

What is group-based child sexual exploitation?

Group-based child sexual exploitation (CSE) is rare, but it involves more than one perpetrator with some form of connection and who all share a sexual interest in children. Perpetrators coerce, manipulate and deceive children into sex and create the illusion of consent.

The audit

The audit was commissioned by the Home Secretary earlier this year and took place between March and May 2025. Over 100 prosecutions, reviews, inquiries and initiatives were included in the review. The timeline for the audit starts in 2009, when the first definition of CSE was adopted by government, although serious case reviews (SCRs) dating back to 1978 are included here.

Auditors found a repeating cycle of reviews, recommendations and failures. Progress has not matched the level of public concern. And, while some action has led to positive change, other initiatives have been dropped or simply faded away.

Overview of victims and perpetrators

78% of victims were girls in 2023 and over half, 57%, are aged 10 – 15 years old. Only 35% of victims had their ethnicity recorded, of which 87% were white.

76% of perpetrators are men. While the majority of perpetrators were white, disproportionate numbers of men were from Asian backgrounds. This pattern was seen in data deep dives with three police forces as well as in serious case reviews / learning reviews following the death or significant harm of a child.

Common themes across all local, regional and national reviews included in the audit

- A lack of expertise and the need for better training for practitioners
- Better data, especially on ethnicity
- The need for research on ethnicity
- A lack of resources in public services
- Poor information sharing between agencies for no single reason
- Victim risk factors not being recognised e.g. being in care, going missing
- Victims and survivors are traumatised and do not want to talk about their abuse for a long time, if ever.

Scale

The police collect the most data of all agencies in relation to CSA/E, but it is not easy to understand scale. "It is a failure of policy over many years that there is such limited, reliable data in this area."

There is no offence of CSE. Around 15% of contact CSA offences are flagged as CSE in police records, this equated to approx. 17,000 in the year ending March 2024.

The only figure on group-based CSE comes from a new, and still developing, police dataset which identified 700 offences in 2023.

There is wide variation in the use of CSE definitions across police forces, charging terminology is different and forces have taken different approaches to their "problem profiles" on CSE.

Children's social care, health and justice data are also incomplete, unreliable or likely to underestimate the true scale of the issue.

Auditors note there is notable underreporting in relation to male victims and specific ethnic groups.

Nature and characteristics of group-based CSE

Offenders use drugs, alcohol and increasingly start the grooming process of their victims online; platforms such as social media now play a significant role in grooming and exploitation cases. To illustrate, a 863% increase in indecent images of a child offences were seen over the 10 years to 2024.

Peer on peer abuse is rising (this and online abuse accounts for the notable growth of female perpetrators in recent times) and sexual exploitation of girls in street gangs can be seen too.

Victims do not see themselves as such, frequently believing they are in a relationship. They may “recruit” other children too.

Gangs are loosely connected via family relationships or employment, for example. They are broadly homogenous in age, ethnicity and socio-economic status. They are typically connected by offending, rather than organised criminal ties. Auditors noted that being part of a group is disinhibiting, allowing “othering” and misogyny to flourish.

70% of group-based offenders are employed in the nighttime economy. Girls are frequently moved around by taxi, this practice is aided by poor licensing arrangements.

Greater awareness of child criminal exploitation has affected how CSE is identified. A gradual move away from CSE to discussing “child exploitation” in general terms can be seen in practice as well as in government documents.

Perpetrator ethnicity

Suspect data is not good enough to support any statements about the ethnicity of group-based CSE offenders at the national level. The audit notes that more needs to be done on ethnicity, however, there is evidence of disproportionality.

Approx. 50 SCRs or child practice reviews were included in the audit, one in five involved perpetrators of predominantly Asian ethnicity.

The audit undertook deep dives with three police forces, finding that male CSE suspects of Asian ethnicity were disproportionately represented; in Greater Manchester, for example, suspects were more than twice as likely to be of Asian ethnicity compared to the proportion of the Asian population in the area based on 2021 census data.

Children's social care

There is a mismatch between police data showing significant rises in CSE related offences and children's social care data e.g. the number of child protection plans for sexual abuse is at the lowest level for 30 years. Reasons for this mismatch are unclear.

In England, the number of assessments identifying CSE as factor has fallen every year since 2017/18 and is now over 30% lower than six years ago. There has also been a fall in serious incident notifications (SiNs) as well as local safeguarding practice reviews for CSE – just four out of 160 rapid reviews undertaken in 2023/24 were for CSE. The reasons for this are unclear.

31 SCRs and LSPRs included in the audit referred to group-based offences, commonly raised issues include:

- Going missing as a risk factor
- A child protection system focused on work with, and risks to, much younger children
- Blame for exploitation, which is too often viewed as “lifestyle choices”
- Practitioner confidence, training and skills
- Data gathering and intelligence sharing

- Understanding and managing risk between agencies
- Significant variation in risk thresholds between agencies
- An absence of information about perpetrators.

Health services

Health has a vital role in both identifying and supporting victims, but service delivery is diffuse, and data is poor; there is no national data available at all. Auditors note that: "Health services are relentlessly cited as a key safeguarding partner which does not share information as easily or frequently as it should."

Police

A multi-agency lens is missing from many of the CSE problem profiles forces developed in response to a 2023 request from HM Inspectorate of Constabulary.

Data are disparate and held on different systems. MoUs for sharing exist but there are practical barriers and too often officers and practitioners from other agencies resort to looking at each other's laptop screens. Information is shared with partners on an incident-led basis and there is a lack of systemic analysis.

The police national database (PND) has significant challenges, it has limited capacity and therefore limited users, leading to delays in uploading information. There are long waits for a license to use the PND and officers can be reduced to ringing other forces when seeking to establish patterns of group-based offending or where cross-border offending or trafficking is suspected or indeed evident.

The Agency Partner Management Information System (APMIS) is used for serious organised crime and is owned by the National Crime Agency, other enforcement agencies, such as HMRC, can access it. APMIS could potentially be used to investigate group based CSE offences.

CPS and HMCTS

The Crown Prosecution Service cannot easily identify group-based CSE cases in their systems, nor can HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS). The MoJ and HMCTS were not able to provide data about CSE prosecutions and convictions, only CSA.

The audit identified some common issues affecting the prosecution of CSA/E cases:

- Witness and witness testimony concerns
- The practice of "trading down" to secure convictions
- Significant delays in CPS decision making – on average 19 months in the central case work division where the most complex cases are held
- There are long delays in court listings (the audit saw some CSE cases listed for 2027)
- The physical capacity of courts is also causing delay; buildings and court rooms are not large enough to accommodate groups, requiring cases to be broken up to be heard, adding further delay to criminal proceedings
- And, as a consequence of these practical limitations, victims then have to give evidence multiple times, which has a huge impact on them.

Good policing practice

The audit identified some good policing practice in relation group-based CSE investigations and cases. Some common features of these approaches are as follows:

- Multidisciplinary in nature
- Utilises serious organised crime tactics and capabilities in investigations

- Takes a proactive approach to investigations
- Builds trust with victims and offers them support
- Has strong arrangements with the CPS.

Denial

Despite multiple reviews, reports and inquiries raising questions about men from Asian backgrounds grooming and sexually exploiting young, white girls, the system has consistently failed to fully acknowledge this or collect accurate data so the issue can be examined effectively. Blindness, ignorance, prejudice, defensiveness and even good but misdirected intentions, all play a part in a collective failure to deter offenders, prosecute them and to protect children from harm.

The audit identified a number of factors hampering efforts to protect children from group-based CSE. Three are explored in detail:

1. **Ethnicity of perpetrators** – “It remains impossible to provide a definite ethnic profile of perpetrators of group-based CSE.” Ethnicity is rarely considered in SCRs (one in five) and the audit saw and heard of examples where the issue was avoided altogether. Ethnicity matters in better understanding, interrupting and prosecuting these crimes. The audit notes that there is less discomfort in naming disproportionality in relation to knife crime or stop and search, more honesty and maturity is needed in the debate.
2. **Adultification** – Children affected by CSE haven't always been afforded the status of a child. *Working Together* guidance is clear that anyone aged under 18 years is a child. Services meant to protect children do not always reflect this e.g. in police responses or where children's social care place 16- and 17-year-olds in semi-independent accommodation. Adultification can result in the child receiving a criminal justice response instead of a safeguarding response. “In relation to CSE, clearer solutions are needed to tackle bias / greyness that weakens the protections and justice afforded to victims abused and exploited by adults.”
3. **Accountability and justice** – Auditors heard palpable frustrations from victims, survivors and practitioners alike about ongoing injustice and the lack of action in the system. No single individual has been held to account for failings or worse. There is a reluctance to admit past mistakes and a defensiveness which has added to the suffering and misery of victims. “Until we are able to acknowledge the problem fully, apologise and make good on the wrongs, it will be hard to ‘move on’.”

Taxis

Links between group-based CSE and taxis have been highlighted in many reviews. Taxis offer a way for perpetrators to meet victims, and a way to traffic them to other locations. Auditors note that where LAs have acted on licensing concerns, a loophole in national legislation allows drivers to register outside of their home LA, which has frustrated the impact of these local initiatives.

Age of consent

The audit uncovered a 13 – 15-year-old “grey area” in the age of consent. Rape charges are all too regularly being dropped or downgraded where the child says they are “in love” or consented to sex. The aim here was to avoid unintentionally criminalising teenage relationships, but in practice, this nuance in law is benefitting much older men.

Conclusion and recommendations

The audit represents an opportunity to draw a line in the sand. New commitments need to be honest, transparent, and prioritise the safety of children and young people above all else.

Dame Louise Casey makes 12 recommendations; the government has accepted them all:

1. The government will tighten the law on rape to ensure that adults who engage in penetrative sexual acts with a child under 16 face the most serious charge of rape
2. A new national police operation (step one, see below) and a new national inquiry (step two) co-ordinating existing investigations into CSE

In terms of the national criminal investigation, all forces should:

- Undertake a review of cases that have been reported but which have not resulted in prosecutions over the last ten years
- Undertake a review of police and children's services records to identify children who have been at risk of or harmed by sexual exploitation over the last ten years... Access to children's services records will require an agreement of mandatory sharing of information to avoid legal delays.

In terms of the national inquiry:

- It will have statutory powers, however, it is not proposed that this is an overarching inquiry like the *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse* and it should be time limited, with further details to follow.
3. The government will change the law so that those convicted for child prostitution offences will have their convictions quashed and their criminal records expunged
 4. Mandatory collection of ethnicity and nationality data for all suspects in CSA/E cases and work with the police to improve the collection of ethnicity data for victims
 5. Mandatory sharing of information between all statutory safeguarding partners in cases of CSA/E. Compliance should be monitored by the inspectorates and overseen by the proposed Child Protection Authority
 6. DfE to move swiftly to introduce unique reference numbers (SUI) for children to improve inter agency information sharing
 7. Police information systems should be upgraded and allow for the incorporation of the SUI to be introduced by the DfE
 8. CSE investigations should be approached like Serious and Organised Crime
 9. The DfE should urgently interrogate child protection data to identify the causes of the decline in child sexual abuse and exploitation representation in child in need assessment data; examine the reasons for variations across LAs; and review the effectiveness of SiNs in relation to CSA/E
 10. The government should commission research into the drivers for group-based CSE, including online offending, cultural factors and the role of the group
 11. The Department for Transport should take immediate action to stop practice of 'out of area taxis' and bring in more rigorous standards for licensing and regulation of drivers
 12. The government should commit to fully resourcing the implementation of these recommendations, track implementation and report regularly to Parliament.