Boys Don’t Cry

Improving identification and disclosure of sexual exploitation among boys and young men trafficked to the UK

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Foreword

In recent years the scourges of human trafficking and child sexual exploitation have begun to be acknowledged, better understood and more widely responded to by the authorities. Their co-occurrence for some young women has been recognised, but little, if any, attention has been paid to the potential for trafficked boys and young men to be sexually exploited.

The resulting vulnerability of this group – because the possibility of sexual exploitation may not feature in many professionals’ thoughts, even when they are considering the likelihood that a boy may have been trafficked or are supporting him once this has been established – is particularly concerning. Not only does it constitute a failure to protect one of the most marginalised groups in our society, it also plays into the hands of those who seek to abuse children.

This research highlights the experiences of trafficked boys and young men and the approaches of practitioners supporting them, addressing key questions: What is known about the scale of sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men? Why do many frontline services not notice the indicators of sexual exploitation in this group? Why do boys not disclose their experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation? And, perhaps most importantly, what can be done to address this situation and improve the support put in place?

The report is timely, when the numbers of children on the move across Europe is increasing by the tens of thousands per year. The accounts shared in this report bring into sharp focus the life-changing nature of these experiences and, as with girls, the stories of boys must be heard to prevent them remaining alone to deal with their trauma.

All support organisations and policy makers must be alert to the sexual abuse and exploitation of trafficked boys and recognise their vital role in addressing this issue. The Boys Don’t Cry report by The Children’s Society should be welcomed as part of broader efforts to grapple with this complex and deeply disturbing problem of our time.

Philip Ishola
Independent Policy Advisor
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Knowledge and awareness of human trafficking has increased in recent years, prompting the Government to introduce a Modern Slavery Act, which received Royal Assent in March 2015, and was intended to drive a more effective response to modern slavery and human trafficking. Recognition of the scale of child trafficking into, as well as within the, UK has also grown as implementation of the National Referral Mechanism\(^1\) has revealed the numbers of children and young people being trafficked into the UK. At the same time – although as a separate development – there has been a burgeoning recognition of child sexual exploitation across the country with inquiries taking place in Rochdale, Rotherham, Oxford and other towns that have exposed the extent of a previously hidden crime. Anecdotally, professionals in the field of child trafficking have identified links between the two issues – including the movement of young people into the UK specifically for sexual exploitation, and the targeting of unaccompanied asylum seeking children who have been placed in local authority care for trafficking within the country for sexual exploitation.

Despite these developments – and an acknowledgement that these children are amongst the most vulnerable in the country\(^2\) – there remains a danger that attention, and action, will hone in on some aspects to the detriment of others. The focus for policy and practice around child sexual exploitation and trafficking has predominantly been on girls and young women. However, recent research\(^3\) and our practice experience has identified a need to look at how boys and young men are affected. This report specifically focusses on the needs of boys and young men who are trafficked into the UK, not those who are trafficked within the UK. The findings presented here will improve understanding of a complex and often obscured issue and can inform the work of those who support trafficked boys and young men.

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\(^1\) The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the framework set up for identifying victims of human trafficking and slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate protection and support.

\(^2\) Department for Education (2014)

\(^3\) McNaughton, Nicholls et al (2015)
Research aims and methods

The Children’s Society received funding from Comic Relief and the Samworth Foundation in 2013 to establish a pilot project to commence work in the London area with boys and young men trafficked into the UK (the Rise project – see Appendix One) and to undertake exploratory research. The original aims for the research were to:

- Find out more about the prevalence of sexual exploitation of boys and young men (up to the age of 25) who have been trafficked into the UK
- Identify the barriers to these boys and young men self-identifying as having been sexually exploited
- Consider how practitioners could better support disclosure of exploitation
- Discover how services could be made more accessible

The research methodology comprised:

- A review of available literature – including policy, legislation and published sources of data around human trafficking,4 as well as relevant research reports and online materials
- Semi-structured interviews (conducted face-to-face or by phone) with 22 professional stakeholders with particular experience related to child trafficking from agencies including social care, the police, the voluntary sector and from solicitors and barristers practising in this area
- A review of seven case studies from The Children’s Society case files of trafficked boys and young men who had experienced sexual exploitation
- Two interviews with trafficked young males who had experienced sexual exploitation

The research was undertaken by practitioners at the Rise project, supported by a steering group of professionals and researchers in the field and by The Children’s Society’s research team. The research was overseen by The Children’s Society’s research team and appropriate ethical standards were followed during the study – eg all participants were recruited via a careful process to ensure informed consent (and, for young people interviewed, their trusted project worker interviewed them directly on behalf of The Children’s Society and offered support before or after, as appropriate); data was kept securely and only accessible to the researchers on the project. No issues have been reported that could lead to the identification of an individual child.5

Structure of the report

The report consists of four main sections after this introduction. Chapter 2 explains the context for the research study with information on officially-recorded data on child trafficking and sexual exploitation, alongside a description of recent developments in the UK in policy, legislation and guidance around both child trafficking and sexual exploitation. Chapter 3 details evidence from the research on the scale and nature of sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men and their experiences as conveyed by the professionals interviewed for the study. Chapter 4 explores the multiple barriers to disclosure of sexual exploitation by trafficked young men. Chapter 5 describes key principles for effective practice to support disclosure and outlines additional contributory factors which could improve wider service provision for trafficked children. The report concludes with a discussion of the issues and key messages from the research and a set of recommendations for practitioners and policymakers.

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4 The literature review focussed specifically on human trafficking for sexual exploitation. The research literature around sexual exploitation was not extensively reviewed for this study due to restricted resources, but colleagues in research and policy teams at The Children’s Society have contributed their knowledge around this as appropriate.

5 The young men who took part were not service users of the Rise project, but had engaged with another specialist service who interviewed them directly.
Terms used in the report

A number of terms are used regularly in the report and it is important to explain at the outset how they are intended to be understood and interpreted by a reader.

- Child trafficking

The report uses the definition of child trafficking established by the United Nations (UN) Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. The protocol states:

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

The UN protocol explains how ‘consent’ to trafficking by an adult relates to whether there was coercion, fraud etc, but any child (a person below 18 years of age) cannot give consent to trafficking under any circumstances.

- Sexual exploitation

The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) defines sexual exploitation as follows:

‘Sexual exploitation shall mean the obtaining of financial or other benefits through the involvement of another person in prostitution, sexual servitude, or other kinds of sexual services, including pornographic acts or the production of pornographic materials.’

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) in UK policy and practice circles has been informed by a more detailed definition:

‘Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive “something” (eg food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child’s immediate recognition, for example..."
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being persuaded to post sexual images on the internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person’s limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability.

■ Smuggling
Smuggling is the facilitation of the illegal entry and movement of people across borders and involves explicit consent. A migrant who has been smuggled into a country is free to make their own choices on arrival in the country and is no longer tied to the smuggler.

■ Debt bondage
According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2004), debt bondage is:

‘Where the worker works to pay off a debt or loan, and is not paid for his or her services. The employer may provide food and accommodation at such inflated prices that the worker cannot escape the debt.’

Both these definitions are helpful in understanding the scope and meaning of sexual exploitation of children.

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Chapter 2: The context for the research

The scale of child trafficking, as officially monitored, has increased by 55% between 2012 and 2014 and the numbers of boys and young men trafficked has more than doubled in the same period – though the recorded levels are widely regarded as underestimating the issue. Cases of boys trafficked where there has been a disclosure of sexual exploitation form a small minority (around one in 20 in 2014) but this is likely to be due to the hidden nature of sexual exploitation – and an emphasis on protecting girls that has been influenced by a recognised link between females and trafficking for sexual exploitation, mirrored in the focus on girls within CSE policy and practice in the UK.

Policy, legislation and official guidance have increasingly acknowledged the existence of human trafficking – symbolised Modern Slavery Act, 2015 – and recognised that trafficked children’s particular needs should be better catered for within systems and support. There is also improved understanding and awareness of CSE in the UK as a result of a series of high profile cases and public inquiries and the introduction of new initiatives by Government to tackle the issue.

The scale of child trafficking

Human trafficking is a largely hidden and complex crime, now encompassed within current discourses and debates on ‘modern slavery’.11

It is widely acknowledged that available figures on trafficking are likely to underestimate its scale because:

- Victims tend to be controlled and hidden away
- They may not identify themselves as being victims
- Children in particular may not understand what has happened to them and indeed may trust or, in some instances, be related to their traffickers

and there is a commonly-held view that trafficking is principally an issue that affects adult females. However in its latest report in 2014, the UK Human Trafficking Centre identified 671 potential child victims of trafficking in the UK, and almost 50% (323) were male.

Figure One: National Referral Mechanism overall numbers of referrals for trafficking each year by gender for children under 18

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11 Modern Slavery Strategy (2014)
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Trafficking of boys and young men for sexual exploitation

The formal identification of sexual exploitation of young men who have been trafficked into the UK has only occurred on a small scale and in relatively recent years.

In 2012 the number of boys referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) who had disclosed that they had experienced sexual exploitation was 11. This rose to 16 the following year and in 2014 the same number of cases was reported. Earlier reporting had highlighted the prevalence of sexual exploitation amongst girls and young women – eg in 2007 the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) produced its first baseline assessment of the level of child trafficking in the UK, which stated that:

- There was more likely to be clear evidence that girls had been trafficked, and greater clarity around the type of exploitation that was involved (87% of girls were assessed as having the highest ‘probability’ for having been trafficked, despite the fact that of all the young people referred almost half – 42% – were boys).
- Amongst this group – girls likely to have been trafficked – 59 (65%) were known or suspected as having been trafficked specifically for sexual exploitation.
- For the majority of boys – 128 (92%) in the dataset – the nature of exploitation was unknown.

As a result, CEOP suggested that there should be ‘more serious concern for girls than for boys’. At the same time CEOP noted that boys may have been smuggled into the UK rather than trafficked, making it more challenging to identify them as victims, and that the degree of uncertainty around types of exploitation of boys could merely indicate that it is harder to identify this for a boy than for a girl.

Higher reported rates of trafficking and sexual exploitation amongst girls have meant that research in this area has tended to focus on females, but in 2009 an NSPCC report stated that ‘it is recognised that boys and young men were vulnerable to being trafficked from abroad into the UK’, and the authors went on to say that:

‘Different forms of trafficking can be hidden under the dominant image of a girl or young woman trafficked for sexual exploitation… Practitioners expressed concerns that this may overshadow awareness of trafficking for other forms of exploitation, including benefit fraud, forced marriage, domestic servitude, work in cannabis factories or nail parlours, as well as masking the trafficking of boys and young men.’

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12 CEOP (2007) A Scoping Project on Child Trafficking in the UK
13 Friedman and Willis (2013)
14 Pearce et al (2009) Breaking the Wall of Silence
Child sexual exploitation of boys and young men

In the UK, despite an increasing focus on child sexual exploitation within child protection and crime prevention, particularly following the cases in Rochdale, Rotherham and Oxford, the focus has remained primarily on the risk to girls – paralleling the invisibility of male victims among trafficked children.

The 2009 NSPCC report also acknowledged that whilst 'there is a developing awareness of the needs of boys and young men...most services for sexually exploited children and young people tend to work with girls and young women'.

A recent Barnardo’s study explored the characteristics of service users of specialist CSE services, reporting that from a sample of over 9,000 service users a third were male and that:

- ‘Males identified by services as being “at risk” of child sexual exploitation tended to be slightly younger than females.’
- ‘Males who presented to services and were identified as being “at risk” of child sexual exploitation were more likely than females to have a disability.’
- ‘There is a complex relationship between gender, patterns of youth offending and risk of child sexual exploitation.’

There may be lessons from the developing body of research around child sexual exploitation for direct work with trafficked young men who are sexually exploited (e.g. the Office of the Children’s Commissioner in England’s research which proposed the ‘See Me, Hear Me’ framework for interventions).

Current Policy and Guidance

Human Trafficking

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings came into force in the UK in April 2009. It provided a framework of obligations that the UK is obliged to comply with and is inspected on. The UK also opted into the European Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting victims of human trafficking in October 2011.

Subsequently there has been increased activity to bring UK legislation into line with the provisions in the directive. A Modern Slavery Minister was appointed for the first time in 2014 and the Modern Slavery Act became law in 2015, bringing together all trafficking-related legislation in England and Wales and – along with Northern Ireland’s Act – was the first in Europe. The Act introduced a number of positive provisions for children, enabling a pilot scheme to deploy child trafficking advocates across the country. Child trafficking advocates were appointed to represent or support the child in negotiations with local authorities and services and had legal powers to instruct a solicitor to act on a trafficked child’s interests in any proceedings.

The Act does not include provision for a separate ‘child exploitation’ or ‘child trafficking’ offence, but it states that authorities must give regard to the vulnerability of child victims and makes clear that ‘alleged’ consent to exploitation should not be used against a child involved in legal proceedings. The Act has also introduced a statutory defence for child victims of trafficking who are forced to commit crimes (though it does not provide protection from prosecution for trafficked children which would be required to comply with international and European law). An independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner has also been put in place, with the

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15 Cockbain, Brayley and Ashby (2014)
16 Lillywhite and Skidmore (2006); Cockbain, Brayley and Ashby (2014)
17 McNaughton, Nicholls et al (2014)
18 Berelowitz et al (2013)
role of ensuring that modern slavery issues are tackled in a coordinated and effective manner across the UK.

The Department for Education and the Home Office published statutory guidance on supporting trafficked and unaccompanied children for the first time in 2014. The guidance sets out the steps local authorities should take to plan for the provision of support for looked-after children who are unaccompanied asylum seeking children and child victims of trafficking.

2014 also saw the publication of an independent review into the NRM. The review proposed a number of changes, replacing the Home Office’s decision-making responsibility for deciding on trafficked status with nine regional multi-disciplinary panels who will henceforth adopt this role.

Child sexual exploitation

The increasing official acknowledgement of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in recent years has seen high profile inquiries into the events in a number of areas – Derby, Rochdale, Oxford and most recently Rotherham, with the publication of the Jay Report – and the activities of individuals (e.g., Jimmy Savile) and of groups where systematic sexual exploitation may exist (the Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s work on groups and gangs).

Government responded in 2013 with the inception of a cross-departmental group of experts and policy-makers – the Sexual Violence against Children and Vulnerable People national group – brought together to review learning and develop an action plan focused on key themes of prevention, culture change, supporting victims, effective targeting of offenders, protecting those in care of the state and addressing sexual abuse through the use of social media. One impact of the action plan has been to change Crown Prosecution Service guidance on safeguarding children as victims and witnesses, prompting a greater focus on evidence of crimes committed and less focus on the character of victims.

New measures to address child sexual exploitation more effectively were also introduced in Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation – the Government’s response to the Rotherham inquiry – launched in March 2015. This included a commitment to a new taskforce and centre of expertise to improve coordinated responses to CSE.

Legislative changes have been made through the Serious Crime Act 2015 to replace references in the earlier Sexual Offences Act 2003 to ‘prostitution’ with ‘child sexual exploitation’ for cases involving children under the age of 18. And a National Policing Plan on tackling child sexual exploitation – instituted by the Association of Chief Police Officers in 2012 – aims to ensure that police forces across the country prioritise responses to child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation.
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Chapter 3: Trafficked boys’ and young men’s experiences of sexual exploitation

This research revealed much about the degree to which sexual exploitation now features in the experiences that young people suffer at the hands of their traffickers and others. The scale and nature of sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men has begun to be revealed to some professionals who have become aware of and increasingly encounter it in their work with trafficked young males. Many think that a proportion of trafficked boys have been subject to sexual exploitation during their journeys as part of the wider abuse used by traffickers to dehumanise and enforce control over them. Once in the UK, sexual exploitation of boys is likely to be embedded within multiple forms of exploitation, which can obscure its existence from the authorities. The criminalisation of trafficked boys – for activities they have been forced to undertake as part of their exploitation – can also shift the focus of interventions away from inquiry into potential trafficking or sexual exploitation. For those trafficked boys who experience it, sexual exploitation can also be an extreme form of ongoing repression and control employed by traffickers to prevent escape or detection.

The hidden scale and nature of sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men

The professionals interviewed for the research had worked directly with only small numbers of young men who had disclosed that they had been trafficked for sexual exploitation – though many felt that this was more because of reticence to disclose rather than because others in their caseloads had not been sexually exploited:

‘I suspect that it is probably higher from young men but it can be harder to identify them. When you think of CSE, you think of girls, not young men.’

Police Officer

‘With boys, it’s much, much more difficult to get any information in relation to sexual assaults on them. Particularly for boys from other continents like Africa and Asia, it is very difficult to talk about any kind of sexual assault on them.’

Police Officer

The young men and boys who had disclosed their experiences had different backgrounds and stories. Some had been sexually exploited in their home country, others along the journey and some whilst in the UK (or a combination of all three).

All had been vulnerable in some way in their home country prior to being trafficked – this might have been for a variety of reasons including financial issues, being a member of a particular social group, or because they had a physical or learning disability. Most of the interviewees agreed that marginalised and isolated young people would have been more likely to be targeted for sexual exploitation by trafficking networks.
Exploitation along the journey

Many of the professionals interviewed said that they felt that trafficked children were particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and that, even when they were not specifically being trafficked to the UK with a view to sexual exploitation when they arrived, many were likely to have had this experience at some point in their trafficking journey:

‘These sorts of networks and journeys, they are by the nature of it criminal underground and there are some unpleasant people involved in that and these [young people] are very helpless, very vulnerable people with very little agency when they’re en route, so people will take advantage of them. People will think, “Yeah I can abuse that child, I can rape that child – who’s going to do anything?”.’

Director of Trafficking Project

Several interviewees also felt that all separated children, not just those who had been trafficked, are similarly vulnerable to sexual exploitation during their journeys:

‘Any young people on the move who have come from traumatised and brutalised backgrounds, and are reliant on adults controlling them, and where there is nobody to protect them, are susceptible to exploitations and forms of particular abuse.’

Child Trafficking Subject Specialist

Practitioners warned against the common misconception that movement and exploitation are two separate events. They explained that, because of how highly vulnerable trafficked young people are, they have often been exploited along the journey at the hands of strangers, as well as their traffickers.

‘Almost invariably they came here with the promise of education or work. Almost always [there has been] multiple exploitation en route and here. Usually [they have been] exploited throughout the journey and then moved around in the UK...Traffickers but also strangers carry out sexual abuse.’

Solicitor

This is a complicating factor in the identification of victims as well as in the prosecution of traffickers, as police investigations are only opened for crimes committed in the UK.
Multiple forms of exploitation – a common experience

The majority of professionals interviewed agreed that, in their experience, sexual exploitation of boys rarely happens as the only form of exploitation:

‘One thing they have in common is that they have been victims of multiple exploitation, not only sexual exploitation.’

Voluntary Sector Caseworker

Interviewees explained that boys were seen as being more versatile by traffickers, able to be exploited in a variety of settings, be it through forced labour, forced criminality or domestic servitude. Sexual exploitation was sometimes regarded by traffickers as an additional way to gain profit by maximising the income they could make out of their victims:

‘I can’t actually think of a case where the story is very clearly [told], this person was brought in and then put into this brothel or put into this escort agency or put into this flat. You very rarely see that, what you see much more is a very complicated situation where maybe someone who’s been brought in for labour exploitation, is working on a farm or in a shop or in a factory, and is then being regularly abused and assaulted by the traffickers, almost as a sort of additional bonus if you want.’

Trafficking Project Director

Several of the case studies analysed for the research evidenced how boys and young men initially presented as having experienced labour exploitation or forced criminality and it was not until months later, once they had established a trusting relationship with a worker, that they disclosed sexual exploitation. Similarly, within legal proceedings, early disclosure of sexual exploitation was rare, as a barrister explained:

‘We had identified the exploitation as labour exploitation because that tends to be disclosed first by the client and then, over the course of pre-litigation and getting experts’ reports, that’s when a lot of the sexual exploitation is disclosed.’
Criminalisation of potential victims of trafficking

Practitioners who were interviewed highlighted that often trafficked boys were compelled to take part in illegal activities and, as a result, many became criminalised through the exploitation they experienced and were drawn to the attention of the authorities via this route. Over time this has had the wider effect of prejudicing the views of workers in the criminal justice system – because they are likely to focus on the presenting issue of offending rather than consider the possibility that a young male who has been arrested may have been trafficked and coerced into breaking the law:

‘Boys are more looked upon as perpetrators, particularly if they are already in the youth justice system and have committed an offence.’

Police Officer

Examples given by other professionals included young Vietnamese males trafficked for cannabis cultivation27 who had been prosecuted, and a newly-emerging trend of North African boys being trafficked for petty theft and street crime. These issues added to the difficulties that young men were experiencing and served to take the focus of an intervention away from considering sexual exploitation towards a criminal justice response.

Sexual exploitation used as a control mechanism

Some professionals who were interviewed noted how, even where sexual exploitation had not been the main reason for the trafficking of boys or young men, it was often used by traffickers as a form of control. An example of this was highlighted by a barrister who had worked on a number of recent cases where this had happened:

‘They were all domestic servitude cases and they were sexually exploited as a mechanism of control so that they don’t run away or they don’t disclose.’

And another barrister related a case where sexual exploitation had featured as a means of control:

‘One boy who was kept as a domestic slave disclosed he had had chillies inserted in his foreskin to punish him.’

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27 Practitioners said they had seen increasing numbers of young men trafficked for this form of exploitation in the last year or two.
Transgender young people

Some of the professionals who were interviewed noted the importance of considering young people who self-identify as being transgender (male to female) in work around sexual exploitation of trafficked young men:

‘We have had a few cases of Thai transgender young people being bought over to work in nail bars but once here they have been sexually exploited in brothels. They were as young as 17 and up to the age of 22–23. One or two have admitted they were working already in their home country providing sexual services, but three of them alleged that they didn’t and they came to the UK purely to work in nail bars and ended up being exploited in brothels. They were picked up after police and immigration visits to brothels and ended up in immigration detention or prison.’

Police Officer

Information on transgender young people who have been trafficked is scarce. The NRM statistics have only recently included a category for transgender victims, reporting two cases of ‘transgender’ trafficking and exploitation in 2014. Although transgender young people may not identify as being male, or may be in transition, they may still have been classified as male in the UK.

‘We’re seeing perhaps very slightly increasing numbers. It’s not huge numbers – so it’s hard to draw any inferences from it – but we’re seeing quite a few transgender cases now and they’re very often quite young and they’re [often from] Vietnam, Thailand, Laos. Certainly whatever the agency [that refers them] they’re very often associated with the sex industry and quite often it’s difficult to work out the degree of choice there – but there are some quite appalling stories emerging from that group of rape and other lesser assaults.’

Trafficking Project Director
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Chapter 4: Barriers to disclosure of sexual exploitation

A key aim for the research was to explore the barriers that exist to trafficked boys and young men disclosing experiences of sexual exploitation.

The primary source of information for this from the study was from the interviews with professional stakeholders. Interviewees – including those who managed long-term casework with trafficked young men – had not often encountered explicit disclosure during their work, but they expressed a consensus that there were many significant barriers to this happening. They described two types of barrier: those around the norms and cultural values which inform the choices made by individual young men, and those which are due to systemic issues (eg poor knowledge and awareness among professionals).

This section of the report details the range of barriers that interviewees described which can limit the chances of a young man electing to disclose, or can inhibit professionals in picking up on the signs of sexual exploitation or considering it to be appropriate to pursue a disclosure.

**Barriers due to norms and cultural values**

- **Masculinity and victimisation:**
  - Cultural challenges to disclosure

Research has suggested that adult men can be reluctant to be identified as ‘victims’, avoiding support centres and services. A recurrent theme from the interviews conducted with professionals for this study was the additional stigma in most cultures attached to sexual violence towards males. For example, one professional suggested that for males the ‘fear of judgment is greater than it is for girls’ and this was especially true for young males for whom religion formed an important part of their identity:

  ‘For young men, there is more sense of shame, their manhood is diminished – and if they are from a more religious background, it could feel like it has gone against all their religious beliefs.’

  Trafficing Practitioner

Some professionals also stated that the connotations of the term ‘victim’ may also impact on a young man’s willingness to disclose, because of the implication that a victim is weak and vulnerable – qualities that run counter to the stereotype of a masculine male who can protect himself:

  ‘For boys, it’s harder to admit that they didn’t have a choice. For women it might be more acceptable than for a boy to admit they were forced to do something against their will. It’s a lot more difficult for boys to do, particularly those who have come from more conservative backgrounds.’

  Trafficing Practitioner

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Rebecca Surtees (2008) Trafficking of men – a trend less considered: the cases of Belarus and Ukraine. IOM Global Database Thematic Research Series.
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Another theory that interviewees put forward was that, for some young men, denial of sexual exploitation was a strategy they employed in order to cope with the trauma they experienced:

‘With boys, there is more of an urge to overcome it and move on...they might feel like the less they talk about it, the more it will go away.’

Trafficking Practitioner

One interviewee contrasted this challenge to male identity with her work with a transgender young person who felt less constrained by gender. The young person, although born a boy, no longer identified as male and felt freer to disclose sexual exploitation:

‘One transgender young person I work with has a female alter-ego and I think that helps her to talk about it. Her identity as a cross-dressing dancer makes it easier to talk about what happened.’

Trafficking Practitioner

Sex and sexuality

Many of the professionals who were interviewed described how cultural taboos around sex and sexuality could be barriers to disclosure of exploitation:

‘Where these young people come from, it’s just a no-no. You don’t even talk about sex in some of these countries.’

Child Trafficking Specialist

Most of the situations discussed in the interviews and described in the case studies had involved male on male rape - and this meant that, especially for boys who came from countries where homosexuality was proscribed, there were particularly complex, deep-rooted issues which could hinder the acknowledgment of exploitation and prevent a young man from disclosing. Several interviewees, spoke about how sexual exploitation could lead to a trafficked young man questioning his sexual orientation:

‘For boys it’s more complicated because of the cultural perceptions. They might feel stigmatised and might think that because they have had sex with a man then they are gay.’

Trafficking Caseworker

‘There is often confusion and stigma ie “if I have been raped by a man that must mean I am gay”. That can be quite difficult for young men.’

Solicitor

And there was a general feeling amongst interviewees that the severe trauma that sexual exploitation could cause – by destroying an intimate part of a young man’s identity – was a particularly significant barrier to disclosure.

‘Sexual abuse and exploitation damage you much more than other forms of exploitation as they can affect you and stay with you for the rest of your life, particularly in terms of building relationships.’

Social Worker
Normalisation

Another barrier to disclosure was that some young people felt that the exploitation was just part of their journey – something they had to put up with and accept in order to access a better life.

‘With some of them, they think they’re coming here to work, they haven’t got any sort of idea what the work might be and then it’s really awful, they think maybe this is what has to happen before it gets good. They say “we thought we have to do this bit first and then the better life comes, it’s just something you have to get through before the benefits happen”.

Child Trafficking Subject Specialist

One interviewee emphasised how this perception was not only because of their self-perception as migrants, but sometimes had already become well-established in their country of origin due to their background:

‘There are really poor levels of self-esteem and confidence and some of that also is cultural, particularly for young people from India. They’ll look at you and say “well this is what my caste does, this is my position in society and it’s right that these powerful, you know, people, abuse me”. Some people will sort of look at you blankly and say “Well, this is what I deserve; this is my role in life, why would you think there’s anything wrong with the way I’m being treated? It’s what I deserve”.

Trafficking Project Director

Responsibilities towards family

Interviewees also stressed the constraints on disclosure that a young man might feel because of factors related to home, or how he had come to travel to the UK in the first place. Some professionals highlighted the potential relevance of family expectations, or of danger to the family of origin, when speaking about barriers to disclosure.

‘For trafficked young people, workers need to be aware of cultural differences, but also about ongoing threats to people who are not in this country – if a child’s family are being threatened.’

Refugee Charity Manager
Others spoke about the possibility of ‘debt bondage’\(^{29}\) as a reason why a young person may hesitate to disclose exploitation:

‘Another group of people would be aware that they were coerced in one way, shape or form and that sometimes that bondage is a factor in that. Very often with Asian people that we’ve seen, it’ll be more than one person who’s paid the fee to get them across, so it may be that they feel responsible for a whole family or a whole village that’s paid for them to be moved across.’

\textit{Trafficking Project Director}

\section*{Institutional barriers to disclosure}

Interviewees identified a range of institutional barriers to the identification of sexual exploitation of boys and young men, or to professionals seeking disclosures. Some of these barriers were said to be located in attitudes and lack of knowledge and understanding, others were related to institutional cultures, lack of adequate resources, or other systemic issues.

\subsection*{Systemic issues}

A police officer who was interviewed noted how the overall nature of the system – with its focus on immigration issues in the cases of children who have been trafficked – alongside the processes in the current NRM, work against identification of sexual exploitation, particularly when it is one of several forms of exploitation:

‘It is very difficult to establish that at the moment with the way the system is set up. The disclosure of those issues is far easier to analyse and gauge if there are no immigration issues as opposed to when there are.’

\textit{Police Officer}

Interviewees for the research identified many potential barriers to disclosure of sexual exploitation by trafficked boys and young men. These included barriers associated with the norms and cultural values that the young men had (eg those related to masculinity, victim status and homophobia), systemic barriers in the ways agencies operate, or among professionals (eg poor knowledge of indicators of sexual exploitation, or brief timeframes for interventions), and complications around how the gender of a professional may impact on the likelihood of young males being willing to disclose.

\(^{29}\) See definition on p.4
Gendered expectations about the context for sexual exploitation

A number of interviewees asserted that professionals were unlikely to consider the possibility that a male had been sexually exploited. As one explained:

‘That sense of the young person as a young man who may have been exploited just hasn’t been explored or questioned as much as it would have been if they were a young woman. It’s due to lack of professional knowledge and assumptions that it happens to young women more than it happens to young men.’

Social Worker

It was also suggested that professionals may be hamstrung in their ability to identify sexual exploitation of young males because they anticipate a similar set of circumstances to the ones they expected when assessing young females:

‘With the girls, you often had an inkling: for example, their behaviour might come across as sexually inappropriate or they would have very blurred boundaries. With boys, there was very little indication until the actual information came out.’

Migrant Children Subject Specialist

Or by a belief that males are more resilient:

‘There is an assumption that boys are less vulnerable than girls and these assumptions about boys are often a barrier to them getting the actual support that they need, or to assist them to fully disclose their circumstances.’

Barrister

An immigration barrister suggested that a lack of insight, and a gender bias in assessing cases, had been common amongst legal practitioners:
‘With the boys that I’ve worked with in this context, the disclosure of the sexual exploitation has come via getting medical reports and psychiatric reports on the harm to them in terms of their domestic servitude etc and through that and through the psychiatrist they’ve disclosed the sexual exploitation. It’s only over the last few cases I’ve done that I’m starting to ask the questions to my solicitors [such as] “Have you asked him the context in which he was controlled?” and “What the relationship was with the family?”. so now we’re starting to ask these questions when we get these clients, so we’re much more aware of it ourselves.’

This highlights the importance of asking further questions when conducting assessments and when gathering evidence with boys and young men, to help unpick the details of their experiences and to support young people with wanting to disclose further information.

- **Lack of knowledge amongst professionals of signs/indicators of sexual exploitation**

Closely allied to the issue discussed in the previous section, many interviewees acknowledged that there was poor understanding of possible indicators of child sexual exploitation amongst workers in the field of child trafficking:

‘Professionals need to look at cases in more detail. [I had] one example of a young person who had been brought over to the UK by his “boyfriend”, but none of the professionals had asked what the age difference was, or questioned whether it had been an appropriate relationship.’

Migrant Children Subject Specialist

It was also suggested that the National Referral Mechanism checklist of potential trafficking indicators – which was set up to help professionals identify potential victims – was not conducive to identifying trafficked young people:

‘The referral criteria for the NRM doesn’t automatically make you look for the right flags, as young people don’t always behave that way.’

Migrant Children Subject Specialist

Many of the indicators flagged in the NRM checklist for sexual exploitation are focussed on girls and women and link to behaviours associated with ongoing exploitation – failing to acknowledge the differences for boys and young men, or to identify how the trauma of past abuse may impact on current behaviour.

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Some interviewees who had worked with trafficked young men for many years were conscious that they themselves had missed signs of sexual exploitation:

‘Professionals need to talk about their assumptions about what boys and young people will be like, but you need to be aware that things are more complex than they are. With boys, it just never crossed my mind about sexual exploitation.’

Migrant Children Subject Specialist

One practitioner felt that sometimes the issue was not clear cut and that boys and young men did not ‘always fit into the neat narrative of what we all imagine is a victim of sex trafficking’, explaining that:

‘When I think of sexual exploitation and victims of trafficking, I see something specific and I didn’t always pick up on cues and indicators. It’s not quite crystal clear, particularly when it’s been the medium that has got them into the UK. It’s not always so extreme. There are some cases where it’s easier to pick up on the trafficking element, but not all.’

Migrant Children Subject Specialist

A number of interviewees highlighted the importance of raising awareness of the issue by investing in training for frontline staff and managers to improve their understanding of the situations faced by trafficked boys and young men – including the likelihood of sexual exploitation – in order to recognise indicators much earlier on and provide better support.

- Timescale in work with boys and young men

Some professionals described how, in their experience, male victims of sexual exploitation had tended to be more reluctant to provide a full narrative compared to females and, when they did, this normally came at a much later stage in the relationship with a worker. Interviewees also said that young men’s initial disclosures most often only came after long-term support. Two specialist trafficking practitioners talked about how, in their experience, the majority of girls would disclose sexual exploitation relatively early in their work with them – in contrast to boys, as one of them explained:
'With the boys I am working with at the moment, two out of four have disclosed sexual exploitation and two have not disclosed at all, but indicators were picked up by me and other professionals involved.'

* Trafficking Project Worker

A police officer related similar experiences working with trafficked boys and highlighted the need in some cases for long-term relationships to facilitate disclosure:

‘Those who were in detention centres disclosed more quickly, but the young African boy didn’t disclose ‘til further down the line when he made a good rapport with two investigating officers.’

It was also pointed out by some of the interviewees that young men may be more likely to disclose to someone they have more regular, stable contact with over a long period than a worker who they see from time to time:

‘One eventually disclosed sexual exploitation to his foster carer after seven or eight months. The reason why he disclosed to the foster carer is that he felt safe and he was living with her 24/7 and felt he could trust her.’

* Trafficking Project Worker

Some interviewees highlighted that high caseloads and staff turnover could mean that practitioners do not always have the capacity to spend time with a young person, build up a relationship and offer long-term support. Young people are often passed from team to team and struggle to build up a meaningful and trusting relationship with the professionals in their lives. Practitioners need to be mindful of the time it will take young people – particularly boys and young men – to build trust, engage with professionals and feel able to disclose sensitive information.

■ The ‘culture of disbelief’ within the immigration and asylum system

Interviewees expressed concerns that a ‘culture of disbelief’ of young people who may have been trafficked – which manifests in the attitudes and actions of workers, but also in the systems they are obliged to operate – acts as a significant barrier to the prospect of young people disclosing sexual exploitation.

‘The general culture of disbelief is something that permeates lots of different organisations, especially social services, even more than the Home Office. The attitude, the kind of questions, the tone of voice, are often to try and catch people out. It’s really shocking. Young people feel massively alienated.’

* Trafficked Young Person’s Adviser
Some of the elements they mentioned included asylum interviews, age assessments and immigration and criminal tribunals.

‘Age assessments are horrendous. The whole process should be reviewed. Most local authorities don’t give young people the benefit of the doubt – often young people feel disbelieved and that does not facilitate disclosure.’

_Trafficking Project Worker_

‘Most of the time social workers take for granted that the first statement is the real one. They do not take into account complexities in trafficking cases eg control, background, culture. So if a young person gives a different version of their story at a later stage, they are very quick to point out inconsistencies without investigating reasons. This is due to lack of understanding and training. They are quick to label young people who have troubles with the law as “difficult”.’

_Trafficking Practitioner_

Young people may become more reluctant to disclose further information about their experiences if they feel disbelieved from the outset and this continues throughout the asylum process. This process can take many months and some young people will have been through numerous assessments, interviews with the Home Office as well as their immigration solicitor, and in some cases will be required to go to court to appeal the decision if their asylum is refused. Having to prove their story to countless professionals over a long period of time is not conducive to a trusting environment where young people want to disclose more sensitive information about their lives.
- **Insensitivity in the legal process**

Interviewees highlighted how aspects of the legal process were conducted in ways that could inhibit disclosure:

‘In immigration tribunals, the Home Office does seem to ask very inappropriate questions about the details of the sexual exploitation, to the point of it being extremely uncomfortable and extremely insensitive in terms of the details of how the child was exploited.’

_Barrister_

It was suggested that the approach taken in the early stages of a young person’s pathway through the system was too insensitive and confrontational, and failed to adequately facilitate opportunities to disclose:

‘Before we even get to the courts, part of the problem is these issues aren’t really spotted – at the point when, for example, they claim asylum and they undergo their full asylum interview, because at that point they may have not disclosed properly and sometimes it puts lawyers in a very difficult position... the Home Office questioning of these young people can be quite horrendous in the context of that initial asylum interview (too) because the detailed facts aren’t there yet, and it’s through these interviews that often young people disclose indicators of it, but in a way that’s not asked in a sensitive context and I think that’s quite worrying really.’

_Barrister_

Some interviewees also felt that too much of the legal process is focused on young people’s immigration status instead of the wider picture:

‘When working with migrant children, there is too much focus on their immigration matters first and foremost, instead of attending to their actual immediate needs.’

_Social Worker_
Lack of specialist support around mental ill health and trauma

Practitioners concurred that often ‘the impact [of trafficking] on somebody’s personality is very profound’:

‘Sexual abuse and exploitation damage you much more than other forms of exploitation as they can affect you and stay with you for the rest of your life, particularly in terms of building relationships.’

Social Worker

One interviewee voiced their concerns around the lack of understanding amongst professionals of the complexity of the trauma affecting trafficked young people:

‘I think that’s a misunderstanding of the psychological damage of exploitation which may not be able to be diagnosed as a clinical issue – but nevertheless young people really need support to deal with and make sense of their past, and a lot of it is making sense of their identity and who they are and how they got to this point.’

Barrister

Another practitioner outlined the complex needs of trafficked children which necessitated concurrent and long-term practical casework intervention and therapeutic support:

‘In the beginning there are lots of practical crises, but the psychological crises go up and down and the trafficked children go into this very dark, depressed, frightening place where they feel humiliated and dirty.’

Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist

The shortage of specialist mental health services for young victims of trafficking was a regular theme in the interviews and was highlighted as another barrier to disclosure for many young men. Practitioners explained that mainstream counselling was often not appropriate to address the needs of trafficked boys and young men, but that referral to specialist services usually resulted in long waiting times, compounding the trauma felt by a young person and inhibiting the likelihood of a disclosure of sexual exploitation.
The gender of professionals

Reflecting on all the factors that might inhibit a young male disclosing sexual exploitation, many interviewees observed that the gender of the professionals involved could be a particularly important issue.

One of the young men interviewed explained that he found it easier talking to a woman than a man:

‘It was emotionally difficult for me as it was hard to express myself to her. It made it a bit easier that it was a woman that I was disclosing to rather than a man, but it still affected me emotionally.’

A social worker also commented:

‘Sometimes a female worker may make boys and young men feel more comfortable, as some have been abused by other men and may not feel comfortable with other men.’

However some interviewees acknowledged that, because of gender divisions within their home country, young men may not be comfortable talking about matters related to sex in front of a female. In terms of interventions with trafficked young men who do not speak English this could mean that using female interpreters (especially women from the same community in this country as a young person) could inhibit the likelihood of disclosure. One interviewee highlighted this when talking about the case of a Vietnamese young man who had only disclosed that he had been sexually exploited when he was in an all-male space with a male worker and a male interpreter.
Chapter 5: What helps in supporting trafficked young men who may have been sexually exploited? Principles of good practice and components for successful intervention

When analysing the views expressed by the professionals who were interviewed for the study it was possible to identify a set of core principles for effective practice with young men who had been sexually exploited:

- Time, trust-building and patience
- Consistency and stability of input
- A safe environment, flexibility and variety
- Self-assurance and empathy (on the part of the key worker)

Alongside these principles, outlined in the following pages are some methods or approaches to intervention that practitioners had found helpful in their practice, as well as some elements of wider service provision which interviewees stressed were equally important in offering holistic support that could meet the needs of this group, including safe and appropriate accommodation and positive multi-agency working.

The principles and methods advocated here relate to work with boys and young men for whom sexual exploitation has ceased, though, as a therapist with many years’ experience working with young migrants who have been trafficked explained:

‘The impact on somebody’s personality is very, very profound, of being forced to be a sex object for somebody else where your needs are not in any sense addressed or thought about and being in a forced position of helplessness particularly as a young adolescent is very, very disturbing... these kids go through very unstable functioning – so they might seem on one day to be functioning really well, but then they would go into what they all describe as a “dark place” or a “black place”.'
Principles for effective practice around disclosure

- Time, trust-building and patience

Practitioners amongst the interviewees were unanimous in stating that having the requisite time to be flexible and responsive and to build a trusting, non-judgemental relationship with a young person at a pace that suited them, was key to having a platform for boys and young men to disclose sexual exploitation.

‘It takes time, building up that relationship... the heavy disclosures are very rare early on.’

Trafficking Caseworker

‘[We] need the opportunity to build that relationship with a young person to find out more. We’re quick to label what form of exploitation it was, and that’s not particularly helpful. It might not become apparent until you build a relationship with a young person that there were multiple forms of exploitation as well.’

Social Worker

In several of the case studies which were analysed for this report, boys and young men initially presented as having experienced labour exploitation or forced criminality and it was not until months later – once they had established a trusting relationship with a worker and had their initial basic needs met in terms of housing, subsistence and safety – that they disclosed the sexual exploitation element of their experiences. Practitioners need to bear in mind the length of time that it can take, and that the initial information that the young person gives may be incomplete and that their disclosure may be piecemeal.

- Consistency and stability of input

Closely related to the first principle of having sufficient time to establish a relationship, the second principle is of consistency in the key personnel who work with a trafficked boy or young man. An immigration barrister reinforced this point when speaking about the context of care for a young person in this situation, indicating that there needs to be stability to support disclosure:

‘If there are other agencies supporting that young person, it makes it much easier, particularly if they’ve got a good foster carer. It does take a long time and that’s a problem, as we don’t usually have a long time. It takes a long time to build up trust to disclose something, especially boys and sexual abuse, it takes a long, long time.’

Immigration Barrister

And, similarly, local authority social workers who were interviewed stressed the need for consistency of the worker holding a case of a trafficked young man, so that a rapport can be established:
‘One key issue is that they don’t feel they have anyone they can disclose to. You put yourself in that young person’s shoes and it must be a really difficult step to take, particularly if they don’t have a consistent nominated adult.’

Social Worker

- A safe environment, flexibility and variety

Practitioners also identified the fundamental importance of a safe environment and choice and flexibility to meet individual needs:

‘They need a safe space where they can come in regularly. At our centre, they can come along to an activity or come for therapy when they want.’

Social Worker

The acute lack of appropriate settings to support this was highlighted in an example given by one specialist worker:

‘With the young man who disclosed sexual exploitation, it took a couple of years. It was only once he was in a place of safety that he felt able to talk. Ironically, the place of safety was when he was locked up in prison.’

Trafficking Caseworker

- Self-assurance and empathy

Although this was less discussed by interviewees, it was clear that an implicit principle for effective practice were the skills and qualities of individual workers, and an ability to convey calmness and empathy to a vulnerable, traumatised young man:

‘You know, things like sexual assault, sexual abuse, rape and so on are something where we clearly see a victim, not a participant, and that people don’t need to be ashamed or embarrassed.’

Director of Trafficking Project
Interviewees talked about the importance of reiterating to young people that as practitioners, they have professional experience of such cases, that they know that it happens and that they understand that young people are often made to do things they don’t fully consent to. This can help to support young people to feel more confident in talking about their experiences.

**Specific practice issues to consider when developing interventions**

- **Level of detail in an initial needs assessment**

Different professionals had different views on how much a young person should be asked in their initial needs assessment. Some felt that it was important that this should not be too intrusive, because trafficked young people may already have been subject to lengthy interviews by the Home Office and the police as well as services:

‘Practitioners need to build that level of relationship initially, not asking too many probing questions as they have already been through so many assessments and interviews and faced that whole culture of disbelief about their age, their documents, their background.’

**Social Worker**

‘With some young people, the more targeted the questions, the more they shut down.’

**Trafficking Practitioner**

Another professional felt that it would be helpful to ask specific questions around a young person’s sexual health, as well as their support networks and their current coping mechanisms in order to introduce the possibility of disclosure, or at least to gain information on indicators of potential exploitation:

‘We need to also look at what other questions we have in our referral forms and risk assessments that could be flags for finding this information out, without being too intrusive and similar to Home Office questions. Perhaps we need to ask them more questions about their sexual health, as this can be a trigger if young people decide to disclose it...We also need to ask more questions about who else supports them (not just the professionals) and broader questions about the community. [For example:] “Who do you talk to when you’re unhappy or have problems?” and more questions around the other networks in their life.’

**Migrant Children Subject Specialist**
Work on sexual health and healthy relationships

As discussed previously, working with young people to support them with their sexual health can be a trigger for disclosure. One professional described a group work programme with young people which included topics like sexual health and healthy relationships. This offered a platform to explain to boys and young men that:

‘This is a normal, healthy sexual relationship and this is a bad one... it doesn’t matter what your sexual orientation is, there is a norm, an okay and there’s one that’s abusive and that’s not okay. Sometimes doing it in a group setting – which I did with these Chinese young people – helped me get the message across to the ones that hadn’t disclosed but you knew the indicators were there and that seemed to be quite a safe way to do that.’

Child Trafficking Subject Specialist

Another interviewee said that there could be gendered assumptions made about young people – that boys need less support and information to understand or come to terms with their exploitation – but that this was not the case in her experience, and that ‘healthy relationships’ work could facilitate conveying appropriate messages to boys and young men:

‘With the girls I worked with, they needed to be told about healthy relationships, what is acceptable, what is risky behaviour. But with boys, we assume they don’t need that much support. There needs to be more work with them around this issue, particularly those who have been exploited by men. Young men need to be told that it is okay to be gay, if need be. Young people need to learn basic skills to see what is acceptable in relationships (particularly in the UK) and learn more about relationships advice and support. You learn about relationships from your family, but these young people have been separated from a young age and have no model to look at.’

Migrant Children Subject Specialist
Empowerment work around self-esteem and confidence

Many professionals talked about the importance of restoring the confidence and resilience of boys and young men after their experiences of trafficking and sexual exploitation, which can create:

‘Feelings of low self-esteem – that they are simply nothing but a piece of goods – and it destroys on its way a lot of links and a lot of, perhaps, ability to fight the situation. They get beaten down and ground down.’

Trafficcking Project Director

One practitioner emphasised the importance of helping young people to ‘establish a stake in their future and in their well-being, trying to create a counterbalance to the pressures on young people from their traffickers and families.’

Practitioners talked about empowerment work with young people to help them recognise their skills, strengths and qualities – one giving the example of ‘life story work’ as a tool to support this:

‘People need to think more about what happened back home as well, not just the exploitation here. They might have suffered all sorts of abuse and trauma in their home country and, on the other hand, they might have experienced some wonderful experiences, which professionals need to draw on to have the whole picture and help them in the future.’

Social Worker

The importance of peer support networks

One of the young people interviewed was very positive about the support he had received from a participation group for young people who had been trafficked:

‘You get to know people and develop as an individual. You do not feel left out because there are other members.’

Young Person

Several professionals talked about the importance of young people building a support network around them, particularly by joining youth groups which can offer:

‘A sense of belonging to something and being part of something.’

Social Worker
The same interviewee – who at the time of interview was running a participation group for trafficked young people – commented that:

‘There seems to be a disproportionate amount of boys that use the group who were sexually exploited, compared to the referrals we have had for boys who were exploited for other reasons. It seems that they need it more, they need somewhere to come and touch base with.’

Youth groups also offer young people a chance to experience healthy relationships, including healthy conflict, something those who have been trafficked and sexually exploited may need, as a practitioner interviewee commented:

‘Support understanding relationships: being part of a youth group, having an opportunity to see young people together, being in a foster family and experiencing positive role models. Young people need to experience these things to be able to understand them.’

Trafficking Practitioner

‘Having friends they can really relate to, not just professionals (is important). I work with one young person who has gone missing in the past. Now he attends a boys’ group with other young people who were trafficked and I think that peer support and network is helping him to stay and not return again, as well as the fact that his traffickers haven’t found him yet.’

Trafficking Practitioner

Through acquiring a peer support network and feeling part of a group, young people also have more incentives not to return to their traffickers:
System wide changes in provision for trafficked young men which could contribute to effective practice

Interviewees also stressed that interventions to support boys and young men in relation to sexual exploitation were dependent on wider improvements in systems and support for trafficked young men in general. The practitioners who were interviewed explained how supporting a trafficked child to leave their exploitative situation could be the most difficult part of their work, because of their feeling of being trapped, of having no other viable choices and no sense of motivation or agency to leave.

They identified the following as being particularly important in improving wider support:

- **Credible alternatives – supporting escape from trafficking**

  Professionals said that there needed to be more positive options made available to trafficked young people to encourage them to escape their exploitative situations:

  ‘You need to provide something very strong and powerful to offer these young people an escape. If the only option is poor NASS (National Asylum Support Scheme) accommodation, where they could share a room and be moved around the country and not allowed any contact with their friends, there is very little incentive. We don’t always have much to offer as an alternative to these kids...if they had secure immigration status, they would be less vulnerable to people who exploit them.’

  Migrant Children Subject Specialist

- **Safe accommodation post-exploitation**

  The particular vulnerability of trafficked boys and young men to going back to their traffickers in the first few weeks after they have left was highlighted by some interviewees. They said that safe accommodation was, in the short term, the main tool to prevent young people from going missing but also a way ‘to bring some stability and to prevent any further criminalisation’.

  Practitioners generally recommended foster placements for all trafficked children and repeatedly stressed the importance of placing trafficked young people with experienced foster carers, given their level of need:

  ‘Foster carers can make a massive difference and they can have a huge impact, good or bad.’

  Trafficking Practitioner

With limited placements available, it is imperative that foster carers and residential staff receive specialist training on the needs of trafficked children. Ideally this would include a trauma-informed approach to support them in
their daily interactions with the young people. Foster carers and staff should also receive ongoing support from social workers with experience of working with trafficked children and young people.

■ Well-linked networks and multi-agency cooperation

Good information sharing and inter-agency working were also seen by interviewees as being key to holistic and effective support. Several interviewees also highlighted the importance of Local Safeguarding Children Boards in coordinating inter-agency communication and co-working. Some commented on the strength of the child trafficking advocate model, where an independent adult acts as a consistent and trusted adult for trafficked young people, guiding them through the complex legal systems, liaising with all the different professionals in their lives and helping to build a network of support around them:

‘A network is better than one professional to provide full support, giving them a choice, making them feel that they have a voice, tackling different needs (emotional and psychological), making the young person aware of their rights.’

Trafficking Caseworker

An immigration solicitor explained how, through her experiences, she had come to value the inputs of specialist youth projects:

‘They helped him express himself in other ways and talk about other aspects of his life, not just his case. He really benefitted from them supporting him with all areas of his life and attending residential and weekends away.

He needed that help to help him move on from dwelling on what had actually happened and to move forward in life.’

However, practitioners did suggest that with a network of professionals in their lives, it was key that young people had a clear understanding of what each professional’s role was:

‘It’s about these young people being very clear about who’s doing what in their lives and who these people are and sometimes, when there’s so many, it’s very confusing for them.’

Child Trafficking Subject Specialist
Boys Don't Cry
Improving identification and disclosure of sexual exploitation among boys and young men trafficked to the UK
Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusion

This research has noted the improved foundation in legislation and official guidance, built over recent years through the efforts of charities, government departments, practitioners, politicians, researchers and others, to improve understanding of and responses to trafficked children and those affected by sexual exploitation.

However, this is not to say that the overall picture is a positive one. In particular, one of the most marginalised groups of children who experience trafficking – boys and young men who are sexually exploited – remains only peripheral, if recognised at all, and unlikely to receive appropriate care and support.

This study has revealed a high level of concern among professionals who are closest to the issues about the degree to which trafficked boys and young men have failed to feature in policy and practice decision-making around sexual exploitation. It has demonstrated that there are some trafficked young men known to services and agencies who have disclosed sexual exploitation – and a higher number who have likely experienced it but who choose not to share their stories – but who represent a much larger group who continue to suffer at the hands of traffickers and those who seek to sexually exploit young people across the UK.

Interviewees eloquently explained the many challenges to accurately identifying the true scale of sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men, and to adequately and effectively responding to the many and varied needs of this extraordinarily vulnerable group. These are complex, ingrained and inter-related: they can be linked to deep personal identity issues for the young men involved around their masculinity and sexuality, and to conflicting drives and emotions around self-protection or disclosure; they can relate to the unwitting professional blindness of some workers to indicators of exploitation and to failures to note what, with hindsight, were clues to the harms being experienced by the children they encountered in their day-to-day work.

To improve this situation, policymakers and professionals must respond better to the sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men. For many this means heightened awareness of the indicators which may point to sexual exploitation. And for specialists working directly with potentially trafficked boys and young men it begins with sensitivity to the messages that individuals may only give piecemeal, indirectly or gradually about the exploitation they have experienced:

‘I don’t feel disclosure is always essential. I don’t think we need the full story all the time. Sometimes you just need to be able to pick up on clues, which can help you work with the young person to help them to feel safe...sometimes professionals can get obsessed with getting disclosure...[but] you can still do good preventative work around safety and risk with a young person without an official disclosure and that work in turn can help facilitate disclosure in the long term.’

Trafficking Practitioner
For these workers, and those who entrust the care and safeguarding of children to them, it also means having the confidence that their intervention can improve a young man’s life. This confidence will only come about when practitioners know that there are services and other forms of assistance available to ensure that boys and young men will be safe, secure and able to thrive after making a disclosure.

As noted earlier, a specialist psychotherapist who was interviewed for the study asserted that disclosure could be the beginning of worse problems:

‘The psychological crises go up and down, and the trafficked children go into this very dark, depressed, frightening place where they feel humiliated and dirty.’

and this led to a question that was also voiced:

‘Does disclosure really help the young people, or just the professionals? Did it really help, trying to help him identify as having been “exploited” and perceived as a “victim” of trafficking? Did it ever really benefit him having to disclose this information and talk through it?’

Until the answer is a resounding ‘Yes’ – because high quality therapy and wraparound support are readily available – then perhaps for most trafficked young men, disclosure of sexual exploitation will remain an option they elect not to take and which professionals hesitate to pursue.
**Recommendations**

Evidence from the research has informed a set of key recommendations targeted at different audiences.

These are presented in two groups – the first relate specifically to what needs to change to facilitate the identification of sexual exploitation of boys and young men who have been trafficked, or to increase the chances of victims making disclosures to professionals in the field:

1. **Local authorities, the police, the Home Office, health workers and schools need to invest in training for frontline staff and managers to improve their understanding of the situations faced by trafficked boys and young men, including the likelihood of sexual exploitation, in order to recognise indicators much earlier on and provide better support.**

2. **Practitioners supporting young people who have been trafficked – as well as other young refugees and migrants – should ensure they are trained in recognising the indicators of sexual exploitation, and that they are aware that boys as well as girls may have experienced this form of exploitation, and that they may have experienced sexual exploitation amongst other forms of exploitation.**

3. **The Government should make provision for an independent legal guardian for all separated children – including potential victims of trafficking – to ensure that every child receives the continuous care they need and is able to build a relationship with a trusted adult. This would facilitate disclosure of sexual exploitation for many boys and young men by guaranteeing the consistent support of one adult throughout their childhood. It could be done by extending the child trafficking advocate model nationally to all separated children.**

4. **Access to specialist mental health provision for children who have experienced trauma should be guaranteed. This may be particularly important in helping boys and young men to overcome feelings of shame associated with their exploitation.**

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The Child Trafficking Advocates Service was piloted in 2014-2015 in certain local authorities and was only offered to young people that professionals suspected may have been trafficked. This assumes that the young person has already been identified as having been trafficked, which this report has illustrated is not always immediately apparent and that many boys and young men are not identified as victims of trafficking till much later on.
5. Local authorities, the police and the Home Office need to ensure that relevant staff are trained in using a trauma-informed approach to ensure that interviews with vulnerable young people are conducted in an appropriately sensitive manner.

6. Local Authorities should prioritise the inclusion of representatives with expertise around trafficking (eg from voluntary sector projects) in their multi-agency sexual exploitation panels.

7. Local Safeguarding Children Boards should have a trafficking sub-group which takes responsibility for mapping trafficking in an area and overseeing services (including for boys and young men).

8. There is a need for more detailed research, directly talking to boys and young men who have had these experiences, and for thorough evaluation of interventions addressing the sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men, in order to begin to establish with greater clarity what is supportive and helpful for those who have suffered such extreme abuse.
The second set of recommendations link to improvements in the wider systems around child trafficking which would also indirectly benefit young males who are trafficked to the UK for sexual exploitation:

1. The Crown Prosecution Service need to provide training to magistrates, youth offending teams and the probation service on recognising the indicators of child trafficking, particularly around the needs of boys and young men, to shift the culture around criminalisation of children who have been trafficked to a safeguarding approach and embed commitments made in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to counter this.

2. The Anti-Slavery Commissioner should consider a thematic review of data on child trafficking, especially to capture information gathered by children’s services which is not fully represented in national assessments. This review should include an examination of the different and multiple ways in which child victims are exploited and abused to improve understanding, as the current data only reflects the predominant form of exploitation that young people initially present with and does not take into account how young people may disclose further information at a later stage.

3. All children’s services departments should have a lead worker who is specially trained around trafficking, to carry cases of young people who have been trafficked and/or to work with others and provide knowledge or expertise. Young people who have been identified as having been trafficked, or who are potential victims of trafficking, should not be allocated to inexperienced staff and should retain a social worker throughout their time in care.

4. Police need to ensure that all trafficked or suspected trafficked young people who go missing from care are recorded as being at ‘high risk’ and appropriate responses deployed to try to trace and return them to safe provision.

5. The Government should create a National Missing Person’s Register, incorporating the facility for rapid information sharing across police force borders on suspected trafficked children who go missing, to address current difficulties in tracking young people who may not be known to be ‘at risk’ if they are picked up in a different area.

6. Police and children’s social care need to recognise that undocumented children and young people picked up in raids are potential victims of trafficking and should not be treated as ‘illegal immigrants’, as many boys and young men continue to slip through the net and are not identified as victims of exploitation and abuse.

7. In implementing the EU Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, the Government should specifically outline how the victims of trafficking are going to have their needs met as stipulated by the directive.
References


Children’s Commissioner Website. http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_743 [Accessed 09/02/2016]


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Appendix 1: Description of the Rise project

Established in April 2013 the Rise Project was set up by The Children’s Society with initial funding from Comic Relief and the Samworth Foundation to address the gaps in service and institutional knowledge for trafficked boys and young men aged 11–25. Since 2015, Rise has been funded by The Children’s Society and the Samworth Foundation. The project provides holistic support through one-to-one advice and advocacy to help young people navigate complex legal systems and to support them to access their full rights and entitlements. It also focuses on long-term outcomes to help improve young people’s emotional well-being and increase their understanding of risk, safety and healthy relationships to minimise the risk of them being re-trafficked.

Rise also runs a regular boys group in partnership with ECPAT-UK with group work to help young people to widen their peer support network and to develop skills to stay safe and to increase their awareness of their rights. Rise is open to boys and young men who have been trafficked for all forms of exploitation (including sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced criminal activity, cannabis cultivation and domestic servitude).

Appendix 2: Some findings about the profile of young males trafficked for sexual exploitation

In interview, the professionals who contributed to the research described individual cases of young men who had been trafficked for sexual exploitation. The small number of cases discussed meant that it was not possible to know whether there was any likelihood that they represented wider issues relative to particular geographies or to different aspects of the sexual exploitation of trafficked boys and young men.

However, with this caveat in mind, the data collected may offer some insights, so it is outlined here and complemented by relevant information from published NRM reports and other research. Findings are arranged primarily by country, continent or region, and there is a short section on transgender young people.

Over the last few years, boys referred to the NRM for trafficking for sexual exploitation include nationals from Albania, Algeria, Morocco, Ghana, Romania, Sierra Leone and Uganda, Vietnam, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Guinea and Brazil.
Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been one of top countries for asylum applications received from unaccompanied asylum seeking children with 168 applications, of which 165 were from males. In 2014 there were only 16 cases of trafficking reported to the NRM with Afghanistan as the country of origin. This discrepancy is often noted by professionals who suspect trafficking of this particular group is particularly under-reported. Whilst there is ‘anecdotal evidence of Afghan boys being brought over to the UK and sexually exploited within the community’ (Police Officer), only one of the professionals interviewed had ever obtained disclosure of sexual exploitation from an Afghan boy. Another stated that:

‘It is possible that some of the Afghan boys are being trafficked for sexual exploitation as dancing boys. I’ve come across Afghan kids who have definitely been trafficked here, but it’s been unclear why and I suspect some of them are coming in as dancing boys for their own community. It’s very difficult to penetrate the community… it’s actually quite difficult to get them to trust anyone who is not from that community. Some of the Afghan boys certainly place themselves at risk of criminal activity. They feel safer with the Afghan community, even if that could be putting them at risk. I did some research… and interviewed quite a few Afghan boys in two boroughs who said they had come over to work as hairdressers, which seemed very unlikely. They had actually been brought in by the same man.’

Barrister

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Africa

In 2014 Nigeria was the fifth highest country of origin for minor referrals to the NRM, with three African countries placed in the top 10 referral countries. Some professionals interviewed for this research indicated that African boys were often sexually exploited in the context of other forms of exploitation, but according to one interviewee (who has worked with trafficked children for almost 20 years) African boys can be more open to disclosing sexual exploitation than young men from other areas.

Several professionals we interviewed had come across African boys who had been bought into the UK on sport visas, often ending up in a mix of domestic servitude and sexual exploitation:

‘There is a lot of anecdotal evidence of “football scouts” going over to Africa and telling young people they will bring them over to the UK so they can have football trials.’

Police Officer

A former footballer, originally from Sierra Leone, has recently taken the brave step of speaking out publicly about his experience of being brought to the UK as a child, believing he was being brought over to start a football career only to experience sexual abuse on his arrival, until he was able to escape.

Another reported scenario was in relation to orphans, who, prior to being trafficked to the UK, had been forced to live on the streets and work in their countries of origin. Professionals had seen some young people in this situation:

‘...being brought in by religious groups and think they’re being rescued but then end up exploited here.’

Social Worker

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34 Andrew Boff’s 'Shadow City' report also offered evidence of the sexual exploitation of young African boys – highlighting that whilst it is no doubt less widespread than female sex trafficking, the lack of knowledge in this area should not allow one to presume it is not a problem. An NGO he interviewed told of ‘residential houses used as brothels in one very specific area of South East London where they offer young African boys’. However, he was warned that it is a very “taboo area and you won’t hear about it in these communities”.
35 Former Premier League footballer ‘was trafficked for sex’, BBC News (2015) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34849619
The increase in the prevalence of street children, particularly from North Africa, being trafficked into the UK was pointed out by several professionals who also noted the transient nature of this group and the consequent difficulty in identifying them as victims of trafficking. As one social worker observed:

‘They were orphans who had been forced to work on the streets in those countries. We’re still concerned about their behaviour here in the UK and who they are linked with. We’re uncertain whether it’s traffickers or if it’s just the behaviour they have picked up from their past experiences and how they associate making money.’

‘For the Moroccan young people, it was the traffickers there and also the people who received them here [who sexually exploited them] because they were going missing and going to London – so it was quite a well-developed network for these young people.’

According to the 2012 Strategic Assessment, approximately a quarter of cases of children trafficked from Nigeria were for sexual exploitation. Many young people stated that they had been trafficked when their parents died and, after being taken in by a relative or friend, had been subjected to deceptive recruitment through being offered employment or education opportunities in the UK.36 As outlined above, boys and young men from African countries feature regularly in referrals to the NRM as having been sexually exploited.

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36 Strategic Assessment on Human Trafficking (2012)
China

According to the professionals we interviewed, Chinese boys and young people are mostly trafficked for multiple forms of exploitation.

‘I’ve worked with trafficked people since 1996 and at the beginning the large majority were Nigerian girls as that was the first group that came to everyone’s attention, but there were a number of Chinese young people who clearly had been trafficked but found it incredibly difficult to disclose anything at all. I think they have a greater difficulty, particularly with disclosing sexual abuse, which there certainly was with some of my Chinese young people. They had been used for selling DVDs, but sexual exploitation seemed to be part of the control mechanism. Usually, the boys were from orphanages or were street children. They had been raped but they found it incredibly hard to disclose. We came to that conclusion as nothing else (in their stories) made sense.’

Barrister
The views expressed in the research interviews indicated that a key characteristic of the trafficking experience of Chinese young people is the level of control exerted on a community level, making them particularly closed to outsiders. As one interviewee described:

‘For psychological reasons as well as cultural reasons...they have subjugated themselves to the community, not just to the individual, so even though they have not liked what has happened, they feel it is benefiting their parents or their community – so they’re not going to talk about it. The abuse seems to be in the home country, along the journey and in the UK.’
Latin America

The lack of young people of Latin American origin being identified through the NRM was noted by one interviewee, with only one male from Panama (in 2014) featuring in the figures – a situation that ran counter to their own knowledge and perceptions:

“When you look at the male sex industry in places like London and other big cities in the UK it’s quite heavily dominated by males from South America.”

Trafficking Project Director

This view is supported by other studies eg in Andrew Boff’s ‘Shadow City’ report:37

‘One stakeholder, who works with the Latin American community for the Naz Project London, said he had seen cases of Latin American men being exploited and trafficked into the UK for sex work. He said some Latin American men here were well aware of the sex work they were about to undertake prior to arrival, but others were totally ignorant of the conditions they faced, mistaking a trafficker for a “generous” friend. The stakeholder told us that he was seeing increasingly more cases as more Latin Americans flocked to London and that unfortunately, as for many migrants, they would not go to the police for help, as they have a “very negative image of police because Latin American police are corrupt so they don’t think our police will help them”.

37 Boff (2013)
Vietnam

Between 2013 and 2014 the number of Vietnamese children trafficked into the UK increased by almost 45%, rising to 109 in 2014. It has been estimated that over half of the children brought here from Vietnam have experienced criminal exploitation, many through cannabis cultivation: the vast majority of all those children identified as trafficked and involved in cannabis cultivation have been Vietnamese nationals – 95% (53 cases) of those identified in 2012.

One professional who was interviewed for this research described two Vietnamese boys whom she had supported in the last year who had a trafficking experience that included sexual exploitation. Both young men had initially presented as having been trafficked for cannabis cultivation and it was not until later on during their engagement with the project that they disclosed experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation during their journey. One of the boys only disclosed sexual exploitation after months of working closely with his project worker and in the presence of a male interpreter.

‘The Vietnamese boys have not talked about sexual abuse. I think that might be down to respect for their parents, their community, as well as debt bondage.’

Barrister

Some professionals we interviewed highlighted how often Vietnamese boys are moved in and out of different forms of exploitation, including domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, forced labour and forced criminality.
Roma

Like the Afghan community, the Roma community is also a very tightknit group. As one interviewee highlighted:

‘We don’t look very much at the Roma kids. I don’t know whether Roma boys are trafficked for sexual exploitation but I suspect that some are but we can’t get anywhere near that community.’

In 2010, CEOP suggested that trafficking of boys for sexual exploitation may be more prevalent among Roma than is shown by official figures:

‘In striking contrast to the general profile of victims of sexual exploitation, where 91% of victims were female, four of the six Roma victims were boys. These boys trafficked by Roma men were identified from two reports which were derived from an untested source, so the validity of the information has yet to be established. However, CEOP has received similar reports in previous periods and filmmaker Liviu Tipurita’s documentary The Child Sex Trade highlighted European sex offenders travelling to Romania to take advantage of vulnerable Roma boys. There are perhaps indications that Roma criminals are exploiting a niche in the sex market here in the UK, but better intelligence must be established before this assumption can be verified.’

CEOP (2010).
It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect.

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Names used in this report have been changed to maintain anonymity. All photographs posed by models.

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