

'It's like we're locked in a box': Girls' and mothers' experiences of the police and legal system following child sexual abuse

Abstract

This article focuses on girls' and mothers' experiences of police and criminal justice system responses and the impact of investigation processes following reporting of child sexual abuse. Participants spoke of a lack of timely therapeutic provision and the subsequent role of female caregivers in providing support. Problems with criminal justice processes and the subsequent impact on families' wider lives were also discussed. Findings suggest that criminal justice processes need to be better attuned to these micro level impacts and should show more sensitivity to the overall experience of children in the aftermath of sexual abuse. Implications for practice are discussed.

Key words

Sexual abuse, impact, children's voices, criminal justice system

Introduction

Children's voices are paramount to research exploring their experiences, with suggestion that they should be the 'foremost advisers' (Sanders and Mace, 2006, p.107). Research examining children's opinions of the child protection system has advised that incorporating children's views can result in better outcomes for them and their families, as they feel more committed and connected to processes (Woolfson *et al.*, 2009). Despite evidence outlining the benefits of gathering and exploring insights from children, there is a scarcity of research available that asks them directly about their experiences of child sexual abuse interventions (Gilligan, 2016; Jessiman, Hackett and Carpenter, 2017), meaning their voices are often absent from discussions around shaping the direction of services. More often, it is the perspectives of practitioners working with children that are gathered (Gilligan, 2016) or adults recounting abuse that they experienced in childhood (Allnock *et al.*, 2015; see Nelson-Gardell, 2001; Woodiwiss, 2014). Published qualitative research directly involving children on this topic is also often typified by small sample sizes (Ellis, 2019; Hill, 2009; Jessiman, Hackett and Carpenter, 2017) which may be a consequence of 'gate keeping issues' (Carroll-Lind *et al.*, 2006, p. 266) underpinned by concern that involving children in research could compromise ongoing criminal justice processes or that talking to them about sexual abuse is too sensitive. The absence of children's active participation in research means that children's voices are 'vulnerable to being represented by others' (Muddaly and Goddard, 2006, p. 158). This paper outlines the perspectives of girls and their mothers who have encountered police and criminal justice system

(CJS) services following the girls' experiences of child sexual abuse (CSA). Within this research, we use the term child sexual abuse (or sexual abuse) as an umbrella term to encompass the full range of sexual offences that are committed against children, such as abusive acts, assaults and rape both within and outside the family context.

Situating the study

CSA describes a wide range of sexual actions perpetrated against children, which may be contact or non-contact, and involve a child usually being tricked or forced into sexual activity (NSPCC, 2020). Measuring the prevalence of CSA is difficult due to its hidden nature (NSPCC, 2019) and variation in methodology used to collect data (Radford et al, 2011). A review of 28 studies conducted within the UK and internationally suggests that prevalence for CSA ranges from 1.1 per cent to 32 per cent for lifetime experiences (Radford et al, 2011). In an English context, estimates indicate that only 1 in 8 children who have experienced abuse come to the attention of statutory services at the time the abuse is occurring (Children's Commissioner, 2015).

Research suggests a long history of children not disclosing sexual abuse at the time it is happening, which Bacon and Richardson (2021) describe as being 'trapped in silence'. The reasons for children's delayed disclosure may include: concern they will not be believed; fear of getting into trouble; feeling guilty/self-blame; worry over upsetting others; or, in some cases, a lack of understanding that what they have experienced is abuse (Allnock & Miller, 2013; McGuire & London, 2020; McNeish & Scott, 2018; Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Radford et al, 2011). Research also suggests that the abuser being a parent or parent figure may also lead to children delaying disclosure (Goodman-Brown *et al.*, 2003) as children who have been abused by a family member may feel responsible for protecting them (Children's Commissioner, 2015).

When children do disclose sexual abuse during childhood, research suggests that professional services may not adequately support them through legal processes; processes that can re-traumatise them (McNeish & Scott, 2018). In their US study, Staller and Nelson-Gardell (2005) found that children may decide to tell only one trusted adult about the sexual abuse they have experienced in the hope that responsibility for taking action can be transferred to that trusted adult. This form of one-time disclosure, however, is in contrast to expectations placed upon children by criminal justice processes, such as children experiencing multiple interviews, hearings and facing general disruption to their lives, with many of these consequences not being anticipated by children when they decide to disclose abuse (Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005). Legal processes can develop quickly, with the goal of collecting evidence for the purposes of prosecution (McNeish & Scott, 2018) and this influx of process and strangers can be overwhelming and leave children lacking control (Allnock & Miller, 2013), for example, feeling pressured to testify in court (Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005).

Studies have also noted that children may experience long waits between reporting sexual abuse and police action, such as police taking statements or providing protective measures (Warrington *et al.*, 2016), which can exacerbate anxiety. When children are speaking to professionals about abuse, research suggests that being believed (Nelson-Gardell, 2001) and building trust (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Warrington *et al.*, 2016) are key to their emotional wellbeing. Leander (2010) examined police reports relating to 27 children who had experienced sexual abuse and found that it often took two or three police interviews before children began to

disclose more details of the abuse. This suggests that a trusting relationship takes time to develop with professionals before children will feel comfortable enough to confide in them, as opposed to legal processes that often rely on children re-telling their story to (multiple) strangers.

This article gives voice to girls and mothers within a particular cultural context, exploring views of those who have experienced criminal justice responses in one police force area in the North-East of England. The aim of the research was to improve service development by understanding children’s and families’ experiences of the police and CJS and the resulting impact of investigative processes following reporting of child sexual abuse. Addressing these issues and contributing to the very limited literature to date, our study is a contemporary account based directly on the voices of children and families.

Methodology

Data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews with children and mothers as part of a wider study exploring the effect of a ‘one-stop shop’ of services for children who had experienced sexual abuse. Within the police force in which the research was conducted, when a case of child sexual abuse comes to the attention of the police, a response officer will usually speak to the child and ‘flag’ the case on the police system with markers relating to sexual violence involving children. The case is then picked up by the local Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC); a centre consisting of specially trained professionals who provide medical, practical and emotional support. The SARC acts as a gateway to services for the child or young person, such as supporting them through forensic examinations, offering practical and emotional support via an Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) and referring them for counselling.

For this study, the SARC identified children on their system who had reported sexual abuse to police within the last three years. Seven girls between the ages of 8-18 and six non-abusing mothers were interviewed by the two authors about their experiences of receiving police and criminal justice responses. Table 1 shows demographics information for participants:

Table 1: Demographics¹

Girls’ name (anonymised)	Age now	Age at time of abuse	Perpetrator	How came to police attention	Mother also interviewed?
Louisa	15	6-7	Male cousin	Told mum who reported to police	Yes, parent 1
Delilah	14	13	Male ex-partner	Told mum who reported to police	Yes, parent 2
Bethany	16	13	Male known to young person	Young person reported	Yes, parent 3
Cheyenne	17	15	Male stranger	Young person reported	Yes, parent 4

Gemma	18	8-11	Step-brother	Told Social Worker who reported to police	No
Abigail	8	7	Step-father	Sibling told mum, who reported to police	Yes, parent 5
Jordan	15	14	Male known to young person	School reported to police	No

¹Parent 6 was also interviewed, but her daughter (who had experienced CSA) was not

Girls and mothers had received a variety of service responses linked to the CJS including: first response from a police officer, therapeutic services (such as counselling or seeing a Clinical Psychologist), SARC services (such as receiving practical and emotional support from ISVAs and forensic examinations) and court. Potential participants were excluded if the SARC had not had contact with them during the previous year, as not to risk any distress that contacting families unexpectedly may cause. Any families who were known by the SARC to be at ongoing risk (for example, if the abuser was a parent or sibling who still lived with the family) were excluded from selection.

SARC workers with pre-existing relationships with families approached them to ask for their permission to be contacted by the researchers. We then made contact with interested families and, at this point, ensured that they were aware that we would not be liaising with the SARC about what they discussed with us during the course of the research, to protect their confidentiality. All of the children and parents who consented to be interviewed were female, which reflects the majority of the work of the SARC in question. When given the choice to be interviewed in the presence of a trusted adult or alone, five of the girls opted to be interviewed with their mother present, one with her carer, and one alone. As children and families were initially approached by SARC workers from their broader caseloads, we cannot comment on the response rate in terms of the overall proportion of those contacted who agreed to take part, though of those who consented for us to contact them, two children decided not to participate, giving a participation rate of 87%.

Eight interviews were conducted at participants' homes, one at a local Rape Crisis Centre, one at the SARC and three at GP surgeries. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form (suitable to age) and had the opportunity to ask questions prior to interview. Interview questions focused on what types of services they had experienced following reporting to the police, their views about how positive/negative their response was, and what services could do to better meet their needs. At no point did the researchers ask participants to recount details of the sexual abuse. Following the interviews, all participants were offered contact details of appropriate support services and a follow-up text or phone call from the researchers one week later.

Interviews were recorded electronically by Dictaphone, and notes were made by each researcher immediately following each interview, detailing key observations. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim by the researchers within two weeks. Transcripts were subsequently anonymised and original voice recordings deleted. Transcripts and notes were analysed by taking inspiration from Braun and Clarke's 'thematic analysis' approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; Braun, Clarke & Hayfield, 2019). Stemming from a constructionist and inductive orientation and based on Braun and Clarke's approach centering researcher reflexivity, the researchers highlighted significant words and phrases within the transcripts relating to children's experiences of the police and CJS, before grouping them together thematically. Themes that pulled out the key concepts of these groupings were then actively generated. Both researchers engaged with the analytic process in order to ensure that themes were robust and tell 'a story' (Braun & Clarke, 2019), whilst recognising our subjective role in the reading of the data. As Braun and Clarke (2019) describe, final analysis is 'the product of deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection, something that is active and generative' (p.591), rather than the 'emergence' of themes.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval for this research was granted by Durham University Ethics Committee. Both authors have significant experience of speaking to people who have experienced sexual violence and we ensured that interviews were carried out with sensitivity to participants' experiences.

Findings

Three overarching themes were generated during analysis, which spoke to children and families' experiences of the police and CJS and the impact of investigative processes. These were: lack of timely therapeutic provision and subsequent supportive role of female caregivers; problems with criminal justice system processes; and, the impact of criminal justice system processes on children and families' wider lives.

Lack of timely therapeutic provision and subsequent supportive role of female caregivers

The majority of the girls did not receive timely professional therapeutic support following reporting sexual abuse, though participants suggested that they needed this '*within days*' (Parent 4). Instead, police told families to contact their GP, or families were left to seek out their own support:

'I don't think they [police] referred me for support, I think they said go to the doctors and get referred to CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service]. They put me in touch with [psychologist] but later down the line' (Jordan, 15)

'She was offered absolutely nothing at the time. We got an ISVA [Independent Sexual Violence Advocate]...towards the end I think after the case was agreed by the CPS [Crown Prosecution Service] that it was going to court. A year and a bit later so she was left with no support during that year' (Parent 5)

The impact of not receiving timely therapeutic support was profound for many of the girls, who consequently struggled with depression, anxiety, self-harm, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation. Where therapeutic support was provided, it was often much further along the criminal justice process, such as when a case was proceeding to court. When they did receive it, girls and mothers spoke positively about support, which was usually in the form of counselling provided by a clinical psychologist:

'The support with [psychologist] is really good, we are doing therapy to process things, it's helping as well...she explains everything she's gonna do...so I know exactly what is going on... straight up she's helped, she's supported, she doesn't force me to do anything' (Jordan, 15)

'She's fun...we make stories...I've finished one already' (Abigail, 8)

'[Psychologist] is fabulous. She just seems genuine - she's kind and seems to have sympathy...For someone with a knowledge base to have a bit of sympathy it's sort of validating I suppose' (Parent 5)

For those who had received psychological support, feeling heard and experiencing a sense of control over content of sessions was important to the girls and mothers, which echoes the findings of other studies (Jessiman, Hackett and Carpenter, 2017). Additionally, participants appreciated the psychologist's 'kind', 'genuine' and 'fun' demeanor.

In the absence of timely therapeutic support, we found that mothers were typically playing a central role in supporting positive outcomes for their daughters following reporting of the abuse: providing emotional support (which was ongoing and consistent), practical support (such as transport to appointments and liaising with school), taking time off work, and in one case, moving house to ensure the girl's safety:

'She [daughter] started to suffer with self-care and depression, but because I have a history of that I nipped that in the bud, but again if it wasn't for me knowing and having people around me who know we would be totally stranded' (Parent 5)

'Waiting for [psychology support] to start for six months, every single night I would sit and cry to [mum] about everything' (Louisa, 15)

'If I hadn't have taken her out [of school due to bullying] she would have been dead by now; her life is more important than her education' (Parent 3)

The girls viewed the emotional support from female caregivers as crucial:

'I was lucky I had my mum to talk to but not everybody has that' (Louisa, 15).

The bond between mothers and daughters in our research was strong; in two cases the mother and daughter spoke of growing closer after the sexual abuse was reported. Simultaneously, mothers were also supporting the wider family, such as caring for other children in the household, speaking to and updating family members and supporting their partners.

Problems with criminal justice system processes

Girls and families outlined their experiences of criminal justice processes and the impact that these had on their wellbeing. We identified four subthemes: Feeling 'trapped' due to investigative processes; lack of police contact; the importance of a named professional and process-driven approaches to investigation.

Feeling 'trapped' due to investigative processes

Girls and mothers outlined feelings of entrapment related to criminal justice procedures, both whilst investigations were ongoing and following case closure. Entrapment was often experienced in relation to living within the same local vicinity as abusers (who were released on bail, or not charged) and girls outlined numerous ways they had adapted their lives to cope with this such as not leaving the house alone (or at all), changing where they shop and only travelling by taxi. Some girls told us that abusers breached bail conditions by coming close to their home *'he just didn't care'* (Bethany, 16), and, in one case, an abuser raped another young woman whilst on bail. Jordan describes her frustration at seeing her abuser walking free on the streets and how she is triggered when she sees him, highlighting the profound effect of his freedom:

'He got no restraining order which I was told there probably would be as well so there's nothing stopping him coming up to me in the street... I just wanted him to have any punishment, I feel like he got a slap on the wrist like 'don't do it again'. I've seen him a couple of times and every time it's the worst trigger I've ever had, it's numbness and I can't move sometimes' (Jordan, 15)

A parent also expressed anger at how her and her families' movements were restricted so she could be sure that they would avoid contact with the abuser and his family, highlighting how she felt her and her family were being punished:

'I don't have a clue why he's out there... he's allowed to go anywhere he likes so that means we're the ones with restrictions because we can't avoid him and it's just injustice it stinks. Literally and metaphorically I am under surveillance. I mean if he's not put in his

box then by virtue of obviousness we are put in a box because one of us has to be kept away from the other, we haven't done anything wrong' (Parent 5)

Lack of police contact

Within our sample, there was a considerable length of time (in some cases several years) between girls reporting sexual abuse and a verdict being given at trial. Whilst waiting for outcomes, girls and their families discussed with us worry, fear and uncertainty about their future, and many were unable to move forward with their lives. One particular concern for families was lack of contact from the police during this time. Though one family had been provided with a direct number to a police officer and described feeling 'lucky' (Parent 4), most struggled with long waits for updates:

'I was talking to a friend in another police force constantly to ask if delays are normal. I had to go to the person below [Chief Constable] to do the chasing. We would ask questions and not hear anything so I would have to ring up and say 'look we asked you this question two weeks ago, where have you been?' [My daughter] constantly felt like she wasn't important because they weren't keeping her updated... they don't have to tell you something new but just to touch base with you' (Parent 5)

'It was a long time to wait, a hell of a long time [January-December] to hear charges were being brought' (Parent 1)

'It's like we're locked in a box and every so often someone will lift the lid and say 'hello are you alright in there?' then close it again' (Parent 2)

Significant periods of waiting for cases to progress had a major impact on families, with one parent saying that the first thing she thought about when she awoke each day was whether her daughter would be okay. Another wanted to book a holiday but was held back due to uncertainties about when her daughter's court date would fall. The large gaps of time that girls and families were waiting to hear from police about their case were anxiety inducing (Warrington *et al.*, 2016) and isolating, leaving families feeling stuck.

The importance of a named professional

Throughout investigation processes, girls were required to recount their abuse numerous times to different professionals, which they found distressing, particularly as they often had no prior relationship with those professionals. Gemma initially felt that speaking about the abuse would be positive, but she changed her mind when she found out she would be required to do this multiple times and with different professionals. Only one girl had a named professional who was taking ownership of their case, and another family told us that we, as researchers, were the first people

in eighteen months who had listened to them and asked how they were feeling. Being able to build up a trusting relationship with the same professionals was important to all of the girls, though seldom experienced. Cheyenne, who experienced this in part, liked having the same police officer stay with her on the day she reported, including accompanying her to the hospital for forensic testing. Girls who were referred to a clinical psychologist or an ISVA also felt that they benefitted from speaking to the same person on a regular basis, though for a number of girls this relationship did not begin until their case had progressed to court. Overall, the experiences of most of the girls were that they were not afforded the opportunity to build up trusting relationships with professionals early on following police reporting.

Process-driven approaches to investigation

Girls emphasised the importance of having choice and control over criminal justice processes, such as reporting when they felt ready and not feeling pressured to take action. By contrast, criminal justice processes were often goal-orientated and time-sensitive, involving gathering information for the purpose of prosecution. Some girls and families described this 'process-driven' way of working as removing control from them and not recognising their emotional needs:

'Originally social services said I'd handled everything fine, no issues, get in touch if you need anything, next thing I know they turned up when I was at rock bottom, house was a mess, it was just like 'what can we put on the list of things you've done wrong?' Not 'we understand we've turned up at a really hard time' you know, none of that at all. I couldn't even stop crying to speak to them you know that crying when there's nothing else you can do, proper gut-wrenching heaving stuff. No compassion, no sympathy, it's all about 'how can I tick those boxes?'" (Parent 5)

'It felt like the police invaded my life, swarmed in, took what they wanted and then bye bye' (Bethany, 16)

Bethany felt pressured to go forward with criminal proceedings after assurances her case would be taken to court and was left feeling deceived when she was informed, after reporting, that the case *may* go to court. These feelings she experienced of coercion, deception and broken promises left her feeling disempowered, and mirrored the abuse. Her experience highlights the downfalls of process-driven approaches to investigation that do not offer control or acknowledge the emotional impact on children and families.

The impact of criminal justice system processes on children and families' wider lives

The abuse that the girls had experienced and their subsequent involvement with the police and criminal justice processes profoundly affected numerous areas of their lives. Three key areas discussed during interviews were: disruption to education; lack of support for girls post-court; and lack of support for parents and the wider family.

Disruption to education

During investigative processes, girls and their mothers described disruption to education such as girls not wanting to attend school due to anxiety, missing classes to attend appointments and bullying/concern over changes to friendships. Only two girls were still attending full-time education, though one was required to forgo classes to attend appointments linked to the investigation and she told us how she felt (internal) pressure to lie to her peers about where she was going. Other girls were attending school on a part-time basis or not at all, having dropped out (or been removed by parents) during investigation proceedings, usually due to being bullied by peers and thus feeling too anxious to attend.

Social media played a large role in girls' disrupted education during investigative processes. Girls and families told us how they had been bullied, received threats from the perpetrator and local community, and experienced reputational damage when others had found out that they had reported abuse. These experiences caused extreme feelings of fear and impacted negatively on mental health. Delilah, for example, who had dropped out of school after the abuse and was scared to go back as she had lost friends due to the abuser being a peer, outlined how she felt punished by police when she was told not to look at upsetting comments on social media:

'I was told not to look at Facebook if I don't like what I see. They [the abuser] should have to change their actions, it's them who should be punished (Delilah, 14)

Other girls also experienced the perpetrator or their family members attending the same school as them. Louisa was sexually assaulted by an older boy in her school who was permanently excluded following the incident. Although staff in school were aware of the assault and were described as generally supportive of Louisa and her family, they did not consider how broader aspects of the school environment could be distressing and re-traumatising for Louisa:

'His [art] work is still up on the wall, I mean I just look up and his name is over everything... I can go into school in a really good mood and everything and to just sit down and just look up, it's just a reminder...it makes us feel small and everything and he's still everywhere' (Louisa, 15)

Overall, investigative systems and processes were not sensitive to the needs of children in relation to their education, particularly in terms of ensuring that they received mental health support to enable them to stay in school, recognising the unique impact on girls if the abuser also attended the same school and being aware of the bullying many young people experience from their peers if investigation details are within the public domain.

Lack of support post-court

Participants recounted how support and contact from criminal justice services ceased at the point that their court case finished, highlighting the negative impact of services being provided over a prescribed period:

'I don't know how I'm going to get my life back. I was just left after the court case, I didn't know what to do' (Bethany, 16)

Being left with no further contact from the systems they had been heavily involved with for long periods of time created numerous issues for the girls such as concerns about seeing the abuser or their family, anxiety about leaving the house and ongoing mental health struggles. Louisa told us that she would be moving away to university as she wanted to leave the area, mentioning that she knew that the abuser (who was in prison) would be released back into the area where she lives. Girls told us that they were (or felt they would be) left with emotions that they wished to process post-court and would like the opportunity to be offered a service to support them with this.

Lack of support for parents and wider family

Criminal justice processes did not routinely involve providing therapeutic support to members of girls' families, despite them being affected by the girls' experiences. This meant that families were left to find their own ways to process emotions:

'I had kept sort of a diary, it was more for me to offload from my head' (Parent 1)

In addition to coping themselves, mothers discussed the impact of the abuse and investigation processes on non-abusing male caregivers, who they described as struggling with depression, anger and guilt:

'He just cries all the time' (Parent 2)

'He struggled to talk about it' (Parent 4)

The struggles of male caregivers during investigation proceedings led to further impact on families, such as divorce, difficulties in emotionally supporting their daughters, and criminal actions and convictions. Siblings were also often aware of the abuse and investigation processes, attended the same school as the abuser and/or their friends whilst investigations were ongoing and received threats towards them or their family. However, therapeutic support was only offered to a sibling in one family. His mother (parent 6) described how her son received clinical psychology provision; however, she did not feel that it was regular enough (monthly) to help him to feel supported to cope with the impact of the investigation.

Discussion

Children who have experienced abuse are a disempowered and silenced group (Jessiman, Hackett and Carpenter, 2017), with the intervention of services having 'the potential to mitigate or exacerbate harm' (Children's Commissioner, 2015, p.78). It is therefore crucial that platforms are provided for children to have their voices heard and responded to. Our findings contribute to

the limited pool of existing research that offers this, by presenting the experiences of a group of girls and their mothers whose voices highlight vital considerations for practice.

The lack of therapeutic support offered to girls and families was found to be problematic within this research. Existing studies have discussed the negative emotional impact on children of not having consistent access to therapy following CJS reporting and advocated that this must be addressed as a 'matter of urgency' (Warrington *et al.*, 2016, p.137). A report by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (2017) outlines the ongoing impact of abuse, highlighting that though survivors felt that seeking justice via the CJS would bring closure, they continued to experience painful emotions afterwards. This research and our current study highlight the pervasive effect of abuse on survivors both during and following involvement with the CJS and demonstrate the importance of therapeutic support being available throughout.

In the absence of professional therapeutic support, mothers in our research supported girls emotionally, which girls viewed as a lifeline. Research has highlighted the significant role of non-abusing caregivers (usually mothers) in providing unconditional love and support to children who have experienced abuse (Bolen, Dessel & Sutter, 2015; Clevenger, 2015; Warrington *et al.*, 2016) and our research endorses this. It is, however, problematic that mothers were providing what was often the sole source of support received by girls. Being offered timely access to therapeutic services can help to mitigate (sometimes lifelong - Fergusson, McLeod, & Horwood, 2013) mental health problems for children and young people (Alaggia, Colliun- Vézina & Lateef, 2017) and when girls and mothers received professional therapeutic support in the current research, most commonly in the form of interventions from a clinical psychologist, they reported increases in wellbeing. Previous research has suggested that professionals being trauma and CSA informed is important to survivors (Gekoski *et al.*, 2020) alongside traits such as being genuine, fun and non-pressuring Allnock *et al.*, 2015; Brown & Lent, 2008; Jensen *et al.*, 2010; Jessiman, Hackett & Carpenter, 2017; McNeish & Scott, 2018); traits which were also mentioned as positive by participants in the current study.

Therapeutic support was not only necessary to support children and families with their experience of the abuse, but it also played a role in helping them to navigate and cope with the demands of the complex criminal justice processes they then were involved in. Girls and mothers described how they felt 'trapped' due to investigative processes, which they most commonly experienced when they were living in the same area as the offender. Girls reported high levels of stress and anxiety around seeing the abuser (Fisher *et al.*, 2017; Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2017) and outlined numerous ways that they had adapted their lives to avoid this. Consequently, girls were often isolated from their peers and communities, in particular compounding the loneliness of those whose education had been disrupted as a direct consequence of the abuse and legal processes. These findings speak to research such as that conducted by Plotnikoff and Woolfson (2009), who noted within their study with young witnesses that 20% felt intimidated by the perpetrator or their family. Similar to our research, they found that intimidation (or fear of intimidation) had a profound effect on some children, leading them to modify their behaviour in ways such as not leaving the house, avoiding particular places, or moving away from their local area.

Participants' feelings of entrapment were worsened by disjointed and ineffective criminal justice processes. Gekoski *et al* (2020) undertook research on behalf of the Independent Inquiry into

Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales and found that the police were rated as the least helpful support service by participants. Research by Butterby (2018) highlights how during criminal justice proceedings, victims' needs may be overlooked and they may feel they have lost control due to 'process-driven' ways of working; like they have opened a 'can of worms' (p.148). Most girls within our research felt a similar way; that they had little choice and control over processes (see also Jessiman, Hackett & Carpenter, 2017; McNeish & Scott, 2018; Warrington *et al.*, 2016), which exacerbated the hold that the abuse had over them. Girls sometimes felt pressured to provide information that would help police to achieve their goal of prosecution and in some instances, police action was different from what girls were led to believe. These discrepancies in CJS action have also been found in previous research, with participants reporting broken promises and regret at involving the crown prosecution service (Woolfson *et al.*, 2009). Additionally, girls told us that they were expected to disclose sensitive information about the sexual abuse to multiple people. As Leander's (2010) study demonstrates, children take time to build up a trusting relationship with professionals before they feel comfortable to disclose, however the current criminal justice processes seldom allow for this. Bar one exception, a named professional was not allocated to families to oversee their case, which meant that they did not have a known person to confide in and speak to if they wanted updates (found as key within McNeish & Scott, 2018).

For all girls, reporting sexual abuse to the police meant that they were not only navigating the intricacies of complex legal systems, but they were also coping with the impact of being part of these systems within their wider lives. A key example of this was disruption to education. The impact of abuse on schooling has been reported within previous research, with suggestions that children who have experienced abuse are anxious about peers and staff finding out, changes to peer dynamics and being unable to cope with the pressure of schoolwork (e.g. Warrington *et al.*, 2016). Our research demonstrates how the impact of abuse and being part of investigative processes made it difficult for girls to remain in full-time education. As most girls were required to wait a number of months or years for their court date, the anxieties they experienced around their schooling were constant, cumulative and pervasive and meant that disruption to education was ongoing.

Non-abusing parents and the wider families' emotional needs were also not routinely considered by legal systems, though existing research highlights that they should receive support – both for their own emotional wellbeing and to help them care for their children (Carpenter *et al.*, 2016; McNeish & Scott, 2018; Warrington *et al.*, 2016). Research suggests that sensitive and effective responses and interventions for parents as well as their children can maximise family resilience (van Toledo & Seymour, 2013). Overall, interviews suggested that police and legal processes focused on investigating and prosecuting the crime and supporting the victim (to some extent), however, broader impacts such as disruption to education and the effect on parents and family may be those that are not commonly considered within criminal justice processes when working with children and families, when the emphasis is often on prosecution as opposed to victim-centered practices and holistic support.

Recommendations for policy and practice

A number of policy and practice recommendations emerged from the findings of the study:

Ensure joined-up, effective processes

Criminal justice processes surrounding child sexual abuse should be as streamlined as possible. Police should provide a named person to take ownership of a case and to give regular updates to the family.

Therapeutic provision for children and caregivers

Immediate, age-appropriate therapeutic support should be offered to children by professionals who have specialist knowledge of sexual abuse to allow children to build a trusting relationship and process difficult emotions. This provision may also remove some of the pressure on mothers and enable them to take on a supportive parental role, rather than being required to act as mother and counsellor. This support should continue when investigations have ceased, recognising that the impact of abuse continues after CJS involvement has ended.

Our research highlights an urgent need for access to therapeutic support for non-abusing parents and caregivers with the aim of improving their mental health and enabling them to support their daughters to the best of their capacity. As previously stated by others (Fisher *et al.*, 2017), more research is needed in order to make specific recommendations for supporting siblings of survivors and non-abusing male caregivers.

'De-abusing' the post-abuse environment

The impact of sexual abuse and investigative processes permeated widely throughout the lives of families and criminal justice services should consider this so that they can provide a sensitive, child-centered response. For example, therapy providers should consider offering flexible appointments out of school hours so that children do not need to choose between therapy and education. Police and schools should also consider the additional complexities when a child lives in the same vicinity as or receives education alongside the person who has abused them, and ensure that victims are consulted as to how they would like to be supported. Partnership working between agencies such as schools, the CJS, therapeutic support services and families will make a significant difference in improving the quality of lives of children and their families after abuse. This 'de-abusing' of the child's whole environment after the sexual abuse has ended should be a priority consideration for police and legal services.

Strengths and limitations

The findings in this research were based on a sample of thirteen girls and mothers who shared powerful narratives, allowing us a unique, in-depth understanding of their perspectives. Children are often not afforded a platform such as this to have their voices heard, and the fact this study offered this is a key strength of the research. Due to the sample size, however, findings may not be generalisable to the wider population.

An obvious limitation of the research is that all participants were female, and male caregivers and siblings of survivors did not opt to participate. Therefore, generalisability to men and boys and the needs of siblings should be made with caution. Interviews were also carried out in a UK context and thus findings may not be applicable to other cultural contexts.

We were mindful that interviewing girls in the presence of their mothers could be viewed as a limitation of the study, as girls may have felt constrained in what they chose to speak about. We found, however, that due to the supportive roles that mothers were playing in the girls lives following abuse, speaking in their presence allowed the girls to feel more comfortable recounting their experiences and thus this became a strength of the research.

Conclusion

This research explores girls and mothers' experiences of the CJS and the impact of investigative processes following the reporting of sexual abuse. It adds weight to the thoughts of others (see Ellis, 2019; Jessiman, Hackett and Carpenter, 2017) highlighting that giving voice to children and carers with abuse experiences is crucial. The research identifies a need for therapeutic support to be offered to children and families as soon as possible after reporting sexual abuse and suggests that they need to be supported emotionally throughout, and beyond, involvement with the CJS. It also draws out the negative impact of disjointed and ineffective 'process-driven' ways of working, which leave little room for children and families to make choices, lacks recognition of emotions involved and fails to take into account the wider impact of abuse on children and families lives. Drawing on the voices of girls and mothers, we suggest that children should be at the centre of processes and decision-making within services. Police and legal systems should demonstrate sensitivity to children's overall experiences, on a micro level. Additionally, the whole system needs to be attuned to these impacts on children and families so that services can work together to provide a helpful and sensitive response. By addressing these issues, it is hoped that police and legal practitioners can adopt a key role in improving responses to these children and their families at a time when they are particularly vulnerable following reporting of child sexual abuse.

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