

## CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION: MYTH VS REALITY

### 10 MYTHS AND THE REALITY

#### **Myth #1:**

#### **There are very few 'models' of CSE**

**Reality:** The grooming and sexual exploitation of young people can take many different forms. CSE can be carried out by individuals (lone perpetrators), by street gangs or by groups. It can be motivated by money, i.e. commercial sexual exploitation, which involves the exchange of a child (for sexual purposes) for the financial gain of the perpetrator or for non-commercial reasons such as sexual gratification or a belief in entitlement to sex. It can occur in a wide range of settings, but the common theme in all cases is the imbalance of power and the control exerted on young people.

#### **Myth #2:**

#### **It only happens in certain ethnic/cultural communities**

**Reality:** Both perpetrators and victims are known to come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. CSE is not a crime restricted to British Pakistani Muslim males or white British girls, despite media coverage of high profile cases. Site visits carried out by the OCC Inquiry identified perpetrators and victims of CSE from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. A thematic assessment by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre identified that "Research tells us that the majority of known perpetrators in the UK of this crime are lone white males".

However, it is important that councils and partners do not shy away from confronting the reality of CSE in their area. Through the LSCB, a clear profile of local need should be developed that clearly identifies the prevalence and profile of sexual exploitation taking place. If a particular group or community is disproportionately involved in the abuse of children and young people, this must be acknowledged and tackled.

#### **Myth #3:**

#### **It only happens to children in care**

**Reality:** The majority of victims of CSE are living at home. However, looked after children account for a disproportionate number of victims and can be particularly vulnerable. An estimated 20-25 per cent of victims are looked after, compared with 1 per cent of the child population being in care. This does, however, leave around 80 per cent of victims who are not in the care system.

**Myth #4:**  
**It only happens to girls and young women**

**Reality:** Boys and young men are also targeted as victims of CSE by perpetrators. However, they may be less likely to disclose offences or seek support, often due to stigma, prejudice or embarrassment or the fear that they will not be believed. They may feel that they are able to protect themselves, but in cases of CSE physical stature is irrelevant due to the coercion and manipulation used.

**Myth #5:**  
**It is only perpetrated by men**

**Reality:** There is evidence that women can be perpetrators of this crime too. They may use different grooming methods, but are known to target both boys and girls. In relation to group and gang related CSE, the OCC inquiry found that the vast majority involved only men and, where women are involved, they are a small minority. Where women or girls were identified as perpetrators, their role was primarily, though not exclusively, to procure victims. Women and girls who were perpetrating were identified during the inquiry's site visits tended to be young, had histories of being sexually exploited themselves and of abusing others in tandem with the group or gang that had previously sexually exploited them. Women and girls directly involved in sexually exploiting children were either in relationships with men who were perpetrators or related to, or friends with, men and boys who were abusers.

**Myth #6:**  
**It is adults abusing children**

**Reality:** Peer-on-peer child sexual exploitation happens too and this can take various different forms. For example, young people are sometimes used to 'recruit' others, by inviting them to locations for parties where they will then be introduced to adults or forced to perform sexual acts on adults. Technology can also play a significant role, with young people known to use mobile technology as a way of distributing images of abuse.

**Myth #7:**  
**It only happens in large towns and cities**

**Reality:** Evidence shows that CSE can and does happen in all parts of the country. CSE is not restricted to urban areas such as large town and cities, but does in fact happen in rural areas such as villages and coastal areas. High profile police operations in areas as diverse as Rochdale, Cornwall and Oxfordshire are clear examples of this. Young people can also be transported between towns, cities, villages etc., for the purpose of being sexually exploited and this is known as trafficking within the UK (an offence punishable by up to 14 years imprisonment).

**Myth #8:  
Children are either victims or perpetrators**

**Reality:** The OCC inquiry found that around 6 per cent of victims reported in their call for evidence were also identified as perpetrators. It is important to keep in mind that, although children may appear to be willing accomplices in the abuse of other children, this should be seen in the context of the controls exerted by the perpetrator.

**Myth #9:  
Parents should know what is happening and should be able to stop it**

**Reality:** Parents may be unlikely to be able to identify what is happening: they may suspect that something is not right, but may not be in a position to stop it due to the control, threats or fear of the perpetrators. There can be risks to parents when seeking to protect their children and they can need support as well as their children. In some cases, there can be an overlap with abuse within the family and this could be a reason why parents do not intervene.

**Myth #10:  
Children and young people can consent to their own exploitation**

**Reality:** A child cannot consent to their own abuse. Firstly, the law sets down 16 as the age of consent to any form of sexual activity. Secondly, any child under 18 cannot consent to being trafficked for the purposes of exploitation. Thirdly, regardless of age a person's ability to give may be affected by a range of other issues, including influence of drugs, threats of violence, grooming, a power imbalance between victim and perpetrators. This is why a 16 or 17 year old can be sexually exploited even though they are old enough to consent to sexual activity.