

Recidivism, desistance and life course trajectories of young sexual abusers. An in-depth follow-up study, 10 years on

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1. Summary

The aim of the project was to describe and analyse the experiences and current life circumstances of adults who, as children, were subject to professional interventions because of their sexually abusive behaviours.

700 cases were analysed, comprising all cases referred between 1992 and 2000 to 9 professional organisations working with young people with sexually abusive behaviours. 117 cases were selected for follow-up and case studies developed. 87 former service users and their families were successfully traced, in each case between 10 and 20 years following initial referral.

Direct contact was made with individuals and their families through the services involved in the original work in order to seek individuals' consent to participate in an interview. In-depth data was collected on 69 individuals through face-to-face interviews, phone interviews and through the use of social networking communications. A range of standardised measures was completed with participants focusing on health, wellbeing and coping. 26% of participants reported positive life outcomes, whilst in 43% of cases outcomes had been poor. In a further 31% of cases, outcomes were mixed.

Factors associated with poor and positive outcomes were identified at individual, relational, social and environmental levels. Most significant in positively influencing the lifecourse of children at risk was the presence of long term professional support, stable partner relationships, educational success and employment. Family instability, poor housing and drug use were factors associated with ongoing criminality, risk and poor life outcomes. Findings support the importance of interventions that seek to enhance social development and relationship stability.

2. Project aims and objectives

The overall aim of the project was:

To describe and analyse the experiences and life circumstances of young adults who, in their childhoods, were subject to professional interventions because of their sexually abusive behaviours, and to consider the implications of these experiences for policy and service delivery.

Key objectives were:

- To identify, trace and secure a total sample of 100 ex-service users who were known to welfare and/or criminal justice agencies ten years

ago because of sexually abusive behaviours in their childhoods;

- To undertake an in-depth interview with respondents about their experiences and life circumstances in the intervening years, complementing this data with study of their case records and interviews with professionals who knew the respondents;
- To assess the current social circumstances and functioning of participants via the completion of a range of standardized measures and identify rates of recidivism;

- To identify factors to explain why the life circumstances of participants who have continued to have significant psychosocial problems in adulthood may differ from those of participants who have not;
- To give voice to a service user group which has been neglected in social research; and
- To synthesise findings in order to inform future policy, service provision and professional practice.

3. Methodology

The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods, including documentary analysis, interviews and psychometric testing.

Stage One:

Using a data collection tool developed for the purposes of the study, we accessed and reviewed the 700 case files from the 9 participating sites comprising all referrals between the years of 1992 and 2000. This ensured that all participants in the follow-up

study would be adults and that at least 10 years would have elapsed since the intervention offered to them. For each of the 700 cases we collected data on age at referral, ethnicity and gender, the nature of the abusive behaviours, victim ages and gender, as well as the child's own family history including their experiences of victimisation.

Stage Two:

We identified 117 cases for 'tracing' to represent the full range of young

people with whom the services had worked. Cases were sampled purposefully to include young men and women, intra and extra-familial abuse, contact and non contact offenders, male and female victims, violent and non violent offenders, etc. We reviewed the 117 case files in depth and produced case studies of each of the 117 young people. Key contact information for each case was extracted. Interviews were held (either in person or by telephone)

with available professionals involved in the original work in order to complement official case file records with their recollections and impressions.

Stage Three:

Using information from Stage Two, we searched for participants on publicly available data sources, such as the electoral register, commercially available databases and social network sites. Overall, we found reliable, up-to-date contact information on 74% (n=87) per cent of people and/or their families.

Stage Four:

The next stage was to contact individuals to invite them to participate in interviews. This was the most

ethically challenging aspect of the work. It was vitally important not to compromise the current living situation of individuals who may not have disclosed their past history to partners, employers, etc. We proceeded with extreme caution. Individuals were contacted by the agencies that had worked with them, rather than directly by researchers. Once contact had been established, permission was sought by the agencies for the researchers to contact the participant at a convenient and safe time in order to discuss the project in more detail. In this way, informed consent was negotiated with individuals in relation to their involvement in in-depth interviews and choice was given as to whether participants would prefer

a face-to-face or telephone interview. In total, we were able to gather information from 69 of the sample of 117 cases (59%). A mix of narrative and semi-structured interviewing was used to encourage participants to recall and reflect on key life experiences and the impact of the childhood sexual abuse. Interviews typically lasted 3 hours or more. A range of questionnaires (including measures of satisfaction with life, mental health, depression, anxiety and self esteem) was completed with participants. Permission was sought to check participants' criminal record history to compare official data on recidivism with self report.

4. Key findings

The findings are relevant for child welfare policy and practice broadly and the sex offender field specifically.

Key findings from the analysis of 700 case files, the largest British sample of juvenile sexual offenders to date, indicate a higher than expected rate of sexual victimisation histories (50%) compared with previous demographic studies. A wide range of sexually abusive behaviour was perpetrated by the sample. 84% of young people had inappropriately touched their victims. Non-contact abuse was prevalent in 50% of cases, but in a further 52% of cases young people engaged in penetrative abuse of their victims. 18% used expressive violence in the commission of the sexually abusive acts. Whilst most young people had either one or two victims, 14% had victimised three or more victims and a small proportion (3%) were prolific sexual offenders with ten or more victims.

A wide range of long term developmental outcomes was reported by the follow-up sample. As far as could be ascertained by self report and official records, most participants had not reoffended.

Only a small proportion had reoffended sexually, with three reconvictions for sexual assault and one for child pornography, giving a 6% sexual recidivism rate. However, general reoffending was more common, with a small number of participants having been reconvicted for serious offences of physical assault, violence and, in one case, murder.

Using Farrington's resilient outcome factors, it was possible to classify outcomes as successful (26% of cases), mixed (31%) or unsuccessful (43%). Successful outcomes were associated with individuals who were able to have ambitions and optimism for their future. Stable partner relationships or enduring carer and professional relationships were a feature of most adults with positive outcomes. Educational achievement and the ability to gain employment also constituted significant desistance factors. Poor outcomes, in contrast, were associated with individuals with poor body image and poor health. Relationship failure, chaotic or unstable living conditions and drug and alcohol misuse were common amongst those with the worst outcomes.

Professional interventions offered to children with harmful sexual behaviours were largely well regarded, but the lasting significance of the work appeared to be related to the quality of the relationship between the child and the professional concerned. This emphasises the vital importance of lasting 'social anchors' in the lives of children and adolescents at risk. Findings suggest that achieving carer and family constancy is an important part of professional interventions, as is general health promotion, though this is an area as yet under-developed in the sexual abuse field.

The study has supported the possibility of undertaking long-term, retrospective follow-up with hard-to-reach populations. We have pioneered, although somewhat unexpectedly, the use of social media as a social research tool (Masson et al., 2011). For some participants, the research interview was the first time they had been able to talk about their ongoing worries about their childhood experiences in their adult lives. The study therefore raises questions about the need for long-term, supportive interventions with children at risk as they develop through adolescence into adulthood.

5. Outputs to date

Impacts produced to date include a series of academic papers and a keynote address and workshop by the project team to a major international conference, as detailed below:

Hackett, S. Case closed, then what? Recidivism, desistance and life course trajectories of young people with harmful sexual behaviours. Keynote address to the NOTA International Conference, Brighton, September 29, 2011.

Balfe, M., Phillips, J., Masson, H. and Hackett S. Risk, resilience and developmental outcomes of young people with harmful sexual behaviours. Workshop presentation to the NOTA International Conference, Brighton, September 29, 2011.

Masson, H., Balfe, M., Hackett, S. and Phillips, J. (2011) Lost without a Trace? Social Networking and Social Research with a Hard-to-Reach Population, *British Journal of Social Work*. <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2011/11/29/bjsw.bcr168.full.pdf?keytype=ref&%2520ijkey=DQZtqz3uCqifpU4>

Masson, H., Hackett, S, Balfe, M. and Phillips, J. (2011) Making use of historical case material – the problems of looking back and the implications for service development in relation to research and evaluation activities. *The Journal of Sexual Aggression*. iFirst article, 1-11, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2011.630539>

Hackett, S., Balfe, M., Masson, H. and Phillips, J. Community reactions to young people who have sexually abused: A shotgun blast not a rifle shot. (Under review)

Hackett, S., Balfe, M., Masson, H. and Phillips, J. Family responses to young people who have sexually abused: anger, ambivalence and acceptance. (Under review)

Hackett, S., Masson, H., Balfe, M. and Phillips, J. Individual, family and abuse characteristics of 700 British adolescent sexual offenders. (Under review).

References

1. Farrington, D., Ttofi, M. and Coid, J. (2009) Development of Adolescence-Limited, Late-Onset, and Persistent Offenders From Age 8 to Age 48. *Aggressive Behavior*, 35, 150-163
2. Masson, H., Balfe, M., Hackett, S. and Phillips, J. (2011) Lost without a Trace? Social Networking and Social Research with a Hard-to-Reach Population, *British Journal of Social Work*. <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2011/11/29/bjsw.bcr168.full.pdf?keytype=ref&%2520ijkey=DQZtqz3uCqifpU4>

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