STOP THE TRAFFIK
Exploitation Analytics

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Key Judgements

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION IN THE UK



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INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) - often also referred to as child sexual exploitation (CSE) - remains a critical and persistent issue in the United Kingdom (UK). Recent developments have brought the issue back into national focus, driven largely by renewed government attention to the activities of 'grooming gangs.' New reports have not only confirmed that these networks remain active but have also revealed more about how they operate, including recruitment tactics and patterns of control. Alongside group-based exploitation, online forms of CSAE are also rising, with offences such as sextortion increasingly reported. These developments highlight the growing complexity and evolving nature of CSAE.

Disclaimer: Please note that this assessment is based on a combination of open-source research, input from subject matter experts on the ground, accounts by those with lived experience, and data analysis.

We assess as follows:

RECRUITMENT

a. As of 2025, males account for the majority of CSAE perpetrators (82%), while females represent the majority of victims (79%).

b. Recent reports indicate that 'grooming gangs' - a term used to describe groups, typically of men, involved in the prolonged sexual exploitation of vulnerable girls - continue to operate in the UK. These groups recruit children for CSAE using coercive grooming tactics that exploit victims' vulnerabilities.

c. Victims of grooming gangs are reported to be as young as 10, with some in the care system, living with physical or mental disabilities, or having previously experienced neglect or abuse.

d. Although ethnicity data on grooming gang suspects is incomplete at the national level - recorded in only around two-thirds of cases - available figures broadly align with the ethnic makeup of the general population. However, in areas with more robust police data, such as Greater Manchester, South Yorkshire, and West Yorkshire, there appears to be a higher proportion of Asian men, particularly those of Pakistani heritage, among suspects in group-based CSAE. It is important to note this may partly reflect increased scrutiny and reporting in these communities after high-profile cases, rather than proving ethnicity-based offending patterns nationwide.

e. Taxis have been identified as environments where children face an elevated risk of recruitment into CSAE by grooming gangs. Taxis serve both as a means for perpetrators to encounter victims and as a method of transporting them to various locations for abuse.

f. As of 2025, organised crime groups (OCGs) responsible for the recruitment of children for CSAE are becoming less structured and more flexible in how they operate, both within the UK and globally. These groups are increasingly operating without clear chains of command and forming temporary networks, making them harder to identify and disrupt.

g. When it comes to sextortion, where children are coerced into sharing explicit images and then blackmailed, these crimes are often carried out by OCGs based overseas. These groups send out thousands of messages, typically via social media platforms or encrypted communication platforms, to identify potential victims.

h. The most recent data from 2023 shows that 91% of sextortion victims in the UK were male, typically aged 14 to 18. This contrasts sharply with other forms of online grooming, which primarily target girls, highlighting a distinct victim profile for sextortion.

DEMAND

a. In 2023, around 700 group-based CSAE offences in the UK were recorded, which is the most recent official figure. The number of cold cases under review is expected to exceed 1,000 in the coming weeks, which may offer a fuller picture. However, these figures are still unlikely to reflect the true scale of the issue, given significant underreporting and historical gaps in detection. This is reinforced by recent police investigations suggesting that grooming is occurring in every city in the UK.

b. Alongside the continued prevalence of group-based CSAE, online CSAE is also rising in the UK - particularly in the form of sextortion. Between January and May 2024, police received an average of 117 reports of sextortion involving under-18s each month, though the true scale is likely far greater due to underreporting.

c. Whilst not directly related to group-based CSAE, an analysis of 14,806 adverts on Adult Service Websites (ASWs) via STOP THE TRAFFIK's ExploitX data shows rising demand for younger girls, potentially normalising such preferences.

d. The analysis of the ExploitX data found significant use of language associated with youth: the term “sweet” appeared in 22.3% (3,315) of adverts, followed by “young” in 7.6% (1,122) and “fresh” in 5.7% (839). In contrast, the more explicit term “teen” was used in only 1.8% (269) of adverts, indicating a preference for indirect or coded language that alludes to youth. This likely reflects an attempt to appeal to exploitative buyers while avoiding terms that could trigger legal action or platform moderation.

e. The high frequency of the term “sweet,” appearing in nearly a quarter of adverts from the last year, points to persistent consumer demand for youth-associated traits.

MONEY

a. Grooming gangs treat victims as commodities, targeting vulnerable girls and allowing friends, associates, and paying buyers to sexually exploit them for profit. While the exact scale of these profits remains unknown, the transactional nature of the abuse indicates a clear financial motive behind the exploitation.

b. Cash is the dominant form of payment, making transactions difficult to trace. Across multiple high-profile group-based CSAE cases, a consistent modus operandi has emerged: victims are groomed, psychologically broken down, and then transported across the UK to be sexually exploited by men in exchange for cash.

c. In some cases, victims are ‘paid’ in alcohol, food, or small amounts of money, which is presented as a gift but serves to maintain control and compliance.

d. It has been reported that the surge in sextortion cases in the UK is being facilitated by the widespread use of social media platforms, raising concerns about platform safety and response mechanisms. In parallel, the rise in this crime has fuelled the growth of fee-based companies offering cybersecurity and reputation management services to victims. Children are not only blackmailed for money but often end up paying thousands of pounds for help - further commodifying their abuse by forcing them to pay for a solution to the exploitation they experienced.

INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS

STOP THE TRAFFIK GROUP WOULD LIKE YOUR EXPERTISE AND INFORMATION ON THE FOLLOWING ITEMS:

1) Further insights into the profits generated by individuals involved in grooming gangs.

2) Information on the financial flows within grooming gangs, including how money is moved.