

Experiences of Child Sexual Exploitation Investigations

Research Report – Due December 2016

The Experiences of Child Sexual Exploitation Investigations project was designed to explore rapport-building techniques in child sexual exploitation cases along with documenting the experiences and impact of such investigations on practitioners and the young people involved. In order to develop interventions to facilitate suspected child sexual exploitation (CSE) victims' comfort with police, social-care and court proceedings, trained researchers administered semi-structured interviews to suspected CSE victims, front-line social practitioners, and law enforcement about their experiences from the initial contact until post-verdict. Due to challenges in recruiting young persons to participate in semi-structured interviews, an additional study was conducted in which forensic interviews were reviewed for socio-emotional dynamics experienced by the young persons being interviewed about their suspected sexual exploitation.

Study Samples

Semi-structured Interviews of CSE Practitioners. Approximately 50 practitioners (30 law enforcement officers, 20 social practitioners) specializing in CSE were approached by email from their supervisor stating the study purpose and its voluntary and confidential nature. 15 practitioners consented to the research (10 law enforcement personnel, 5 social practitioners) and participated in a semi-structured interview by one of three interviewers; the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Practitioners ranged in their length of service in law enforcement or social care from 4 to 30 years and their service on CSE cases specifically from .5 to 3.75 years.

Semi-Structured Interviews with Youths Suspected of CSE Victimization. Approximately 40 young persons were approached by a familiar social practitioner or law enforcement officer from the CSE investigation; 4 consented to participate in the research; 3 of whom were young persons suspected of exploitation and 1 of whom was a friend of a young person suspected of exploitation. Because less than 10% of the young people approached consented to be interviewed by a researcher, a number of non-profit organizations were contacted about possible collaborations (Barnardo's, the NSPCC, Catch-22, the Children's Society, Spurgeon, Kids Company) but none proved to be fruitful in terms of recruiting additional young persons.

Investigative Interviews. In light of the challenge to recruit young persons for the semi-structured survey (Study 2), we reviewed case file information (e.g., Achieving Best Evidence interviews of young persons) for research purposes with ethic board approval.

Publications & Key Findings

Ahern, E.C., Leach, C., & Lamb, M.E. (Submitted). The emotional experience of child sexual exploitation as portrayed in achieving best evidence forensic interviews.

- Many alleged victims reported persistent self-blame, anger toward themselves, lowered self-esteem, and feelings of powerlessness.
- Several young people reported eventually recognising the malevolent, rather than loving, intentions of their offenders.
- Some young people noted having feared negative repercussions should they disclose the abuse and reported feelings of embarrassment during the forensic interviews.

Ahern, E.C., Kowalski, M., & Lamb, M.E. (Submitted). A Case Study Perspective: The Experiences of Young Persons Testifying to Child Sexual Exploitation in British Criminal Court.

- Witnesses reported that they felt extreme pressure to remember events accurately and cared greatly about being believed.
- Defense attorney questions were reportedly repetitive, rapid, confusing, and focused on secondary content rather than the central criminal acts.
- Witnesses mentioned dissatisfaction in having supportive social workers whom they trusted leave the case and be replaced.

Ahern, E.C., Sadler, L.A., Lamb, M.E., & Gariglietti, G.N. (In Press). Practitioner perspectives on child sexual exploitation: Rapport-building with young people. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*.

- Practitioners reported that rapport building in CSE cases occurred over lengthy periods of time via repeated contacts between the practitioners and young people; during which practitioners minimized their roles as authorities and maximized their authenticity as caring people.
- Practitioners mentioned the importance of dependability, light heartedness, and having a casual demeanor.

Ahern, E.C., Sadler, L.A., Gariglietti, G.N., & Lamb, M.E. (2016). Wellbeing of professionals working with victims of child sexual exploitation. *Child Abuse Review*.

- Practitioners reported that they seldom reacted emotionally during forensic interviews because they were attending entirely to the victims while gathering evidence.
- Although some practitioners employed post-interview stress management techniques, anticipatory coping strategies were seldom adopted, and most coping methods were employed outside of the work place (e.g., spending time with family).
- Practitioners focused on the needs of young people, almost to the exclusion of their own.
- Many did not consider the negative emotional impact of CSE cases on their welfare.

Conference Presentations

Kowalski, M., Ahern, E.C., & Lamb, M.E. (2016). Sexually exploited youths' first-hand accounts about their disclosure process and experience testifying in criminal court. Child Abuse Review Anniversary Conference. Birmingham, UK.

Ahern, E.C. (May, 2016). Child Sexual Exploitation: Experiences of the Young People and Practitioners Involved. British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect at Birmingham University. Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Ahern, E.C., Gariglietti, G., Sadler, L., & Lamb, M.E. (2015). Interviewing Practitioners and Suspected Victims Involved in Child Sexual Exploitation Cases: Building Rapport and Protecting Well-being. Presented as a Poster at the American Psychology and Law Society, San Diego, California.

In Preparation Works

Ahern, E.C., Kowalski, M., & Lamb, M.E. (In Preparation). A Case Study Perspective: The Experiences of Young Persons Disclosing Child Sexual Exploitation

Ahern, E.C., LaMontagne, A., Zelechowski, A., & Lamb, M.E. (In Preparation). British police officer well-being and coping strategies.