

Development of an offending typology of child sexual abuse

Summary briefing

June 2018

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) recognises that in order for children to live a life free of the threat and harm of sexual abuse, we must develop a better understanding of perpetration.

At present the ways in which we describe 'types' or 'models' of CSA offending are not consistent. They have largely been developed over time by professionals to help them make sense of what they see in the field. That is a valid response in the absence of anything else, but is not grounded in evidence.

Our initial scoping studies on perpetration highlighted the challenges this presents. A lack of shared definitions of the range of CSA stymies understanding, research, prevention and disruption.

The CSA Centre has commissioned the development, testing and application of a typology of CSA offending to address gaps in knowledge and inconsistent approaches to the nature of offending and its contexts. The project is being conducted by a team from Middlesex University and is due to last for 18 months. It will consist of three stages. We will be seeking to draw out emerging findings within the first year.

We envision the typology representing a Venn diagram rather than a traditional grid as it will highlight nuances such as interaction and overlaps between different offence types and variables within them. The findings of the project will be utilised to inform policy in relation to disruption and prevention, in addition to highlighting existing gaps in knowledge and informing resource allocation.

This work is funded and commissioned by the CSA Centre and will be delivered by Middlesex University.

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

The aim of the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) is to create a future where children are free from the threat and harm of sexual abuse by radically improving how we prevent and respond to the issue through really understanding its causes, scope, scale and impact.

We know a lot about the issue and have made significant progress in dealing with it, but there are still far too many gaps in our knowledge and understanding. The more we know, the better we can tackle an issue that affects children in all our communities. Working alongside researchers, policy makers and practitioners we are identifying and bridging gaps in evidence and knowledge and applying that learning to practice.

The Centre of Expertise on child sexual abuse is focused on building knowledge and understanding by:

- Collating and analysing existing research, policy, practice and the real experiences of those affected, and filling the gaps we identify with new research, insights and analysis.
- Using that evidence and insight to challenge and improve existing policy and practice, develop new approaches and increase everyone's knowledge and confidence to more effectively tackle the issue.

The CSA Centre is funded by the Home Office and hosted by Barnardo's, but operates independently.

Background to the project

At present the ways in which we describe 'types' or 'models' of CSA offending are not consistent. They have largely been developed over time by professionals to help them make sense of what they see in the field. That is a valid response in the absence of anything else, but is not grounded in evidence. Our initial scoping studies [looking at perpetration of CSA](#) highlighted the challenges this presents. A lack of shared definitions of the range of CSA stymies understanding, research, prevention and disruption.

Additionally, our [scale and nature report](#) highlighted important detail lacking from data, including demographic profiles of those who commit sexual abuse as well as the contextual information (e.g. online elements of contact abuse; relationship between perpetrator and victim; crimes committed by multiple perpetrators or against multiple victims). This seriously hinders our ability to answer questions about whether there is a particular issue with certain groups/whether we can compare between either types of offenders or types of offending.

The purpose and aims of the project

The project has been designed and commissioned to build a better understanding of the nature of child sexual abuse offending through the development, testing and application of a typology of CSA offending. The data-driven 'bottom-up' approach to this research seeks to remove all existing presumptions and assumptions about models of offending and also move away from considering 'offenders' to instead focus on 'offending' behaviour.

Through this approach, the typology will give us a consistent way of describing the ways and contexts in which children are sexually abused. For example, it will show, based on evidence, if 'organised exploitation' or 'grooming gangs' are a clearly defined type of offending, and if so, what the characteristics are and how these overlap with other CSA offending.

The overarching research questions for this study to address are:

- What are the types of CSA offending?
- What are the contexts within which these types of offending occur?
- How and to what extent do these types of offending and their contexts overlap, interact and coexist?

Who is delivering the project?

The contract went out to a full and open tender process and, following shortlisting and interviewing, a team from Middlesex University were selected to deliver the research.

The project will be delivered, in collaboration, by the Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies (CATs) and Forensic Psychological Services (FPS) at Middlesex University.

The team has worked with the wider CSA sector for more than two decades and has strong existing networks, through CATS and FPS, with police, health services, social services, prisons and third sector organisations across the UK. Research and practitioner training related to this work has been carried by the team across social, charity and voluntary services including CEOP, the Metropolitan Police, the NSPCC, the Ministry of Justice, the Children's Commissioner for England and the National Probation Service.

The project will be co-led by Dr Elena Martellozzo and Professor Julia Davidson and supported by Dr Daniela Lup and Professor Joanne Alder, who will advise on methodological approaches throughout the project. The team will also be supported by industry experts and engage throughout the process with a wide range of stakeholders.

Methodology

The project takes a grounded theory approach which aims to use the data to build new theory, rather than use the data to test existing theory. This process uses the data to build a picture, constantly checking and amending this picture as new data emerges. A total of 135 police case files and five voluntary sector case files will be reviewed.

The team will also conduct focus groups with practitioners working in the field who work with both victims and offenders. This will support us in understanding the applicability of the typology outside of the criminal justice lens.

We won't be interviewing perpetrators directly, but instead reviewing police case-files of sexual abuse cases against children. This will allow us to move away from pre-existing assumptions about those people who sexually abuse children and instead focus on the contexts in which sexual abuse happens and the behaviours and enablers that support it.

Findings will emerge through three different stages of the project:

- The first stage will produce an initial iteration of the CSA typology from police and voluntary sector case files.
- The second stage will test the accuracy of the CSA typology by reviewing further police case files and undertaking focus groups with practitioners in the field.
- The third stage will apply the 'types' of CSA offending to a large representative sample to better understand the scale and nature of CSA in England and Wales.

What will the typology show us?

Recognising the overlaps and fluidity of offending behaviour, we anticipate that the typology is likely to look more like a Venn diagram than a grid or fixed set of models, with certain behaviours, contexts and motivations likely to be present in more than one type of offending.

The typology will give us a consistent way of describing the ways and contexts in which children are sexually abused. For example, it will show, based on evidence, if 'organised exploitation' or 'grooming gangs' are a clearly defined type of offending, and if so, what the characteristics are and how these overlap with other CSA offending.

What are the limitations of the project?

As the project comes from police data, it will only develop a picture of the perpetration of those cases dealt with by the police that contain sufficient evidence for us to analyse. We will be addressing this limitation through our stakeholder engagement events (see stage two), which will aim to provide us with an indication of how well this represents the picture of those cases that may not reach the police.

What the project won't do

While we cannot be certain what the project will and won't tell us due to the iterative nature of the data collection, the project has not been designed to specifically look at:

- The motivations of those who commit sexual offences against children; we are not interviewing or working directly with those who have sexually abused children and therefore will be unable to collect any reliable information related to this.
- Profiling those who commit sexual offences against children; the project seeks to move away from offenders as individuals and towards offending as a set of behaviours within a context.
- Present a measure or further understanding of the scale of CSA; this project will only provide us with further information as to the nature of those offences brought to the attention of the police.

Contact details

For further information about this project please contact Polly Pascoe.

polly.pascoe@csacentre.org.uk