

New approach to preventing child sexual exploitation

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A pioneering research project is underway in Dundee to help ensure young people at risk of child sexual exploitation are being properly protected.

Funded through Comic Relief, the project is being led by the sociologist Dr Jin Nye Na – a Visiting Research Fellow at Abertay University.

Child [sexual exploitation](#) is high on the political agenda at the moment but, to date, has only ever been addressed after a scandal has broken – as in the cases of Rotherham and Rochdale.

In a bid to prevent the need for this kind of retrospective investigation, Dundee is taking a radically different approach.

Rather than waiting for the worst to happen, the city is tackling the issue head on by carrying out what is believed to be the most detailed piece of research into sexual violence against children that has ever been conducted in Scotland.

The project – which began in May 2014 – is examining how those who work in the field of child protection assess the risk of child sexual exploitation for any given individual: how they define the term; how frequently they see it occurring; and what prompts them to take action.

The aim is to make sure that the systems and services in place to assist those in vulnerable situations truly meet the needs of those they are

intended to help.

The research involves all [service providers](#) within the city, meaning not only that Dundee City Council is being assessed, but that the services provided by the police and third sector organisations are also under review.

When the project is complete, recommendations will be made for how to update and further enhance the services within the city.

A toolkit will also be created to streamline the risk-assessment process and make sure that service providers have a robust system in place that offers adequate protection for vulnerable young people across Dundee.

Dr Na explains:

"Child sexual exploitation is an extremely sensitive issue and in the cases of Rotherham and Rochdale, the mechanisms and institutions that were supposed to shield vulnerable young people from harm clearly failed miserably.

"Dundee wants to make sure that nothing similar ever happens here and has taken the bold and proactive step of opening its services up to thorough scrutiny as a preventative measure.

"This means that, instead of an investigation taking place after the event to try and work out how [vulnerable children](#) came to be failed by the very system that was supposed to protect them, we will be making sure that no such failure is allowed to happen in the first place."

She continues:

"Despite what many people think, child sexual exploitation is not a new

phenomenon – it's actually been around for a long time. It's just that prior to 2009 it was known as child prostitution.

"This means that the services currently in place have been around for many years and, while they may have been able to identify at-risk children in the past, times have changed and there might be changes of patterns of risks for children, so it is vital that we evaluate whether the existing services meet the needs of vulnerable young people in Dundee.

"We've got technology at our fingertips these days for example, and social media dominates young people's lives, so there are new ways in which children can be sexually exploited and therefore new warning signs that need to be looked out for.

"However, these risk-factors may not yet be on everyone's radar – the ways in which technology is used by [young people](#) is undoubtedly different from the ways it is used by the adult population – so it's possible that early signs of vulnerability may occasionally be missed.

"With this project what we aim to do therefore is carry out a thorough audit of current services to make sure they are up to scratch; to make sure that everyone who works with vulnerable children is able to identify all those who are at risk of sexual exploitation; and to make sure there are no gaps in the system through which a vulnerable child could potentially fall."

The way this assessment will work is two-fold: firstly, in order to establish a broad picture of the current situation, the researchers have been collecting and analysing existing data and statistics from public authorities and charitable organisations.

However, because these sources are often fragmented – and because the perspectives and purposes of the different organisations involved vary so

much – the team have had to gather additional information to support the research.

This has been achieved through conducting detailed and in-depth interviews and focus groups with those who work in the field of child protection – both those who deal directly with children and those in management positions who strategically plan for how [child protection](#) policies should be put into practice.

Dr Na concludes:

"It's a challenging project, not least because there are so many different aspects of child sexual exploitation.

"In general terms it can be described as a specific form of [child sexual abuse](#) where the child is given whatever it is they may need – money, food, drugs, shelter, affection – in exchange for sex.

"However, both across the UK as a whole and within Scotland itself – as well as within and between organisations – the definitions are varied, so it is difficult to get data on the exact prevalence of child sexual exploitation.

"This project would benefit from further support and resources, but the approach we are taking means we will still be able to build an overall picture of the situation and establish the true profile of child sexual exploitation in the city.

"The abuse scandals in places like Rotherham and Rochdale have quite rightly received widespread media attention and condemnation, and it is important that we do our utmost to ensure something like this never happens again."

Provided by University of Abertay Dundee

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