

Contact sexual crimes against children have traditionally been thought of as lone perpetrator offences. Research suggests that just 8% of child sex offenders knowingly met another offender prior to conviction and only 5% committed an offence with another person. Recent developments in the UK suggest group-based child sex offending may be more common than previously thought.

A series of high-profile child sexual exploitation (CSE) cases involving large groups of offenders and victims have highlighted the need for better understanding of and responses to this phenomenon. Systems traditionally geared towards tackling solo offending and familial abuse must now be adapted to improve the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of group-based child sex offending.

Group-based CSE has attracted increasing media, public, policy and practitioner attention since late 2010. It has been referred to by many different names, including on-street grooming; localised grooming; internal child sex trafficking (when movement is involved) and complex CSE.

DEFINITION: Children can be sexually exploited by various different groups, both online and offline. This document focuses on offline offending perpetrated by groups who are neither related to their victims, nor occupy a position of trust (e.g. teacher). Groups are defined here as two or more offenders operating together.

OFFENDERS: The overwhelming majority of offenders have been male, ranging in age from their late-teens to early-60s. Offending groups may comprise strangers joined by a mutual interest in children, or from pre-existing social networks, such as relatives, friends or colleagues.

VICTIMS: Most victims have been female and aged in their early to mid-teens, although they may have already been abused for several months, even years, by the time of detection. Victims have