

An Analysis of the Psychosocial Backgrounds of Youths (13-18) Who-Pose-Sexual-Risk to Children

Abstract

Summary: Social workers had expressed concern to their Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) about male Youths (13-18)-Who-Pose-Sexual-Risk (YWPSR) to children, leading to this study of 36 social-history protocols, completed by the youths' social workers, that identified the presence of research-based factors of YWPSR who then go on to become adult child sex offenders.

To ensure total confidentiality, no actual case-record data were available to the authors, ensuring the LSCB, social workers and their clients remain totally anonymous.

While a small sample poses methodological difficulties, the authors believe the data is worthy of consideration as a pilot study for a larger project that might highlight the potential areas for early intervention.

Findings: Key findings were: Twenty-nine (80%) of thirty-six YWPSR were <14 when first showing inappropriate sexual behaviour, whilst 25% were known to have been sexually abused themselves, mostly <11yrs and 47% were either currently or had been, Looked-After-Children, with 42% having been Excluded-from-School of who 36% had learning difficulties. Their level of disturbance is shown by 11% having made a suicide attempt and they being formally charged for sex offences against children, which was significantly higher than that found in the adult general population. Finally 66% suffered from low self-esteem, were socially isolated and had poor peer relationships; reflected in the high level of problems at school.

Application: Such young people pose a challenge for all concerned and an evidence-based debate is required to explore how to prevent further unacceptable behaviour and thereby protect vulnerable children.

Key words: Social Work Risk Sexual Abuse Early Intervention Children

Research Ethics: The Local Safeguarding Children's Board gave ethical approval for the study. The authors had no access or knowledge of clients of the social workers supervising the cases. Permission to submit the study for publication was on the understanding that the LSCB remains anonymous to ensure total confidentiality of clients and social workers

Declaration: The authors have not vested or conflict of interests in this study. There was no external funding for the project.

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Introduction

Children who pose a sexual threat to other children raise major practice and policy issues (Erooga and Masson, 2002), however, most recent research in this field comes from North America (Christiansen and Vincent, 20013; Reavis et al, 2013; Riser et al 2013; Wortley and Smallbone, 2013). While there is a limited body of recent empirical research concerning Youths-Who-Pose-Sexual-Risk (YWPSR) from continental Europe (Chakhssi et al 2013; Glowacz & Born, 2013; van de Putt et 2013), there is relatively little recent empirical work from the UK. As Riser (2013) states, practitioners need a better understanding of YWPSR, because they represent a potentially important intervention point to prevent future abuse, as these young people are at the full flood of their hormonal drive, and the earlier the unchecked inappropriate sexual behaviour the more likely they are to become confirmed paedophiles (Waite et al 2005'; Finkelhor, 2009; Whitaker et al , 2012; Glowacz and Born, 2013; Poepl et al 2015). Thus there is every incentive for social workers to confront the issues and understand what leads them to this situation, as this may be the optimum, or even the last opportunity for effective prevention.

Aetiological research identifies two key themes. First, studies showing associations with various biological and neurological links (Harrison et, 2001; Seto, 2004; James, 2006; Becerra-Garcia, 2009; Poepl et al, 2015); however, whether this is causal or reactive is problematic. A 'biological' element seems to have a place, as illustrated in a recent twin-study that found monozygotic twins having higher concordance rates for child sex abuse than did dizygotic twins (Alanko et al, 2013).

The authors' model of human behaviour is of a *constant bio-psycho-social interaction*. Such a model acknowledges the possibility of biological interactional influence upon psychosocial factors that in turn influences biological development (Baron-Cohen, 2009). This does not exonerate the abusers, nor diminish the vital importance of the psychosocial and environmental features, but the interaction of the two needs to be better understood.

Recent work by the Children's Commissioner for England has highlighted that a proportion of young people who sexually offend have a degree of neuro-disability, opening up the possibility of another complex interaction that may underpin offending behaviour (Hughes et al, 2012) but offers a possible better opportunity for preventative intervention by taking an integrated view earlier (Erooga & Masson, 2002).

Most psychosocial research emanates mainly from North America and continental Europe (Craig et al, 2008; Finkelhor, 2009; Whitaker et al, 2012; van der Put et al 2013) and its complexity is highlighted by Whitaker et al (2012) in their meta-analysis of 89 studies published between 1990-2003. They identify six discernible inter-related categories: family factors, internalising and externalising behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, social deficits and sexual problems. The work of Strassberg et al, (2012) strongly indicates a degree of psychopathy, what Baron-Cohen (2012) succinctly defines as '*zero degrees of empathy*'. This suggests there are different types of young people who offend against children (Kjellgren et al, 2006; Glowwacz and Born, 2013; Wortley and Smallbone, 2014), but what all agree upon is that the earlier the offending starts, the more likely it is that the child sex abuse will continue for longer (Finkelhor, 2009; Whitaker et al, 2012).

A major issue is the degree to which current child sex abusers (CSA) were themselves victims of sex abuse as children, as there is research pointing in this direction (Finkelhor, 2009; Witztum et al 2012), but of course not all abused children become abusers, and, not all CSA were abused when a child. Consequently, the more we can know about this early stage the better.

This study emerged following a request from front-line child protection social workers who sought the guidance of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), which oversees child protection in their area, about their clients (13-18 years) who appeared to be Youths-Who-Pose-Sexual-Risk (YWPSR) to other children, which led to this descriptive case analysis.

Two important groups of young people to consider, who might be amongst YWPSR are those with known severe psychosocial problems. The first are children who have

formally been taken into public care and are 'Looked-After' under the supervision of the Local Authority, designated 'Looked-After- Children' (LAC) (Beilhal et al, 1995; Stein, 2006; Parton, 2014). The second group are children who have formally been *Excluded-from-School* (EFS) by the Head Teacher because of behaviour that either disrupts other children's education or they are unable to be educated within mainstream education which is associated with serious psychosocial difficulties (Social Exclusion Unit, 2005; Pritchard and Williams, 2009).

There are four main research questions, based upon anonymised information from the Youth's social workers.

1) were these Youths who appear to be YWPSR more likely to have been Looked-After-Children (LAC) or not?

2] were these Youths who appear to be YWPSR more likely to be or have been Excluded-from-School children (EFS) than not?

3] are there significant differences between the Youths known to have been sexually abused compared with those not known to be abused?

4] are there significant differences between those who have already been Formally Charged with a child sex related offence and those who have not been charged?

Methodology

Team leaders from an English Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) reported that their front-line colleagues were expressing concerns about possible YWPSR. Because of related work in this field of risk assessment (Pritchard, 2004; Pritchard and King, 2004; Pritchard and Sayers, 2008, Pritchard et al, 2013), the LSCB confidentially and anonymously invited the authors to undertake an audit of the cases to determine whether there were any discernible patterns of behaviour in the background of these young people. It was not possible to examine actual case-records because of the need to protect the anonymity of the Youths, their social workers and the LSCB. Ethical approval for the project was given by the LSCB as they were satisfied that clients and their social workers confidentiality were

maintained. To ensure total anonymity we agreed that the LSCB would remain anonymous in any subsequent publication. Consequently the data we used came from a social history protocol we designed based upon international research that identified a range of factors that was associated with Youths (<18) who later became adult (18+) Child-Sex-Abusers, to determine whether these Youths had similar characteristics (Pritchard, 2004; Almond et al , 2006; Craig et al, 2008; Roe-Sepowitz and Krysik, 2008; Finkelhor, 2009; Witztum et al, 2012 Christiansen and Vincent, 20013; Reavis et al, 2013; Riser et al, 2013; Wortley and Smallbone, 20134).

We could not find a standardised questionnaire or protocol that was indicative of youths who posed a potential sexual risk to children. Consequently, from current research literature, referred to throughout this paper, we extrapolated what appeared to be the strongest statistical association of factors related to those who became a child sex abuser. Thus the protocol, although not standardised, is of original design and proved to be internally consistent as demonstrated by the results obtained. Nonetheless, we recognise this is a limitation to be born in mind when considering the findings.

The questionnaires were distributed by the LSCB to the social workers and because of the perceived sensitivity of the material, only one author had direct contact with the LSCB and none with the social workers thus maintaining total confidentiality.

A confidential report went to the LSCB but as the results appear to have wider relevance in an area of relative paucity of British empirical data, the outcomes are reported here.

There are a number of inevitable limitations to the study, in part due to the small sample size. The reliability of the data is influenced by the individual social worker's knowledge of factor(s) present to a specific youth. Hence, a negative score about a particular piece of behaviour or background does not necessarily mean that it did not apply to that youth, but simply that the social worker did not know about it. These limitations are explored in greater detail in the discussion.

Data covered the Youths' demographics and the problems they faced, broadly categorised as psychological, educational and family. The total data was then separately analysed in subgroups to compare:

1. Youths who were known to have been Sexually Abused, with those who were not
2. Youths were either former or current Looked-After-Child (LAC), or former Excluded-from-School (EFS) with those who were not
3. Youths who had been Formally Charged with a sex offence against another child versus those who had not been charged

This last comparison is undertaken because a formal charge of a sex offence against a child within the general population is statistically extremely rare (Pritchard and Williams, 2009) and consequently might be considered as a serious indication that the young person is already at risk of recidivism (Finkelhor, 2009; Whitaker et al, 2012; Christiansen and Vincent, 20013; Reavis et al, 2013; Riser et al, 2013; Wortley and Smallbone, 2014). The subgroups were statistically tested using the non-parametric chi square test, which is appropriate for relatively small numbers.

Findings

We first report on the total sample in regard to the YWPSR demographics, their behaviour and family background. Frequency scores are given in Table [1] on every item for the whole cohort. However, rather than swamp the reader with masses of data on each identified factor, only those showing a statistically significant difference will be commented in each of the four comparative sub-groups.

Sample

The sample consists of a cohort of cases of young men aged 13-18 who came to the attention of child protection social workers over the course of one year. In each case the

case-responsible social workers had expressed concern that the young people appeared to be YWPSR to other children because of reported inappropriate sexual behaviour, invariably against much younger children. Fifty-five young males and one female were initially considered and 37 questionnaires were finally completed.

The main reasons for the non-return of 18 questionnaires were because the social workers were either concerned not to inadvertently stigmatise their client, or, because the problem appeared to have been resolved.

As only one case was female (14 yrs), it was decided that little could comparatively be said about her, other than she had a highly disturbed background. Consequently, the following findings refer to the 36 males for whom we have completed case-history protocols, giving a 67% response rate.

Age

Table [1] give the demographics of the cohort and their current situation.

Of the thirty-six cases at the time of the offence 47% were aged 14 years and under, 20% between 15-16 years, and 33% were 17-18 years old. A key aspect of YWPSR is their age. Nearly a third (31%) had their first inappropriate sexual behaviour aged eleven and under, more than half (55%) were aged between 12-14 and the remaining 5 (14%) were aged 15 years and over. Twenty (55%) of the Youths had been formally charged with a sexual offence, 25% were aged <14 and 31% were aged 15+.

Links with Children's Services

Seventeen (47%) of the YWPSR were known to the Social Services, 20% who had been LAC whilst 28% are still LAC. The youths' problems fall naturally into Psychological, Educational and Familial factors.

Psychological: Major themes were: more than two-thirds (69%) had low self-esteem, 67% were socially isolated, 61% lacked appropriate peer relationships, 31% were described as having attachment difficulties and 17% had expressed confusion about their sexual

identity. Behaviours linked to fewer than 10%, i.e. only two or less cases, are not discussed, but are noted in the table.

Educational: Almost half (47%) had experienced bullying at school, 25% had bullied others, 25% were frequent truants, 36% had learning difficulties 33% had Special Educational Needs and 14% had a formal diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Whilst fifteen (42%) of the Youths had been Excluded-from-School (EFS) at some time, forming a separate sub-group for analysis.

Familial: The Youths came from families experiencing multiple disruption; 56% were reported to have suffered emotional abuse, 39% neglect and 31% physical abuse. There was a high level, 53%, of reported domestic violence and 31% within-family sexual abuse of other children by a parent figure. 28% of families had a history of parental mental illness, but a relatively low level of reported parental alcohol misuse (8%) and substance abuse (6%).

However, the parents had reported 39% of the youths being violent and abusive in the home, with 22% reporting them as violent/abusive outside the home. 17% were reported as having run away either from home or care and 11% as being involved in fire-setting at home. Self-evidently, with such profiles these YWPSR have a multiplicity of problems.

Insert Table [1]

The Sub-Groups

Each sub-group is compared against the rest of the cohort to determine any themes that might emerge. Rather than give each item, only those that were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) or a trend (where the chi square fell just short of significance) are shown.

Youths who themselves were Sexually Abused

25% (nine) were known to have been Sexually Abused in the home, though it must be remembered that the referring social worker would not always know of any abuse. Despite

the small numbers, Table [2] shows that there were some statistically significant differences between these two groups, which indicate the particularly adverse experience of these YWPSR in the context of their having experienced sexual abuse themselves.

Whilst it was not statistically significant, six of the nine abused Youths were also Excluded-from-School (67%), which of course is of practical significance and would add to any social isolation.

The 'abused' group had greater contact with social services, 8 of the 9 were either currently or previously LAC. There was a trend of witnessing more family violence; significantly more emotional abuse, physical abuse and neglect; and six had a history of running away from home/care. All were said to be socially isolated, lacked peer relationships and had greater contact with mental health services.

Insert Table [2]

Previous or Current LAC

Table [3] lists the statistically significant differences between those 17 (47%) youths who were or are currently LAC, compared with those who were not.

Of the 35 factors related to the YWPSR backgrounds and behaviour, the LAC sub-group had significantly greater scores or showed trends on 25 of the items, indicating that LAC young men were frequently involved in problematic situations. However, in regard to deliberate-self-harm, violence in the home and contact with mental health services, it was the non-LAC youths who were significantly more often involved than the LAC youths.

It is noteworthy that the LAC sub-group tended to start age-inappropriate sexual behaviour at a much younger age; half (50%) were eleven and under.

The main differences between the two sub-groups were that the LAC youths had greater exposure to domestic violence and were more likely to be victims of emotional and physical abuse and neglect. They were also considerably more socially isolated, had lower self-esteem, comparatively lacked social skills and had attachment difficulties.

As would be expected with LAC young people, social services were significantly more often involved in their supervision and they attended group sessions. Interestingly, there was little difference in terms of victim awareness training.

Inset Table [3]

Excluded-from-School

Table [4] lists the significant differences between the 42% (15) of YWPSR who had also been Excluded-from-School (EFS) compared to the non-EFS youths. Of the 35 items regarding background and behaviour, the EFS sub-group differed significantly on 19 items from the non-EFS.

The EFS group contained more 15-year old YWPSR whose inappropriate sexual behaviour started after 12 years old. Interestingly the EFS had a greater history of parental alcohol abuse, substance abuse and mental health problems than the non-EFS.

As might be expected the EFS had significantly more school-related problems such as truancy, bullying and being bullied. Linked to this was a lack of peer relationships. The EFS group were more violently abusive at home, had more consensual sex and four (27%) out of the 15 had been involved in deliberate-self-harm, which when compared to their age peers in the general population was more than a thousand times that of the general population. The EFS group had less contact with social services, a finding to which we shall return. Finally, 40% (six) of the 15 EFS were either previously or currently in care.

Insert Table [4]

YWPSR & Charged with a Sex Offence

More than half (56%) of the cohort had formally been charged with a sex offence against a child. This is a remarkable statistic as such charges are amongst the rarest in the criminal field, because the authorities find the offence so hard to prove. However, against

expectations, we found relatively *few* significant differences between the 'charged' and 'non-charged'; indeed there were only four significant items.

Crucially, the 'charged' group were older, and 14 (70%) out of the 20 were 15+ and were relatively later in terms of age at inappropriate sex. None had parents involved in substance abuse, but half the group had been involved in victim awareness sessions. It would seem the only notable difference of this sub-group was their age, suggesting the police only become involved when YWPSR are older.

Key Findings

First, there were statistically significant differences between the Youths who themselves had been abused and those who were not known to have been abused.

Second, of the current or former LAC, 47% (17 out of 36) had far worse backgrounds, in terms of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence etc. than those who had never been LAC.

Third, the majority of these youths experienced low self-esteem, social isolation and poor peer relationships. This suggests that achieving age-appropriate relationships may be especially challenging, especially in view of their problems at school.

Fourth, the over-lap with the learning difficulties spills over into educational problems and this may further impair young people's ability to relate appropriately to their age peers. Furthermore, many had begun their depredations very early and there is evidence that the earlier this starts, the greater likelihood this becomes a repetitive pattern of behaviour (Erooga & Masson; 2002; Pritchard, 2004; Cohen et al, 2010; Alison et al, 2012; Chakhssi et al, 2013; Glowacz & Born, 2013; van de Putt et al, 2013).

The above psychosocial environmental factors reflect recent studies from continental Europe and North America (Chakhassi et al 2013; Glowacz and B, 2013; Reavis et al, 2013; Chakhassi et al, 2013; van dam Putt et al 2014), which gives the authors some confidence in the validity of the findings of this small British study.

Fifth, against our expectations, the twenty youths (56%) formally charged with sexual offences had few significant differences when compared to those who were not charged, other than their age. This strongly suggests that when the police intervene the youths are a little further along the cusp to becoming child sex abusers. Conversely, it may be they were charged because they were more visible to children's services and it may be their being known that makes them more readily identified.

Finally, after accounting for the 17 LAC and the 11 EFS, there are a further 8 YMPSR for whom biological factors, namely ADHD, might be an issue. There are studies that link biological and environmental factors as possibly multi-**causal** of CSA (James and Neil, 1996; Harrison et al, 2001; James 2006; Vizard et al, 2013; Becerra-Garcia, 2009; Alenko et al, 2013; Poepl et al, 2013). Indeed the Children's Commissioner Report reminds us that those on the autistic / learning difficulties spectrum may be more prone to be YWPSR (Hart-Kerkhoffs et al, 2009; Hughes et al, 2012), possibly in part due to their inability to maintain appropriate age-related relationships, with the resulting social isolation (Hart-Kerkhoffs et al, 2009).

Discussion and Conclusions.

Limitations

- 1] There was only one female in the cohort so her case was excluded from the general analysis as little could be comparatively said about a single protocol other than her profile indicated a highly disturbed person.
- 2] Paradoxically, because of the high level of previous contact with children's services, what about these youths only known because of this relationship. Whereas negative behaviours of other young people is not known because they are not in contact with children's services, hence their behaviour passes unknown.
- 3] Conversely, the absence of a risk factor does not necessarily mean it was not part of the individual's behaviour or background, but simply because it is unknown to their social worker.

4] There is the problem of age-span in these cases. Whilst age is a chronological fact, in practice it is highly variable in individuals, as some 12 year olds can hormonally be virtually a young adult.

5] A major problem in assessing this children's and adolescent's sexual behaviour is that we do not know the boundaries of normal child and adolescent sexual behaviour

6] Finally, these findings could be misunderstood or misinterpreted, especially in relation to the LAC group, indicative of 'failure' of the child care system, hence the need for the greatest caution in interpreting the data.

Despite the small numbers, it was possible to demonstrate some significant differences between the various sub-groups, which were internally consistent. For example in relation to those who had been abused themselves, it was possible to confirm earlier research on former LAC and EFS young men aged 16-24, in relation to a comparatively high rate of sex offences against children, although former LAC males had a significantly better outcome than another disadvantaged group, former EFS young men (Pritchard and Williams, 2009).

So despite these qualifications, the authors believe this study is worth pursuing because of the relative paucity of British based empirical research in this area and the need for better informed practice and policy.

Policy & Practice Implications

When informally discussing our findings with experienced front-line child protection social workers, a frequent response was that none of the findings surprised them. Indeed, it was felt that the problems posed by YWPSR were well known, but rarely *formally* discussed or acknowledged. So, despite the earlier reports from National Children's Home (1998) and the Dept. of Health and the Home Office (2006), there appears to be relatively little debate, which highlights the first key issue as, by implication, the social workers themselves are aware that there are youths who potentially pose a sexual risk to children on their case load.

Clearly, until a formal assessment and consequent identification has been undertaken, we do not know the numbers or the scale of the problem at a national level.

This leads to the second key issue and this relates to the 'deservedness' of the YWPSR. We would invite the reader to consider the factors that underpin the lack of discussion, assessment and identification of YWPSR. It might be that, with such a high link with current or former LAC young men being YWPSR, we might be ignoring what might be happening in the young people's care situation. We need to confront the issue of how services treat the sexually inappropriate behaviours of their LAC charges before the young person has left the care of the local authority.

The third issue we highlight relates to the treatment and care of the YWPSR. The social worker's duty is to maintain the focus upon the paramount interest of the child, which also includes when the child poses a sexual risk to other children. This needs to be achieved, by skilfully balancing risk with the key legislative principle that the best place for children is for them to be looked-after in their own homes. This confronts us with the need to make a judgement of whether the child's removal from their family is necessary to ensure their safety and well-being. Overall, this requires balancing the ethical dilemma of how best to assist the individual whilst ensuring the safety of other children.

To maintain the highest proportion of YWPSR in their home requires effective local provision. We are aware of local authorities that are developing their own specialist provision and, crucially, building the capacity and confidence of their child care social workers to practice in this context. This fits the agenda for professional development clearly laid out so helpfully in the Professional Capabilities Framework (The College of Social Work, 2012). Perhaps the key practice implication is the fact that the majority of these young people were socially isolated, with low self-esteem and few peer relationships. This core sense of their psychosocial 'inadequacy' might largely account for their inappropriate targeting of younger children, as they are unable to sustain a peer-age relationship. We need to remember that these youths are at the first full flood of their sex drives, so it is a matter of helping them to handle it appropriately. Hence, the practice aim should be to improve their social skills,

equipping them to better develop more mature and age appropriate social and sexual relationships.

Whilst the authors acknowledge the limitations of this study, they believe it has the potential to contribute a wider debate that is required so that we are better able to respond to the reality of YWPSR. The priority is for the victim-abuser to develop an acceptable sexual behaviour and thereby avoid joining the next generation of child sex abusers.

Perhaps the most salient feature of this study is that social workers already know about young people who pose a sexual risk to other children. They currently manage the risk that they young people pose in their different placement settings e.g. residential homes, foster homes, or is quietly ignored in case we inadvertently stigmatise these young people or hope they will develop more mature age-appropriate relationships.

For practitioners and policy makers, evidence can and should encourage better-informed decision-making. In the context of youths who pose a sexual risk to children. The evidence highlighted in this study suggests that the optimal outcomes for these youths will be by the earliest possible intervention. For these youths already on the case-load of child care social workers a skilled assessment will identify those in greatest need of diverting as early as possible from the path of child sexual abuse i.e. before becoming too fixated along the road of becoming a child sex abuser.

The authors hope this study may strengthen the argument in favour of providing for these vulnerable young people while the statutory services retain the duty of care and the power to provide effective intervention.

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