

Understanding child sexual exploitation (CSE): Policy and practice implications

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Background

What is child sexual exploitation?

- No established definition of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Australia.
- Understood to be a form of child sexual abuse; sex or sexual activity involving a child (all those under the age of 18) and some form of exchange for perpetrator gain and/or in which the child receives something they need or want.

Child sexual exploitation in Australia:

- Received attention through findings from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017).
- Limited empirical evidence;
- Focus on interventions, out-of-home care and harmful sexual behaviour combined;
- Practice directions informed by early understandings of CSE from the UK;
- Focus on educative, therapeutic and protective initiatives.

The research

Research aim: To explore understandings of CSE and the practice challenges and opportunities for responding to young people where there are concerns in relation to CSE.

Research objective: contribute to understanding CSE and how best to respond to inform effective policy, practice and intervention.

Method and participants:

- Small qualitative study, involving 15 statutory case workers from across one district in one large Australian state.
- Case workers took part in focus groups (2-4 participants) and one individual interview.

Understanding child sexual exploitation

CSE: 'survival sex' and exploitation of unmet needs

'I think [what] comes into it that they need to be able to survive as well out on the streets so how do I get money, how do I get food'.

(Focus group 3)

'She's an example of somebody that's gone outside to find love. Her idea of love isn't there, she never, I don't think she experienced that kind of security in her own home environment. Put her in a residential [home], she goes outside that, takes drugs, alcohol, you name it, trying to find a sense of security, trying to find that love, that person that's going to provide it for her. She's quite a vulnerable young person insomuch as she'll sell herself for the kick of feeling that love and security'.

(Focus group 2)

CSE and perpetrator gain

'Dad was selling off his oldest daughter for slabs of beer for sex. She was putting her hand up to do it to stop her two younger sisters, 9 and 7, from being sexually assaulted so she said I'll keep having sex with all these men, just don't get them two'

(Focus group 3)

Family

Case worker 1: We got [young person] into care with the most beautiful lady out in [place name] which I thought was going to be the best thing since sliced cheese. It was a lovely home, lovely lady. Got her doing her own washing, was helping her do the cooking. But maternal grandma was just up the road at [place name]. Guess who gravitated straight back to nan and mum

Case worker 2: Then I took the case up so when I first got it I couldn't get in contact with [young person], no idea where she was... So then we got her set up and she's in a caravan park here at the minute ... still gravitating to mum... And the last time she was going to mums at the weekend so mum kind of, the weekend that she goes to nan happens to coincide with the weekend she gets paid, it just 'really' works out like that. And she bought like a \$100 worth of food and everyone ate her food so then she had no money when she got back here

(Focus group 4).

Lack of stable relationships and community networks

'Her relationships are very short-lived, [so she's] hanging out with boys. So one night she's sleeping on the beaches with a group of 14-year-olds, the next day we find out she's in a car with older boys, that sort of thing.'

(Focus group 1)

'And that's what constantly worries me about [young person] is that the safe people in her life are us... we're paid to be in her life. And like we're not, at the weekend like what does she do at the weekend or in the evening time? Like she has no one like I can't go hang out with her at the weekend or like oh I'm having dinner at my house, call over. Like I can't do that with her.'

(Focus group 4)

Living circumstances and placement instability

'I said I don't think this is a good idea putting a child in a house only a block away from where she was sexually assaulted. I think the drive is probably going to traumatise her a bit because it's out at [place] which is like 20 min away so it's a long drive... And then that's where you just see, so she's messaging boys to come pick her up because she didn't want to be out there'.

(Focus group 3)

Residential care

'And I think the instability of a group home where you've got two or three children, young people, all with different rotating carers. You've got all this instability and it increases the vulnerability of these young people. So then they go outside the organisation to find that security and the safety. And quite often you have the predators that come and try to provide that sense of security.'

(Focus group 2)

Responding to child sexual exploitation: challenges and opportunities

Identifying CSE

'I noticed that she was characterised as sexualised behaviours due to her autism...the two were connected they weren't [seen as] two single things: she has autism and she has been sexually exploited'

(Focus group 2)

'If that child or adolescent you know is sexually exploited, it's [treated by others as] blame coming onto them. That they are [perceived as] naughty, 'this is their fault', 'if they just stayed at home and if they didn't go out' and 'they know what it's like going down there, they shouldn't go near that pub or down to that beach.'

(Focus group 1)

'She'd finally told me what had happened but then she wouldn't disclose the fact that this had happened to anyone else, to the police or anything.'

(Focus group 2)

Limited existing service provision

'We're not thinking innovatively on how to support these kids therapeutically, it's oh well they don't want it. They're not talking, they don't want it, and what else can we do? Hands up in the air you know. We should be tailoring our care and our support for these kids in a way that is going to benefit them, not how we think they should take that service. So we go 'oh we've given you a therapist but you said no', that's an adult approach. We should be going and getting creative on how can we work with these children to get better outcomes.'

(Focus group 3)

Assertive outreach and intensive support

'It's what each child needs and will respond to. So it's really about really understanding that child'

(Focus group 2)

'And so because the young people didn't have engagement with school or role models or sport or anything like that, encouraging them [to engage with] the things that I knew that was happening in the community to help them feel more connected, that was a positive [we put in place].'

(Interview 5)

'That's something I talk about so much about trying to get more mentor services in place to really do that one-on-one work to teach them rent, paying bills, home applications, like the stuff that they need...like I'm talking proper life skills, cooking and things like that.'

(Focus group 3)

Stable and suitable placements

'The only course of action we had was to say well we'll place you down in [place], now this child doesn't want to live in [place]. So but we're forcing these children to do something that we know they're just going to vote with their feet and put themselves more at risk.'

(Focus group 3)

'I think there's a need for like supported accommodation for kids that instead of having to feel like they've got to go and self-place... I've always thought if we had the capacity to say to a carer let's come in and refurb your garage to a teenage pad we can soundproof it whatever, you know let them live there, they can come in and have a shower or come in and have dinner at their own time, help themselves to the fridge you know like that kind of space where they're not, they don't want someone who's trying to love them and fix them but they can still make decisions.'

(Focus group 1)

Shared language and multi-agency working

'The police don't react because the kids are well known...The frequent absconder gets notified [by police] as frequent absconder, not as a vulnerable young person that might be getting sexually exploited, out in the field they're classified as a frequent absconder. Let's reword that, let's look at it in a different context and say this child is vulnerable.'

(Focus group 2)

Guidance and specialist support

'in the caseworker training I think you know they get the caseworkers now get bombarded with so much stuff but if there was something specific when they do you know that section of the module where they could go and they could just see... I think that would be important because some people that are caseworkers, they would never have those conversations in their lives. So they might feel awkward and uncomfortable that they're going to say the wrong thing at the wrong time you know so I think that would be the stuff to make sure we have a good like grasp on.'

(Interview 5)

'It would be really good if there was someone who specialised in that field because I think there is a little bit of a lack of expertise when the carers are coming to the caseworkers and with these pretty difficult questions.'

(Focus Group 1)

Key messages and implications

Key messages: understanding CSE

- Analysis indicates three CSE victimisation pathways – connected to unmet need and perpetrator gain.
- CSE is understood as a form of sexual harm and abuse through the exchange of sexual activity for something.
- There is no perpetrator ‘type’.
- Opens up a more complex picture of CSE than is apparent in a focus on grooming and risk in relation to perpetrators or young people’s behaviours or trauma.
- Family, friendships and community networks, living circumstances and statutory care involvement are domains for key risks that coalesce to inform vulnerability to CSE, while also being significant areas for attention in their own right.

Key messages

- Challenges for identification and responding to young people related to the absence of a shared understanding of CSE between case workers, carers and other agency professionals, and therefore an absence of shared ways of making sense of occurrences of this abuse and how to best respond to young people understood to be engaging in difficult to manage CSE-related behaviours.
- CSE-specific directions should facilitate a response to young people's specific care and support needs – understood by these case workers to underpin CSE.
- Coordination of provision to enable assertive outreach and intensive support, focussed on building connections and addressing young people's emotional, social and practical needs, are opportunities to consider in further development of approaches to CSE.
- Responses should also give consideration to placements and living circumstances.
- Signals the importance of child-centred, wellbeing-oriented directions, underpinned by a shared language in the multi-agency context, and enhanced provision in existing systems.

Key messages: implications

- Practice guidance and directions should recognise multiple models of CSE and its connection to a wider context of vulnerability and unmet needs.
- There is a need for broader prevention strategies beyond those focussed on perpetrator disruption and educative initiatives;
- CSE responses should be guided by child-centred practice and attention to unmet needs and wellbeing.
- Outreach and support that addresses young people's emotional, social and practical needs are valuable directions.
- Suitable placements and ensuring young people have a safe and stable home environment is vital to any response to CSE.
- Training, guidance, access to specialist support, and a shared language of CSE underpinned by the emerging CSE evidence base in Australia, would all be valuable directions for developing policy and practice.

Limitations and future research

- This was a small-scale qualitative study exploring the perspectives of a small group of statutory caseworkers from across one large district in one state.
- Offers rich insights by drawing on key perspectives of those directly involved in work with young people abused through sexual exploitation.
- Small but unique contribution to a limited evidence base.

Key directions for research:

- a consideration of the perspectives of young people involved with statutory services and/or with direct experience of sexual exploitation
- specific attention to Aboriginal critique and review of child sexual exploitation.

References

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