

Perceptions and Reality of Child Sexual Exploitation

Perception: It only happens in certain ethnic/cultural communities

- Reality: In spite of what we have seen in the media about high profile cases, both perpetrators and victims can come from a variety of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. But research shows that the majority of known perpetrators in the UK are lone white males.

Perception: It only happens to children in care

- Reality: The majority of victims of CSE (80%) are living at home. However, children in care can be particularly vulnerable.

Perception: It only happens to girls

- Reality: Boys are also victims of CSE. However, they may be less likely to tell anyone because of the stigma of being a male victim, and the fear that they will not be believed.

Perception: It is only perpetrated by men

- Reality: There is evidence that women can be perpetrators of this crime too. They may use different grooming methods but are known to target both boys and girls.

Perception: It is always adults abusing children

- Reality: Child-on-child sexual exploitation happens too - for example, children are sometimes used to 'recruit' others, by inviting them to locations for parties where they will then be introduced to adults or forced to perform sexual acts on adults.

Perception: It only happens in large towns and cities

- Reality: CSE can and does happen in all parts of the country, in rural and coastal areas as well as towns and cities. Children can also be transported (trafficked) between towns, cities, villages etc., for the purpose of being sexually exploited.

Perception: Children are either victims or perpetrators

- Reality: Around 6 per cent per cent of victims are also perpetrators. But although children may appear to be willing accomplices in the abuse of other children, this is because they are themselves controlled by an abuser.

Perception: Parents should know what is happening and should be able to stop it

- Reality: Parents may not be able to identify what is happening: they may suspect that something is not right but not be able to stop it due to the perpetrator's control and threats.

Perception: Children can consent to being exploited.

- Reality: A child cannot consent to their own abuse. Firstly, the law sets down 16 as the age of consent to any form of sexual activity. Secondly, any child under 18 cannot consent to being trafficked for the purposes of exploitation. Thirdly, regardless of age, a person's ability to consent may be affected by a range of other issues including influence of drugs, threats of violence, grooming, and a power imbalance between victim and perpetrators. This is why a 16 or 17 year-old can be sexually exploited even though they are old enough to consent to sexual activity.

Perception: If it happens online, it is not CSE.

- Reality: If a child is being manipulated or forced into take part in sexual activity, it is CSE, even if it takes place online.