparative analysis (Cockbain et al, 2014) and interviews with professionals (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014) suggested that there may well be some gender-based differences in how existing services respond to male and female service users.

### Gender differences in the impact of CSE and corresponding support needs

Previous studies have shown that male victims of CSA tend to report fewer negative impacts than do their female counterparts (Brayley et al, 2014). These include impacts relating to:

- **Self-harm:** In interviews, professionals noted that, in their experience, males may express their anger externally, and self-harm in different ways from females as a response to CSE. For example, males may intentionally provoke a fight as a means of sustaining an injury, which may not be recognised by adults as a method of self-harm (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014).
- **Sense of self and sexuality:** Professionals described a range of ways in which males' development of their sexuality may be negatively impacted by exploitation, and suggested that males were particularly likely to lack relationships in which they could discuss feelings – and therefore need support to safely discuss sex and relationships (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). This was supported by existing literature (Brayley et al, 2014).

- **Expectations of masculinity:** Linked to negative impacts on males' sexual development, professionals suggested that exploitation could affect males' perception of their masculinity. Professionals argued that prevailing social concepts of men as 'tough' could result in sexually exploited males feeling as though their masculinity had been compromised and, therefore, perhaps needing support to develop broader understandings of their masculinity and develop relationships with positive male role models (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). Professionals' experience in this regard is well supported by the existing literature on male victims of CSA (Brayley et al, 2014).

### Gender differences in identification of young people at risk (disclosure and referral)

- **Referral routes:** Findings from both the interviews and the comparative analysis indicated that referral routes into sexual exploitation services may be different depending on a child's gender. While the most common referral reason for both genders of Barnardo's service users was going missing, this reason accounted for 80% of males, compared with just 42% of females (Cockbain et al, 2014). Other reasons used to refer females to services (such as suspicions of exploitation or concerns about a relationship with an older person) were far less commonly found for males. One explanation for this could be something expressed by professionals in interviews: that males are often perceived as less vulnerable than females and their relationships with other people viewed as less inherently risky. This interpretation of the relationship between gender and identification of CSE was also discussed by young people in the workshop, who argued that problematic



relationships between adults and children should be recognised as such, regardless of the parties' genders. Previous studies have also found that professionals are more likely to recognise female rather than male CSA, and that when males are acknowledged, they are more likely to be viewed as complicit in the abuse they suffered (Brayley et al, 2014).

- **Disclosure:** The comparative analysis showed that while few children came to the attention of Barnardo's as the result of a direct disclosure of CSE, this was particularly rare for male service users (Cockbain et al, 2014). The views of professionals across a range of services supported this finding (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). Professionals suggested that males face specific barriers to disclosure related to their gender. Findings from the interviews with professionals (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014), coupled with areas identified in existing literature (Brayley et al, 2014), highlighted three reasons why males may not disclose. These were: experiences of discriminatory social attitudes and stereotypes (e.g. homophobia, stereotypes of masculinity, stigmatisation as offenders); gender differences in educational initiatives (e.g. focus on female victims); and gender differences in emotional responses (e.g. males being more emotionally isolated/lacking communication skills to talk about CSE).

### There remains confusion over the most appropriate service provision for male victims

Interviews with professionals from different service providers across the UK revealed two broadly different perspectives on how CSE services were best provided for young males: via a gender-neutral but individualised

approach; or via a gender-specific approach (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2014). These perspectives on engaging with male service users tended to align with professionals' own broader understanding of gender and its impacts.

- **Gender-neutral but individualised approach:** The professionals who favoured this approach tended to explain gender differences as a product of young men's socialisation within narrow constructs of masculinity. This approach emphasised the need to tailor support to young people as individuals, irrespective of their gender, rather than developing different forms of support for boys and girls.
- **Gender-specific approach:** The professionals who favoured this approach tended to explain gender differences as a result of innate biological differences between boys and girls. This approach emphasised the importance of offering support tailored specifically to young males as a group – for example, through more activity-based engagement than would ordinarily be delivered with girls – and male-only peer support opportunities.

There is little robust evidence available on the efficacy of different forms of support for young males who are sexually exploited.

# Implications and recommendations

- The research highlights just how little is known about the sexual exploitation of young males, and what a complex issue child sexual exploitation (CSE) is. The combination of serious social issues identified – offending, experiences of violence, homelessness, looked-after children, going missing, etc – supports earlier arguments by Jago, Pearce and others about the need for good multi-agency working to tackle this complex phenomenon.
- Taken as a whole, the findings suggest that more targeted attention needs to be given to the ways in which gender (and sexual orientation) may have an influence on vulnerability, responses to CSE, and support needs. That is not to say that no existing policies or practices will work for young males, but careful evaluation is needed of the ways in which they might need to be refined, adapted or otherwise changed. This includes assessing how the See Me, Hear Me framework developed by the Office of the Children's Commissioner (Berelowitz et al, 2013) explicitly incorporates the needs and experiences of young people with different gender identities and sexual orientations when it is implemented.
- There is a clear need for awareness-raising among professionals and the general public about the fact that CSE affects males as well as females – as there are currently hugely varying percentages of male victims reported across different geographical areas and services.
- Gender itself may be a factor that obscures identification of CSE – where, for example, gendered perceptions of masculinity mean young males are unlikely to talk about having been sexually exploited due to shame, fear, and concerns about being labelled gay due to homophobic social attitudes.
- Processes and impacts associated with female perpetrators need to be recognised and better researched. This may help professionals and victims recognise this kind of exploitation.
- Better standardised data collection mechanisms is an important first step towards conducting research into known CSE cases on a nationally representative level. To understand questions such as prevalence and how cases that are known to the authorities differ from those that are not, alternative data collection methods could usefully be employed – e.g. including questions in existing large-scale population surveys. However, both these important steps would first require a clearer and more consistently applied definition of CSE.

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# Appendix: Information about the authors

This report presents findings from a three-strand, mixed-methods study. The project was delivered as a partnership between the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)'s Crime and Justice Research team, the Department of Security and Crime Science at UCL (University College London), and Barnardo's.

**Dr Carol McNaughton Nicholls** is the Co-Head of Crime and Justice Research at NatCen. She specialises in researching interpersonal violence and abuse. Enquiries about the overall project, or the qualitative study, can be directed to [carol.mcnaughtonnicholls@natcen.ac.uk](mailto:carol.mcnaughtonnicholls@natcen.ac.uk)

**Dr Ella Cockbain** is an ESRC 'Future Research Leaders' Fellow at UCL's Department of Security and Crime Science. Her work focuses on serious and organised crime and its prevention. Enquiries about the quantitative study can be directed to [e.cockbain@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:e.cockbain@ucl.ac.uk)

**Dr Helen Brayley** is a chartered psychologist and Honorary Research Associate at UCL's Department of Security and Crime Science. Enquiries about the literature review can be directed to [helen.brayley@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:helen.brayley@ucl.ac.uk)

**Shannon Harvey** was a senior researcher in Crime and Justice Research at NatCen when this research was conducted. She is now Head of Research at Shelter.

**Carron Fox** is a research and policy officer at Barnardo's, focusing on child sexual exploitation. Before working at Barnardo's, Carron worked for the International Labour Organization and ECPAT UK, specialising in research on child trafficking and exploitation.

**Dr Caroline Paskell** is research director in Crime and Justice Research at NatCen. Between 2009 and 2013, she was research and policy lead on child sexual exploitation for Barnardo's.

**Matthew Ashby** is a doctoral student at the UCL Security Science Doctoral Research Training Centre, specialising in quantitative crime analysis methods. He is a former police officer and police intelligence researcher.

**Kate Gibson** is a researcher and doctoral student in the Department of Security and Crime Science at UCL. Kate's research interests include violent crime, organised crime, and literature review and evaluation methodology.

**Natalie Jago** is a researcher in the Crime and Justice Research team at NatCen, focusing primarily on child protection.

We are also grateful to **Cassandra Harrison** for her contribution to the project. Cassandra is an assistant director in Barnardo's Strategy Unit, leading its work on child sexual exploitation. She has previously held policy roles in a number of different organisations.



**Research on the sexual  
exploitation of boys  
and young men**

**A UK scoping study  
Summary of findings**

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