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Victims' Voices: The Impact of Online Grooming and Sexual Abuse

Aims

This qualitative research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the impact online grooming and sexual abuse has on victims, from their own perspective. In addition, the research sought to obtain feedback and recommendations for police and social services, based on the victims' experiences with these agencies.

Key Findings

Victim Perceptions and Experiences

- There is no evidence within this study to suggest that young people who were also abused offline experienced greater negative impact than those who were abused online only.
- Instead, the negative effects of abuse appear to be correlated with the risk and protective factors impacting on the young person prior to the onset of the grooming.
- In particular, young people who were exposed to multiple risk factors over a long period of time reported considerable negative effects of the grooming and abuse (including depression, self harm, shame and suicidal thoughts); often demonstrating psychological repercussions. These young people are often unsupported in their family environment and are likely to need extensive support from police and social services to help minimise the abuse impact.
- Some young people were vulnerable to grooming temporarily, as a result of a trigger event(s) (e.g., serious parental illness, divorce), which led to the loss of protective factors. These young people generally found that their protective factors were reinstated after the abuse, which assisted the victims in forming more resilient reactions and improved coping. The negative impact on these young people tended to be more often associated with social interactions (impact on family relationships, difficulty with peers).
- Unsurprisingly, support from family, friends and school following abuse assisted the victims in recovery, while negative reactions from family, in particular, generated greater challenges for the victims.
- Victim support, counselling and advisory services aided the process of recovery and helped to minimise the negative impact of abuse.
- The victims discussed the necessity for engaging, persistent and interesting internet safety lessons from an early age. Several young people thought that using victim testimonies within education could help ensure messages resonate.
- The importance of parental involvement with their child's internet use was highlighted by the victims. The young people indicated that this engagement should be implemented in a way that is acceptable to the child, such as open discussions between family members about why parental monitoring is necessary, how it will be implemented and the impact on the child. Young peoples' involvement in decision-making surrounding internet use should aid compliance and lessen the impression of being patronised, directly effecting their compliance.

Key Recommendations for the Police:

- Establishing rapport (including being supportive and approachable) with victims is pivotal in generating good evidence and assisting victim recovery.
- Understand the complexity of the grooming process and the fact that the victim may still love their offender.

http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/research

Research Highlights for Children's Online Safety #63

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- Comments made to, or in front of, the victims should be sensitive and non-judgemental.
- Training of officers needs to include challenges to myths and stereotypes about victims.
- Clarify the investigative process and timeframes at first contact with the victim to manage expectations.
- Keep the victim informed as the case progresses.
- Where possible, consider the victims preferences when assigning an interviewer, taking into account the gender of the offender and which officers already have a good rapport with the victim.
- During interview, go slowly and include breaks.
- Limit the number of officers interacting with the victim to enhance consistency and rapport.

Methodology

An information sheet was sent to approximately 4,000 professionals who had attended courses hosted by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre (CEOP). The majority of these professionals were police, but also included social services and prison services working within child protection. The information sheet asked the professionals to recommend young people known to them who had experienced online grooming and sexual abuse, matched the inclusion criteria and were likely to wish to engage with the research. Participants met with the researcher and were involved in a semi-structured interview to discuss their experience of online grooming and abuse, as well as other aspects of their life. Interviews lasted between 1 ½ hours and 3 hours depending on the individual. The researcher then transcribed the interviews and conducted Thematic Analysis on the data. The sample size for the study is small (N = 8), firstly due to complexities in recruiting young victim participants and secondly due to the resource intensive style of analysis.

Background

The online grooming of young people for the purpose of online and offline sexual abuse is a global issue, and despite increased research in this field during the last decade, studies identifying the impact of online sexual abuse remain scarce. Research reports that young people who experience sexual solicitations online can feel upset and/or afraid as a result and this has on occasion been mapped to existing knowledge of the impact of offline sexually abusive experiences. Research assessing victim impact generally reports difficulties in establishing the direction of the correlation into and out of abuse (i.e., whether risk factors led the young person to be targeted or whether these factors are consequences of the abuse).

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Full report www.hrpub.org/download/201308/ujp.2013.010206.pdf

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