

SAGE Research Methods Case Health Submission for Consideration

Case Title

Children, gender and sexual exploitation: A quantitative analysis of administrative data

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Published Articles

- Cockbain, E., Ashby, M. and Brayley, H. (2015) Immaterial Boys? A Large-Scale Exploration of Gender-Based Differences in Child Sexual Exploitation Service Users, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, <http://sax.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/12/02/1079063215616817.abstract>
- Cockbain, E., Brayley, H. and Ashby, M. (2014) Not just a girl thing: A large-scale comparison of male and female users of child sexual exploitation services in the UK, Barkingside: Barnardo's

Abstract

In this case study, we focus on our recent large-scale quantitative analysis of 9,042 children who accessed sexual exploitation support services provided by a major UK charity. In doing so, our aim is to discuss the practicalities of one important but often neglected source of data for research into child sexual exploitation: data that are routinely generated and collected by non-academic institutions in the course of their everyday business activities. There are considerable practical, logistical and ethical benefits to using such secondary data. Child sexual exploitation is a highly sensitive and largely hidden issue that is notoriously difficult to research. Consequently, we benefitted greatly from the unobtrusive approach, increased reach and cost-effectiveness, that our research design permitted. Nonetheless, there can also be substantial challenges associated with working with secondary data not generated for research purposes. Among the key barriers we encountered were lack of clarity around key terms and fundamental parameters, missing data and difficulties finding appropriate baselines against which to interpret our results. We will discuss approaches we took to mitigate these

challenges and to ensure high-quality research outputs. Finally, we will reflect on some more general lessons both for the providers and the users of non-research oriented secondary data. Their application, we contend, could help ensure more effective research collaborations in future.

Learning Outcomes

[insert 3 – 5 Learning outcomes under the following statement

“By the end of this case students should be able to”:]

By the end of this case students should be able to:

- Develop an exploratory project when there is limited pre-existing literature and comparison data available
- Recognise the importance of understanding how secondary non-research datasets were designed and managed to ensure the data you chose to use are relevant, accurate and appropriate to your study
- Understand measures for, and consequences of, dealing with incomplete and/or duplicate data to ensure academic robustness
- See how stakeholder engagement can be valuable in clarifying data collection processes and assisting with the interpretation of findings when dealing with administrative datasets.

Case Study

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Understanding the context: child sexual exploitation

We begin by sketching out the landscape against which we conceived, designed and conducted our study into child sexual exploitation (hereafter CSE) in 2013 and 2014. While the term CSE can be problematic, not least because of a lack of internationally agreed definition, it is generally understood as a form of child sexual abuse involving the exchange of sexual services for tangible or intangible commodities (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009). It also tends to be associated with the extrafamilial abuse of older children.

The UK has recently seen a rapid and sustained growth of interest in CSE among policymakers, practitioners, the media and general public (Cockbain, 2013; Cockbain et al., 2015). Once dismissed as consensual child prostitution, CSE is now widely recognised as a serious child protection, public health and crime prevention issue (Barnardo's, 2012; Barrett & Melrose, 2003; Chase & Statham, 2005; World Health Organization, 2013). In addition to the heavy criticism the British authorities have received in the media, various studies and reports have highlighted ways in which various agencies have failed adequately to recognise and respond to CSE (Harvey et al., 2015; Jago et al., 2011; Jay, 2014).

Such vocal criticism stimulated change and recent years have been peppered with new national and local reports, guidance, action plans and consultations on CSE (Association of Chief Police Officers, 2012; Barnardo's, 2014; Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011; Crown Prosecution Service, 2013; Department for Education, 2011; Home Affairs Select Committee, 2013; Home Office, 2011, 2015; Home Office and Department for Education, 2016; Jay, 2014; Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, 2012; Public Petitions Committee, 2014).

Despite welcome efforts to improve policy and practice around CSE, a major barrier remained: the scarcity of robust research evidence. There are numerous likely reasons for the underdevelopment of the evidence base: from definitional issues (Brayley & Cockbain, 2014; Cockbain, 2013) to limited previous prioritisation and funding – and perhaps a lack of applications for such funding. Other barriers to research on CSE include the sensitivity of the topic, its largely hidden nature and associated difficulties in accessing data and/or study participants. Among the many marked gaps in the research literature are the long-term health impacts of CSE, the evaluation of preventative and protective interventions and – the area on which our study would focus – the sexual exploitation of boys (Barnardo's, 2001; Forrest, 2007; Lillywhite & Skidmore, 2006).

How our research came about

Within this context, we were delighted to be approached by Barnardo's and NatCen Social Research proposing a research collaboration around sexual exploitation of boys and young men. By then, two of us (Ella Cockbain and Helen Brayley-Morris) had been conducting research into other aspects to CSE for several years. The suggestion of a collaboration appealed for two reasons in particular.

First, we felt the topic itself was important and vastly underexplored. Looking at the literature on child sexual abuse in general (as opposed to CSE in particular), we found a small but informative body of research on the relationship between victims' gender and the characteristics and context of abuse (Feiring et al., 1999; Finkelhor, 1986; Moody, 1999; Nelson & Oliver, 1998; Smallbone & Wortley, 2000). Such work gave us empirical and theoretical grounds to believe that children's gender could be an important factor affecting the CSE process, victim selection and manipulation, disclosure of abuse, effects suffered and the ways officials respond to and support victims.

Second, we were excited by the offer of access to the Barnardo's database of thousands of CSE service users. Given the aforementioned problems in obtaining appropriate data to study CSE, this access represented a rare and valuable opportunity for novel research on CSE. Most CSE research is qualitative, leaving gaps in the literature that can be better filled using quantitative and mixed-methods approaches. What quantitative research exists has tended to use crudely aggregated data and to lack methodological rigour (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011; Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, 2012). We were being offered the invaluable opportunity to conduct research on a national sample that included individual-level data on thousands of cases. In terms of reach, our study would be unparalleled in the CSE research literature – certainly in the UK and to the best of our knowledge internationally.

We also saw considerable benefit to using secondary rather than primary data in our quantitative analysis. Collecting primary data on such a large sample would have been impossible within the time and funding constraints we faced. There would also have been substantial ethical implications of using primary data. CSE victims are a hard-to-access and vulnerable research population (Palmer, 2001). To a large extent, the Barnardo's data contained the information of research interest to us. Consequently, there seemed little benefit in risking re-traumatising those affected by CSE when we could access what we needed through unobtrusive methods.

Together with our project partners, we secured funding from the Nuffield Foundation for a programme of work on the sexual exploitation of boys and young men in the UK. It involved three distinct but complementary strands of research (all granted ethical approval), the third of which is the focus of this paper:

- A rapid evidence assessment (Brayley et al., 2014)
- Interviews with relevant professionals about their perceptions of sexual exploitation of boys (McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2014)
- A large-scale comparative analysis of gender-based differences in users of CSE services (Cockbain et al., 2015; Cockbain et al., 2014)

An introduction to our dataset

Barnardo's is a well-established non-governmental organisation (NGO) and the UK's largest provider of CSE support services. The raw data for our study would come from Barnardo's

centralised electronic case management system, which has individual-level but fully anonymised information on people whom Barnardo's supports.

This database is used by all Barnardo's services in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Since Wales, the fourth nation of the UK, operates on a different case management system neither the database itself nor our study data would include Welsh cases. To explain the data entry process briefly, caseworkers use a standard template to input information about each client at the point of starting work with him/her. They can revise records if new information emerges. Caseworkers base their entries on sources including:

- Their own assessments;
- Discussions with the service users;
- Discussions with other people associated with the service users, including relatives and various practitioners (*e.g.* police, teachers, social workers); and
- Formal written notes (*e.g.* minutes of safeguarding meetings).

The Barnardo's database was neither designed nor is administered in a way that prioritises research. It is chiefly an administrative dataset with the primary function of facilitating transparency, consistency and accountability in case management.

Reflecting the diversity of Barnardo's services, the database includes but is not limited to CSE service users. To identify relevant 'cases' (service users), Barnardo's used the tag 'CSE' as a filter when extracting raw data for our study. The CSE tag is used across all Barnardo's

services to mark relevant cases. Although Barnardo's uses a standard definition of CSE (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009), we could not rule out differences between services and between individual caseworkers in their interpretation and application of this definition.

Our (planned) research design

We designed our study as a large-scale empirical assessment of the relationship between children's gender and their exposure to and experiences of CSE. We were expecting a sample of thousands and individual-level data on 39 different variables. We intended to focus on disentangling the relationship between CSE victims' gender and:

- Their demographics;
- Their personal circumstances;
- The characteristics of the exploitation; and
- Official responses to them.

Given the extremely limited literature on which to build, we favoured an exploratory approach. We framed our research question in broad and inclusive terms:

What are the differences and commonalities between the recorded characteristics of males and females affected by CSE and supported by Barnardo's services in the UK?

We appreciate that gender is a broader construct than a male versus female dichotomy and knew that Barnardo's supports children who do not conform to cisgender norms. As expected, however, there were so few such cases in the data that our analysis was necessarily limited to examining differences between males and females.

Once cleaned and (re)coded, we intended to subject the data to a series of multivariate analyses focusing on different aspects of CSE. Above all, we expected to use logistic regression analyses. Multivariate analysis would control for possible interactions between variables. Once we had interrogated the between-group variation (boys versus girls), we planned to focus on within-group variation for the boys alone.

From the outset, we were aware of possible sources of bias in our dataset. The main source of bias we expected was that the sample only covered identified cases of CSE, which might threaten the external validity of our findings. This is an issue common to research into hidden populations as no reliable sampling frame exists (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005).

Stakeholder engagement

The plan

We built stakeholder engagement into the research process from the design phase. The research had been conceived in collaboration with Barnardo's in the role of end user (for all three component studies), gatekeeper to research participants (for the interview-based study)

and data provider (for the quantitative analysis discussed here). Additionally, we made provisions to engage with two key groups at particular points in the research process:

- **The project advisory group:** This group was specially convened for the project and comprised ten representatives of different governmental agencies, police services and NGOs. The group would meet at the start and end of the research process and provide input on the aims, design, implications and dissemination of the research programme as a whole.
- **The ‘What Works For Us’ forum:** This group was convened from a pre-existing set of young people who provide input on CSE-related issues. Of them, 16 CSE victims (including six males) participated in our research. They would meet once the final results from the research programme had been reached. They would provide a young person’s perspective on the research’s key thematic findings and how they might best be translated into policy and practice.

We opened up the research to stakeholder engagement to enable a more diverse set of perspectives and experiences to come to bear on the research and to improve its transparency, accountability and quality (Pawson et al., 2003; Rees & Oliver, 2012)

The reality

As expected, we received valuable input from the two aforementioned stakeholder groups.

While cleaning and coding the data, however, we realised we required more immediate assistance in understanding exactly how the database’s entries, variables and categories had been used in practice. Our project advisory group, as may often be the case, was rich in

strategic expertise but did not have a representative familiar with the operational details that we needed.

Our main contact at Barnardo's was crucial in identifying and facilitating access to frontline staff who had the insights we needed to analyse the secondary data accurately and effectively.

We ended up engaging with stakeholders in two further ways as a result:

- **Ad hoc calls to a key service manager:** This helpful individual had worked with Barnardo's for many years and could answer our very specific questions. These included queries about definitions, categorisations and logistics of the data-entry process. While cleaning, coding and analysing the data, we collected sets of questions to ask and made around three calls in total to address them all.
- **A targeted focus group with Barnardo's CSE service managers:** This focus group consisted of eight managers from English and Scottish services. We engaged with them in person after we had preliminary results from our initial analysis and again by email to review our draft report. They helped us understand the data generation process, advised on different possible interpretations of the findings, highlighted potential limitations in the data and helped co-produce necessary methodological amendments.

Researchers using secondary data may often require input from those who originally generated the data. Such input, we would argue, is especially vital when the data were not

originally created for research purposes due to factors such as reduced methodological transparency and limited written material about the process, assumptions and so forth.

Key challenges encountered in the research

We encountered six key challenges in working with secondary administrative data. Here, we explain these issues and our efforts to resolve them.

Sources of data: two distinct data entry systems

The ‘core data’ always entered into the database by Barnardo’s staff included service users’ age, ethnicity, any known disability, whether they are looked after/housed by the state, the agency that referred them to Barnardo’s, how long they waited after the referral and where they received care. Staff at certain services record further information using a second electronic form. These ‘additional data’ provides information on service users’ offending history, involvement in weapons crime, peer involvement in CSE and grounds for referral. Consequently, supplementary information was only available for children in the sample supported by certain services.

To overcome this issue, we decided to separate out the analysis by variable. We conducted a series of bivariate analyses addressing the relationship between gender and variables from a) the core data and b) the additional data. This approach presented two problems: it reduced our sample size for some variables; and it made it more difficult to present the results in an accessible format. We felt that it was, however, likely to produce more robust and generalisable results than alternative methods.

Having some variables present in certain cases only was problematic for the multivariate analysis too. We decided to limit the multivariate analysis to cases for which additional data were available because bivariate analysis had indicated that the referral reason was significantly associated with gender and this variable came from the additional data. Together with the problem of missing data (discussed shortly), this meant that our multivariate analysis included only 23% of our overall sample. Given the size of our overall sample ($n = 9,042$), even this limited subset was unusually large for the CSE research field. The results of our analysis went some way to validating our decision: the reason for a child's referral had the largest co-efficient of any variable in the multivariate model.

Units of analysis: phantom and multiple records

The data provided to us by Barnardo's were the raw output from their database. There were 15,130 entries (lines) in the raw data, which we eventually filtered down to our final sample of 9,042 unique individuals. Exploratory analysis showed that 1,792 entries appeared to be fictional test cases inserted into the database by the technicians who designed and tested it. Such cases were easy to identify because the technicians had used non-sensical data. Had they used realistic data, identifying test cases could have been far harder. Similar projects should be aware of this issue and ensure that test cases are readily identifiable.

More problematic was that multiple records existed for children cared for by Barnardo's more than once. Unfortunately there was no reliable way to merge automatically multiple records and merging manually was impractical given the size of the dataset. Consequently, we decided to analyse the first entry for each individual child and exclude any subsequent

entries: 2,171 duplicate entries were thus excluded. Before doing so, we confirmed that later records were not likely overall to have less missing data than the first records.

Impossible data: adults and the unborn in a dataset of children

Exploratory analysis showed that although all the cases were flagged as relating to CSE, in some the recorded date of birth suggested that the service user was either an adult at the time of referral (18 years or over) or that (s)he was born post-referral. Consultation with Barnardo's managers indicated that the adults were likely to be sexually exploited adults tagged as CSE in the absence of an equivalent tag for adults. There was also the possibility that services had decided to assist young adults who had turned 18 shortly before referral. These adult cases ($n = 960$) were excluded to ensure our results were representative of sexually exploited *children*.

The unborn children, meanwhile, appeared to be genuine referrals from caseworkers concerned that they were to be born into especially vulnerable circumstances. Similar was believed to be true of the young children who featured in the original data. According to Barnardo's staff, the construct of exchange is so central to understandings of CSE that children under eight years would be highly unlikely to be labelled as 'sexually exploited' but rather would be categorised under the broader term of 'sexually abused'. Young children tagged CSE were, they said, probably the offspring of sexually exploited service users. Following these discussions, we set a lower limit for inclusion at eight years and excluded 351 cases involving younger children. This limit was somewhat arbitrary and we cannot be sure that we managed to exclude all children deemed at risk only by association with their

parents. We felt it represented a reasonable compromise between capturing a broad range of CSE while not extending our analysis into other issues better analysed separately.

Multiple roles: victims, perpetrators and children 'at risk'

Our initial objective was to study victims of CSE. Discussions with Barnardo's managers revealed that our sample was not limited to victims. Instead, it also included children judged to be 'at risk' of exploitation (for which the risk threshold was said to be high). It also included children who might have been involved in exploiting other children, either directly or in a facilitation role. Finally, children might assume multiple such roles: *e.g.* an existing victim at risk of exploiting others.

Although the managers all felt strongly that the vast majority of children in our sample were CSE victims, the nature of a child's involvement in CSE was not recorded in the data. Consequently, we amended our term of reference from 'CSE victims' to 'children affected by CSE' in all our outputs and clarified exactly what we meant. While there are some benefits to addressing a complex and stigmatised issue like CSE in a holistic manner as we did, future research could usefully explore whether there are systematic differences between children involved in CSE in the different ways outlined above.

Missing data: analysis when most cases are incomplete

Perhaps the most significant challenge that we encountered was the high number of cases with empty variables. Practitioners could submit new records to the database without completing some variables and as a result at least one variable was missing in all but 2% of

cases. In the median case, six of the ten core data variables were missing for boys and five for girls, while five of the nine additional data variables were missing for boys and three for girls.

In a well-developed research field in which data were widely available, this level of missing data might have led us to discontinue the research. Yet, CSE is of considerable policy importance but heavily under-researched, particularly in terms of quantitative analysis. So, we felt strongly that we should continue in an effort to extract as much useful knowledge as possible from the available data. We did so both acknowledging that our results might be bettered in future if more complete data became available and hoping to stimulate the collection of such data by showing the value of empirical research in this field.

Having decided to continue, we adopted a two-stage approach to analysis in order to maximise the useful information we could extract. First, we analysed each variable individually to look for bivariate differences between boys and girls. This allowed us to make use of larger sample sizes for those variables with few missing cases, while still finding out whatever possible for those variables that were frequently missing cases. To ensure our approach was transparent, we reported the proportion of valid cases both in our tables and our narrative alongside the result of each bivariate statistical test.

In using bivariate analysis, we accepted the risk that multicollinearity might produce spurious results. To identify such issues, we conducted multivariate tests using a logistic regression model. Since the high proportion of incomplete cases made a model including all our variables impractical, we included only those that appeared from the bivariate tests to be

associated with gender differences. The limitation is that we cannot be sure that variables that were not significant in the bivariate tests might not have been significant once other variables were controlled for in the multivariate test. We felt our decision was the right one though: although we only used five variables in the regression model, just 23% of cases could be included.

Despite the considerable limitation of the missing data, we felt it was vital to make use of what data were available to begin to build the evidence base on sexual exploitation of boys. Importantly, we communicated explicitly and transparently in our outputs both the nature of the data limitations and their implications for our findings. **In particular, since we used a convenience sample it was important for us to emphasise that our results could not be extrapolated beyond the group under study (children cared for by Barnardo's).** The alternative – waiting for better data before conducting any research – effectively forces policymakers and practitioners to continue making important decisions without information that we could have made available.

Producing comparable results: lack of controls and baselines

Basing our study on the secondary data from Barnardo's allowed us to produce the largest quantitative analysis of CSE of which we are aware in the UK or elsewhere. Using administrative data meant that we had no obvious control or comparison groups for children not affected by CSE. To contextualise our results we had to find comparison data from other sources.

This approach meant we were reliant on decisions made in previous research, reports and statistics, concerning for example how to aggregate groups or which figures to publish. To illustrate, we wanted to compare the proportion of boys and girls in our sample in each ethnic group to the wider youth population. We soon found differences between England, Scotland and Northern Ireland in how census data are recorded and reported. While our sample included eight to 17 year-olds, census data for the same age range were only available for England and Northern Ireland. For Scotland, the closest comparison group available was ten to 17 year-olds. Consequently, our comparison was imperfect and there are limits to our conclusion that the ethnic distribution of children affected by CSE broadly reflected that of the youth population at large.

We felt it better to provide what comparators were available, however imperfect, than simply present our findings without any contextualisation. The comparisons produced interesting results that may indicate areas worthy of further study, even if our sample and other published data were not directly comparable. We found, for example, that the proportion of looked after children in our sample was many times higher than in the general population of England, although we could not find equivalent figures for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Lessons learnt

The research discussed here holds several potential lessons for practitioners and practitioner organisations seeking to support research and for researchers themselves.

Lessons for practitioners and practitioner organisations

As previously explained, the main issue in conducting this research was the high proportion of cases for which information had not been entered for some variables. We do not think this reflected a lack of interest in or understanding of the value of research on the part of caseworkers. On the contrary, all the practitioners we spoke to were keen to use research insights to improve the services they provide. We think it is more likely that the missing data were instead a reflection of the trade-offs that caseworkers must inevitably make between operational and administrative work, particularly in a time of cuts to government spending on public services. In addition, some information may simply not be routinely available; perhaps an ‘unknown’ response option might usefully be added to certain variables, albeit judiciously to avoid over-reliance on this option.

The primary lesson for practitioner organisations to take away from this particular study is the importance of designing processes to facilitate frontline staff in recording useful data. Research on the recording of safety-critical information (such as reports of incidents in the nuclear-power industry or in hospitals) suggests that it is more likely in certain circumstances. In particular, it appears important that frontline staff understand the value of recording information (*e.g.* how it can help them provide better services), that the recording process is as easy as possible and that organisational culture emphasises recording as an element of good practice (Beale, 2000). Designing databases so as to require certain information to be entered may be particularly useful in ensuring that certain variables are always completed. Had gender and age been recorded for all the children on the Barnardo’s database, for example, our sample size would have increased by up to 624 more cases. Consistent recording of such information could also have operational benefits.

Lessons for academic researchers

We found it very helpful to present results of our initial analysis to the Barnardo's project managers and would recommend researchers undertaking this type of project solicit similar feedback at this stage in the analytical process. The managers were intimately familiar with the conditions experienced by caseworkers and the operational environment that influenced the data that we were studying. We were able to ask questions about interesting patterns in the data and used practitioners' interpretation of these patterns to aid our discussion. This process gave us several new directions for analysis, prompting us to address questions we would not otherwise have considered. Involving practitioners in the co-production of academic research is becoming more common and we found it most helpful.

The data-related issues we encountered meant we had to balance carefully providing as much relevant information as possible and maintaining academic rigour. We were committed to practical, outcome-oriented research that could help prevent, detect or otherwise tackle CSE. Given our outlook and the general paucity of robust CSE research, we felt it important to produce what knowledge we could rather than wait for a perfect dataset to become available. To ensure academic rigour within this context, we adopted the two-stage approach to analysis (bivariate then multivariate) previously described and explained in detail in our outputs the choices we made. We hope this approach may be useful for other researchers confronting similar issues in future.

Conclusion

In quantitative research, perhaps the most obvious limitation of working with secondary data is the lack of influence on the design and deployment of the data collection instrument.

Rather than being able to stipulate what would be of interest to a particular research question, one must depend on what has already been collected. In this article we have demonstrated that there are additional pitfalls in working with secondary data generated not for research but for administrative purposes. Among the challenges we encountered were phantom and multiple records, impossible data and difficulties identifying appropriate comparators. We hope our frank discussion of the problems we faced and the mitigating measures we applied will prove useful to others. We also proposed some more general lessons for data providers and users that could help future research collaborations. In detailing challenges, we do not wish to detract from the considerable rewards of working with secondary data of this nature. In our project, we benefitted greatly from access to a dataset that was both empirically rich and unusually large for the research field. It allowed us to explore an important but under-researched topic in a novel, timely, cost-effective and unobtrusive manner.

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Exercises and Discussion Questions

- In our research, we were able to consult with those responsible for managing the original data collection and inputting process. What problems could we have faced if we had not been able to do this?
- For this study, we used secondary data that were collected for administrative purposes; what are the challenges and benefits of this approach?
- What are the different approaches to dealing with missing data and why might you continue with the research when you do not have a complete dataset?
- This study was conducted as part of a collection of complementary research projects. What are the key considerations when conducting research that is part of a larger programme of work?

Further Readings

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Web Resources

[insert links to any relevant web resources here]

n/a

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