
safeguarding in public spaces



research report executive summary

saferlondon



Foreword by the Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime

Keeping young people safe and tackling violence against women and girls are two key commitments made in the London Policing and Crime plan earlier this year.

A core priority within this is to reduce harm to children and young people and this has included making Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) a London-wide priority.

We know from the MOPAC and NHS England commissioned London CSE Needs Assessment that peer-on-peer abuse accounts for 55% of all CSE cases in London and up to 85% in some boroughs. We also know that young women are the most affected, and that abuse often takes place outside the family home, with young women experiencing CSE often being reported as missing from home.

In order to protect and safeguard young Londoners we need a better understanding of where young people are at highest risk. The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) are committed to working with the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and other partners to identify these areas. In commissioning the CSE Safeguarding in Public Spaces pilot we have taken steps towards our goal of identifying areas where young people feel least safe.

This important piece of work has highlighted that we need to change and develop our safeguarding procedures to ensure we consider the needs of young people in communal spaces. Our Policing and Crime Plan includes some key initiatives supporting young people, however we know there is always more that can be done.

This report emphasises the need for greater awareness raising on how to recognise and respond to CSE with both the general public as well as professionals in public

spaces. It also shines a light on the crucial role of youth services and Peer Advisors in reaching out to those at risk.

Young people need to have access to people they trust and spaces they feel safe in, in order to feel confident to access the support they need.

We are committed to ensuring that the voices of young Londoners are heard and reflected in the work that we do. I am delighted to have supported this pilot in which young people's engagement was integral at all stages of the work. From the shaping and design of the project and resources, through to the public engagement, the voices of young Londoners can be heard throughout.

This approach has given us unique insight and increased our understanding of young people's views of their own safety in London and what they would like put in place to protect them.

I look forward to working with partners to take forward the recommendations in the report.

Sophie Linden
Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime

executive summary

Safer London's Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)¹ Safeguarding in Public Spaces pilot aimed to scope and evaluate an innovative contextual safeguarding model, applicable in a range of community settings. The initial idea for the project came about after a shopping centre's management team proactively approached Safer London, wanting to improve their young customers' feelings of safety whilst in their shopping centre.

The project built on previous research in the area of contextual safeguarding alongside the experience and knowledge gained from Safer London's work around vulnerable adolescents through its direct services such as Empower.² Contextual safeguarding recognises that the traditional framework of child protection is limited, as the focus is on safeguarding against risk within the family and home. This approach can fail to take into account or adequately address young people's experience of harm beyond the home or from peers. This is particularly the case for vulnerable adolescents.

In London, 55% of CSE is actually committed by perpetrators of similar age to the victim. The 2016 London Sexual Violence Needs Assessment found that peer-on-peer abuse accounts for as much as 85% of CSE in some London boroughs.³

In order to take appropriate action to protect young people, we need to include public spaces in the safeguarding framework. Interventions, together with

support, are required in the places where young people socialise and spend time, such as shopping centres and transport hubs.

Safer London recognises the right of young people to participate in, and influence, decision-making about their lives and wellbeing. We recruited 14 Peer Advisors aged 16-25 who supported the implementation of the project and ensured young people's voices were heard throughout. They co-produced resources, raised awareness about CSE and engaged young people within public spaces about their perceptions of safety. The project comprised four strands:

- peer education,
- supporting and training professionals,
- creating a CSE Safeguarding in Public Spaces Toolkit, and
- research on Awareness and Experiences of CSE in Public Spaces.

¹ The 2017 Home Office definition of CSE is 'Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.' https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/591903/CSE_Guidance_Core_Document_13.02.2017.pdf

² To see a range of research and resources visit <https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/> including: Peer-on-peer abuse: safeguarding implications of contextualising abuse between young people within social fields - Dr Carlene Firmin, University of Bedfordshire (2015) and Towards a Contextual Response to Peer-on-Peer Abuse: Research and Resources from MsUnderstood local site work 2013-2016. Firmin, Curtis, et al (2016).

³ Sexual Violence against Children & Young People. The London Sexual Violence Needs Assessment 2016 for MOPAC & NHS England (London): https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/sexual_violence_against_children_young_people_needs_assessment_report_2016.pdf

The research sought to establish how young people understood CSE, how safe they felt in public spaces and their views on improving safety. It was conducted across four shopping centres in different areas of London, where Safer London Peer Advisors and staff spoke to young people and adults about:

- their awareness of child sexual exploitation,
- their views on young people's safety in shopping centres,
- what help is available for young people in shopping centres, and
- how to improve the safety of young people in public spaces.

In these four shopping centres Peer Advisors interviewed 642 young people and 83 adults capturing a wide range of views and experience.⁴

Key Findings

Overall, Safer London's research uncovered a concerning picture of young people feeling unsafe in public spaces in London, not knowing where to turn for help, as well as adults who felt unable to identify young people at risk from sexual exploitation. We did, however, gather many ideas from young people and adults on how this situation can be improved.



⁴ For the purposes of this research we defined young people as aged 25 or younger, and adults as respondents over 25 years old.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) - Awareness and views

Over half of all young people surveyed had some levels of CSE awareness. Common themes raised included: adults hurting children, online grooming, sexual violence, images (nudes) circulating on the internet, people taking advantage of others and women and girls being exploited. Although not stated explicitly, themes of power and control are threaded through the narrative.

“When young people are made to do sexual things. Not consent.” [Young person]

“When you feel intimidated and someone tries to touch you in a sexual way.” [Young person]

“Children exploited for sexual things, don’t know how to describe. By adults, could be by other young people too.” [Adult participant]

68% of young people we interviewed knew of young people being approached and filmed in shopping centres with sexual comments or judgements about them (known as ‘baiting out skets’). These videos are then uploaded onto YouTube without consent from the individual being commented on. The vast majority of young people said this was unacceptable, and spoke about the negative impact such videos can have on a young person’s school life, mental health and safety.

“They (the young women in these videos) feel horrible. Happened to a girl in my school and she didn’t come in for months.” [Young person]

“It’s dangerous – labels stick for life.” [Young person]

A small minority of young people said they thought the videos were okay, as “its entertainment”; however, they still acknowledged that the videos invaded young women’s personal privacy.

Responses by adults demonstrated that, whilst 80% had heard of CSE before, **less than half felt able to identify young people at risk of, or experiencing, sexual exploitation.**

Over a quarter of adults who participated in Safer London’s survey said they have witnessed something in shopping centres that would make them think that a young person is at risk of CSE. Adult understanding of CSE was generally informed by the media and related to adult perpetrators rather than peer-on-peer abuse. Responses also demonstrated some victim-blaming attitudes, in particular towards young women:

“Some young women come to the shopping centre really tarted up. I just saw one up there with her clothes and make-up.” [Adult participant]

The majority of adults also said that they think it is the parents’ responsibility to keep young people safe in shopping centres, despite most young people coming to public spaces alone or with their friends. This highlights a general lack of awareness that it is everyone’s duty to safeguard young people and signals a real need to raise awareness about peer-on-peer abuse and safeguarding in public spaces.

Safety in shopping centres

Safer London found that approximately **one in four (23%) young people reported they had felt uncomfortable, intimidated or scared whilst in shopping centres.** Young women were particularly affected: around one in three young women (29%) reporting this, compared with approximately one in six young men (14%).

Young women described experiences of sexual harassment, including being approached by groups, being grabbed, and people taking photos of them:

“Groups of guys coming up to you and following you around even if you say no, and making sexual comments to you.” [Young woman]

“One of the themes that came up often was mostly young females who said that sometimes they didn’t feel safe in the shopping centre [...]. Generally they talked about older boys being loud and dominant, not necessarily aggressive, but it made them feel vulnerable.” [Peer Advisor]

Nowhere to go

Alarming, young people reported that if they were in trouble, they wouldn't know what to do or where to go. 54% of young people told us that they thought there was no help available in shopping centres, or if there was help available they didn't feel confident they could ask for it. This was often attributed to the perceived attitudes of adults or staff:

*"Security don't care ... only stop shoplifters."
[Young person]*

"Victim-blaming so kids would not be able to talk to anyone." [Young person]

"Older generation looking at us in a certain way just because we are young." [Young person]

When asked what they would do if someone was harassing and/or filming them in shopping centres, young people most commonly answered that they would confront the person/group themselves or leave the area.

Over one third of young people didn't think there was somewhere they could go if they were unsafe, and would instead seek out alternative places:

"Many young people said that if they feel unsafe they would go to the toilets or a store, or somewhere more crowded, but that doesn't mean that they'll be safe because they're not telling anyone or asking anyone for help, so they go somewhere else, but no one knows you're in trouble." [Peer Advisor]

Adult respondents also had concerns about levels of safety in public spaces, including reports of parents not allowing their teenage children to go to shopping centres, particularly on their own.

Improving Safety

Our results showed that young people often felt that there was no one to talk to and nowhere to go if they felt unsafe. Unsurprisingly then, the main things young people called for were:

- Safe spaces, hubs or help desks specifically for young people:
"Places that you could go if something was happening." [Young person]
- Approachable security and staff:
"Security has to be less suspicious and more welcoming." [Young person]
- Youth workers/peer advisors who they could talk to and who would understand them:
"After school young people congregate here and no one understands them." [Young person]
- Both male and female staff being available – almost half of young women had a preference for a female adult to speak to:
"[Women] understand more." [Female participant]

Adult survey participants echoed many of these ideas, together with Youth Workers being available, raising awareness and displaying key information in public spaces. As part of this pilot, Safer London delivered training to shopping centre staff. Participants included security and cleaning teams and car park attendants. The training proved to be beneficial in improving staff's understanding of CSE and in building their confidence to intervene:

"The teams are more aware about these issues and said it was very helpful when dealing with young people; now they're thinking about it and being more aware, they think, 'what if this is something else, what if there are deeper issues?' and they speak to someone about their concern, so it was an eye-opener really." [Marketing Manager, The Mall, Walthamstow]

Recommendations

- **All staff in public spaces such as shopping centres should be trained in safeguarding, including how to respond to CSE.** This needs to go beyond the traditional security enforcement, and health and safety approach that currently exists.
- **Policies and procedures on safeguarding and CSE are needed in all shopping centres, including designated safeguarding leads and CSE champions.** This approach is also needed in other public spaces such as transport hubs, leisure spaces and parks. Staff must be trained to understand the importance of these policies and how to implement them.
- **All public spaces should have a designated and clearly signposted safe place for young people which they can go to should they feel unsafe or concerned.**
- **Places where young people, particularly young women, go to when they feel unsafe (such as cafés, shops or toilets) should have information readily available with details of safe spaces, advice and helplines.** Alongside this information, they should be reassured that security or local staff are trained and able to provide support.
- **Investment is needed so that the Youth and Voluntary Sector can have an in-person presence (either Youth Workers or Peer Advisors) in public spaces that can deliver outreach, including gender-specific support, developed in partnership with young people and relevant staff.**
- **Businesses operating in public spaces need to be engaged and encouraged to participate in the creation of safe spaces, working alongside and involving young people.**
- **A public awareness campaign is needed to build a better understanding of CSE and challenge some of the negative attitudes towards young people, especially young women.** The campaign should highlight that it is everyone's duty to safeguard young people, and that peer-on-peer abuse is a real concern in public spaces.

The full report, together with the toolkit can be downloaded on our website using the following links:

CSE full research report:

http://saferlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Final-research-report_271017-low-res.pdf

Toolkit:

http://saferlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CSE_Toolkit.pdf

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