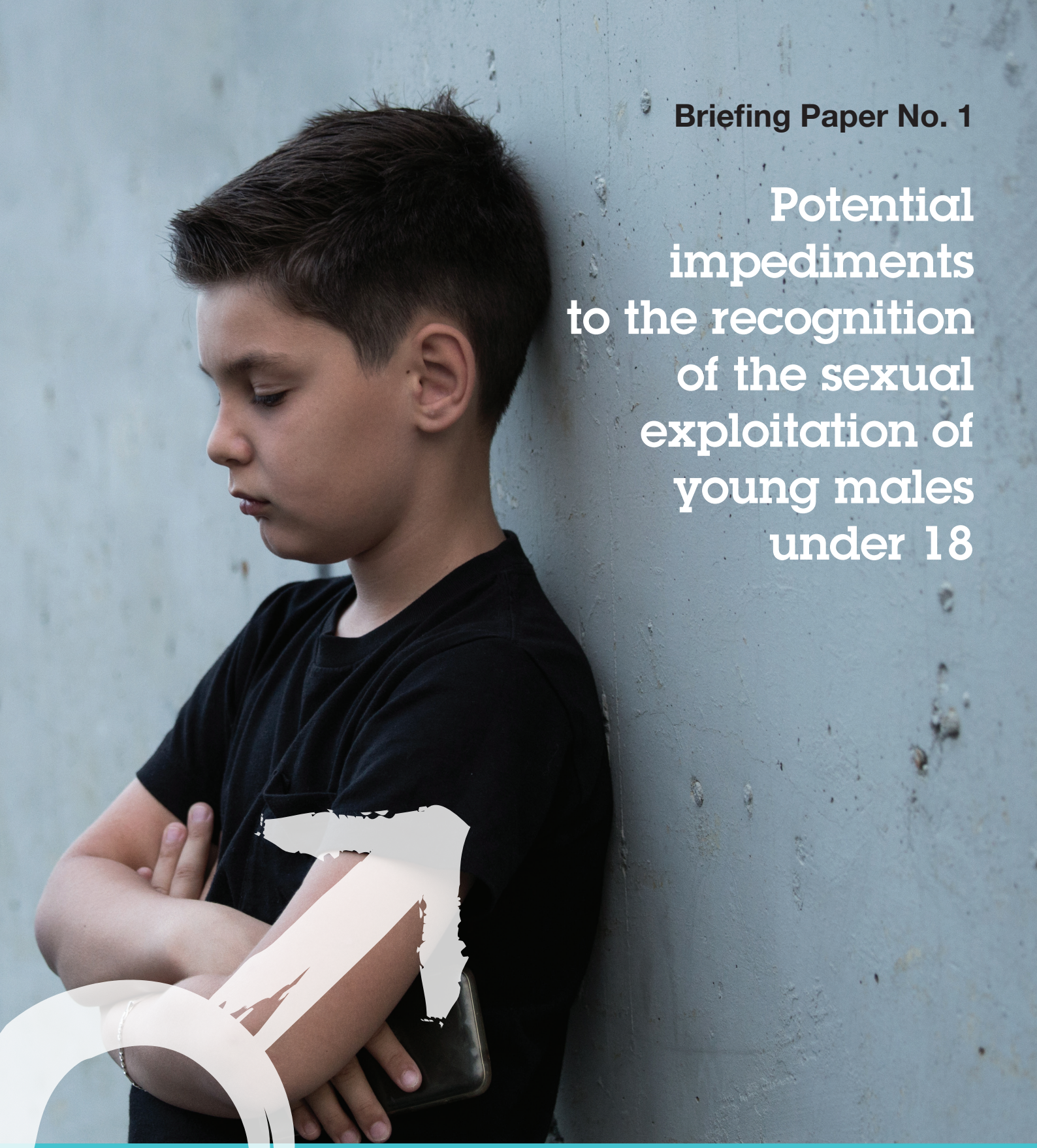


Briefing Paper No. 1

Potential impediments to the recognition of the sexual exploitation of young males under 18

Date: **June 2020**
By: **Dr Jacqui Montgomery-Devlin**

SBNI
Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland

What is child sexual exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity

(a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants,

and/or

(b) the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.

The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.
(Department for Education (DfE), 2017, p.5).

Introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) can affect both young males and females. However, the traditional discourse on CSE has primarily been female-centric despite some attempts to raise the plight of young males as victims of this phenomenon. Only in recent years has research on the sexual exploitation of young males begun to gain prominence, with an increasing appreciation of difficulties in relation to its recognition, and hence the low rate of known cases (Beckett, 2011; Berelowitz *et al.* 2013). While there has been a greater focus on this form of abuse, an absence of specific research into barriers to disclosure and the impediments to identification mean that fundamental gaps in knowledge and understanding have limited the degree to which boys and young men can be effectively protected.

In response, the author undertook research to achieve an understanding of factors inhibiting the recognition of young males as victims of CSE (Montgomery-Devlin, 2019). The central focus of the study was to:

- Identify inhibitors to disclosure by young males and potential solutions
- Identify impediments to identification by professionals and potential solutions
- Explore the existence of any relationship between inhibitors to disclosure and impediments to identification.

About this paper

This paper is the first in a series of briefings on learning arising from the research on potential impediments to recognising the sexual exploitation of young males (Montgomery-Devlin, 2019). It summarises key themes emerging from the study and associated literature review, including findings related to stereotypical assumptions, criminality, perpetrator gender and paramilitarism. The paper concludes with recommendations to inform CSE policy and practice, specifically with regards boys and young men. Other targeted briefings will explore some of the core research themes in more detail.

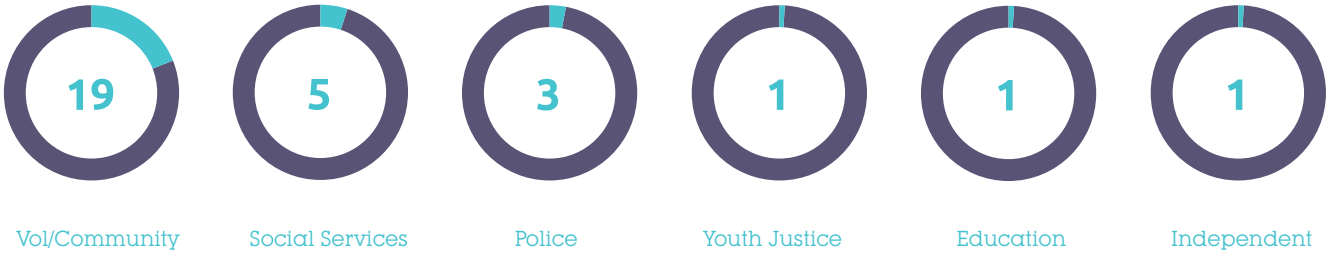
Research methodology

The study utilised a mixed methods approach to achieve a valuable range of data, including:

- Surveys and interviews with more than 90 professionals working within the field of CSE, or related fields across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors and throughout the UK:
  - **91** survey respondents
  - **30** one-to-one interviews (Figs.1 & 2)[1]
- Interviews with **10** young males who had experienced CSE or had knowledge of it in their past or present social circles
- A survey completed by **1,158** young people within the general public.[2]

Figure 1: Number of professional interviewees by nation

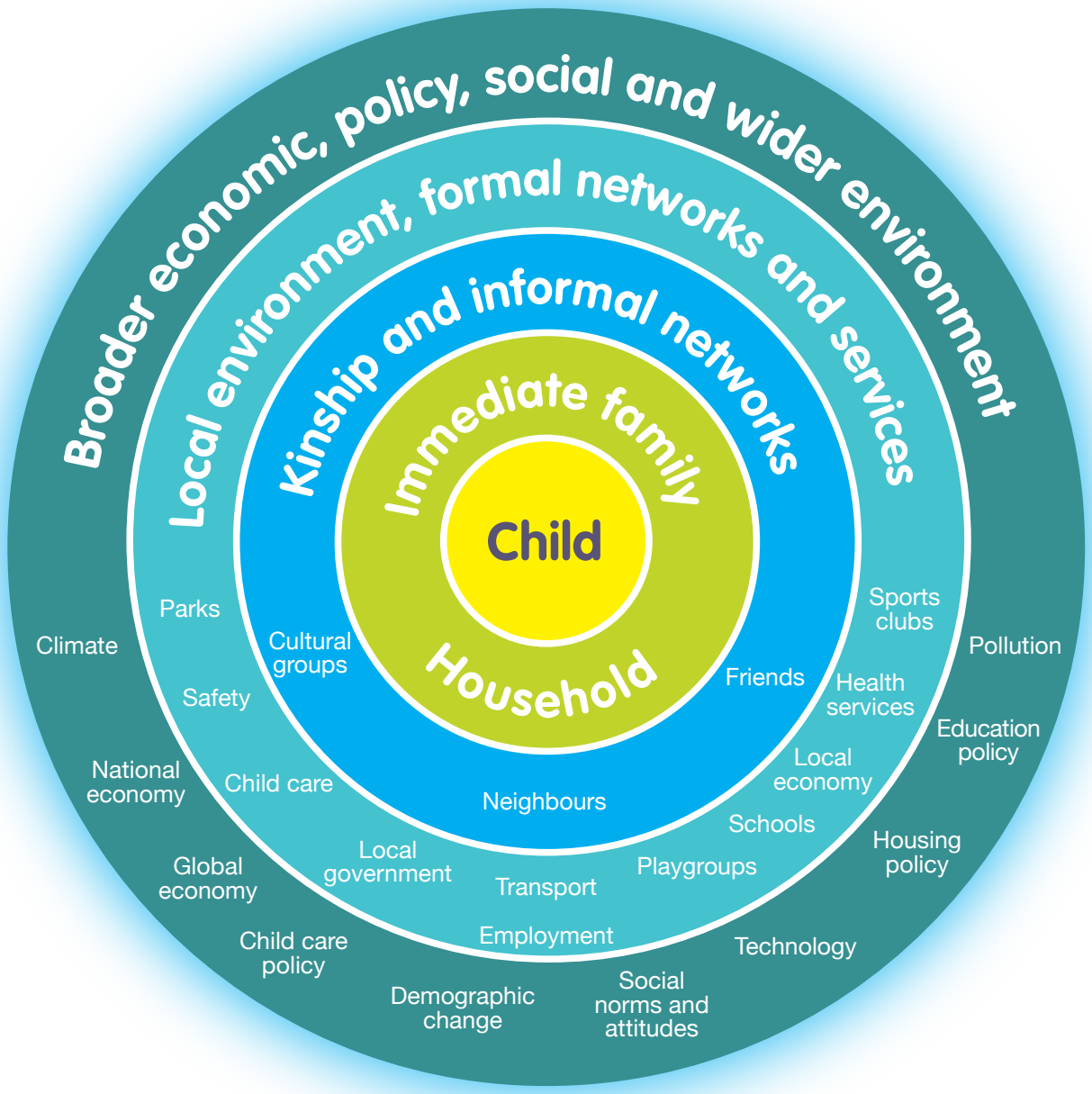
Figure 2: Number of professional interviewees by sector



1 One third of survey respondents chose to take part in a one-to-one interview.
2 This method of data collection was a series of questions placed in the ARK Young Life and Times Survey (YLT) 2015, in NI. The administration of the mail out for the YLT survey was undertaken by an independent mailing company on behalf of ARK. An initial letter was sent in September 2015 to all eligible 16-year olds in NI which introduced the survey. The entire survey consisted of seven topics, of which CSE was one. The overall sample of eligible respondents was 3753. The survey achieved a 31 per cent response rate, yielding a total of 1,158 responses. Not all respondents answered every question.

The study was underpinned by the **theoretical framework** of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986, 1995), supporting the notion that the sexual exploitation of young males, as a phenomenon, is not simply a manifestation of the individual male victim operating in a vacuum, but contextual to the prevalence and impact of other factors.

The overarching benefit of the theory is its ability to integrate all levels of human ecology, moving away from the traditional approach of pathologising the young male victim of CSE, rendering him responsible for navigating the social and structural systems that act as a barrier to his disclosure.



The theoretical framework of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986, 1995).

Legal and policy context

The introduction of the Sexual Offences Act (SOA) (2003) in England and Wales (equivalent legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland) represented a major overhaul of the legislation in relation to sexual offences, and within it clearly defined a child as someone under the age of 18 years, even though the age of consent to sexual activity was 16 years of age (Chase and Statham, 2005; Jago and Pearce, 2008).

This new legislative framework introduced specific offences which recognised, for the first time, grooming, coercion and trafficking as potential elements within CSE, as well as recognising the use of the mobile phone and internet as a means by which perpetrators could exploit (Jago and Pearce, 2008). The creation of the Serious Crime Act (SCA) (2015) in England and Wales gave a new title to the existing offences of abuse of a child through prostitution and pornography – that of 'sexual exploitation of children'. This Act removed all references to 'child prostitution' and 'pornography'. The content of the SOA (2003) remained the same (see Beckett *et al.* 2017).

The development of policy to tackle CSE has resulted in distinct policies within each of the UK nations. However, a core common element within them is a clear demarcation between children and adults in the world of prostitution and the formation of the concept of CSE as a child protection issue. The requirement of each nation has been to develop strategies to strengthen a co-ordinated approach to tackling the issue of CSE, with an expectation of increased accountability on agencies regarding those children in need of services yet being missed by them (Beckett *et al.* 2017). This included the 2017 definition and guidance produced by the DfE which clearly defined CSE as a form of child sexual abuse (CSA).

Whilst this progress has been welcomed, the devolved status of the UK means there should be recognition of the potential for differential responses to victims of CSE in the policy and political frameworks of individual nations (Barnardo's, 2014).

Key findings

Literature review

A review of the relevant literature confirmed there has been a significant shift in the recognition of CSE as a child abuse issue. This has mainly been prompted by children's charities, academics and high-profile cases evidencing failures in the systems tasked with protecting young people from CSE.[3] Undoubtedly, policy, legislative, and definitional contexts relating to CSE have responded positively to the changes, demonstrating a greater understanding of the issues, and giving recognition to the victim status of young people affected by CSE. However, analysis of the literature highlighted several challenges:

- **The potential for inconsistencies in interpretation and application of policy, legislation, and in defining the issue.** Complexities entailed with CSE and specific nuances involved for both male and female victims mean the existence of safeguards does not necessarily or naturally translate into equality of practice or provision of services for males and females.

- **The absence of a UK prevalence study on male CSE is problematic.** The known prevalence rates of male CSE illustrate, not necessarily a lower rate of male than female victims, but a need to focus on why our knowledge is more limited in relation to males, and a need to improve recognition of it alongside more robust statistics.

- **One single model of CSE is limiting.** It is advantageous to have additional knowledge regarding models or routes into CSE for males, and to acknowledge that, 'complex intersections of different factors appear to influence the different models of sexual exploitation by which boys and young men are victimised' (McNaughton Nicholls *et al.* 2014, p.24).

- **The role of gender constructions, and in particular masculine ideology.** These are significant influencing factors in this discourse; the latter because the sexual exploitation of young males violates a prevailing perception in society of all that is masculine.

The literature review also revealed the significance of 'disclosure' and 'identification' in the context of CSE:

- **Disclosure**

The victim making their sexual exploitation known[4].

Several factors prevent disclosure happening which relate to the unique characteristics inherent in a victim of CSA interacting with community, cultural and societal influences (Alaggia, 2010). Disclosure is seen as being significantly influenced by the age and gender of the victim. Influences on non-disclosure are seen to be multi-faceted, including: the fear of not being believed; being the subject of gossip; or a fear of circumstances worsening, for the victim and/or others, following disclosure (Paine and Hanson, 2002; Barter, 2005; Staller and Nelson-Gardell, 2005).

There is consensus amongst writers that disclosure is an ongoing process as opposed to a single event, potentially occurring in concomitant or sequential ways (Summit, 1983; Sorensen and Snow, 1991; Bradley and Wood, 1996; Alaggia, 2005; Collin-Vezina *et al.* 2015). Understanding of the disclosure process and method are important if professionals are to recognise disclosure in its various forms.

3 Derby (2010); Rochdale (2012); Scotland (2012); Telford (2013); Oxford (2013); Bristol (2014); NI (2014); Rotherham (2014).
4 Defined by Allnock, 2018, p.37, and further adapted to explain identification.

Identification

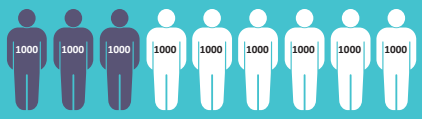
The professional making something new or unknown, known in relation to CSE or heightened risk of CSE.

The crucial significance of identification is essentially that most victims of CSE do not self-identify as victims or disclose their experiences of exploitation. Professionals' identification of heightened risk and understanding of disclosure factors and processes are, therefore, critical to prevent the exploitation occurring and, if it does occur, facilitate earlier disclosures. This requires skills, knowledge, and a professional curiosity to accurately assess risk factors in the individual circumstances of a young person (Beckett *et al.* 2017).

Like disclosure, cognisance should be taken of the unique characteristics which individual professionals bring to the process that will determine their ability or willingness to identify CSE in victims. Therefore, the process of identification also reflects a social-ecological, person-in-environment orientation for understanding the complex interplay of individual, contextual, and cultural factors involved in disclosure (Alaggia *et al.* 2017).

Prevalence

Although low in comparison to females, available statistics indicate that young males are also being sexually exploited.



One third of 9,000 CSE, or at risk of CSE, service users across England, Scotland and NI **were male** *(Cockbain et al. 2014)*

11% of the 2,409 children and young people identified by professionals as being sexually exploited in gangs or groups in England **were male** *(Berelowitz et al. 2012).*

13% of the 2,083 suspected victims in a UK-wide study of 'localised grooming' **were male** *(CEOP, 2011).*

Almost **one-fifth** (17%) of children and young people (aged 12-17 years) known to Social Services in Northern Ireland, where CSE was identified as an issue of concern, **were male** *(Beckett, 2011).*

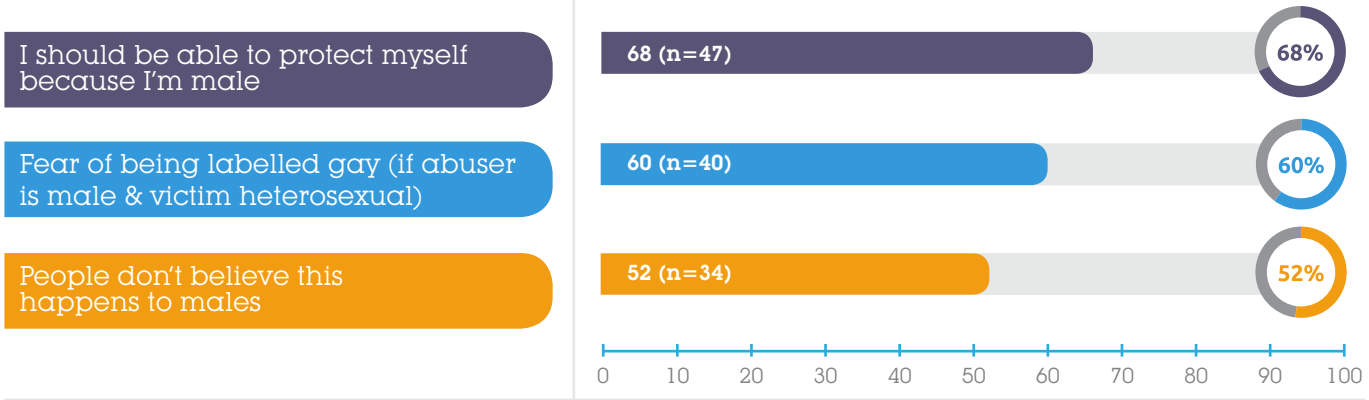
One in 23 **males** (**4.3%**) of 786 16-year olds in Northern Ireland, reported being sexually groomed by an adult before the age of 16 as opposed to one in seven females *(Beckett, 2011).*

11% of 4,206 reported cases of CSE in the UK worked with by 53 specialist services over one year **were males** *(NWG, 2010).*

Research findings

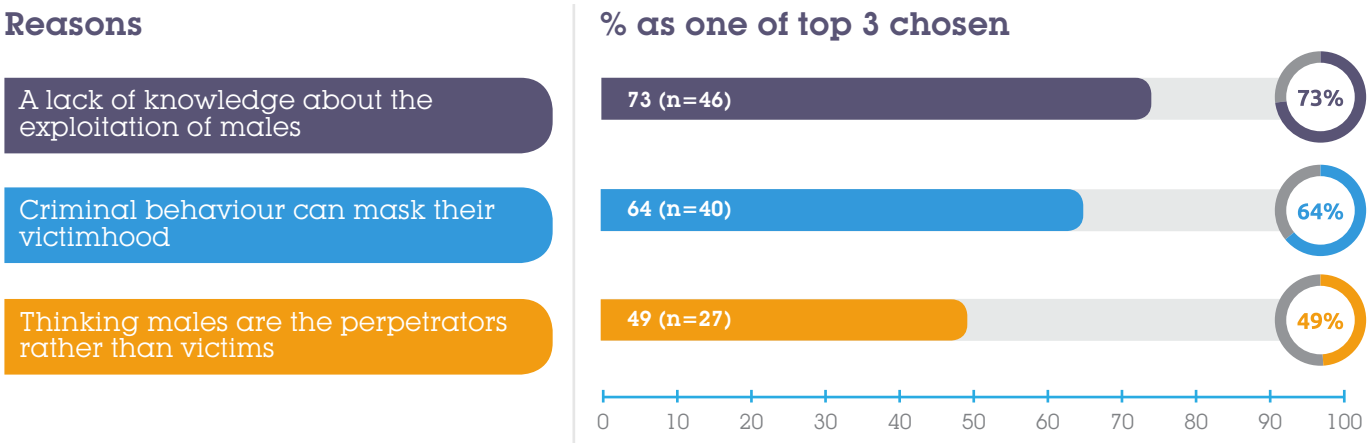
The underpinning theme throughout this research was consideration of the impact of masculinity upon the recognition of CSE in young males. The findings highlighted particular themes related to this, addressed below.

Figure 3: Reasons most likely to inhibit disclosure of CSE by young males – (Professionals' Survey)



Other reasons included: Perceived threat to masculinity (if abuser is male) (48%); Fear of homophobic response (28%); Confusion over sexual identity (if abuser is male) (27%); Perceived threat to sexual identity (if abuser is male & victim heterosexual) (22%); If abuser is female, society views this as a 'conquest' for the male (19%); Lack of emotional vocabulary (18%); If abuser is female, the male views this as a 'conquest' for the male (11%); Fear of being viewed as a potential perpetrator (6%)

Figure 4: Reasons most likely to inhibit identification of CSE in young males – (Professionals' Survey)



Other reasons included: Thinking males cannot be victims (36%); Thinking males can cope better than females (35%); A young male abused by a female is not viewed as seriously as abuse by a male (32%); Fear of appearing discriminatory or homophobic (if abuser is male) (28%); Thinking males should protect themselves (26%); If abuser is female, this is viewed as a 'conquest' for the male (22%); Bias against homosexuality (if abuser is male) (20%)

Stereotypical assumptions regarding masculinity and the impact on the recognition of CSE in young males

Not the victim: Professionals viewed the failure of others to see young males as victims of CSE as more of an inhibitor to disclosure for young males than young people viewed it, particularly young males. However, young people and professionals shared a common view that others' failure to view males as victims was a significant impediment to identification. There were also mixed responses in accounts from professionals as to how they viewed this situation improving. Contrary to the views of professionals, young people, especially males, did not hold to the perception that 'others will not believe them' as a significant barrier to disclosure.

The physiological composition of the male and his physiological reaction to sexual touch was highlighted as one reason for the minimisation of victimhood of young males; that is, if he visibly appears as, or talks of, having been aroused, it is assumed he cannot have been abused. This also highlights a significant difference between the potential for males and females being viewed as a victim in that the same physiological reactions cannot be used to argue she is not a victim:

> *"I have worked with men who have been raped and it did go to court but, because it came out that they did get an erection, the defence just slaughtered them saying 'you must have enjoyed it because you got an erection.'"* (PI27, Voluntary, CSE specialist).[5]

The perpetrator: Professionals did not estimate the young males' fear of being viewed as a perpetrator to be a critical barrier to disclosure. However, there was a common belief from participants in both surveys that this assumption was a significant potential impediment to identification:

> *"He has spoken about being befriended by a number of adult males who we knew to be of concern…But when we wanted to raise the vulnerabilities for this lad - and he is 15 but he's six foot, he's quite heavily built, he's got a learning difficulty - but no-one wanted to see him as being vulnerable or being exploited, and were seeing him as a perpetrator only. …this is a boy we now know was being picked up of evenings, by adults of concern, taken from one area to another area and not being returned home until three or four in the morning with nobody reporting him as not being home." (PI 22, Voluntary CSE specialist).*

> *"There is an example of a 12-year-old lad where he and a young girl were both being sexually exploited by adults, but the language used about him was that he was a perpetrator. The girl involved, who was also being exploited by the adults, was marginally older and she was seen as a victim, but both had been exploited." (PI 4, Voluntary CSE specialist).*

The male as protector of self

> *"…if a man does something to a woman it's seen as massive…it's like 'you're a young girl, you're fragile, this wee thing that has to be protected'…but young male… you're a man, not seen as vulnerable…'you should be able to sort this out yourself…how did you get yourself into that?'"* (Sammy, aged 21).

Survey findings suggest that both professionals and young people believe expectations that young males should protect themselves to be a significant barrier to disclosure. Across the surveys and interviews, professionals were divided in their opinion as to whether others' view that young males can cope better than females is an impediment to identification of CSE in males. This correlates with young peoples' perception that professionals take the sexual exploitation of males less seriously than that of females.

5 Quotations from respondents to the professionals' survey will be referred to as 'PS', followed by the number of their survey and sector (if provided). Quotations from professional interviewees will be referred to as 'PI', followed by the number of their interview and sector.

The findings showed feelings of shame, self-blame and helplessness, as potential consequences of the young males' perceived failure to live up to his own expectations, and that of others, as protector of self and others. Whilst being seen to influence non-disclosure of CSE in males, they somewhat challenge stereotypical assumptions of these as more critical barriers to disclosure for young males than females:

> *"... a young lad maybe 15/16 goes missing, maybe three or four times in a month ... They (professionals) think nothing of it because he's a bloke and he can look after himself. A girl goes missing for one or two days and it's all over Facebook, it's all over (name of country) online, it's out there..."* (PI 6, Voluntary CSE specialist).

> *"Whilst we all try to be impartial and non-judgemental, I think we are naïve to think it doesn't influence us on some level."* (PI 16, Social Services).

The expectation of self-preservation: Interviews with professionals and young males illustrated self-preservation as an additional feature of the male as protector, negatively impacting on disclosure. Although not posed as a question to participants, 'survival sex' was one descriptor as a route into CSE for males where the need to survive was seen, by professional and young male participants, to supersede the decision to disclose abusive experiences:

> *"Obviously, I didn't want to do it. I did it because it was a way of surviving; I needed money; I was homeless...this other bloke always put it that they were helping me out because I was homeless, and he was finding people for me... It's just something you get into and it's a way of surviving and sometimes you've just got no choice but to do the dirty things just to get on in life."* (Pete, aged 30).

> *"I worked with a young male who spends a lot of time sleeping rough and when it gets really cold and he just can't face another night out, or he can't break into a car for that night for somewhere to sleep, he actually said to me 'you know well when I just can't bear being cold again I go stay at this flat and I know I will just have to take it up the bum but that's just what I've got to do sometimes.'"* (PI 24, Independent).

Consideration should also be given to how the young males' apparent 'accommodation' of the exploitation may lend itself to the inaction of professionals in terms of identifying him as a victim. Rather, what can be perceived is a young male who is coping or acting as a 'willing participant', exemplifying the concept of condoned consent.

The male as protector of others

> *"I felt a bit guilty as well that he (perpetrator) was being charged because...he was helping me. When he went to prison I felt ever so guilty because he was old, and I didn't want him to go to prison... I did feel really bad."* (Pete, aged 30).

Qualitative data from professionals and young males revealed a perception of the young males' need to protect others as well as himself, and the potential impact of this upon disclosure of his own victimhood. A professional depicted a young male who was sexually exploited from the age of 12, yet adamant he could not risk hurting his mother by disclosing:

> *"He was very, very concerned about his mum. 'My mum lives in there and if my mum knew...it would devastate her, and all the neighbours would be looking at her.'"* (PI 8, Voluntary non-CSE specialist).

For some young male victims, the need to protect family from even greater physical consequences was evident:

> *"One of the other barriers is that sort of manipulation that goes on – 'if you tell anybody about this...I'm going to kill you; your family is going to get it as well'. So, young men think 'I can't say this...I'm okay, I can do this...I'll just be abused as long as*

my mother, as long as my father, as long as my granny, as long as my brothers and my sisters are perfectly fine; I can shield them from this;' and maybe it's back to the masculinity issue – 'I can protect my family by just getting on with it.'" (PI 29, Voluntary, non-CSE specialist).

The fear of repercussions for others (and self) if young males disclose was particularly evident where they resided in paramilitary controlled communities in Northern Ireland. Such communities were seen to create a level of connectedness between individuals within the community which heightened the young males' need to protect family, thus functioning as an inhibitor to disclosure:

"…his mum lived in that estate, granny lived in that estate and everybody would be talking, and it would just fall to pieces and he was never ever going to be the one who was going to do that – he would never be the one who would bring that down because the consequences were just far too high for him." (PI 8, Voluntary, non-CSE specialist).

Threat to masculinity

"I think one of their biggest fears…is their loss of masculinity…and 'I'm a man'. These communities are all built on strength and power and the size of your muscles, and to say those things out loud… is to take away from all of that never mind then if a report is written about it or the police get involved or these things start to get unpicked and that loss of masculinity is terrifying – terrifying to the point where I do believe young men would take their own lives before they would actually disclose that."
(PI 8, Voluntary, non-CSE specialist).

The research findings showed quite a strong perception amongst professionals that a young males' perceived threat to his masculinity is a factor influencing non-disclosure. Interviews with young males reflected these thoughts:

"I think the feelings of emasculation and shame associated with a boy disclosing that abuse is an additional barrier to disclosing really." (Greg, aged 22).

"…for a boy it's much worse because men/boys are meant to be strong and that might make them feel physically inside that they are weak and unable to defend themselves…" (Malcolm, aged 14).

Communication strategies

"…a boy wouldn't really come forward about it as such because they are meant to be 'oh I've no feelings; I hold my feelings', but there comes a point where you can't hold your feelings." (Johnny, aged 18).

Many of the barriers to recognition can be impacted by, as well as impact the ability of young males to communicate about their experiences. Some of the communication difficulties may be inherent to their gender or a result of gender socialisation. Professionals tended to think a lack of communication strategies was more of a reason for non-disclosure by males than females, suggesting a lack of emotional vocabulary as being a significant factor.

Overall, YLT survey respondents stated a significant barrier to disclosure would be their difficulty in explaining what happened. Interestingly, however, more females than males indicated this as a barrier to disclosure. Irrespective of the reason, it is important to take cognisance of a cautionary appeal from one professional interviewee not to allow conjecture, regarding young males' reluctance to disclose, to influence practice and to silence young male victims:

"Let's not make assumptions about gender because there is a bit of a stereotype that boys don't like to talk the way that girls do. Well, lots of boys don't, but lots of boys do."
(PI 24, Independent).

Level of awareness impacting recognition of CSE in young males

"…because I consented to everything I didn't think he was doing anything wrong, do you know what I mean? I wasn't forced into it. He bought me gifts and bought me mobile phones, credit; took me out for nice meals." (Pete, aged 30).

"I think there's something more about young men not realising that what has happened is abuse…a huge barrier to young men being able to label the abuse, and therefore they are unable to disclose (because they don't know there is anything to disclose)." (PS 23, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

There were examples throughout the findings that demonstrated, where a lack of awareness/ knowledge of professionals exists, there is the potential for misinterpretation of behaviours, inaccurate assumptions, the creation and compounding of negative belief systems, and consequent failure to respond to the victimhood of young males:

"I hold my hands up, I don't know a lot about it; I don't know the signs. You are going on your gut." (PI 17a, Voluntary, non-CSE specialist).

There were examples from young male interviewees who believed that the signs of their exploitation should have been obvious to others, but this did not result in an appropriate response:

"I used to come home with blood in my boxers and all over my clothes when I had been abused… Nobody would ever reach out to me…" (Simon, aged 22).

What Pete described was not so much a professionals' lack of awareness; more an example of condoned consent – that of professional negligence:

"I had money, nice new clothes, trainers, gifts – obviously stuff that a young lad can't afford. I was in and out all the time, being picked up all the time, like outside where I was living and in people's houses. I think they knew what I was doing." (Pete, aged 30).

Connor's example suggests that no response is tantamount to a negative response:

"We would be getting in the same cars pretty much every night or in the same spot in the road and there is a police station about 10 feet down the road and the police would drive past and not one of them would say anything and they'd seen both of us getting in and out of cars…we would get in like 10 cars a night...we'd be out to like one in the morning, two in the morning, and not one police officer ever said anything." (Connor, aged 18).

Over one quarter of professional survey respondents believed a lack of cognitive awareness to name the abuse was more of a barrier to disclosure of CSE for young males than females. Professionals also perceived a lack of confidence in talking about the issue of CSE, with all its complexities, to be more likely to impede the identification of males than females as victims. With insufficient knowledge and a consequent lack of confidence in a subject area, there is the potential for practitioners to feel unable to deal with it appropriately:

"...you're scared to say because if you get it wrong and then it's a real battle…and then if you don't say it...Do you say to that young man and risk losing that relationship?" (PI 17b, Voluntary, non-CSE specialist).

Other issues, such as the fear of re-traumatising the victim, which can result from a lack of confidence and knowledge in how to deal with it, was also viewed by professionals as a potential impediment to identification of CSE, particularly in relation to young males. Furthermore, the awareness of others, including the general public, can portray negative messages to young males regarding their victimhood which could influence non-disclosure, including non-response:

"I remember sometimes I was so terrified of these people because I'd been beaten up for something…I'd be put in a taxi with another man and I would just stay silent the whole way, and the taxi driver… it's things like 'who is that older man you are travelling with at two o'clock in the morning – you look like you should be in school'. Why are you not saying anything? I mean it's clear from my face that something's wrong and the taxi drivers and the hotel staff and even the public in the street in (name of town) town centre, when I got punched in the face, no-one did anything. But it's not normal for an adult to punch a child in the face." (Greg, aged 22).

Service Provision

Appropriate services which support young males to disclose and enable professionals to deal with the issue are essential. Many professionals believed that 'no available/appropriate service to disclose to' as more likely to inhibit disclosure and identification for males than females. Suggestions from professionals for effective services included:

- **Additional time is needed to engage and work with young males:** It can often take them longer to feel comfortable and ready to talk about CSE issues.
  "…the biggest aspect is engagement and building a relationship with that young person. That goes for anybody but more so with young males because they tend to be a little bit harder to engage than the girls… building up a trusting relationship is at the core of everything…being available because if you are available at times which they might not expect, it goes a long way in building that relationship." (PI 23, Voluntary, CSE specialist).
- **Relevant experience is more important than gender of workforce:** While there were mixed views amongst professionals about the merits of an all-male service for male victims of CSE, the skills and approaches of the worker were generally viewed as being more critical:
  "…it's very much about the worker. I don't think they necessarily need a male worker. …in some instances, they may do but equally there are some who would need a female worker. We need a child centred approach and therefore, male/female wouldn't necessarily make a difference." (PI 21, Voluntary, CSE specialist).
- **Accessibility:** A well located and visible service that is both available to and appropriate for young males would bring a focus to them as victims, thus making identification easier.

Impact of perpetrator gender on the recognition of CSE in young males

Perpetration by females

"...how his peers might see it is, you know, 'oh you've been having sex with an older bird' you know. 'Well done you'. And some adults may even view it like that." (Greg, aged 22).

"You also get 'the cougar', but that's not normal. But it's that lad culture; 'well done, gold star, you've earned your stripes, you've been with this older woman.'" (Sammy, aged 21)

The survey findings showed a degree of dissonance between how professionals and young people viewed the minimisation of male exploitation by females as a barrier to disclosure and identification. The perception that female on male exploitation is seen as a conquest for the young male was viewed as partially responsible for this, but more in relation to identification than disclosure, and seen as more significant by young people. Professionals did not see the young males' view of his exploitation as 'a conquest' to be a significant barrier to his disclosure:

"... Now if we don't accept that females can abuse in that way, we are already minimising that impact before they tell us..." (PI 22, Voluntary CSE specialist).

Perpetration by males

Whilst a threat to masculinity was viewed as a significant barrier to disclosure, opinion was divided over the significance of a 'threat to or confusion over sexual identity' being a similar barrier. What was particularly evident was the importance professionals placed on the young males' **'fear of being labelled gay'** (if the abuser is male and the victim heterosexual), viewing it as a major inhibitor to disclosure, including cultural influences, creating and/or compounding this fear:

"I think there is this thing about certain stigma maybe being labelled gay, about being weak and all of that. It makes it more difficult for males than females to talk about their feelings, their emotions and their experiences and certainly about being sexually exploited which means the risks to things such as suicide are maybe much higher for males than for girls." (PI 23, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

Data analysis revealed a gap in the research, i.e. how **cultural influences** might potentially impede professionals' identification of CSE amongst males:

"Males who are from a South Asian background may be fearful to disclose due to reasons of honour-based violence and forced marriage" (PS 25, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

"...a big no, no. And I have worked with young men who have been sexually exploited who are from the travelling community and especially where there are particular notions of masculinity. ...where you're brought up to box, and that's not your thing, and that terrifies you..." (PI 24, Independent).

Fears regarding homophobia and actual bias against homosexuality were viewed, by professionals, as relevant factors in influencing both non-disclosure and non-identification. This pointed to the conclusion that the personal discomfort of professionals in discussing these issues and their potential to misinterpret and misunderstand sexual behaviours related to the sexual exploitation of young males, may be the primary factors which require addressing:

"Society is either not aware or fearful of tackling the subject for fear of being labelled homophobic...and there is concern that an investigation may be seen as anti-homosexual." (PS 36, Police).

"When I was in foster care social services put me with a gay foster carer because they thought that was more beneficial to do, but I never identified as a homosexual…" (Simon, aged 22).

Criminality

The findings on criminality brought together two co-presenting issues:

Youth offending behaviour

There were **four** themes that emerged from the findings regarding youth offending:

(i) A perceived predisposition of professionals to focus on youth offending behaviour of young males, rather than considering other behavioural motivators for the crime, namely CSE:

"I do think there is too much of a tendency to rush boys into the criminal justice system when they are kicking off…I think it can be more of a mixed bag with boys and the sexual exploitation gets missed and they are more likely to go down the youth offending route." (PI 6, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

(ii) The perception that male youth offending behaviours can be manifestations of CSE related trauma, which the male victim and the professional may not recognise as such. Two manifestations were those surrounding aggression and drug use:

"Boys will tend to respond to trauma by acting out through negative or anti-social behaviour which tends to be criminalised as opposed to seeing them as a victim." (PS 88, Social Services).

'Because when you are telling these people, and nothing is being done, well you think, 'it's got to be normal, hasn't it?'… kept myself stimulated to forget about everything. It was also an easier way to deal with the abuse, so I didn't feel any pain at the time and after. Drugs are often used as a pain relief just as a normal person takes paracetamol to try to take away a headache." (Simon, aged 21).

(iii) Professionals' misinterpretation of CSE related behaviours can impact both identification and disclosure:

"Because of all the risk indicators of my CSE really…where I was coming home with injuries and bruises and things like that; I had the use of 2 mobile phones and I was very secretive about calls, I had new trainers, new clothes, anything I wanted I had and that was interpreted as being in criminal activity with other young people which wasn't the case." (Greg, aged 22).

(iv) The perception that a previous poor negative response to a young male, and the repercussions of such, has the potential to impede disclosures:

"…I worked with a young guy who was groomed when he was younger...everyone thought this man was grooming him and he would say 'no, no he's a mate'… Eventually he got a girlfriend who was the same age as him…He mentioned in passing to his social worker that he and his girlfriend were sending each other naked pictures. There's no violence, no coercion, no pressure…the social worker heard it, freaked out, told the police, the police came and recorded a crime in his name… The really sad thing about that is him and his girlfriend split up… and the man that everyone suspected of grooming him raped him, and because of the police's overzealous response to the images, he did not want to engage with police and he did not want to give a statement and he said to me 'if they hadn't criminalised me for those images I would probably have spoken to the police'". (PI 27, Voluntary, CSE specialist).

The role of paramilitarism (in NI)

The issue of paramilitarism was not a pre-determined area for examination in the study; however, the significance of accounts by several participants in Northern Ireland necessitated its inclusion and analysis. It was evident that there can be a direct impact on young males from sexual exploitation by paramilitaries, and an indirect impact through the fear of living within such communities, as a victim of CSE. The primary factors found to impede recognition of CSE in males within these environments were those of:

- **Fear (for self and others):**

  "There was one young man one night when I was on nightshift, and he came down in tears, floods of tears…and then he disclosed he was in huge drug debts and a paramilitary group were making him perform oral sex as a way to pay off this favour. His social worker at the time was involved and reported it to the police but he didn't want to proceed with the investigation. He withdrew his statement and retracted what he had said." (PI 16, Social Services).

  "…if I went and told my dad, him and his manly paramilitary friends would go up and kill him, I mean literally kill him there and then on the spot. So, for a young male feeling that sense of responsibility, knowing you've caused someone's death because you've told about something happening." (Sammy, aged 21).

- **Control (including through the use of drugs):**

  "…that whole aspect of having total control over a community, one that closes down and that sense of the young person…they are involved with ourselves because of drugs or alcohol issues...It's very scary… they get the drugs to deal with the issues that are going on at home. …they go to the paramilitaries, get involved in getting drugs when they don't have the money to get them, so eventually they get to the stage of 'well how are you going to pay the debt off?' So, they may do a couple of runs but maybe they get into the habit and create a dependency and the aspect of that is that it becomes a greater dependency…and then I suppose thinking who would they tell, who would believe them?" (PI 12, Social Services).

- **Coercion to perpetrate:**

  "…so there would be powerful individuals in the community who would organise line-ups and then there would be fear attached if young men don't turn up and do as they are asked; then there would be repercussions – could be very, very sinister; they could be beaten up...Young males would be expected to perform sexual acts on girls as well so then they look like they are the predators but essentially, they are being controlled by the paramilitaries. So, there is a very fine line between victim and perpetrator." (PI 21, Voluntary, specialist).

- **Gains for the young male:**

  "I think a bit of both status and fear. 'I've met someone and he's really powerful'…. In a way you are living the dream because you are with him, but no-one knows and he's buying you a drink. I think in their heads it's not a bad thing because there's this powerful person…It's almost like this mobster's wife, you know. With the paramilitaries I don't think it's so much 'oh I'm so scared;' it's more 'I've more status now.' Especially if you grow up in (named paramilitary area)." (Sammy, aged 21).

- **Normalisation of paramilitarism and all that is inherent in that culture:**

  "…if you grow up in the wrong place…if you are born into the wrong house…He saw that he was never going to live anywhere else in his life; that was him for the rest of his days, he was never going to be employed or have proper education but…this was how he was going to make his money, this was his future; so everything was tied in to this

and whatever was going on, on the side, you just had to soak it up, you just had to get on with it; that was life and just accept it. Young men get very stuck, 'this is my life, this is the way it is. This is the way it was for my brother, my da, my cousin'".
(PI 8, Voluntary, non-CSE specialist).

Analysis of this subject concluded more is known about the potential barriers to disclosure of CSE amongst young males within paramilitary controlled environments than there is in relation to impediments to identification by professionals.

Conclusion

This study concluded that there is both commonality and dissonance between the views of young people and what we already understand from the CSA literature relating to the non-recognition of males as victims. The findings challenge the actual stereotypical assumptions regarding males and masculinity believed to inhibit the recognition of males as victims. They also underscore the importance of recognising the role of gender constructs and socialisation in the negating of males as victims of CSE, but more importantly, how they may be manifested.

The research further revealed a level of dissonance between the views of young people and professionals regarding the relevance of barriers to recognition of CSE in young males which is concerning from a safeguarding perspective. The implications of this for the interpretation and application of CSE policies and procedures to the identification of young males as victims, is significant.

Recommendations

1. Policy and practice focused on child protection and CSE should specifically consider the sexual exploitation of young males and the effectiveness of current responses to it; and, in consultation with young people affected, revise existing guidance to reflect the complexities in identifying the sexual exploitation of males.

2. CSE services should be reviewed to ensure the delivery of available and appropriate provision for young males, specifically considering:

   - local demographics and police intelligence (including missing young people), and whether an all-male service may be required
   - the potential need for extended appointments to engage, build trust and provide suitable support
   - the nature of the service, to include hours beyond 9am-5pm weekdays, and outreach provision
   - staff gender, and the availability of both male and female support workers
   - the use of materials specific to the needs and experience of young males, and the option of hearing from other male survivors
   - the role of community/voluntary organisations.

3. CSE professional training should be multi-agency, or profession-specific where necessary, and incorporate the sexual exploitation of young males, specifically:

   - models of male-victim CSE
   - risk assessment of males
   - impact of societal ideologies for gender construction, especially the concept of masculinity
   - links between youth offending and CSE, including professionals' focus on offending behaviour
   - influence of paramilitary gangs on the recognition of CSE.

4. Social media and other information platforms, including CSE campaigns, should be used to raise public awareness about the sexual exploitation of young males and challenge dominant discourses regarding masculinity.

5. Further research is required on:

   - the influence of gender socialisation on the communication strategies of males and females experiencing CSE
   - impediments to the identification of CSE amongst young males in specific cultural environments
   - the physiological complexities surrounding female-on-male exploitation.

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SBNI
Safeguarding Board
for Northern Ireland

Safeguarding Board
for Northern Ireland
The Beeches,
12 Hampton Manor Drive,
Belfast BT7 3EN
Tel: 028 95 361810
Email: SBNI.Info@hscni.net
Twitter: @safeguardingni

Jacqui Montgomery-Devlin
07813 373935
jacqui.devlin63@btinternet.com
Twitter: @DevlinJacqui