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Race Class 2013 54: 22

DOI: 10.1177/0306396813475983

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Grooming and the 'Asian sex gang predator': the construction of a racial crime threat

ELLA COCKBAIN

Abstract: Following a mainstream British newspaper's claim to have uncovered a new crime threat of 'on-street grooming', extensive and emotive debate continues around the so-called 'Asian sex gang' problem in the UK. This article examines the construction of a new racial crime threat, assessing the validity of its foundations and exploring its possible causes and consequences. Grooming is shown to be a dubious category, not a distinct offence but an ill-defined subset of child sexual exploitation more generally. The article highlights a fundamental tension in the grooming discourse, showing that claims of a uniquely racial crime threat are ill founded but that Asians have been overrepresented, relative to the general population, among suspected child sexual exploiters identified to date. The implications of the current fixation with grooming and 'Asian sex gangs' are examined and shown to further a political agenda and legitimise thinly veiled racism, ultimately doing victims a disservice. The article concludes by calling for a shift from the sweeping, ill-founded generalisations driving dominant discourse to date, towards open and level-headed discussions around child sexual exploitation, including but not limited to, examining relationships between race and offending.

Keywords: Asian, child sexual exploitation, crime, grooming, media, Pakistani, political correctness

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Race & Class

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10.1177/0306396813475983 <http://rac.sagepub.com>

Since 2011, there has been widespread media, public and policy debate in the UK around so-called 'grooming', depicted as a new crime threat inextricably associated with 'Asian sex gangs' who deliberately seek out white British girls for repeated and horrific sexual abuse. This article traces the origins of the grooming debate, examining the possible roots of its incendiary nature and critically assessing key factors against historical parallels. In an area beset by confusion and complexity, this article provides a simple overview of key definitional and statistical considerations. While exposing the logical fallacies in representations of a uniquely 'Asian model' of grooming, it also shows that Asians have been overrepresented among suspected perpetrators of child sexual exploitation (CSE) identified to date, relative to the general population. The risks of a narrow race-based construct of grooming are examined and shown to include fuelling racist rhetoric, distorting policy and practice and exacerbating community tensions. The article concludes by arguing for a shift away from a fixation with grooming as a uniquely racialised threat towards responding to CSE in its entirety, including, but not limited to, an honest, transparent examination of observed racial trends.

At the outset, it should be noted that, in Britain, the term 'Asian' typically refers to people of South-Asian descent. Grooming has been overwhelmingly associated with Asians of Pakistani heritage, although the terms 'Asian', 'Pakistani' and 'Muslim' have often been conflated. Consequently, other South-Asian groups have argued for greater linguistic precision in order to distance themselves from grooming's stigma. In practice, data-recording conventions mean that specific Asian ethnicities can rarely be disentangled from large-scale datasets. Consequently, despite recognising its contentious nature, the term Asian is used in this article when greater specificity is impossible.

The creation of a racial crime threat

In January 2011, *The Times*, a leading British conservative broadsheet newspaper, ran a front-page exposé entitled 'Revealed: conspiracy of silence on UK sex gangs'.¹ It claimed to have uncovered a new racial crime threat, dubbed 'on-street grooming'; this coinage has since been widely abbreviated to 'grooming', the term used throughout this article. According to *The Times*, the grooming threat was a 'plague on northern towns', threatening in particular white working-class girls in England's North and Midlands – regions with large and segregated Asian communities, where racial tensions are thought to have been exacerbated by industrial decline, economic deprivation and media sensationalism.² The authorities, it claimed, were failing to tackle widespread cases involving Asian male offenders sexually abusing white British girls for 'fear of being branded racist'.³ Against a context of increasingly vocal disillusionment with multicultural Britain, the contention proved explosive that 'foreigners' were not only abusing 'natives' but also going unpunished due to misguided political correctness.

This exposé coincided with the culmination of the latest in a series of trials across the late 2000s involving multiple offenders convicted of sexual offences

against British children. Of the thirteen defendants in this case, the UK's largest CSE investigation to date, one was white and twelve were Asian, primarily British Pakistanis. While this was not the first trial of its kind to feature multiple Asian defendants, previous coverage had typically been localised, sporadic and comparatively low-profile, and defendants' race was rarely discussed. Nonetheless, occasional predecessors to *The Times'* exposé include a 2010 article 'How predatory gangs force middle-class girls into the sex trade'⁴ and a 2004 TV documentary⁵ investigating primarily Pakistani-heritage offenders sexually exploiting white girls in Keighley, an economically depressed Yorkshire town with a large and segregated Asian community. Despite almost being cancelled for fear of inciting race riots,⁶ the political implications of this film were minimal: pre-*Times* exposé, Keighley's member of parliament remained virtually the only mainstream politician discussing CSE.

In contrast, *The Times'* coverage catapulted grooming into the national consciousness. In the week immediately following the exposé, grooming dominated the national news agenda: it was the subject of the BBC News website's most-read article and of intense debate on numerous high-profile radio and TV shows, including BBC's *Newsnight*. At the time of writing, almost two years on, grooming continues to attract intense media and political attention and has led to several prime-time documentaries, two nationwide scoping studies and a government action plan on CSE. Perspectives have typically polarised between those who uncritically present grooming as a racial crime threat and those who concentrate on the illegitimacy of this racialisation. Both extremes, however, involve propelling race to centre stage. Characteristic of the racialisation of the grooming debate, the *Daily Mirror*, a liberal tabloid newspaper, re-released an article several days after its original publication, substituting the original headline 'Nine quizzed over child grooming' for 'Nine Asian men quizzed over alleged grooming of white girls for sex'.

Misunderstanding persists around the legal status of grooming. Despite statements such as '50 of 56 men convicted in English courts of on-street grooming were Muslim',⁷ grooming is not a distinct criminal offence. Grooming is better understood as a subset of CSE,⁸ itself a broad, umbrella-type phenomenon encompassing diverse offences – ranging from rape to sexual activity with a child, to false imprisonment. Occasional commentators have further confused grooming with the offence of 'meeting a child following sexual grooming', prohibited under Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.⁹ Intended primarily to support proactive enforcement against online sex offenders without requiring actual sexual activity, this offence is unlikely to be charged in so-called grooming cases.

An explosive combination

Grooming's immediate 'appeal' probably lay at least partially in its incorporation of most classic news values associated with crime journalism,¹⁰ as well as involving children and a clear political dimension, both of which typically amplify an

issue's impact.¹¹ As one newspaper exclaimed, 'There could, of course, hardly be a more emotive story than this. Sexual abuse! White girls! Pakistani men! Politically-correct establishment letting it happen!'¹² Grooming combines novelty with comfortable conventions: many of the defining characteristics of the new threat discourse are resolutely familiar.

At its most extreme, it can seem that the greatest effrontery about grooming is not the abuse of children but the interracial sex itself. This may explain a tendency towards ethnically homogenising victim and offender groups: victims' whiteness and offenders' otherness are both regularly overstated. White co-offenders and ethnic minority victims are routinely downplayed in the insistence that this is a problem of Asian men targeting white girls. In fact, this contradicts early research findings which suggest that victim recruitment is largely opportunistic and that ethnic minority children are also abused.¹³ The literal and metaphorical 'whitening' of victims raises the question that grooming might never have attracted such attention, and its victims such sympathy, if the offender threat figure had not been so resolutely 'other'.

This treatment recalls a similar process played out in the Australian media around the threat of Lebanese rapists,¹⁴ which led one commentator to state, 'It is a shame we have to be racist in order to recognise the rights of raped women.'¹⁵ In the early 2000s, a series of group rapes by predominantly Lebanese offenders sparked mass hysteria: notably victims were consistently *mis*represented as white Australians.¹⁶ The rapes, as with current grooming cases, were implicitly constructed as an extrinsic attack on dominant white culture and nationhood itself.¹⁷

Grooming concerns should be contextualised against deeper-seated concerns and frustrations around migration, the alleged failure of multicultural Britain, positive discrimination and growing Islamophobia in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 bombings. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that confident assertions from a reputable mainstream media outlet of an Asian (Muslim) crime threat sufficed to open the floodgates for a national scandal. At its most extreme, the mood was one of outrage at a failing system supposedly incapacitated by political correctness, encapsulated in furious diatribe about 'multicultural, reverse-racist, sickeningly hypocritical Britain'.¹⁸

Many aspects of the construction of the 'Asian sex gang predator'¹⁹ as Britain's newest folk devil recall 1970s Britain's archetypal moral panic around mugging.²⁰ Mugging, like grooming, was constructed as a new and pressing crime threat, for which the 'ideological bedrock' was the widespread conception of Afro-Caribbean communities as highly problematic.²¹ As a result of this racialised construction, mugging became inextricably linked with attacks on the 'elderly white lady'²² by young black men, even when perpetrators deviated from this racial stereotype.²³ Just as young blacks subsequently had to contend with being ascribed 'certain collective qualities, e.g. alienated, vicious little criminals, muggers',²⁴ Asians in Britain may find themselves treated as potential groomers in future.

Again, as with mugging, grooming has been readily explained in political and media debate in cultural terms. Reflecting a broader preoccupation with the idea of irreconcilable culture clash theories, grooming proved a convenient focal point for longstanding frustrations about arranged marriage practices (whose implication for migration policies should be remembered), perceived misogyny and insufficient assimilation. Despite little direct supporting evidence for such cultural *correlates*, they were not only presented as self-evident but as direct *causes* of grooming. In fact, certain claims can be readily exposed as dubious, despite attracting little scrutiny at the time. For example, Jack Straw, Britain's former home secretary, was quick to explain grooming as an inevitable consequence of an arranged marriage culture, whereby young unmarried Pakistani-heritage men resort to abusing readily available white British girls out of pent-up sexual frustration. Not only is the notion that CSE is the only outlet for sexual release risible, but Straw ignores the fact that the offenders in the cases in question were typically already married and in their 20s or 30s, hardly the sexually frustrated 'young men ... fizzing and popping with testosterone'²⁵ of his argument.

A conspiracy of silence?

A particularly pernicious element to constructing grooming as a racial crime threat arises from the claim that grooming constituted a 'conspiracy of silence', in which authorities were 'crippled by misplaced fears about upsetting racial sensitivities'.²⁶ Consequently, attempts to examine critically the validity of the Asian groomer construct could be, and were, attacked as further evidence of an institutional cover-up. Similar attacks were levied at Australian police in the wake of the Sydney rapes discussed earlier. In reality, the situation is probably far more mundane and less racially motivated than has been suggested. It is possible that local authorities, police and children's services may have been nervous about tackling CSE cases involving Asian offenders in the wake of the 2001 Bradford race riots and widespread criticism of the police for institutional racism following the Macpherson inquiry into their handling of the Stephen Lawrence case. Nonetheless, there are numerous other factors that may have played as much, if not more, of a role in deterring effective responses to CSE. After all, it is critical to note that CSE in general, not just the spurious grooming model, has only just begun to be treated as a child-protection priority that requires effective, co-ordinated and proactive responses. CSE cases have been easy to ignore as victims rarely report their abuse, and, even if they do, the Crown Prosecution Service appears to have been reluctant to pursue prosecutions because of fears around witness credibility and jury members' insufficient understanding of the nature and impact of CSE.²⁷ Finally, it should be noted that, in a climate of budget cuts, CSE is an expensive, complex and time-consuming issue to tackle. A major positive repercussion of the grooming debate, despite its many limitations, has

been to establish CSE firmly as a child-protection issue and exert considerable pressure for clear and concerted multi-agency responses nationwide.

Spurious statistics

Another possible reason why *The Times'* exposé enjoyed such immediate and far-reaching impact was that it took an emotive and novel issue, furnished it with a catchy name and legitimised it with statistics. In media and policy debate, as in academic research, quantification can often be confused with objectivity; the methods and assumptions underpinning apparently self-evident statistical conclusions are not necessarily scrutinised. *The Times'* creation of grooming as a new racial crime threat is a classic example, it seems, of a bold claim resting on shaky foundations: anecdote, opinion and spurious statistics.

The basic 'proof' that grooming was a racial issue was that, of fifty-six offenders, convicted across seventeen trials, '[t]hree of the 56 were white, 53 were Asian. Of those, 50 were Muslim and a majority were members of the British Pakistani community'.²⁸ Despite the severity of the offences, seventeen cases hardly constitute the alleged 'tidal wave of offending',²⁹ a clear example of the disproportionality of the original threat, a key ingredient for any moral panic. Findings from an exploratory academic study were cited in support, despite the authors publicly emphasising that their (unpublished) work, focusing on two cases alone, had been de-contextualised and deliberately 'over-extended to characterise an entire crime type'.³⁰ *The Times'* statistics were widely repeated, often uncritically; the source of these figures was rarely addressed. Their frequent misrepresentation as 'research' may have served to heighten their impact.

In fact, *The Times'* figures derived from a search of press coverage from 1997 to 2011 aimed at identifying convictions involving two or more men for sexually abusing girls aged 11–16 years they had met locally, hence the 'on-street' in grooming.³¹ These inclusion parameters have never been explained or justified, despite the questionable decision to exclude male victims wholesale. This raises the question as to whether the statistical exercise was deliberately designed to isolate evidence for a predetermined 'Asian model'. Finally, a reliance on press coverage to measure a crime will naturally echo media biases about newsworthiness, including the tendency to over-report offences involving lower-class or ethnic minority offenders.³²

The official picture

Widespread concern around grooming resulted in two large-scale government studies: the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre's (CEOP) assessment of 'localised grooming',³³ and the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England's (OCCE) study on 'child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups'.³⁴ It is important to emphasise that these studies measure not convicted or charged suspects, but simply those highlighted by data-providers, including the police and

children's services, as suspects: many will never have been formally identified. Consequently, the degree of active engagement with CSE locally is likely to impact upon the level of CSE identified. In the absence of a single study covering all forms of CSE, it is worth summarising what each of these studies measured and their findings regarding suspects' ethnicity. An additional caveat in interpreting results is that both reported considerable data deficiencies, including missing or incomplete data.

Addressing the UK as a whole, CEOP measured 'localised grooming': the name echoing the new grooming debate, a clear example of media influence shaping official responses. Like *The Times*, CEOP focused on community-based CSE, specifically excluding familial, peer-on-peer, professional³⁵ or primarily online abuse. Unlike *The Times*, CEOP removed limitations on victims' age and gender and covered both solo and group offenders. Of the 31 per cent ($N = 753$) of suspects for whom race was known, 49 per cent ($N = 367$) were white and 46 per cent ($N = 346$) Asian.³⁶ Meanwhile, the OCCE included all forms of CSE in England, both online and offline, but was restricted to offenders acting in groups of two or more, the exclusion of solo offenders seriously undermining its claim to provide the 'most thorough and comprehensive collection of information' on CSE to date.³⁷ The statistics presented in the report are often confused and incoherent,³⁸ exacerbating methodological shortcomings and understandable data deficiencies. What can be disentangled is that only a minority of submissions to the call for evidence included any information on suspects. Of a total of 1,514 suspects thus identified, race data were available for 84 per cent ($N = 1266$). For those suspects where race was known, 43 per cent ($N = 545$) were white and 33 per cent ($N = 415$) Asian.³⁹

These studies clearly demonstrate that, contrary to popular opinion, CSE is *not* a uniquely Asian threat: in both cases the single largest ethnic group among suspects was white. At first sight, however, the large proportion of Asian suspects *is* concerning, since Asians comprise just 7 per cent of the British and 6 per cent of the English population. Yet, at least one, if not both, of these studies relied overwhelmingly on a few geographical areas for their suspect data. Consequently, it would be more accurate and informative to compare the demographic (including racial) composition of the suspect group to that of these areas alone. Neither study included such analysis, nor did they provide information on the geographical provenance of their limited data that would have facilitated independent analysis. Instead, this was a missed opportunity to reduce confusion, alleviate claims of institutional cover-ups and ultimately make a meaningful contribution to the race debate.

Implications of a racial crime model

Racialising criminal justice issues poses several risks, some of which have already materialised in the grooming debate. First, it provides ready ammunition to

right-wing extremist groups: British organisations have been quick to capitalise on the establishment's perceived failure and the new social legitimacy of anti-Asian sentiment: some of their most concerning actions are summarised here. The British National Party (BNP) narrowly missed rendering a recent prosecution of a major CSE case a mistrial after its leader tweeted the supposed verdicts while the jury was still deliberating. The English Defence League (EDL) caused a two-week delay to the same trial after attacking two (Asian) defence barristers outside the court: such actions endanger defendants' right to a fair trial, prolong the traumatic prosecution experience for complainants and incur considerable public costs. Meanwhile, perceiving the OCCE report as a 'whitewash', Britain First posted the Deputy Children's Commissioner's home address online and circulated it to thousands of supporters, placing her and her family at direct personal risk.

Second, fears of racial crime trends can be readily manipulated to win votes and legitimise repressive crime-control measures.⁴⁰ Taking advantage of a fearful populace, which is more susceptible to manipulation and willing to accept tougher measures, this can help to further the immigration-control agenda.⁴¹ Despite failing to engage with CSE during his period as home secretary (1997–2001), Jack Straw suddenly took a hardline stance on grooming in the run-up to the critical Oldham by-election.⁴² The Conservative party's announcement of a new stance against 'state multiculturalism' quite possibly gained credibility against the backdrop of the grooming panic. In the 2000s, the construction of the Lebanese gang rapist as a threat to white Australia and resultant media-fuelled panic culminated in poorly founded legislative change and draconian sentencing.⁴³ Constructions of grooming as a racial crime threat may exacerbate community tensions, support populist racism and even directly incite hate crime.⁴⁴

Third, the emergent stereotype of a racial crime threat can self-perpetuate. In a classic case of confirmation bias, instances of Asian grooming may attract greater media coverage, thereby fuelling public perceptions of grooming as a racial crime threat. Following a recent trial involving mostly white offenders, parents of the children sexually exploited reported frustration at the relatively low level of interest it attracted, compared with similar cases involving Asian offenders. Recent anger at the OCCE report's failure to address the 'Asian model' highlights the growing misconception that there exists a uniquely Asian form of CSE.⁴⁵ The notion of an Asian model rests on two assumptions: '[f]irst that Asians and Asians alone follow this particular MO [modus operandi] ... Second, that this (at best vaguely delineated) MO is the only one that Asian offenders use'.⁴⁶ Both are flawed, as the involvement of non-Asians in classic grooming-style cases and arrests of Asians for other forms of CSE clearly demonstrate. Finally, there remains the risk that official responses will be affected by emergent racial stereotypes, potentially meaning suspects fitting this racial profile are more likely to be identified and pursued than those who do not. Should this

transpire, the overrepresentation of Asians among CSE offenders may in itself become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Conclusion

The image of the Asian groomer has proved a seductive and enduring one, yet, as this article has demonstrated, the idea of a uniquely Asian crime threat is ill founded, misleading and dangerous. The construction of grooming as a distinct offence and a racial crime threat has been shown to lie on insubstantial foundations: misconceptions, anecdote, opinion and the deliberate manipulation of limited statistics of dubious provenance. Nonetheless, the greatest tension in responding to all this arises from the identification of Asians as the second-largest racial group among suspects of various forms of CSE in two major national studies, greatly overrepresented relative to the general population.

While race is by no means the only notable aspect to CSE, nor the most important one, this disparity begs further exploration and, if possible, explanation. Admittedly, this is not an easy job. Complex social issues can rarely be explained in terms of a single factor and moving from correlation to causality is particularly challenging. Nonetheless, in CSE, as with other crimes, observed relationships between race and offending may well be mediated by social, structural or situational factors. Asians, like whites or blacks, do not commit CSE offences *because* they are Asian, white or black. This lazy, circular logic, verging on quasi-geneticism, would label every Asian adult equally a groomer-in-waiting and fails to address the immediate precipitates of CSE, such as ready access to children and low levels of formal or informal surveillance to constrain deviant behaviour.

As counter-intuitive as it may seem, refusing to talk about race at all risks fueling racialised stereotypes and racist discourses, validating the claim of institutional cover-ups. Talking about race, however, must not mean pointing fingers at an apparently homogeneous 'Asian culture'. Simplistic cultural explanations are grounded in a misguided belief in a single, homogeneous and self-evident culture. Cultural explanations are hard to test and rarely offer much in the way of explanatory value, let alone informing interventions. Nor should talking about race mean shifting full responsibility for CSE onto Britain's Asian population in a way that conveniently absolves the indigenous majority from addressing the involvement of their own. Child sexual exploitation is not an 'Asian problem', it is everybody's problem.

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