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Authors	Balfe, Myles;Hackett, Simon;Masson, Helen;Phillips, Josie
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Young men with harmful sexual behaviour problems: a qualitative exploration of the nature and characteristics of their violence

Myles Balfe, Simon Hackett, Helen Masson, and Josie Phillips

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Abstract

There is a lack of exploratory data describing the offences and violent acts of young people with harmful sexual behaviour problems. Such research is necessary to provide realistic insight into the nature of this group and their behaviours; and to help to illustrate and inform practice with them. This study involved a thematic analysis of 111 case files of young men with sexual behaviour problems to analyse their violent actions. Seven violence-related themes were identified in the data. There was evidence that harmful sexual behaviours could sometimes last for considerable amounts of time before services intervened. As well as harmful sexual behaviours, services need to assess whether self-directed and more general forms of violence need to be targeted.

Introduction

Child sexual abuse is an issue of major concern. Most commonly framed in the context of adults offending against children, young people (under 18 years of age) account for a significant proportion of those who are assessed for sexually abusive behaviours (Hackett, 2014; Veneziano & Veneziano, 2002). Young people with harmful sexual behaviours are a distinctive group in a number of important respects. Most of them are not "adult sex offenders in waiting" (Ryan & Otonichar, 2016). The majority of them do not meet the criteria for paedophilia (Silovsky et al., 2007). They tend to have low sexual recidivism rates once they receive treatment. For instance, after five years, their sexual recidivism rate may lie somewhere around 7%; though their general recidivism rate may actually be much higher, closer to 40% (Caldwell, 2010).

At the same time, it is important to note that young people with sexual behaviour problems can engage in a wide variety of sexually harmful acts, which at the extreme can be violent, intrusive and sadistic (Hackett et al., 2006). Hackett et al. (2013) reviewed the cases of a large number ($n = 700$) of young people in the UK who displayed harmful sexual behaviour problems. In terms of demographics, 97% of Hackett et al.'s sample were male, 93% were white and 38% had some degree of learning difficulty. Sixty-six per cent of the sample had themselves been generally abused in some fashion (for example, physical or emotional abuse) and up to 40% may have been sexually abused. Hackett et al. found that the idea that these young people's sexual behaviour problems were "of a minor nature ... [was] not borne out in the findings" (p. 238). While 80% of their sample attempted inappropriate touching of other young people/children (in a separate study Young et al. (2009) note that this is one of the most common forms of "upsetting sexual assault" committed by young people), just over half of Hackett et al.'s sample had attempted to nonconsensually penetrate another individual (see also Fortune & Lambie, 2004 and Bladon et al., 2005 for similar findings). About one in

five of the young people who were reviewed in Hackett et al.'s study had used violence in the context of non-consensual sexual activity. The young people in Hackett et al.'s study most commonly offended against children under 10, though 45% of the sample harmed other young people 11–17 years of age and about a fifth committed offences against adults. Male and female children appeared to be equally likely to be offended against.

A few quantitative research studies have examined the specifics of these young people's offences. Vizard, Hickey, French, et al. (2007), for example, examined 280 cases of young people who sexually abused. They found that while the young people in their study generally lacked the sophistication of adult offenders, they did use (semi)sophisticated tactics such as grooming and isolating victims in order to gain control over them. Furthermore, while they rarely used physical violence against victims, they often used threats. Very worryingly, a very small minority of these young people (4%) fantasised about killing their victims. Severe personality disorder appeared to be linked to more predatory sexual behaviours (Vizard, Hickey, and McCrory, 2007). Most of their abuse took place at home or in school (Vizard, Hickey, French, et al., 2007).

Leclerc and Felson (2016) also examined, by surveying 116 adolescent male young people with HSB (harmful sexual behaviours), the places where adolescent sexual offending occurred. Offending in their sample mainly happened in the young person's local neighbourhood (most often in their own home), and most often in the context of routine activities such as babysitting, playing (often video games) and watching TV. Leclerc et al. (2008) also noted that young people with harmful sexual behaviours could display a degree of rationality in relation to their offending behaviours, for instance, by intentionally using strategies such as gift-giving in order to reduce the risk of victim non-compliance. It also appeared that the strategies that some young people used to enable their offending, such as emotionally blackmailing victims (Leclerc & Tremblay, 2007), also varied by offence location (e.g. they may be more likely to use gift-giving at home and use force outside).

Sexually abusive behaviours are not the only type of anti-social actions that some of these young people engage in. Some also engage in destructive acts such as animal cruelty and fire-setting (Hackett et al., 2013; Vizard, Hickey, French, et al., 2007). Others engage in actions ranging from using weapons to attempting strangulation (Vizard, Hickey, French, et al., 2007). Six per cent of the sample of young people with sexual behaviour problems in Vizard et al.'s study also had convictions for violent offences as well as sexual offences.

Despite the important research studies already mentioned, overall there has been little work conducted on the specifics of these young people's harmful sexual and non-sexual behaviours. McCuish and Lussier (2017) note that research on young people with sexual behaviour problems has tended to concentrate on these young people's psychological states but has "neglected the [sexual] behaviour" and the contexts in which it occurs. While "adolescent sexually abusive behaviours manifest in a myriad of ways ... researchers have too often overlooked ... such [acts]" (McCuish & Lussier, 2017, p. 72). Vizard et al. (2007, p. 66) note that obtaining information about young people's sexual behaviour problems is often "complicated". This may be because of, on the one hand, the difficulties in getting these young people to talk about their harmful sexual behaviours, and on the other, the difficulties that researchers face in gaining access to the services and settings that work with these young

people. This article attempts to address the lack of research on this topic by examining information concerning the harmful sexual behaviours of a sample of 111 young men. In contrast to previous work on this topic (which is almost all quantitative), our study is primarily qualitative and is based on an analysis of case records at a large number of geographically distributed settings. The aim of this article is to provide a descriptive overview of the characteristics of the violence that is associated with young people with harmful sexual behaviours.

Methods

Overview

As part of ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom), grant (X) data were collected from nine HSB (harmful sexual behaviour) services in England and Wales. Several of these nine services were part of larger organisations (i.e. while some of the services that we worked with were standalone, some of them were part of the same national organisation – though the individual services were funded by different local authorities).

The nine services were all “child welfare” services rather than police/prison/probation services. They were chosen to reflect different geographic areas of England and Wales to reflect services that were based in the private and public sector, and to reflect services that were community and residential based. Four of the services were residential, and five worked with young people on an out-patient basis. Out-patient services generally provided weekly treatment sessions that could last up to six months. Residential services usually treated young people on a long-term basis, in some cases, for a period of years.

We wrote to each of the nine services, and their larger organisations, to obtain their consent to take part in the study. We also wrote to two additional organisations that declined to participate for ethical and data protection reasons. Full details concerning the background to our recruitment methods are outlined here (Authors).

Sampling

All cases, which were referred to the nine services in a nine-year timeframe (1992–2000) ($n = 700$), were initially analysed. The vast majority of these individuals (99%) were under 18 years of age, and the mean age at referral to services was 14. A purposeful sampling strategy was then used to identify 117 cases (111 young men, 6 young women) (all under 18 years of age) from the total population for detailed qualitative analysis. We purposively selected between 12 and 14 cases in each service who were representative of the total of all cases in that site according to variables such as sex of the young person; ethnicity of the young person; the young persons living circumstances; the age of the young person at referral; whether the young person was disabled or learning disabled; offence characteristics and trauma history (including the presence of sexual abuse and other forms of abuse in the young person’s background). The 117 figure is, therefore, a combined outcome of 12–14 representative cases being chosen across 9 different sites. We chose to focus on the 12–14 representative cases in each site because we wanted to collect more detailed narrative information on the service

users. However, we felt that it would have been impossible to collect detailed information on all 700 cases, which is why we decided to focus on a sub-sample of cases.

Participants

These 117 cases were demographically representative of the broader $n = 700$ sample population. Over 95% of the 117 cases were white; all were under 18 and the average age at which they were referred to services was in their mid-teens (14 years of age).

The number of female cases in the files was very small, so for the purposes of this article we excluded them to focus on the harmful sexual behaviours of the 111 young men for which we can say much more. However, given the uniqueness of the female dataset, we have reported that information separately (Authors).

Data collection

The case files of all 111 young men were read, and detailed notes were made on them. Most of the original files of these 111 individuals were about 30–60 pages in length, and these files routinely contained large amounts of information about the children's life circumstances. The files were generated by a variety of different professionals including psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. Certain files were written by one of these types of professionals; others were written by multiple professionals. Usually, each file had a summary or abstract at the start, which could be substantial, outlining the young person's lives and the nature of their offences, and we usually concentrated most of our efforts on these portions of the files.

We summarised each case file as a 2–4 page synopsis document (giving about 400 pages of narrative information) outlining in standardised narrative format the child's background and sociological/family context; their offence characteristics; and their experience in the services. These summaries were made by the first and the fourth authors, and reviewed by second and third authors. To help standardise the recording of information, the first and fourth authors were accompanied by the second and third authors (the Principal Investigators) to one site each in order to trial the generation of the narrative documents: the first and fourth authors then split the remaining sites between them. As the case file summaries were generated, they were reviewed by all of the authors. There were a few reasons for making these summary documents. We were unable to take any primary documentation off-site, so we needed to obtain detailed information in a way that could be securely transferred out of the service in an analysable format. Additionally, many of the case files were stored securely and centrally in services (e.g. next to the main office) that were actively working with clients, meaning that our time on each site was limited (for instance, because we were taking up meeting rooms or offices while making our notes). Case file summaries and analysis provided a very time and resource-efficient and effective way of capturing information on a large number of these young people. Altogether it took several months of archival work to generate the 2–4 page summary documents for all 117 files.

This article focuses on the violence-related material (approx. 100 pages of notes) in the case file summaries of the 111 young men. We thematically analysed this material broadly using

the process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2009). The initial act of summarising the case files as narrative documents familiarised us with much of the data. We then generated initial codes by searching across the data and grouping similar data points together. For the most part, this was very straightforward as given the source of the data (official records) there were no hidden sub- themes as there might be in an interview. We then grouped codes together which seemed to fit in order to form larger themes (e.g. “seeing themselves as victims” and “rose-tinted glasses” could be grouped under the larger theme of “views of self”). These larger themes became the seven sub-sections of the results section in this article. In Braun and Clarke’s terms, our thematic analysis was semantic rather than latent (we focused on what was actually said in the files rather than seeking to determine any hidden meanings within them) and essentialist rather than constructionist (we took the files as describing reality rather than giving one perspective on it – though see the limitations in the discussion section for more on this). Our approach was also generally more deductive than inductive. Although we knew that we wanted to record information on the young people’s offences, we did not prepare a predetermined schema to capture this information before we began the analysis. For instance, we did not specifically know that the theme “where the abuse occurs” would be an important topic in this data before we began our analysis. While this is a qualitative and descriptive article, we employ basic quantification throughout to give further insight into overall patterns within the data. Percentage figures are calculated in relation to the overall sample of 111 young men. See Table 1 for a description of the major identified themes and the codes that underlie those themes.

Table 1. Themes and Codes

Theme	Codes
Offences against children vs. offences against adults	Non-contact offences against children (exposure; sexual harassment); touching; simulated sex; penetration; offences against adults (verbal harassment; stalking; groping; penetration)
Where offences occur	Bedroom; home (general); bathroom; living room; supermarket; school; woods/wasteland; abduction; public (swimming pools, street, car parks)
Tactics and planning	Planning; Threats/force; reciprocity; grooming; bribery; flattery; games; lies; threats; focus on weak victims
Callousness	Sadism; physical violence
Motivations for the assault and reactions afterwards	Sexual excitement; negative mood; own experience of abuse; revenge; end in and of itself; fearful of being caught; self-disgust; uncontrollable emotions
View of self and other	Flaws in thinking (children are sexual beings); denial and minimization; see themselves as the true victims; clear thinking
Non-sexual violence	Theft and criminal damage; drugs and alcohol; self-harm; fire-setting and arson; generalised violence; violence towards animals

Ethical issues

The study was approved by the research ethics committees of Durham and Huddersfield universities. To protect the young people's identities, neither they nor the services who worked with them are identified in this article. We have also taken care to remove any identifying information from case quotes.

Results

Seven themes were identified in the data: offences against children versus offences against adults; where the offences occur; tactics and planning; heartlessness and callousness; motivations for the assault and reactions afterwards; view of self and offence; and non-sexual violence.

Offences against children versus offences against adolescents and adults

Non-contact offences against children and young people

The majority of the young people in this study offended against children who were 10 years or under. Both young boys and girls were harmed. The young people engaged in a wide variety of non-contact and contact offences against these children. Exposure was the most common non-contact behaviour that was recorded, noted in 14 cases (13%). The young person could expose themselves in public and private, and in group and one-on-one contexts. Some of the young people began to expose themselves when they were quite young, which could lead social services to become suspicious that the young people had themselves been traumatically sexualised.

Eleven (10%) young people were reported for sexual harassment or threats. One young person, a 15-year-old male, was reported to services for telling a younger girl that "I'm going to finger you and I'm going to put my hand up your skirt". Verbal threats could be very serious and could be used in conjunction with other problematic behaviours. For instance, one 13-year-old threatened to rape and kill a baby.

Contact offences against children and young people

Thirty-seven (33%) of the young people had either sexually touched a child, or had got the child to sexually touch and masturbate them. Touching behaviours appeared to be temporally dynamic, emerging in some young people when they themselves were very young and in others during adolescence. On some occasions, touching could involve force or deception. Touching often occurred in the context of play activities, and when the young person was babysitting and adults were not around. One 15-year-old, for instance, played a game with a girl who he was babysitting called "mums and dads" where he pretended to be a doctor so that he could put his hands down the girl's pants and diagnose her "tuppence". Touching could be highly upsetting to victims. One young girl reported being very distressed because her brother had touched her "private area".

Eight files (7%) indicated that the young person had engaged in simulated sex with a child, for example, by pressing themselves up against them. This most often occurred in private, but could also occur in public settings, for example, in playgrounds. One young person (14 years of age) would line his brothers and sisters up and call them to him in turn. He would then make the children lie on the floor while being rubbed himself against them. Additionally, eight files (7%) indicated that the young person had engaged in oral sex with a child (against both boys and girls).

Twenty-six cases (23%) described instances of penetrative or attempted penetrative activity. All of the children who were penetrated were young (some very young, a number being between three and seven years of age) and in the majority of cases appeared to be related to the young person. Many of these cases featured elements of force or coercion, such as the young person putting his hand over the child's mouth if they attempted to call for help. In one case, a 12-year-old boy attempted intercourse with a 3-year-old girl, and also stripped and urinated on her.

Offences against adolescents or adults

Twenty-two files (20%) contained details that the young person had directed sexually harmful behaviours at older victims (older adolescents or adults), all of them female. Five young people verbally harassed adult women, which could range from sexually threatening them to making sexually harassing telephone calls to them. Some of these women could find themselves in very vulnerable situations. In one incident, a 15-year-old young person saw a young woman walking with a pram. The young person walked up to her and said to her "will you suck my cock?" He was masturbating while he spoke. The woman said "you what?" He told her "if you suck my cock I will go away". The woman told him "fuck off" and he ran away, leaving the woman feeling stunned and disturbed.

Two of the young people in the study were noted to have a record for stalking adult females, which could involve a great deal of premeditation. One young person, for instance, 16 years of age, selected women with a specific look after spotting them while he was travelling on the bus. He would then follow these women home over a number of days and weeks and would learn their travel routines.

Fifteen cases (14%) described contact offences against adult women. In almost all instances, this involved the young person groping the women or attempting to digitally penetrate them. Most of these events were directed towards strangers, though some were directed towards family members such as step-mothers. One young person, for instance, who was only 12 years old, walked up to a woman in a car park while she was putting her keys in her car door. He then touched her on her breasts and attempted to put his hands between her legs.

Where the offences occur

Offences against children and younger adolescents generally occurred in different places and contexts compared to offences against older women. Just under 10% of files indicated that the offences against children were carried out around the family home or local neighbourhood. An additional 13 of the assaults (12%) against children were specifically identified as taking place in bedrooms, either the child's or the young person's. One young

person told interviewers that he felt that he could safely assault his sisters in a variety of locations around the family home without getting caught. Seventeen incidents (15%) took place in schools.

Offences against children appeared to take place in outside contexts less frequently, though as noted above a handful occurred in supermarkets and playgrounds. Six (5%) occurred in waste-grounds or woods where no one else was around. Additionally, five cases (4%) featured the young person abducting their victim.

Notably, the pattern with adult female victims was reversed, with most incidents occurring in public places such as on the street, in swimming pools or in car parks. One file noted that while a young person was walking home, he saw a young woman at a bus stop and asked her for the time. He then put his arm around her. When the woman tried to get away, he grabbed one of her breasts.

How long do the offences occur

In some cases, the abusive behaviours appeared to be one-off or infrequent. There was information in 22 of the cases, however, to suggest that the young person's harmful sexual behaviours lasted a considerable amount of time. Eight cases (7%) indicated that the abuse lasted at least 10 months. There was a difference here between offences against adults and children. Offences against adult females were generally one-off, or if they were extended, were of a non-contact nature (e.g. stalking). Offences against children, including an individual child or groups of children, could last a number of years, and involve contact or non-contact offending. One 17-year-old, for instance, was noted to have raped his younger foster sister for a period of two years; the sister of another boy, in his mid-teens, said that he had raped her for three years – for his part, he admitted having anal and oral sex with his sister for “a long time”. Harmful sexual behaviours could also escalate over time. One boy, for instance, started sexually abusing his sister when he was 12. He began with cuddling and progressed to running his hands over her. He later began to have simulated intercourse. This, in turn, escalated to his using force against her, after which he began to have penetrative sex with her. This went on for three years. The young person told social workers that he recognised that what he was doing was wrong, but felt that he could not stop doing it.

Tactics and planning

Some of the assaults were uncontrolled and poorly thought out and others did not require much planning. However, it appeared that a minority of young people put at least some degree of effort into planning their actions (n = 16, 14%). This could involve deciding in advance where and when to assault their victims, or trying to engineer situations where the young person would have access to victims, such as pretending to be sick in order to stay at home from school. In one case, a young person (after an intervention by social services) admitted that he planned his assaults in advance. His parents were surprised and shocked by this revelation and his father (who had been sceptical of the young person's involvement in harmful sexual behaviours) began to take his behaviour seriously.

Not all the files contained information about the tactics that the young people used to facilitate their harmful sexual behaviours, but those that did indicated young people used various strategies to develop and maintain access to victims, to ensure victims' acquiesce and to reduce the risk that victims would inform on them. Some used threats (e.g. telling victims that they would be strangled or that their toys would be broken if they told anyone about what had happened) (n = 5, 5%); some attempted to groom children over a long period of time; some used flattery, such as telling victims that they had "nice breasts" or that the young person loved them; some used lies, such as telling victims that this would be a once-off activity. Seven young people (6%) were noted to target vulnerable people, such as disabled relatives or young children, because they would not (as one file noted) "put up much of a fight". Eleven incidents (10%) were noted to have taken place in the context of game activities. Two cases involved the young person offering sex to their victim before asking for sex in return. In one of these cases, a young person performed oral sex on his younger cousin, then asked his cousin to reciprocate the act.

One strategy that appeared to be relatively common was bribery (n = 11), which most commonly involved offering sweets (one 15-year-old young person attempted to bribe a younger girl with a "20p bag of sweets"), but could also involve allowing things like asking victims to play on the young person's game system. One young person got a job as a paperboy specifically to get money to enable him to bribe his victim.

Nineteen files (17%) contained information on the young person's perceived risk of getting caught. The assessments of this risk varied, with some being very scared of getting caught and others not even considering the risk. The strategies mentioned immediately above to gain access to victims (threats, flattery, bribery) could also be used to ensure their silence after assaults. Assaults in woods or other private spaces can also be viewed as spatial strategies to manage risk. Some young people assessed several potential victims to work out who would be most, and who would be the least, likely to inform on them. One young person felt that since he was bigger and stronger than his victim (a young boy), the boy would not tell anyone about what had happened. Another young person made a conscious decision not to abuse his older sister because the family's father had previously abused her and he believed that she would tell on him. Some young people also tailored the level of their harmful sexual behaviours to fit their victims in order to reduce risk. One 14-year-old young person, for example, would not push his abuse of his sister past a certain "level" because he felt that it would have caused her too much anxiety and therefore increase the likelihood that she would inform on him.

Callousness

Nine of the cases (8%) indicated that the sexually harmful behaviours either had an element of heartlessness (e.g. in one case a young person was described as having taunted his victim that "no one was there to help her"), or that the young person had callous sexual thoughts or fantasies, such as about torturing someone during sex. One case file noted that "there was a sadistic element to his sexual behaviour". Another file noted that a young person in his mid-teens had sexual fantasies about "beating the shit out of someone" while having sex with them. Another file noted that the young person, 15 years of age, had intense rape fantasies about sexually torturing children and other vulnerable individuals. Still, another file contained

a detailed account of an act of sexual torture that a young person, 14 years of age, had committed against a younger boy.

Nine cases (8%) described the young person using physical violence during an assault. Violence could be directed at familial and non-familial victims, and at younger and same-age peers. During one incident, a 15-year-old young person told his sister to undress and then pushed her back onto the ground. His sister told him that she did not want to have sex with him and he told her to “lie back and enjoy it”. He then hit her to stop her struggling. Social workers reported that he “began to enjoy his sister’s struggles.” Another file indicated that the young person “bit her, fingered her, slapped her and kicked her”. In another incident, a young person, 12 years of age, hit his sister while sexually assaulting her and told her “to take what was happening seriously”; the young person also sexually assault his younger brother and hit him when he began crying. A handful of files indicated that physical assaults could trigger medical incidents in the young people’s victims, such as epileptic fits.

Motivations for assaults and reactions afterwards

A number of the files contained information about the young person’s motivation. Five of the files indicated that the young person had been motivated by sexual excitement and desire, and three that they had been motivated by sexual frustration. However, it was notable that the majority of the files that contained information on motivation indicated that the young person had engaged in sexually harmful behaviours when they were in a negative mood (n = 12, 11%). When interviewed, these young people often said that they thought about sex when they felt angry, frustrated or left out. One 15-year-old told social workers that whenever his parents criticised him he would go to his room and think about raping his sister; another was reported by a psychiatrist to so strongly associate anger with sexual arousal that he would develop an erection whenever he became angry. Another young person assaulted a younger boy because he was jealous of the attention that the boy was receiving; the young person did not see the boy as a “vulnerable person, but as a selfish competitor, an enemy rather than a person”.

A number of these young people (about half of the wider sample of 700 cases) had themselves been sexually abused (Authors). Caseworkers noted in one case that the young people’s behaviour was partly driven by “earlier experiences of abuse ... which frightened, angered and aroused” him. In some cases, therefore, it was felt that the young person’s behaviour was a way to traumatically re-enact and gain control over their own experiences. Additionally, many of these young people had also been bullied and ostracised by their peers, and some used their harmful sexual behaviours – at least in part – as a way of (as one young person put it) “getting his own back on someone”. One young person who was disabled made the younger children who laughed at him “hold my dick”.

However, it also appeared that this desire for power over others, even if it emerged out of a context of vulnerability, could become an end in and of itself (seen in n = 13 or 12% of cases). Some of the young people actively sought power over, and to exploit, those more vulnerable than themselves.

Seventeen files (15%) contained information about how the young person had felt immediately following the assault. As noted, some were very fearful of getting caught. Some felt calmer. However, again it was notable how negative some felt about themselves afterwards, many feeling ashamed and disgusted at their behaviour. One young person, for instance, said that what he had done to his sister made him feel “disgusting and horrible”. Another reported that he felt “right depressed” and suicidal following his assault on his sister. The assault could also unleash feelings and thoughts in the young person’s minds that they were unable to control. For instance, one boy in mid-teens, following an assault on a younger boy, told service personnel that he was “tortured” by continuous sexual thoughts about the boy. He said that “he was in my mind, standing there without clothes on. I banged my head against the wall to get him out of my mind and it hurt”.

Views of self and offence

Young people in this study appeared to have a number of flaws in their thinking, and how they viewed themselves and their victims, that facilitated their offending behaviours. Eleven (10%) were identified as seeing children as sexual beings who should be able to have sex with older adolescents. One young person, for example, said that all children were special to him and that he loved all children at first sight because they reminded him of himself. Another teenager was described as having intense sexual interests in children but having very little empathy for them – he thought that any child who looked at him wanted to have sex with him. Another young person, 16 years of age, who exposed himself to a group of primary school children thought that the children would be interested in what he was doing. Still another did “not have a very well developed concept of his sister (his victim) as a person”, and still another noted that “children are different from me so I don’t know how they feel”.

A substantial minority of cases (n = 20, 18%) were noted to have issues with denial and minimisation, sometimes providing a “rose-coloured” interpretation of their actions. Even some of the young people who had acknowledged their behaviour could feel that their victims would soon forget about it, or that the behaviour was “in the past”. One young person in his mid-teens told social services that his sexual problems were previously very great but that now on a scale of one to five he would rate them about one and a half (social services disagreed with his assessment). Another young person claimed to have found Jesus and was therefore cured of the potential for wrongdoing. He said that even if he did re-offend, Jesus would forgive him. Some young people were noted to have very little insight into their actions.

Additionally, some of these young people saw themselves as “the victims”. Given their own abuse histories (Authors), there was an element of truth to this in many cases. However, a strong victim mentality could be used to justify abuse. Some of the young people even suggested that their victims had tricked them into offending, and that their victims were, therefore, the real perpetrators. One 13-year-old, for instance, who abused a younger girl, blamed his victims for his action and said that the little girl had “told him to do it”. Another young person decided that he was wrongly accused of sexual abuse and had been “set up by his brother to commit an act that he had no wish to commit”.

In six cases (5%), the young people were noted to be fully clear in their thinking and reflections, and had taken full responsibility for their actions.

Non-sexual harmful behaviours

The young people in this study engaged in a variety of concerning acts other than harmful sexual behaviours. Nineteen (17%) had been referred to the police for theft and criminal damage, ranging from shoplifting to stealing cars and motorbikes. The young people practised a variety of theft-related activities ranging from stealing from their parents, to stealing from their employers and shops, to burglaries. Twenty-two (20%) of the young people were noted to have taken illegal drugs and alcohol, and some drank very heavily, including spirits. Of special concern, several were noted to have taken heroin and seven had inhaled aerosols. It was noted that some had used drugs “to deal with feelings”. Thirteen of the young people had a history of self-directed violence, ranging from cutting to burning themselves. One 15-year-old was noted to have chewed glass and attempted to drink cleaning fluids. On occasions he spoke of his desire to hurt himself and hit himself in the face. Another young person, 11 years of age, inserted needles into his fingertips and burned his ears with cigarettes.

An interest in fire, in fact, appeared to be common, and fire-setting and arson were noted in 27 (25%) of the cases. In one case, the young person’s sexual victim (his sister) also shared an interest in fire, and both of them were perpetrators of arson. One 10-year-old boy said that he started fires because he felt sad and angry. Another 12-year-old burned another boy in school with a cigarette lighter and had also burned his brother with matches.

Some of the young people were noted to be very violent. One boy would push concrete blocks off of the tops of apartment buildings. Thirteen (12%) of the young people were noted to carry knives and 1 individual was arrested for stabbing another boy 12 times, including 4 times in the head. Another of the young people had used knives against staff in the sexual behaviour service. Finally, 11 (10%) of the young people were cruel to animals. Animal cruelty could begin when the individual was quite young and continue over a long period of time. One boy in his mid-teens, for instance, began killing and torturing animals from the time that he entered primary school. Another boy, 14 years of age, set fire to his carer’s dog and cut the whiskers off their cat.

Discussion

This article examined the nature and characteristics of the harmful and violent acts of young men with harmful sexual behaviours. In particular, it outlined the characteristics of the offences that these young people commit against children and adults; where those offences occur; the use of tactics and planning during the commission of those offences; the young people’s motivations for their assaults and their reactions afterwards; and their use of non-sexual violence (whether directed at themselves or others).

Adolescent harmful sexual behaviour has been identified as a major public health issue that remains relatively poorly understood by society (Ryan & Otonichar, 2016). Hackett et al. (2013), in fact, argue that even researchers can lack a clear understanding of these young people’s behaviours. The experiences of these young people are rarely captured in detail (Leclerc & Felson, 2016; McKibbin et al., 2017), and are most often reported in purely statistical forms which can abstract, and some- times potentially sanitise, what they actually

do. This study takes a slightly different approach to most existing demographic studies on the topic of sexual abuse by children and young people, including our own previous work (Authors), in offering rare descriptive data on the wide range of acts of harm committed by a sample of young people across a diversity of service contexts. This is significant in a number of ways. One of the most welcome developments in recent years has been the understanding that harmful sexual behaviour in childhood and adolescence is not one categorically distinct phenomenon, but rather a diverse set of behaviours with a range of motivations, meanings, sub-types, trajectories and outcomes. As such, models such as the Brook Traffic Light Tool and Hackett's Continuum Model are now used by practitioners in determining the level of concern and response to specific behaviours. However, such models are largely conceptual and can benefit from the type of descriptive evidence offered here in illustrating the range of behaviours being pro- posed. The types of data presented by this article are often difficult to obtain through interview methods because these young people might not want to talk about them, or might have difficulty remembering them (Kjellgren, 2019).

Overall, this article highlights the varied, and destructive, nature of these young people's harmful sexual behaviours. It supports recent research which suggests that these young people's sexual abusive behaviours are often, though not always, embedded in routine activities such as babysitting and playing (Leclerc & Felson, 2016). Furthermore, it supports the hypothesis that some of these young people can be relatively strategic in the way that they go about their offending, making deliberate determinations about who to victimise and how to go about doing this (Leclerc & Tremblay, 2007). It provides new evidence, though, to show just how strategic some young people can be, with some going so far as to gain employment to access victims, and others tailoring their level of abuse to particular victims in order to reduce risk. Furthermore, it lends support to the hypothesis that some of these young people's harmful sexual behaviours are driven by negative moods and feelings of powerlessness – previous research has found mixed support for this idea (Kjellgren, 2019).

Although the focus of this article was on young people with harmful sexual behaviours and their actions, it is crucial to keep in mind the ultimate effect that such actions have on victims (who in many cases are very young children). Young people who are the victims of sexual abuse of the types outlined in this article are at an elevated risk of experiencing anxiety, post-traumatic stress and major depression and are also at an increased risk of self-harm (Khadr et al., 2018). They require substantial support from health and social services following an assault, something which comes with a significant economic and resource cost to services and to society more generally. Harmful sexual behaviour also has a destructive impact on families and communities, undermining social networks and the social capital contained within those networks (Hackett et al., 2014, 2015).

More positively, if these young people receive professional help and interventions, their rate of sexual recidivism is low (Caldwell, 2010; Lussier et al., 2016; Vandiver, 2006). Most young people with harmful sexual behaviours do not go on to become adult sex offenders (Hackett et al., 2006). Therefore, while their actions can be very upsetting and impactful on victims, the research evidence suggests that they can be effectively helped to become individuals who pose less of a danger either to themselves or to others.

We had numerous conversations with service staff while collecting data. It was notable that none of the service professionals who we talked to believed that harmful sexual behaviours were either fixed or unchangeable; rather staff felt that these young people and their troubled behaviours were amenable to interventions based on principles of risk reduction and risk management. The importance of services intervening early to disrupt and manage the young person's behaviour (Hackett & Smith, 2018) is clear as parents and the young people themselves may sometimes downplay or misunderstand the seriousness of the behaviour (Ryan & Otonichar, 2016). Our study suggests that the harmful sexual behaviours of some of these young people have the potential to last a considerable amount of time, and in some escalate over time, making it important that services intervene quickly and effectively. It was notable how distressed and disgusted some of the young people in this study were by their actions, though they said that they were often unable to stop engaging in them. Young people who do get professional help can experience significant improvements in their psychosocial functioning (Edwards et al., 2012). Because these are young people (albeit young people with HSBs) there may also be significant benefits to working on these young people's strengths and protective factors, as well as their risk factors, as useful and evidence-based ways of enhancing desistance. The findings of this study also suggest the importance of services working to address these young people's non-sexual harmful behaviours. It was notable that many of the non-sexual violent behaviours that we identified, such as cruelty to animals and fire-setting, were identified by Vizard, Hickey, French, et al. (2007) in their study – these types of actions may cluster in some young people with sexual behaviour problems. Self-directed violence amongst this group also appears to be a significant concern, with over 10% of the sample cutting or burning themselves.

Whilst this study represents one of only a small number of projects that have generated detailed descriptive evidence of the nature of young people's harmful sexual behaviour, the study also has some important limitations that need to be considered. One is that the study is based on retrospective case file analysis and not on interviews with people who had first-hand knowledge of the matters under investigation. The young people themselves – and their families – might have different perspectives that, if they were interviewed, might complicate the information presented here. Furthermore, whilst the case files contained significant amounts of information, they are written for particular purposes and are reflective of the practice of the services working with such young people. Some case files may not have recorded information of relevance to the study. Different services could consider different types of information important to be recorded, and then within a service different professionals might have recorded more or less detailed notes. This means that the true prevalence of the behaviours identified by this study may well be higher – as usual, absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.

Furthermore, while some of the information in the files was concrete data that could potentially be verified (such as criminal convictions), other information might have been more subjective and thereby at an increased risk of being influenced by a professional's biases (i.e. an assessment that a young person lacked empathy). Additionally, while we took care to standardise how we recorded information about the young people's lives, it is the case that inconsistencies could potentially have entered into the recording process given that different authors were creating case file summaries in different settings.

One additional limitation is almost philosophical in nature and concerns the data that were the foundation of this article. While we have taken (as noted in the methods section) a generally essentialist perspective on these data, it could also be viewed as providing a constructivist perspective, i.e. presenting the views and opinions of a range of professionals regarding motivations, impact of offences, etc. regarding the issues under investigation, rather than presenting concrete information about “reality” per se.

One final limitation concerns our sampling strategy. As noted in the methods, the cases (n = 111) that were analysed in this study were chosen because they were a representative sub-sample of a wider sample of 700 cases. We identified the representative cases (n = 111) to analyse prior to seeing the detailed files themselves. As such, some of the files that were analysed, although they were representative, may not have contained as much information within them as some of the cases that were not selected for more detailed analysis. While we are confident that the themes that we identified in this article (callousness, tactics, planning, etc.) would apply and be relevant to the wider sample, we think that it is perfectly possible that the wider sample would contain information about a wider variety of sub-themes than we discussed here. For instance, while we identified animal cruelty as a sub-theme of “non-sexual harmful behaviours” in this article, it is possible that analysing the full 700 cases might have revealed information about a wider and more complex typology of animal cruelty.

Conclusion

Young people with sexual behaviour problems can engage in highly destructive acts that are very damaging to their victims. Many of them are also victims themselves (Authors), and come from highly troubled or broken backgrounds. While it is important to be conscious of the fact that most of these young people can be made less of a threat to themselves and to others, it is also important to keep in mind the seriousness of their actions, and the impact that these actions can have on victims and on society more generally.

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ORCID

Simon Hackett: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3275-9324>

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