Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Coventry University

Child sexual exploitation perpetrators research programme, report 3

Characteristics and perspectives of adults who have sexually exploited children

Scoping research

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About the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse has been established to help bring about significant and system-wide change in how child sexual abuse is responded to locally and nationally.

We do this by identifying, generating and sharing high-quality evidence of what works to prevent and tackle child sexual abuse (including child sexual exploitation), to inform both policy and practice.

The Centre is funded by the Home Office and led by Barnardo's, and works closely with key partners from academic institutions, local authorities, health, education, police and the voluntary sector.

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Summary

There is a lack of information about individuals who perpetrate child sexual exploitation (CSE) offences. This report describes one of three research projects commissioned by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse to build an evidence base about this population.

The projects' aims were to:

- investigate the characteristics of those who commit CSE
- identify the nature and dynamics of their behaviours, their motivations and the way they target and exploit their victims.

The report will be of interest to frontline practitioners, service providers, commissioners of services, policy makers, researchers and academics.

Method

Notes from police intelligence briefings with 27 perpetrators of CSE were analysed, using content analysis to extract demographic information about CSE perpetrators. Additionally, interviews were undertaken with 18 adults who had sexually offended against children; using the current (2017) Government definition of CSE for England, these 18 adults were classified as either CSE perpetrators (n = 11) or Non-CSE perpetrators (n = 7). Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data, to identify common themes that captured the characteristics and motivations of CSE perpetrators.

Key findings and gaps in research knowledge

- There has been little research to date that has specifically examined the characteristics, context and motivations of CSE perpetrators.
- It is difficult to identify CSE perpetrators, since most sexual offences are not specific to CSE and individuals who have committed CSE offences have not been categorised as such in the criminal justice system process. This makes it difficult to conduct research with this group.
- Adults in this sample who had committed CSE offences had experienced dysfunctional lives. They evidenced individual internal characteristics, such as mental health problems, low self-esteem and antisocial attributes.
- Many excessively used adult pornography and/or images that depicted children.
- Negative external influences were also present in their relationships and environments. These included chaotic intimate relationships, poor relationships with family members and peers, and violence and abusive relationships at home and school.

> Individuals believed their offending was associated with a culmination of all the dysfunctional and negative experiences in their lives.

- Individuals believed that their offending was associated with a culmination of all the dysfunctional and negative experiences in their lives, including both internal and external influences.
- Individuals justified and 'explained' their offending behaviours, which enabled them to continue to offend.
- Motivation for offending was described as sexual gratification in this exploratory sample.
- An ecological framework can be used to understand the complexity and interplay between the individual, relationships, social, cultural and environmental factors associated with CSE.

- There are gaps in research knowledge as to whether the factors identified as associated with CSE perpetration are variable risk markers or fixed risk markers and whether these are casual risk factors that could be targeted in interventions.
- Little is known about the role and relevance of protective factors which can potentially mitigate perpetration.

Implications and recommendations

This is a difficult group to research, as they are largely 'hidden' in criminal justice system processes. A complex range of factors are associated with the commission of CSE, which means that there is no simple way of preventing individuals from perpetrating this type of offending. However, the evidence is still limited and we do not have a clear picture of the range of factors that lead to CSE offending, particularly across the wide range of offences that meet the definition of CSE. More research is therefore needed: for example, with a larger, national sample of individuals who have sexually exploited children and a wider range of CSE offences than has been captured in this exploratory study.

"This is a difficult group to research, as they are largely 'hidden' in criminal justice system processes."

1. Introduction

Research into child sexual exploitation (CSE) in the UK has been difficult to achieve, owing to the hidden nature of the abuse (Barnardo's, 2011).

CSE affects children and young people of all backgrounds, and its prevention requires understanding of the nature of the problem and those involved. An important element of this is understanding the characteristics, behaviour and motivations of individuals who perpetrate this type of child abuse; however, research in this area has to date been sparse and inconclusive.

In early 2017, the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse commissioned three research projects to build an evidence base about this population, through a rapid evidence assessment, exploratory empirical research with adult perpetrators of CSE, and a case study analysis of juveniles who have committed CSE offences.

This report presents the findings of the exploratory empirical research with adult perpetrators of CSE, and should be read in conjunction with the reports on the other two research strands (Hackett and Smith, 2018; Walker et al, 2018). These studies will be of interest to frontline practitioners, service providers, commissioners of services, policymakers, researchers and academics.

1.1. Defining CSE

In England and Wales, CSE is regarded as a form of child sexual abuse (CSA), However, policy and practice frameworks differ, and indeed definitions have changed over time (for example, by being extended to say that children up to the age of 18 can be coerced, persuaded or forced into sexual activity, which may happen in exchange for gifts, drugs and alcohol, affection or status), with implications for practice. The most recent guidance from the Department for Education (DfE, 2017:6), for use in England,[1] states:

> '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) for 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.'

1.2. Who are the perpetrators of CSE?

The rapid evidence assessment commissioned by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (Walker et al, 2018) detailed how research to date on perpetrators of CSE was inconclusive. It was identified, however, that perpetrators were generally male, white and aged between 18 and 85 years (with the average age in various studies ranging from 30 to 46 years); a high proportion were employed, and a significant number of these were in professional jobs.

Factors such as depression, anxiety, stress and suicidal ideation were most likely to be relevant to CSE perpetrators, although no causal relationships could be established given the nature of the data and the limitations in the methodologies employed across the studies. Other characteristics identified as potentially relevant and warranting further research were attachment styles and the

[1]There is a different definition of CSE in Wales, set out in an *All Wales Protocol* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). In January 2017, the Welsh Government commissioned a review of this definition and its statutory guidance on CSE safeguarding; the review has recommended developing an updated definition (Hallett et al, 2017).

formation of relationships, which appeared to be problematic in this group. The two main motivations found for these offenders were sexual and financial.

1.3. Aims

Using a qualitative methodology, this project aimed to undertake exploratory empirical research that would:

- scope out and establish different data sources where CSE perpetrators could be identified and studied
- determine the characteristics of those who commit CSE
- identify the nature, dynamics and contexts of their behaviours
- determine their motivations and the way they target and exploit their victims.

It needs to be understood that this research is a preliminary insight and scoping exercise. As such, it will need to be developed and extended further, based on its findings and learnings.

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2. Method

2.1. Design

A qualitative design was employed for this study. As part of the scoping exercise to identify the best methods of research and access to relevant participants, two approaches for data collection were employed:

1. Sharing of an existing data set of intelligence briefings **(Data set 1: Existing redacted police interviews)**, which had already been undertaken by the police (from an organised crime unit) as part of their intelligence gathering prior to the start of the project.
2. Face-to-face interviews undertaken with CSE perpetrators in the community and in prison, who were specifically recruited and interviewed for this research project **(Data set 2: In-depth face-to-face interviews)**.

Information about the two data sets, including the methodology used for analysing them, is provided below.

The design for this empirical study was discussed and agreed with the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, and with the reference group set up by the Centre for its series of linked research into the perpetrators of CSE. The reference group consists of practitioners and professionals including regional police CSE leads, voluntary organisations working in the field of CSE, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and Nacro.

2.2. Data set 1: Existing redacted police interviews

Ethical approval for use of this data set was obtained from Coventry University Research Ethics Committee. The police force sharing the data reviewed and approved the use of the redacted police interviews once they had been fully anonymised for the study.

Participants

Existing intelligence briefings with 27 individuals, currently in prison and flagged as CSE perpetrators by the police, were available for analysis. CSE perpetrators among these 27 individuals were identified and classified based on the offence(s) for which they were convicted (details of which were included in the intelligence briefing).

For this classification, the research team used the 2017 Government definition of CSE for England (see section 1.1), which was felt to be comprehensive as well as being the most current official definition in the UK. If their offence aligned with this definition, perpetrators were classified as CSE; if it did not, they were classified as Non-CSE.

Nine of the 27 individuals were classified as CSE, and 18 as Non-CSE. Two researchers independently classified the perpetrators and achieved 100% agreement.

Data analysis

Since the data were notes made of briefings after they had been completed, and were not verbatim accounts, they were not as detailed as recorded interview transcripts. Hence, only limited details could be extracted consistently from the data.

The redacted police interviews were analysed using directed content analysis with a focus on analysis of manifest content. Given the focus of previous research and the limited detail of the redacted interview notes, demographic information was selected as the main theme of analysis. A coding scheme was developed, comprising categories such as age at time of offence, marital status, nationality and previous convictions. Interview notes were then screened for occurrences of these categories.

Two researchers analysed the interview notes and completed coding schedules, achieving 100% agreement for the information extracted.

2.3. Data set 2: In-depth face-to-face interviews

Ethical approval to undertake this part of the research was obtained from Coventry University Research Ethics Committee and HMPPS's National Research Committee. Guidelines from the British Psychological Society were adhered to. Participants were given full information about the purpose of the study, what it would entail, and how the interview data would be transported, stored, analysed and used. All gave their signed, informed consent; they were fully debriefed at the end of the interviews, and given signposting for further help should the need arise.

Participants

In total, 18 participants were recruited:

- Ten male offenders were recruited from a category C prison (for inmates who cannot be trusted in open prison, but are considered unlikely to try to escape) by the psychology team working at the prison. Many other offenders were approached but did not agree to be interviewed; we do not have detailed information to compare the full population to those interviewed.
- Four offenders (three male and one female) living in the community were recruited by the social justice charity Nacro.
- Four males living in the community were identified and recruited by a police constabulary.

The individuals who recruited these participants were asked to identify CSE perpetrators by examining their case files and using the new (2017) Government definition of CSE for England (see section 1.1). These 'gatekeepers' had access to different information sources (e.g. police records, Nacro files or prison files), and often felt that it was difficult to categorise CSE clearly: in particular, they found that the boundaries were not clear-cut in relation to contact-only offenders. Online exploitation is included in the definition of CSE used, making it easy for the gatekeepers to identify online offenders as CSE perpetrators using the information in the files and case notes that they had access to.

For consistency across the study, the research team independently classified each participant using the details they self-reported in the interviews, their offence details, and the context of their offending discussed in the interview. By mapping this information against the Government definition for England, they classified 11 participants as CSE perpetrators (of whom nine were online offenders) and seven as Non-CSE.

Regardless of classification, all the participants offended on their own, with none being part of a gang or involved in a sexual grooming network (such as those seen in several high-profile cases, e.g. in Rochdale and Newcastle).

Data collection

The majority of the interviews were conducted by two researchers from Coventry University; those participants identified by Nacro were interviewed by one Coventry University researcher and one Nacro researcher.[2] All interviews followed the same comprehensive interview schedule, to promote consistency and reduce any bias from using multiple researchers.

> The individuals who recruited the participants had access to different information sources and often felt it was difficult to categorise CSE clearly.

The interview schedule was developed by the project team, based on findings from their rapid evidence assessment (Walker et al, 2018), in consultation with staff in the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

[2]The interviews involving Nacro were linked to another study, of interventions for perpetrators of CSE, commissioned by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (Drummond and Southgate, 2018).

The interview questions – which were reviewed and approved by the two ethics committees – were structured along a timeline starting at childhood and moving through adolescence and adulthood to the present day. They covered topics including the participant's family, employment and educational history, relationships, mental and physical health, substance use and abuse, context of the offence, victim selection, grooming, understanding of the offence, consent, offence prevention and intervention. Open-response questions were used, followed by probing questions to elicit further details where necessary. A copy of the interview schedule is available by request from the authors.

The interviews lasted between approximately 20 minutes and just over two hours, with a mean duration of 71.44 minutes; informed, signed consent was obtained for them to be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. All data were anonymised, and identifying information was removed. Each participant was allocated a unique participant (P) number, followed by their classification (CSE or Non-CSE), followed by a C or a P to indicate whether they were currently living in the community or in prison. For example, 'P10 (CSE) P' indicates participant 10, classified as a CSE perpetrator, currently serving a sentence in prison.

Data analysis

Interviews were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (or a data-driven, bottom-up approach). This approach was taken as it is appropriate for investigating a diversity and range of experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006), so the research team could understand the experiences of both CSE and Non-CSE perpetrators. The epistemological position taken was broadly a realist one, meaning that experiences of the participants were mostly taken at face value and based on the assumption that they were reporting the truth about their individual subjective experiences (Hayes, 2000).

Thematic analysis explores rich and complex accounts of data, allowing for both social and psychological interpretation of the data sets (Guest et al, 2012). Analysis followed a six-step procedure, as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), and involved:

- reading and re-reading transcripts, highlighting relevant material and making annotations
- identifying preliminary codes (e.g. participants' words or phrases, labels associated with the research question)
- clustering codes into lower-level sub-themes and categorising into higher-order themes
- reviewing and refining themes and developing a thematic map
- defining, refining and naming themes
- producing and writing the report.

Two researchers completed analysis of the transcripts, and themes were checked to ensure agreement.

"The interview questions were structured along a timeline starting at childhood and moving through adolescence and adulthood to the present day."

3. Findings from redacted police interviews

Given the nature of the data set (redacted information based on written notes taken at interview as opposed to a verbatim transcription, and interviews not following a set of predefined questions), only some insights into the (mainly demographic) characteristics of CSE and Non-CSE perpetrators were identified.

The 27 individuals (26 males, one female) comprised nine CSE offenders (eight males, one female) and 18 Non-CSE offenders (all male).

Of the four CSE offenders who disclosed their relationship status, three were in a relationship and one widowed. Eight of the Non-CSE offenders disclosed their relationship status: one said they were married, two said they were in relationships (one with a partner said to be the victim they offended against), three were divorced, one was separated and one identified as "married multiple times".

Five of the nine CSE offenders reported having children, as did eight of the 18 Non-CSE offenders.

Compared to the Non-CSE offenders, the CSE offenders were less likely to have previous convictions. Only two of them reported having been in trouble with the law prior to their current sentence: one had been convicted of assault, and no additional information was provided for the other. Of the six Non-CSE offenders who disclosed previous convictions, a range of offences were reported including sex, drug and public order offences.

In relation to family, offenders reported growing up within diverse family structures such that no clear distinguishing patterns between CSE and Non-CSE offenders could be discerned. There was a significant variation in offenders' education history, irrespective of the offence committed, with some offenders leaving school at 16 and others completing university degrees. A similar pattern was noted for employment history. The demographic characteristics noted were wide-ranging and did not follow a specific pattern, suggesting that nothing could be identified as being a specific characteristic attributable to the CSE group or the Non-CSE group in isolation.

> "The demographic characteristics noted were wide-ranging and did not follow a specific pattern."

Age data, at the time of either the offence or the writing of the briefing, were not available for any of the CSE offenders; the Non-CSE offenders were reported to be 20–70 years old at the time of the offence, but it was not possible to identify their current ages.

Twenty-five of the participants (all nine CSE offenders, and 16 Non-CSE) were British; one participant was Indian (Non-CSE) and one was from the Middle East (Non-CSE).

It should be strongly emphasised that the information above is based on limited data and should be interpreted with caution. With more structured, comprehensive interviews, it is possible that different results would have been obtained.

4. Findings from in-depth face-to-face interviews

Of the 18 individuals interviewed in this part of the study, 11 were classified as CSE perpetrators and seven as Non-CSE. Demographic information about all of them is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information of 18 interviewees (Data set 2)

Demographics		CSE (n = 11)		Non-CSE (n = 7)	
		n	(%)	n	(%)
Gender	Female	0	(0)	1	(14.3)
	Male	11	(100)	6	(85.7)
Age (current)	19-29	1	(9.1)	1	(9.1)
	30-39	2	(18.2)	0	(0)
	40-49	0	(0)	2	(28.6)
	50-59	0	(0)	0	(0)
	60+	2	(18.2)	0	(0)
	unknown	6	(54.5)	4	(57.1)
Ethnicity	White British	11	(100)	7	(100)
Relationship (current)	Single/separated/divorced	5	(45.5)	5	(71.4)
	Married	1	(9.1)	2	(29.6)
	In relationship	1	(9.1)	0	(0)
	Unknown	4	(36.4)	0	(0)
Relationship (time of offence)	Single/separated/divorced	4	(36.4)	2	(28.6)
	Married	2	(18.2)	0	(0)
	In relationship	2	(18.2)	4	(57.1)
	Unknown	3	(27.3)	1	(14.3)
Children	Yes	5	(45.5)	5	(71.5)
	No	6	(54.5)	2	(28.5)
Highest educational qualification	No qualification	3	(27.3)	3	(42.9)
	O Levels / GCSEs	3	(27.3)	3	(42.9)
	A levels	3	(27.3)	1	(14.3)
	Degree	2	(18.2)	0	(0)
	Postgraduate	0	(0)	0	(0)
Sexual offence	Contact	2	(18.2)	7	(100)
	Non-contract (online)	3	(27.3)	0	(0)
	Both	6	(54.5)	0	(0)
Convictions (non-sexual)	Yes	4	(36.4)	3	(42.9)
	No	7	(63.6)	4	(57.1)

4.1. Perpetrator characteristics

The first part of the thematic analysis revealed the individual (internal) characteristics and relational/environmental (external) characteristics that were evident in the participants' narratives. With a couple of exceptions, the themes appeared to be common across those classified as CSE and those as Non-CSE. As a result, similarities and comparisons between the groups will not be discussed, except where there were notable differences or exceptions identified in the data set.

Figure 1 presents the themes that were identified. It also shows the number of participants' accounts (n) in which each theme was found to indicate the spread of themes across the data set.

Both internal factors (individual) and external factors (relationships, environment) were common themes across CSE and Non-CSE participants, with all having dysfunctional elements and experiences within their lives. Regarding some of the external relationship factors, however, participants did identify some functional elements and experiences within their lives. A description of the identified themes follows, supported with example quotes from the participants. The quotes have been presented verbatim in the participants' own words and therefore have not been corrected for grammar.

Figure 1. External and internal characteristics of perpetrators

INDIVIDUAL (Internal)	RELATIONSHIPS (External)		ENVIRONMENT (External)
Dysfunctional	Dysfunctional	Functional	Dysfunctional
Mental health problems (n = 17)	**Chaotic intimate relationships** (n = 18)	**Close to mother** (n = 7)	**Unstable childhood environments:**
Low self-esteem (n = 14)	**Defective relationship with father** (n = 10)	**Strong friendship groups** (n = 7)	***Unstable school environment*** (n = 15)
Deviant and excessive use of pornography (n = 9)	**Absent peer friendships** (n = 7)		***Unstable home environment*** (n = 12)
Addiction issues (n = 11)			**Violent and abusive childhood environments:**
Conflict around sexual identity (n = 7)			***Domestic violence and abuse*** (n = 9)
Antisociality (n = 8)			***Sexual violence and abuse*** (n = 9)
			Peer violence and abuse (n = 11)

Note: 18 interviewees, both CSE and Non-CSE perpetrators

4.1.1 Individual (internal) characteristics

This theme represents the common factors that pertain to, constitute or indicate specific dysfunctional individual characteristics or qualities. Given the data set, the small number of participants and the analysis undertaken, it is not possible to comment on whether the factors identified were causal in relation to the participants' sexual offending; however, there were prevalent individual descriptions found across all the participants' accounts.

Mental health problems

Some reference to a mental health problem or problems was found in the accounts of all participants except one (P17 (Non-CSE) P). The consistent issues that were identified revolved around depression, anxiety and emotional problems. These mental health issues were not all formally diagnosed, nor were they issues that had been experienced through childhood and/ or were evident pre-offending. Some mental health issues occurred during the time of their offending or after being caught and sentenced for the offence. For others, there was a specific build-up of mental health issues around the time of their offending.

Many participants talked about having emotional issues and problems with deep anxiety and stress: for example, "I've never known so much misery" (P1 (CSE) C); having "emotional difficulties" (P10 (CSE) P); being "diagnosed with severe stress" (P4 (Non-CSE) C); and feeling "unstable at an all-time low" (P9 (Non-CSE) P).

The most common mental health problem identified and discussed was depression. Some participants had been formally medically diagnosed; for others depression had been 'diagnosed' by themselves or others, e.g. friends or family. There was evidence that some individuals experienced depression through childhood and pre-offending. For example, one recalled depression being an early ongoing problem and reported being formally diagnosed:

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "Now, I'd say I was depressed [at 12], I was anxious, I had massive anxiety issues, and I think it was because I was trying to process the abuse, and then process the adoption. "I was deemed to have clinical depression… That was when I first started to go on antidepressants [age 22]… Ever since then I've had depression, on and off antidepressant since I was 22, and I'm currently on them now."

The participants who discussed depression suggested that this was either:

- a problem around the time of their offending –

  P18 (CSE) P: "I know what I was doing was wrong but I was going through a bad time anyway and I was messed up, I was deeply depressed, I wasn't getting medication for that."

  P6 (Non-CSE): "During the offence running up to it, I was suffering from depression and I was rather withdrawn; running away from all my family and friends."

> The most common mental health problem identified and discussed was depression.

- a problem because of how they felt about their offending –

  P10 (CSE) P: "It was on my own, I would literally Google search and find images… I'd look at them until I'd climax and then I'd chuck the computer down and… be massively mortified at what I'd done. Get so angry, wound-up and grief-stricken, and then for a couple of days that would start to subside. I'd be down and depressed again, look for something to make me feel better."

- or a result of being caught/ arrested or sent to prison –

  P9 (Non-CSE) P: "I've suffered [from depression]… it goes up, down, up, down like. When I first came to prison it was like I didn't know what to do, I was a bit confused and stuff like that. And – but yeah, they gave me the tablets here."

This suggests that these mental health issues can be an issue pre, during and post offending.

For both groups of participants, another mental health problem linked to depression and manifesting itself around similar scenarios (i.e. pre and/or post offending) related to suicidal thoughts and attempted suicide. Prior to their offences, one participant had attempted suicide on a few occasions (P10 (CSE) P, slashed wrists and took overdoses), while another had planned to take his own life:

> **P1 (CSE) C:** "It's a very dark space. The worst aspect of it was in the immediate run up to my first offence in 1998. I had tried all sorts of coping mechanisms as they call them… I decided basically I couldn't really see much point in life, in my life going on. So I made sure that all my financial affairs were in order and it was merely a question of waiting for the opportunity to do the deed."

However, suicidal thoughts and attempts were also a common feature post arrest and when individuals were in prison.

Low self-esteem

Fourteen of the perpetrators raised issues of low self-esteem, talking about feelings of worthlessness, failure and not fitting in. They identified that their offending was in part a way of boosting their self-esteem. In their narratives, they talked about a dislike of the self, about hating themselves, seeing themselves as scum, feeling like a piece of dirt and describing themselves as worthless:

> **P11 (CSE) P:** "Generally a feeling of worthlessness… my father and other people that have kind of jumped out at me as people which are failing you in your life, so it makes you feel rock bottom and anything you try and do you're going to fail at, so that's how it feels generally."

A similar narrative was found from another participant, who also described a distinct feeling of not being comfortable with the self, feeling down and withdrawn, and not being happy with who they were.

Conflict around sexual identity

It is important to note that this theme is not included to suggest that being homosexual was related directly to or had a 'causal' relationship with the individual's offending; however, being homosexual caused some participants internal and external conflict. It is possible that this conflict could have resulted in issues with self-identity and low self-esteem, and chaotic and problematic intimate relationships that were both seen to be a feature in the data. As adults, the participants in the main had identified as and were openly homosexual, but for many it had been a struggle to get to this point. One of the issues reported was an internal conflict – participants said they had struggled to find their sexuality, had been confused about and/or uncomfortable with it, had not initially been able to accept it, and had not thought that it was 'right' to have sexual relationships with other men.

> **P7 (CSE) C:** "I didn't know what a homosexual was anyway. I just knew in my head that I liked a particular boy, and if I touched him or he touched me I would get a feeling… I just felt good about it and I felt I would like to do it again, but I tried to stay away from it because I didn't think it was right."

However, conflict also came from external sources: they reported feeling that being homosexual would be frowned upon by others, or meant they were bullied at school; one participant suggested that it put him at risk of being disowned by his father. There was a clear conflict for the participants about their sexuality, meaning that it took them time to be comfortable with it.

> **P11 (CSE) P:** "I've always been trying to please somebody else, like my father always said if I was gay he wouldn't want anything to do with any of this, and that's always been in my mind about that… Because I'd always play it straight [heterosexual] and only recently within the last couple of years begun to be more myself."

Deviant and excessive use of pornography[3] (adult and/or child online sexual images)

Unlike all the other themes, this theme included only data from CSE (nine in total) perpetrators. Non-CSE perpetrators did talk about use of pornography, but from their accounts this was not described as deviant (it was age-appropriate, adult, legal pornography) and not engaged with excessively: for example, it was watched "once in a blue moon" (P3 (Non-CSE) C) or "general porn watched occasionally" (P6 (Non-CSE) C). The CSE perpetrators' accounts were different, particularly in relation to frequency, usage and content (i.e. illegal, child sexual material, watched to excess).

Pornography use for the CSE perpetrators became progressively more frequent and more deviant in relation to content. They used pornography consistently and for long periods of time.

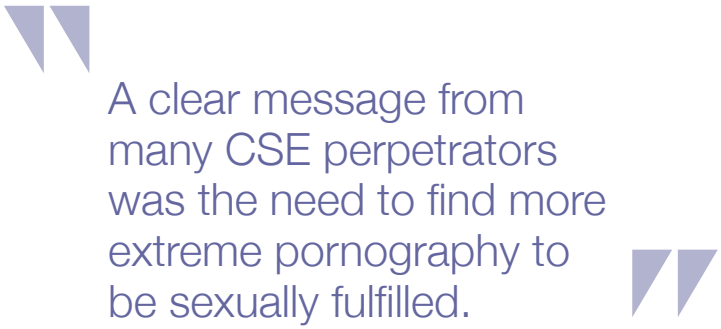
> **P16 (CSE) P:** "I was always getting pornographic DVDs… before I came to prison [pornography] was a big part of my life… I'd rather spend money on pornography… I was always using pornography… I mean the amount of times I was looking at pornography and the amount of magazines I would buy."

> **P18 (CSE) P:** "I was watching porn, I was watching a lot of pornography and I was masturbating every day, every day."

However, the most notable and consistent finding about the pornography use was the progression over time to more deviant, extreme pornography. A clear message from many participants was the need to find more extreme pornography to be sexually fulfilled.

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "I started looking at normal pornography… And when it wasn't doing it for me I'd up the level to more extreme, and then more extreme until normal pornography wasn't doing it for me."

Part of the deviant nature of pornography use relates to their specific type of offending that the participants engaged in. Many of them noted that, as adult pornography was not meeting their needs, they looked for online sexual images that depicted children.



> **P14 (CSE) P:** "I was starting to find that the adult stuff wasn't working, so they started getting younger and younger."

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "Normal pornography was boring… so I was then looking at child pornography… the pictures gave me the ability to get the climax that I wanted to."

In addition, the pornography used became more deviant in relation to different types of content that the participants were looking for and using for sexual gratification.

> **P14 (CSE) P:** "It was getting more extreme. It wasn't just images, it was more extreme stuff including images… Bondage, and all sorts of stuff like that. Looking back now, I can't even imagine why I looked at them to be honest with you."

> **P7 (CSE) P:** "I was looking at teen girl porn and of course then I started looking at gay porn and animal porn, bestiality, I was looking for anything that gave me a buzz."

It was observed in the accounts that the participants had a dysfunctional use of pornography (adult and child online sexual images) which progressed over time, and that their usage was both excessive and deviant.

Addiction issues

This theme can be separated into two main issues of addiction and excess: the first (pornography) is intrinsically linked to the previous theme, while the second relates to substance abuse (drugs and alcohol).

[3]Sexual images depicting children were referred to by the interviewees as 'child pornography'. The authors consider 'child online sexual images' to be a more appropriate term.

Pornography

As previously discussed, several of the participants talked about their deviant and excessive use of pornography. Five of the participants suggested that their pornography use was an addictive part of their character. This was only seen in the CSE group. Some identified themselves that this was an addiction:

> **P7 (CSE) C:** "I'd be there [using pornography] from 10 o'clock at night until 5 in the morning…But it's an addiction, I couldn't be without it."

> **P5 (CSE) C:** "I've got this addiction to pornography."

Throughout the narratives there is clear reference to an excessive use of pornography and the amount of time spent engaging in it, which suggests that this was an addictive behaviour for some of the participants.

> **P16 (CSE) P:** "The year before I offended I was always using pornography, and then – and then as the years went on it got worse and worse."

> **P5 (CSE) C:** "Progressively you end up watching so much porn all the time."

Alcohol and drugs

It was found that some of the perpetrators had alcohol addiction issues, or would use alcohol and drugs to excess. While addiction to pornography was particular to the CSE group, substance misuse and addiction featured across both the CSE and the Non-CSE groups. Generally, alcohol and drug addiction was part of their lifestyle, before they had committed any abuse. Three of the participants said they knew they were actually alcoholics:

> **P14 (CSE) P:** "I was an alcoholic back then, I know I am an alcoholic."

Nine participants discussed excessive drinking, while others became reliant on cannabis as part of their lifestyle and day-to-day existence.

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "I stayed in that house, became very, very heavily addicted to cannabis, was smoking a lot all day, every day. Never went anywhere, lived in the same room."

> **P2 (Non-CSE) C:** "But I was drinking heavily, I mean I were drinking like, you know bottles of vodka, I were drinking one of them every day… I couldn't go without it."

Antisociality

This theme relates to the evidence found in the data set that participants displayed antisocial characteristics from adolescence. There was evidence of early-age use (e.g. age 12, P10 (CSE) P) of both cannabis and alcohol, plus examples of antisocial behaviours including driving illegally and theft (P10 (CSE) P), fighting (P13 (CSE) P), vandalism (P16 (CSE) P), stealing from shops (P12 (CSE) P, P2 (Non-CSE) C), criminal damage and theft (P3 (Non-CSE) C), and vandalism and smashing a car up (P8 (Non-CSE) C).

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "I was very disruptive; I kicked back against authority, I'd steal, started smoking when I shouldn't be, driving at 12 years old and thought I was the best driver in the world."

> While addiction to pornography was particular to the CSE group, substance misuse and addiction featured across both the CSE and the Non-CSE groups.

4.1.2 Relationships (external) characteristics: dysfunctional

This theme encapsulates the external relationships that the men described as a part of their lives. It was apparent in the data that these relationships were a consistent dysfunctional feature throughout their lives.

Chaotic intimate relationships

For all 18 of the participants interviewed, there was evidence of dysfunctional intimate relationships. This refers not to any 'relationships' that they perceived to have as part of their sexual offending, but to consensual intimate relationships with other age-appropriate adults.

None of the participants indicated having stable long-term relationships with other people. Their dysfunctional relationships were formed pre, during and post offending. In many cases, they would go from one chaotic relationship to another. A consistent finding was that many of the intimate relationships formed were one-night stands, casual encounters and those purely based on sex.

> **P15 (CSE) P:** "A meet, a physical meet and casual sex… I would go out and meet someone, have sex with them and probably never meet them again because I found them online."

> **P3 (Non-CSE) C:** "I were just sleeping around here, there and everywhere. Sorry for putting it this way, but any hole was a goal back then, I didn't care who I got into a relationship with, who I slept with."

It was clear that many of the participants struggled to form meaningful relationships. For others, the relationships were chaotic owing to infidelity within the relationships. Some participants reported that their partners had been unfaithful to them, while others said they were the ones who were unfaithful. Violence and abuse in relationships were also reported, with some participants experiencing violence and others perpetrating it:

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "But after [son] came along she became very violent, very aggressive to me. She stabbed me three times."

> **P8 (Non-CSE) C:** "Well, towards the end I got violent… I just used to lash out."

> Relationships were being formed within dysfunctional environments by individuals who described themselves as having dysfunctional characteristics.

Other issues reported in relationships were constant arguments, emotional trauma, partners' mental health issues, and issues with children. These issues resulted in participants not being able to have contact with or see their children, as partners refused access or took them away. The environment thus created meant that their subsequent relationships were generally not stable. It is important to note that relationships were being formed within dysfunctional environments by individuals who described themselves as having dysfunctional characteristics.

Defective relationship with father

Participants revealed that they had difficulties in their relationships with their fathers. It was apparent that, within the family unit, it was the relationship with the father over all other relationships (i.e. with the mother and siblings) that was particularly dysfunctional. Participants discussed how their relationships with their fathers were "terrible", "bad", and "difficult"; several had a fear of their fathers.

One of the main reasons for a defective relationship was that, as reported by both CSE and Non-CSE groups, the father was absent. In some cases, this was because he left with no contact:

> **P12 (CSE) P:** "When I came along, my Dad done a runner."

Others met their fathers on just a couple of occasions, or had occasional contact but with no meaningful relationship:

> **P11 (CSE) P:** "We never had a relationship, he was just someone I went to see every month."

A number of participants reported a defective relationship with their fathers, where they

witnessed and experienced violence and abuse. This theme is intrinsically linked to the environment (external) characteristic 'Violent and abusive childhood environments', discussed in detail in section 4.1.4; however, of relevance to this theme is that as children they had a fear of their father and therefore a dysfunctional relationship through this witnessing or experiencing of violence.

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "For the early years, domestic violence [from father] was always happening and there was always fear."

The result of the violence and abuse across all those who witnessed and experienced it was that they could not form a good relationship with their fathers.

> **P16 (CSE) P:** "The relationship between me and my dad, it was always difficult because he was – he was very aggressive, he sexually abused me for a bit."

> **P3 (Non-CSE) P:** "I actually went through violence at home courtesy of my father from the age of eight years old till 14 years old, and I don't see anything of my father now, don't know if he's dead or alive."

Absent peer friendships

Some of the participants also reported that they did not have particularly good or strong peer relationships. This was more the case with the CSE offenders (n = 6) than the Non-CSE (n = 1). The main issues were that they did not have many friends and found it difficult to make friends.

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "I didn't really have any friends. The people I thought were my friends were often not… But, as time went on I realised they weren't my friends, they were either using me or taking the mickey out of me, someone to laugh at, so I never really had proper friendships at all really."

There was a definite lack of peer support and close friendships developed by these participants.

> **P16 (CSE) P:** "I didn't really have that many friendships, I was more – I was more of a social recluse, I think."

4.1.3 Relationships (external) characteristics: functional

While dysfunctional relationships were more prevalent and consistent throughout the data set, a minority of participants talked about experiencing some positive functional relationships.

Close to mother

Some of the participants reported close relationships with their mothers, which appeared to be an important part of their lives. It was expressed quite simplistically:

> **P18 (CSE) P:** "Excellent. Me and my mum have always been very, very close. I mean… my mum would give me her last penny, bless her."

> **P7 (CSE) P:** "Yes, my mum was the happiest part of my life."

> **P8 (Non-CSE) C:** "Oh, me and my mum, I love my mum to bits."

> While dysfunctional relationships were more prevalent and consistent, a minority of participants talked about experiencing some positive functional relationships.

These relationships were close through childhood and pre-offending, but some had also developed more and been formed post-offending.

Strong friendship groups

While some of the participants revealed that they struggled to make friends, others reported experiencing good and strong friendship associations. They said that they formed good friendships at school (strong wider friendship groups as well as specific close friends) and that this continued through adulthood.

P1 (CSE) C: "I was always pretty gregarious and enjoyed being around a close circle of mates and we did all the things that guys do at that age."

P3 (Non-CSE) C: "There's between six and a dozen of us, and we always used to meet up and just spend time together and be kids and enjoy stuff."

4.1.4 Environment (external) characteristics

This theme includes the external environmental or contextual factors experienced by the participants which formed part of their lifestyles. It has been separated into two main groups, *Unstable childhood environments* and *Violent and abusive childhood environments*. All the factors identified were dysfunctional.

Unstable childhood environments

This group encompasses two environments: school and home. These environments lacked stability for the participants and indeed were quite negative for many. Violence and abuse have not been included here, as they form standalone themes which follow.

Unstable school environment

A high proportion of perpetrators talked about a very negative school environment, and several suggested that it was not a supportive environment for them.

P14 (CSE) P: "School wasn't good, it wasn't good… I was always doing wrong in the teacher's eyes, or the headmistress's, that's how I felt it. And I used to run home, I used to run away from school."

P2 (Non-CSE) P: When they've put you into maths and then English and then getting different teachers come from a different place taking me out and putting me into a different room and that, it were weird.

Others' schooling experience was unstable because they were suspended or excluded from school. This generally was a result of their disruptive behaviour at school and the inability to settle down within the school environment.

P10 (CSE) P: "I went to primary school where I was quite disruptive, and eventually got removed from that school, and went into a school for children with behaviour and emotional difficulties."

Some participants described struggling academically, which meant they did not enjoy school and left with very few qualifications. A number reported school as a difficult experience as they did not form friendships well and struggled to get on with the teachers, suggesting that this was not a stable environment that they were able to thrive in.

P3 (Non-CSE) C: "Didn't like school whatsoever… didn't get on with half the teachers… and I feel I did not fit in because of my sexuality… a lot of piss taking, shoved to one side stuff like that."

Unstable home environment

In relation to the home environment, instability was caused by poor marriages of the participants' parents (including infidelity by parents); experiencing broken homes, separations and divorces; and poor relationships with step-parents. This lack of stability seemed to be associated with disruption to the core family (i.e. their biological parents) and then living with an absent father or with the introduction of step-parents to the childhood environment. Examples of this include:

> A high proportion of perpetrators talked about a very negative school environment.

P11 (CSE) P: "I always struggled with the fact that, you know, my dad lives, why did my dad live a hundred miles away and why am I, why haven't I got a mum and dad at home and stuff, because other people had that and so that was very difficult to deal with. I didn't particularly get on with my stepfather."

> **P4 (Non-CSE) C:** "Yeah, my dad was never home, he left when I was 18 months old and I saw him once when I was five. Never seen him since, so it's just my mum. Had a stepdad for quite a few years called [stepfather's name]. And after that there was a stepdad called [stepfather's name], I did not like."

Another issue causing an unstable childhood environment was being removed from the home and sent to foster parents, adoptive parents or children's homes.

> **P2 (Non-CSE) C:** "I moved out because I were fostered… my life was all disrupted because of my family… we was moving around all the time and it was just horrible for me."

Violent and abusive childhood environments

This group is made up of three categories: domestic violence and abuse; sexual violence and abuse; and peer violence and abuse. However, it needs to be highlighted that these categories and the incidents they involved are not mutually exclusive and should therefore be seen as a continuum of childhood violent and abusive environments.

Domestic violence and abuse

It was consistently found that many participants experienced violence and abuse throughout their childhood as a result of witnessing parental violence and violence in other family members' intimate relationships.

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "I remember as a young child, a very young child, aged five or six, violent arguments, verbal arguments between the two [mum and dad]."

> **P16 (CSE) P:** "Yeah, my dad used to beat my mum up quite a lot. It was mainly if my dad came home from the pub a bit worse for wear then he'd become violent."

> **P4 (Non-CSE) P:** "Saw what was happening to my sister, because my sister was beat up quite a few times by her partners… I could see the bruises and see the after-effects."

In many cases, violence and abuse in the home was also experienced by the perpetrators, and mostly inflicted by fathers or stepfathers.

> **P1 (CSE) C:** "My dad used to batter my mum black and blue and physically broke my arm. I had both my legs broken, my brother had his bones broken regularly. Domestic violence was always happening and there was fear in the house."

> **P2 (Non-CSE) C:** "My life was all disrupted because of my family, because of what I was witnessing from my dad beating my mum… He used to get, you know, his belt with the – the thing on the belt, the metal bit, he used to batter me with that… he used to kick me around with steel-cap boots on."

There were two examples of violence in the home involving the perpetrators and their mothers: one involving the mother as victim, the other as a perpetrator herself.

> **P16 (CSE) P:** "I beat my mum up twice, and that was just before I went into care."

> **P1 (CSE) C:** "That was a very abusive, very horrible time, physically and emotionally abusive – both my mum and my stepfather against me and my brother."

Sexual violence and abuse

Some of the perpetrators described experiencing sexual abuse from different people during their childhood. One of them (P10 (CSE) P) recalled how he was removed from the family home owing to safeguarding issues and his father sexually abusing him and his brother. Another described how his father was arrested and he was put in care:

> Many participants experienced violence and abuse as a result of witnessing parental violence and violence in other family members' intimate relationships.

P16 (CSE) P: "My dad, he got arrested for similar [sexual] offences… My dad, the relationship between me and my dad, it was always difficult because he was – he was very aggressive, he sexually abused me for a bit."

Two of the participants revealed that they had been sexually abused by uncles, and one was sexually abused by his sister as well as other females who were known to him:

P8 (Non-CSE) C: "My sister. She's older than me… And she abused me… Sexual abuse. Sexual. My mum's partner's daughter and her friends, getting me to touch them. But with my sister, she used to get me to do oral sex."

Sexual abuse was also experienced in the school environment and the online environment. One participant (P14 (CSE) P) described how a friend of the same age sexually abused him when he was sent to boarding school; this links to the characteristic 'Peer violence and abuse' below. Another was abused sexually as a young adolescent when, at home, he went online while trying to understand his sexuality and ended up being the target and victim of sexual abuse.

P15 (CSE) P: "[People met online] started taking pictures and videos and blackmailing me and all sorts and then I was passed around for many people, men online. One would pass you to another and share… Extreme stuff so everything from insertions… to being recorded and me made to do sexual tasks and being put on the internet."

> A high proportion of participants experienced violence in the form of bullying from their peers.

Peer violence and abuse

As noted above, there was one account of peer-on-peer sexual abuse experienced by a participant, although this form of abuse (i.e. peer-on-peer sexual) was not common in this data set. However, a high proportion of participants experienced violence in the form of bullying from their peers; they were bullied for various reasons including having older adoptive parents, their sexuality, being from a different area, being overweight and the way they looked. Different levels of bullying were experienced: for some it was verbal and for others it was physical.

P14 (CSE) P: "I think it [bullying] all started at school when I was made to feel like a piece of dirt basically. Being called poof, gay, all the names; I'm not going to go into them but you can imagine all the names I was called… I was called stupid and useless as well."

P2 (Non-CSE) C: "Being punched, being dragged through like woods and that by a group."

Figure 2. Context within which offending took place

EXPLANATIONS WHY	EXPLANATIONS HOW
Culmination of dysfunctionalities (n = 13) **Justifiable behaviour** (n = 12) **Won't get caught** (n = 13) **Sexually motivated** (n = 13)	**Victim identification:** ***Untargeted victim: Planned abuse*** (n = 12) ***Targeted victim: Planned abuse*** (n = 6)

Note: 18 interviewees, both CSE and Non-CSE perpetrators

P16 (CSE) P: "My dad, he got arrested for similar [sexual] offences… My dad, the relationship between me and my dad, it was always difficult because he was – he was very aggressive, he sexually abused me for a bit."

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> Three factors were more prevalent across perpetrators' narratives: work, build-up of mental health issues, and relationship problems.

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P2 (Non-CSE) C: "Being punched, being dragged through like woods and that by a group."

4.2. Context of the sexual offending

This part of the analysis related to the context within which the sexual offending took place. As in the previous section, there was little differentiating the CSE narratives and experiences from those of the Non-CSE, so only the exceptions will be reported. Figure 2 presents the themes that were developed. As can be seen, within the context of the sexual offending there are three main themes that capture the narratives and explanations of the context of *why* the offending took place, coupled with one main theme that explains the context of *how* the offending took place.

4.2.1 Explanations why

Culmination of dysfunctionalities

This theme represents the context of how chaotic the perpetrators explained their lives to be before and just as their offending took place. The perpetrators talked about how the time around their offending was a particularly difficult stressful period in their lives:

P6 (CSE) C: "I just hated my life."

P13 (CSE) P: "It was a bad, bad time."

P9 (Non-CSE) P: "That's when I felt on an all-time low."

There had been a culmination of several different factors within their lives which seemed to gather momentum before and during the time of their offending. The perpetrators had experienced different combinations (in types and amount) of factors, most of which were identified as individual dysfunctionalities in the previous section. They discussed issues such as a build-up of problems with drugs and alcohol, family stresses (particularly with their own children) and issues with debt and financial worry. Three factors were more prevalent across the narratives: work, build-up of mental health issues, and relationship problems.

Regarding their work environment, perpetrators said they had disliked their jobs, had not been satisfied with their jobs and, in particular, had been under stress in their jobs.

> **P1 (CSE) C:** "[Just prior to offending] It was a dark space….Work was extremely pressured… there was work… I'd been under or felt under extreme pressure from whether it's professional or particular emotionally… because I've had some
>
> fairly high-pressure jobs but I think the ways that I chose to deal with it weren't the best ways imaginable."

As identified in themes representing dysfunctional characteristics, another culmination had occurred in relation to mental health issues:

> **P1 (CSE) P:** "When I committed my second offence I was in pieces mentally and emotionally."
>
> **P9 (Non-CSE) P:** "I felt unstable, that's when I felt at an all-time low really, being back on benefits again and being, like, out of a job. I was feeling depressed, I was feeling like quite low."

Another issue concerned problems, which seemed to have grown and worsened, within intimate relationships. Participants discussed how they experienced a range of relationship difficulties in the time leading up to their offending: common features in their lives included a lack of intimate relationships, feeling alone, relationships breaking down, infidelity from partners, and arguments.

> **P11 (CSE) P:** "I was pretty much home alone… I didn't go out, I stopped going out. I wasn't having any kind of relationships, short or long, so going online seemed at the time obviously, the only way that I could get any release or get any interaction with people."
>
> **P2 (Non-CSE) P:** "I had a massive argument with my ex-girlfriend, the one that I've got a daughter with, she kicked me out and I just went to my brother's, and then it all happened from there."

A frequently occurring pattern involved a culmination of different dysfunctions experienced across a range of different internal and external factors, and not one static issue:

> Owing to the very nature of online abuse, its perpetrators felt that they were less likely to get caught.

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "Yeah, and then when I felt the relationship was going to break down, and my drug use was at its peak, my depression had kicked in, we were fighting loads, we weren't having sex because she had postnatal depression."

Justifiable behaviour

The majority of participants rationalised and justified their abuse in a bid to create a context within which they could continue their offending: they legitimised their offending and in effect gave themselves permission to carry on offending. Two of the CSE offenders discussing online images of children simply stated:

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "These girls were smiling, 'nothing's going on, they wouldn't do it if they didn't want to', so I would find justification to make it legitimate for me to do it."
>
> **P18 (CSE) P:** "I never had a thing for children but the imagery of them in a sexual position was arousing to me so I guess that's how I justified it."

One sentiment echoed throughout the narratives – which could perhaps represent a form of denial on the part of the offenders – was a sense that they were not causing any harm (e.g. P10 (CSE) P: "I'm not harming anyone"; P5 (CSE) C: "they're not being hurt, they're smiling"; P7 (CSE) C: "I didn't think I was doing any harm") so in effect there was no victim. This was particularly the case for the CSE perpetrators regarding their online offending: they commonly perceived that it was legitimate to view this material online, because they personally did not take or distribute the pictures and were not physically hurting anyone. In addition, both online and contact perpetrators created a scenario to legitimise their offending by explaining that their victims were compliant and willing and in effect knew what they were doing.

> **P14 (CSE) P:** "I mean, this boy was willing… he had a profile on Grindr as well, even though he was younger, and he knew what he was doing so it wasn't like we plucked."

> **P3 (Non-CSE) C:** "He [victim] actually turned round and said fuck me… he said 'I want you to have sex with me'."

Another way that the perpetrators legitimised their offending was to frame their behaviours and actions as being legal. Convincing themselves that what they were doing was not illegal added some legitimacy to it and provided justification.

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "I didn't think it was illegal that she'd sent, because I knew the law… These nudist websites, they're perfectly legitimate, perfectly legal, you can look at them."

> **P4 (Non-CSE) C:** "I wasn't sure about it being illegal, because I know the age of consent changes… but I do know that the age of consent is 14, but to legally have sex is 16. The legal age of consent, like I say, was 14, but I wasn't sure what it was to be convicted."

Won't get caught

Whilst this data set was qualitative and comprised relatively small numbers, it was observed through the narratives of the interviewees that the CSE and Non-CSE perpetrators held slightly different perceptions around the concept of not being caught. CSE offenders thought on the whole that, owing to the nature of their type of offending (i.e. generally more online), they would not get caught; the Non-CSE offenders tended to be more proactive in creating a situation so they were less likely to be caught.

There was clear evidence in the data that, owing to the very nature of online abuse, its perpetrators felt that they were less likely to get caught.

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "I'd looked at indecent images before in my life, never been arrested before... I thought, 'I've got away with this, that was a close call.' Yeah, I'd got away with it before. I thought, 'I'm not harming anyone, I'm not distributing images, I'm not printing them, I'm not saving them, I'm not getting a great big database of them.'"

> **P11 (CSE) P:** "The fact is there's so many people online, there's so many potential victims, there's so many potential perpetrators, that finding one needle in a haystack it feels almost sometimes, you know, how are they going to find me."

Additionally, these perpetrators believed that they could put strategies in place to remove any evidence, or believed that their online offending could not be proven.

> **P13 (CSE) P:** "I always cleared my phone, always deleted everything off my computer. I'd done computer training online, done my certificates, I know how to forensically wipe stuff so it can't be found."

> **P5 (CSE) C:** "For the online, for the, yeah, I guess after I got arrested and they told me that I'd, I did think in my head well hang on a minute how can they prove, unless they go and interview him because I could just say it was a bloke pretending to be a child."

Another way that the perpetrators believed that they would not be caught was to convince themselves that they were not actually doing anything wrong and therefore in effect there was nothing they could get caught for.

> **P5 (CSE) C:** "It didn't occur to me he would tell the police, I didn't think I was abusing him because I… he wants to masturbate, I want to masturbate, at least do it together."

Three Non-CSE perpetrators of contact offences reported having proactively created a situation which they believed would prevent them from being caught. In one case, the perpetrator had made sure that there was never anyone else around or involved who could have been a witness to the offence. Another had impressed on the victim not to tell others as this would mean the perpetrators would "get in to a lot of trouble" (P6 (Non-CSE) C). And the third explained how he used both fear and love to prevent the child he was abusing from telling anyone:

> **P6 (Non-CSE) C:** "I'd carry on doing it and then… I mean, with the boy, I used to cuddle him at the end and tell him… I told him I still loved him… But with the daughter, I'd obviously used the… again, fear, by telling her mum about money's been stolen… They were basically scared of me, in a way."

Sexually motivated

When discussing their offending, a consistent motivation given for this behaviour was that it was sexually driven. There were no discussions of financial motivations nor abusing with others, in gangs and groups or as part of grooming networks. It was simply stated by many of the perpetrators that their motivation was self-sexual gratification.

> **P16 (CSE) P:** "Well some of the victims I thought were quite cute or good looking. I mean the one – I mean the one that – the person I'm in for now, he's the one – he's one where I felt a proper sexual attraction."

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "The motivation was sexual gratification. Yes, instant gratification. I wanted to make myself feel better through sex."

4.2.2 Explanations how

Victim identification

In explaining how they identified or 'chose' their victims, the perpetrators took two distinct avenues, labelled 'Untargeted victims: Planned abuse' and 'Targeted victims: Planned abuse'.

Untargeted victims: Planned abuse

The majority of perpetrators explained that their victims were non-specific, untargeted and 'random':

> **P5 (CSE) C:** "I didn't target him, I just went in the [chat] room."

This comes with the caveat that often the offenders had been searching for children/young people. There was no indication that they had been looking for a particular age or other characteristic in terms of how the child/young person looked or behaved.

It appeared that the abuse itself had been a planned behaviour, so the perpetrators identified that they had been looking for some type of sexual exchange with the victims; however, the actual choice of victims had not been a premeditated choice of a specific, targeted person. Victims were generally not individuals who were known to the offenders or with whom there was a prior relationship, although this was not always the case.

> A smaller proportion of perpetrators had specifically chosen their victims and made a conscious premeditated victim choice.

The CSE perpetrators' victims found online had been untargeted because they were anonymous and unknown, contacted through the use of technology. While the aim had been to achieve some sort of sexual gratification with children, for the offender it had been irrelevant who that victim was, and it was never a case of a known, identified victim.

> **P10 (CSE) P:** "I was using the internet to make me feel better, to obtain sexual gratification… it was just random downloaded images… It was on my own, I would literally Google search and find images."

> **P11 (CSE) P:** "I've never met the victims. I would struggle to name any of them anyway. They're all online, all anonymous, I didn't know them."

Throughout the accounts, the perpetrators stated that the victim could have been anyone, and as such this had been a random choice on their behalf. However, their intention had been of a sexual nature.

> **P14 (CSE) P:** "Sexual gratification. No, purely, purely sexual gratification, that's all it was on both fronts… It was just random, totally random, totally random. I didn't even know his name to start with, and there were no phone numbers, it was just all on this chat-site, so it was just totally random."

In other instances involving contact offences, there had been a prior 'relationship' with the victims (e.g. son's friend, niece, stepchild) but the choice of who they abused was not premeditated, planned and organised. There did not appear to have been a process of engaging with the victim before the offence. The narratives read that the abuse had been planned, but the victim was selected by their accessibility.

> **P1 (CSE) C:** "I took the boys up some juice and some biscuits and decided at that instant that I was going to abuse my son's friend, which I did… There wasn't a reason. He was just there at the wrong time."

> **P2 (Non-CSE) C:** "No, it just happened – just happened, yeah, I didn't pick it, I didn't – it weren't that I thought in my mind I'm going to do – go there and abuse this person… I didn't plan it, if you know what I mean, I didn't – not like other people do, it takes planning to do. No, I didn't plan it."

The perpetrators were not suggesting that they had not meant or planned for the abuse or sexual act to happen, nor that it 'just happened'. Rather it was the context of who the victim was, as a result of the circumstance they found themselves in, that was not planned.

> **P4 (Non-CSE) C:** "I picked them because they [partner's children] were there… They… I could kind of… Easy targets. Yeah, basically, because they were there. It's sickly and this… the thought of actually doing it to my own daughter, because she was… It was wrong. I can't work that kind of logic out, that… I did it to them, but I didn't pick them specifically… I don't know."

Targeted victims: Planned abuse

A smaller proportion of perpetrators discussed how they had specifically chosen their victims and made a conscious, premeditated victim choice (i.e. targeted victim) of who they would abuse. In this case, their behaviours had amounted to grooming: a process where a perpetrator engages in specific behaviours – which may include giving gifts such as alcohol, cigarettes and money – to engage their chosen victim and build a 'relationship' with them in which abuse can eventually take place.

> **P13 (CSE) P:** "I saw him a couple of times near the shops after that, kept going in, buying him cigarettes, sometimes give him some of my own cigarettes. Because I found him attractive – I wanted to have sex with him… and fantasise about things in my head and masturbate and dream up different scenarios and stuff like that… I took him back to my flat on the sole purpose of basically to have sex with him."

> **P5 (CSE) C:** "But it was grooming… I knew what I was doing but that's where I started, it started with a boy… it was a slow process… Eventually I got into the family and I took loads of stuff to them, bought loads of stuff, which is grooming… I was giving them gifts… Yes, I wanted to sleep with them… well, with the boys, there were three boys."

The perpetrators had identified a specific victim or victims – a family of three young boys, 'friends' made online (through Facebook), a female friend's daughter or a neighbour's nephew, for example – and had then worked gradually to create and develop a relationship with them, online or in person.

> **P13 (CSE) P:** "She was 14. After a while we started swapping pictures [online through Facebook], and that was when… 'Yeah, you're not 19.' Then we both came clean, then we sent pictures of who we really were. At home, yeah. We started swapping messages and stuff, then it started getting a bit sexual."

> **P3 (Non-CSE) C:** "He actually used to look after his nephew and hence the reason how I come to meet the victim… I started looking after him [victim]… We got to know each other more and more as the weeks went by, and months went by, to the point where I was actually looking after the lad more than what the uncle was, and it just progressed from there."

5. Discussion

The qualitative analysis found no specific characteristics that differentiated CSE perpetrators from Non-CSE perpetrators. A common theme in the perpetrators' narratives was experiencing dysfunctionality in their lives, in relation to both their internal characteristics and external contextual factors. These are potential risk factors that could be associated with CSE and therefore warrant further exploration.

Very few functional or potential protective factors were evidenced in the accounts. This is clearly an area that needs to be examined and developed more fully.

When examining the context of the offending, a culmination of dysfunctionalities was identified as an explanation for this behaviour; but by justifying the abuse and maintaining the belief that they would not get caught, the perpetrators had been able to continue with their offending.

The perpetrators' main motivation for offending was sexual gratification and the satisfaction of their sexual needs. Within this data set there was no evidence of financial motivations.

Finally, it was explored how the perpetrators identified or 'chose' their victims. There were two distinct avenues that they took: targeting specific victims they knew; or choosing untargeted victims who they did not know and would never know, but were accessed via the internet. Whether targeted or not, the motivation was planned sexual abuse.

5.1. Applying an ecological model

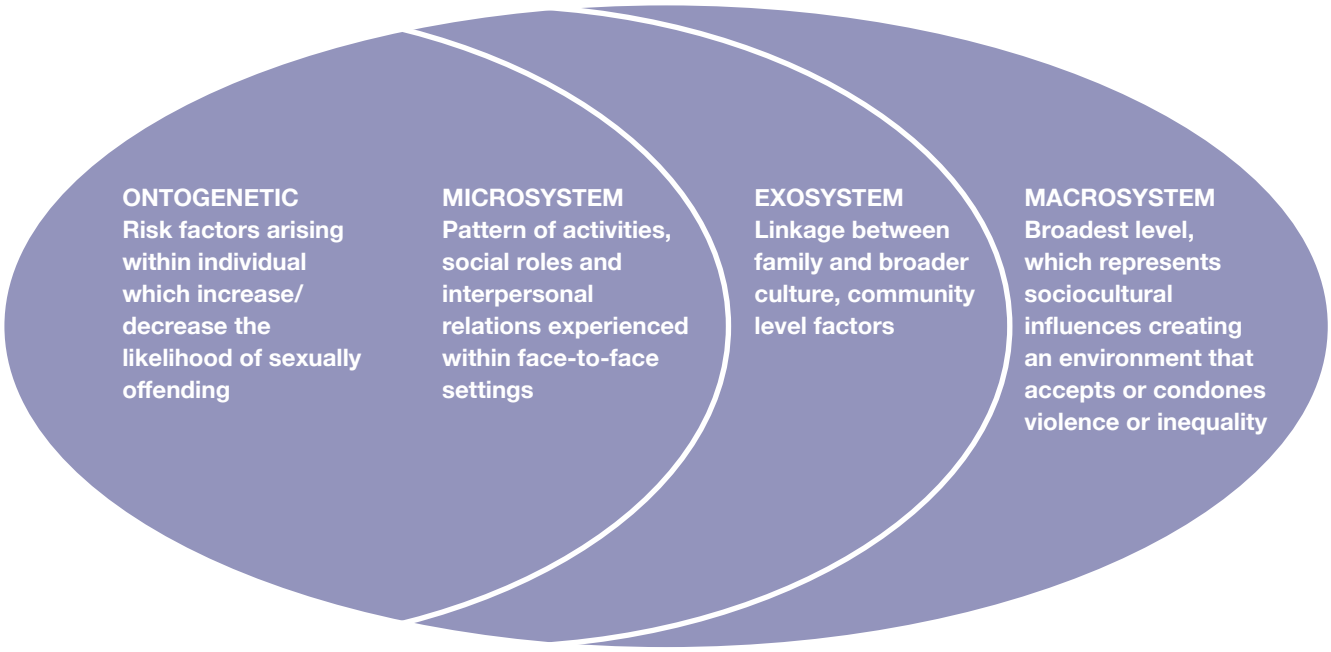
When the themes emerged from the data, it was identified that they could be viewed through a systems or ecological lens. This model was chosen because the participants in the face-to-face interviews had discussed the individual, family, external, environmental and contextual factors that they had felt were associated with their offending behaviours. They had talked about their individual characteristics and the multiple, interconnected environmental contexts that they had experienced, discussing a range of different levels that may be relevant in relation to their sexual offending. An ecological lens was therefore deemed appropriate, as this framework considers the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community and societal factors.

> Exposure to violence in multiple environments is another example of an exosystem-level risk factor.

The most widely cited ecological model is Bronfenbrenner (1979), which has been reinterpreted to structure risk factors for intimate partner violence and abuse (Bowen, 2011). This model could therefore provide a useful framework for understanding the characteristics and context in relation to CSE perpetration, through its assessment of risk and protective factors within multiple contexts. Using such a framework, we can understand the interplay between the individual, relationships, social, cultural and environmental factors that need to be considered both at each level and as an interaction across levels.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) initially identified three social contexts: the micro-, exo- and macro-systems. In a refinement of the model when applied to adult intimate partner violence, Dutton (1995) further specified the individual or ontogenetic system. See Figure 3 for a summary of the levels.

Figure 3. Ecological model framework for understanding the factors associated with child sexual exploitation



In relation to the ontogenetic system, the individual (internal) characteristics found to be relevant include factors such as mental health issues, self-esteem, deviant use of pornography, substance abuse and antisociality. Other factors that may also be relevant, but were not identified in the current data, include demographic information and offence history.

The microsystem is the immediate environment and the people – such as family members, partners and peers – with whom the individual interacts in face-to-face settings. From the current data set, examples were found in perpetrators' chaotic intimate relationships, poor relationships with fathers, negative dynamics seen between parents, absent peer relationships, bullying at school, and living with domestic and sexual violence and abuse. For some, close relationships with their mothers and strong friendship groups could be potential protective factors.

Regarding the exosystem, family structure has been identified as an exosystem risk factor; examples of this risk from the current data might include experiencing a single-parent family (identified by Connolly et al (2010) as a risk for perpetrators of intimate partner violence), absent fathers and/or several stepfathers. Exposure to violence in multiple environments is another example of an exosystem-level risk factor, and in the current data violence was said to have been perpetrated and experienced across several levels (e.g. parental domestic violence, violent and sexual abuse in the home, and peer violence and abuse).

The macrosystem reflects sociocultural influences including gender role norms and pro-violence societal norms. This element was not explored in the interviews undertaken, and certainly factors such as gender inequality, gender role norms and pro-violence societal norms may be of relevance, particularly given the violent and abusive environments that many of the participants experienced. Another factor that could be of relevance is pornography use and understanding whether this is part of a wider culture which creates a context in which it is acceptable to force sex on women and children. Connolly et al (2010) have identified media as a mechanism of transmitting cultural messages as a macrosystem factor (in relation to partner

violence); in our context, this may link with pornography use and the portrayal of women and children, but it was not specifically explored in the current study.

5.2. Alignment with findings from previous research

Characteristics of online CSE perpetrators

Some of the identified themes seem to align with the characteristics of CSE that have been examined in the limited literature to date on CSE perpetrator characteristics, particularly in relation to online CSE offenders; this is unsurprising given the high level of online sexual offending that was observed in the current group of interviewed CSE perpetrators. For example:

- The current study identified issues such as anxiety, stress, depression and suicidal thoughts as potential risk factors associated with CSE perpetration. Some but not all of these were at a diagnosed clinical level. What could not always be established was the temporal ordering of events in relation to the mental health issues described: a proportion of perpetrators did identify some of these issues as being present throughout childhood and before their offending, but others presented evidence suggesting the issues were a result of their offending.
- Gillespie at al (2018) identified that a high proportion of their sample – 92 users of child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) – were classified as severe or extremely severe relative to general population norms on depression, anxiety and stress, based on their scores on the widely used Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21). They also suggested that their CSEM users reported low levels of self-esteem (as was discussed in the accounts in the current study), although this was not ascertained through significance testing with norm or control group data.

"What could not always be established was the temporal ordering of events in relation to the mental health issues described."

- Briggs et al (2011) found that approximately 75% of their chat room offenders presented with mental health conditions, the most common of which were depression, adjustment disorders (e.g. depressed mood, anxiety and difficulty coping, loss of self-esteem and suicidal thoughts) and substance use disorders. However, they were measuring offenders' current mental health condition, so it was possible that the mental health issues arose because of the offending behaviour and were not a precursor to it. Such characteristics were evident in the current research, and were cited as being present before offending for some and and/or because of offending.

The findings suggest that more research is required to examine the temporal ordering of these issues, in order to establish whether they are distal or proximal factors, or those that occur because of offending behaviours.

Factors associated with persistent sexual offenders

Additionally, some findings in the current study also align with factors identified as being associated with persistent sexual offenders (i.e. not necessarily those identified as CSE offenders). For example, Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2005) undertook a meta-analysis and identified seven risk factors associated with sexual offending: these are listed and described in Table 2, alongside the themes identified in our perpetrator interviews that could represent some of these factors.

Table 2. Risk factors identified by Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2005), and associated themes found in the current study

Risk factor	Description	Theme
Sexual deviancy	Deviant sexual interests, such as children, rape, and other paraphilia	Individual characteristics: Dysfunctional
Antisocial orientation	Antisocial personality, antisocial traits (e.g. lifestyle instability, substance abuse, hostility), and a history of rule violation (e.g. childhood criminality, history of nonsexual crime, violation of conditional release)	Individual characteristics: Dysfunctional
Sexual attitudes	Tolerance of sexual crime, support for adult– child sex, and low sex knowledge	Explanations why: Justifiable behaviour
Intimacy deficits	Poor social skills, negative social influences, conflicts in intimate relationships, emotional identification with children, and loneliness	Relationships: Dysfunctional
Adverse childhood environment	Conflicts with and separation from parents, neglect, and physical and sexual abuse	Relationships: Dysfunctional Environment: Dysfunctional
General psychological problems	Internalization of psychological problems (e.g. anxiety and low self-esteem, as well as major mental illness)	Individual characteristics: Dysfunctional
Clinical presentation	Denial, minimization, lack of victim empathy, low motivation for treatment, and poor progress	Explanations why: Justifiable behaviour

> Some of the characteristics are like those found in other studies that have examined factors and motivations associated with CSE, and those that have examined CSA perpetrators.

Justifying behaviour

In relation to the context of the sexual offending, in the current data set it was found that the participants justified their offending behaviours to enable them to continue. This is consistent with other research that has specifically examined CSE perpetrators and identified evidence of cognitive distortions or permission-giving statements (Kettleborough and Merdian, 2017; Merdian et al, 2014). For example, Kettleborough and Merdian identified (through a survey of professionals) some permission-giving thoughts of offenders who had used/downloaded CSEM, including:

(i) Children as sexual beings (have the capacity to enter in to sexual relationship with an adult).

(ii) Uncontrollability of offending behaviour (offending because of factors beyond their control).

(iii) Denial of role in CSE (viewing CSE causes little harm to child as no sexual contact).

The perpetrators in the current study talked about their offending in terms of having a relationship (child as sexual being); said their offending was the result of a culmination of uncontrollable external and internal factors (uncontrollability of offending behaviour); and noted that they personally did not take or distribute the pictures, so they were not physically hurting anyone, and their victims were 'compliant' and 'willing' (denial of role in CSE).

Motivation for offending

In the current study, the motivation given for offending was purely sexually driven. In typology research that has examined CSE perpetrators, sexual and financial motivations seem to be the two common motivations (Burgess and Hartman, 2005; Elliott and Beech, 2009; Krone, 2004). Perpetrators of group and gang CSE or trafficking CSE did not form part of the sample recruited in the current study (owing to a lack of opportunity to recruit them; they were not specifically excluded). It is in these samples that other motivations might be more apparent, particularly in relation to financial exchanges.

Profiles and pathways

It appears that some of the characteristics identified in the current study are like those found in other studies that have examined individual and contextual factors and motivations associated with CSE, as well as those that have examined CSA perpetrators. It may be of interest to examine whether the offenders interviewed have specific offence profiles or pathways.

Hudson, Ward and McCormack (1999) identified eight pathways. It may be useful to examine whether the major pathways (e.g. Pathway 1: Positive affect – explicit plan – positive affect – mutuality – positive evaluation – persistence; or Pathway 8: Negative affect – implicit plan – negative affect – self-focused – negative evaluation – avoidance) are similar in this specific group of offenders, or whether they present with different pathways. In Pathway 8, for example, the predominant affect is negative throughout the offence process (perhaps reflected in the dysfunctionalities identified in the current research). In this pathway, child sexual offenders identify as feeling anxious, unhappy with life, depressed and lost, and the offending 'just happening'. Post-offence evaluations and future commitments were also negative, e.g. feeling disgusted. Some of these factors were observed in the current data, suggesting that such pathways perhaps warrant further exploration in CSE perpetrators.

5.3. Implications

It was difficult to identify specific characteristics of CSE perpetrators that would potentially be unique to this group. This may be because CSE offenders share similar characteristics with Non-CSE offenders; it could also be attributed to the difficulty in defining CSE. If CSE is too broad a term for its perpetrators to be classified as one group with specific characteristics, there may be a need to establish smaller groups or types (based on offending profile and context of offending) and look for similarities and differences within these. However, this is likely to be complicated given that offenders might correspond to multiple types (e.g. online, exchange of gifts and contact offending), thereby blurring the boundaries.

As there seem to be individual, relationships, social and environmental factors at interplay, more research using an ecological framework is required to explain why some individuals sexually exploit children. Researchers need to examine continuously how interaction between factors at multiple levels of the social ecology increases risk of this behaviour. Using this framework means that we need to examine:

- broad cultural/social factors, i.e. societal norms (macrosystem)
- the linkage between the family (family of origin, and current home life) and this broader culture, and the level of integration with the community (exosystem)
- social roles, interpersonal relations experienced, attitudes, attributes and behaviours of perpetrators and their families (microsystem)
- risk factors that arise from within the individual as a function of physiology, cognitions, predispositions, emotional responses and learned behavioural responses (ontogenetic).

There needs to be understanding of whether such factors are variable risk markers (which can be changed) or fixed risk markers – and whether they are causal risk factors (meaning that, when they are manipulated or changed, the risk of an outcome also changes). We also need to examine which factors precede and/or follow CSE perpetration, and researchers must identify protective factors within ecological contexts that can mitigate perpetration – e.g. resilience, positive intimate relationships, pro-social attitudes, high self-esteem and stable external environments. An ecological approach to understanding perpetration of CSE can be used as an assessment tool for identifying context-specific risk and protective factors, which can result in effective prevention and intervention strategies.

> It was difficult to identify specific characteristics of CSE perpetrators that would potentially be unique to this group.

More exploration is required into perpetrators' motivations to offend, as this evidence could also be used to inform treatment. Those who have sexual attraction to children and offend for sexual gratification are likely to have different treatment needs from those who are purely motivated by money. This links to examining offender pathways and understanding individuals' desires and goals in relation to offending. Very little research to date has explicitly examined the offender motivation behind CSE, meaning that there may be gaps in our knowledge which need to be filled if we are to intervene effectively with this population.

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