

The Extent and Nature of Known Cases of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse

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Summary

The sexual abuse of children by persons who work with them—institutional abuse—is a focus of major concern among policy makers, practitioners and the public. Despite this, knowledge about it remains limited. This paper presents findings from a study of institutional abuse cases referred to social service departments or the police in eight local authority areas. While such cases were relatively uncommon and constituted a small proportion of all child protection referrals, some involved large numbers of victims and abusers. Institutional abuse cases in the present study shared some characteristics with the majority of (intrafamilial) abuse cases, but there were also important differences, such as the proportion of male victims and the extent to which abusers used techniques of targeting and entrapment. Contrary to media representations, the institutional abuse reported here was not just a problem of children's homes, social work or the public sector, but occurred in a wide variety of settings and sectors and was perpetrated by a range of occupational groups. If all children are to be protected, then policy and practice measures to prevent abuse need to be directed towards a much wider range of institutions.

The sexual abuse of children by persons who work with them—institutional abuse—has been one of the most challenging issues to confront social work in the past decade (Stanley *et al.*, 1999). A good deal of the concern has focused upon abuse in children's homes (Corby *et al.*, 1998a). However, these are not the only residential institutions in which children have been sexually abused. Cases have also been

reported in residential special schools (Brannan *et al.*, 1993) and independent boarding schools (La Fontaine and Morris, 1991). Neither has institutional abuse been confined to residential establishments. Allegations have been made in a wide range of institutions serving the community, including nursery schools (Hunt, 1994), churches (Moore, 1995) and voluntary organizations (Smith, 1993). It is likely that sexual abuse has occurred in most, if not all, types of institution for children.

Central government has, over the past ten years, responded to the problem of institutional abuse in a number of ways. These include legislation (see the 1989 Children Act in particular, and its accompanying guidance and regulations relating, for example, to residential and day-care facilities, Department of Health, 1991a, 1991b); official reviews (such as Utting, 1991 and Warner, 1992); inquiry reports (see Corby *et al.*, 1998b, for a comprehensive account); and a range of special measures including, for instance, the setting up of the Support Force for Children's Residential Care (Cervi, 1993) to advise local authorities on the development of residential child-care services.

Amidst continuing, if not increasing, disquiet over institutional abuse, it is possible to identify, in recent years, the development of two major strands in policy. The first of these is broadly concerned with child-care practice. A prime example is embodied in the measures proposed by the government in the wake of the Utting (1997) review of safeguards for children living away from home. These include a complaints system for children in boarding schools, the registration of independent fostering agencies, and the provision of information to parents. A second major initiative is the Quality Protects programme (Department of Health, 1998a), central to which is the expectation that local authorities can enhance the protection of 'looked after' children by raising the standards of the care they provide to them. Further protection is to be offered to children through the White Paper, *Modernising Social Services* (Department of Health, 1998b), one key aspect of which is the setting up of eight Regional Commissions for Care Standards to strengthen the inspection and registration of a variety of children's institutions. The most recent draft of *Working Together* (Department of Health *et al.*, 1999) serves to reinforce many of these initiatives from an inter-agency perspective.

The second major strand of government policy has been concerned more with abusers and, in particular, efforts to prevent them gaining access to children. Chief among these is the setting up, under the 1997 Police Act, of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) which is intended to provide a more efficient and effective means of carrying out criminal record checks. Under the 1999 Protection of Children Act, it is intended to combine the existing Department for Education and Employment 'List 99' and the Department of Health Consultancy Service Index into the single mechanism of the CRB, thereby providing a 'one-stop-shop' for employers to check whether those who wish to work with children are known or suspected abusers. Furthermore, the areas in which abusers are to be banned from working with children are to be extended to include, among others, accommodation, and leisure and sporting activities. Following the recommendations of an inter-departmental working group, the government has also proposed making it a criminal offence for convicted

abusers to apply to work with children or for employers knowingly to appoint such persons (*Community Care*, 29 July 1999, p. 5).

Research appears to suggest that institutional abuse is a small but significant problem. Nunno (1992), for example, in a study of 'looked after' children in the United States found that there were 158 reports of maltreatment for every 1,000 children. McFadden and Ryan (1992) showed that allegations against foster parents in five states varied from 2 to 28 per 1,000 foster families. Other research indicates that allegations of institutional abuse make up a small proportion of all reports. Finkelhor *et al.* (1988) in their study of abuse in 'daycare' found that these cases accounted for 1 per cent of child sexual abuse (CSA) reports. Conversely, Booth and Horowitz (1992) found that cases of abuse among 'looked after' children in Sydney, Australia made up 9 per cent of all CSA allegations. Other studies have focused upon the characteristics of cases, especially in relation to victims. Westcott and Clement (1992), for example, suggested that boys were most at risk in residential schools but girls in children's homes. McFadden and Ryan (1992) found that the group most at risk of sexual abuse in foster homes was adolescent girls. They found that 83 per cent of victims were female and their mean age was 13.8 years.

Despite studies such as these, there are major problems with our knowledge of institutional abuse. The main reason is that there has been relatively little research in this area. Where research has been carried out, much of it has focused upon narrow groups of children, especially 'looked after' children and those with disabilities. In addition, many of the studies have been carried out abroad, raising issues as to how fully the findings can be applied to this country. A further difficulty is that much of what is known about institutional abuse derives from case studies and official reports. While these are undoubtedly of value, there is an issue as to how far one can generalize from them.

Overall, knowledge of institutional abuse is thin, even in respect of its most basic aspects; namely, its extent and nature. This means that policy and practice may not be as well informed as they should be, leading to questions about the efficacy of the measures which have been implemented. It is the aim of this paper to address some of the shortfalls in knowledge by presenting the results of a major study into known cases of institutional abuse.

Methodology

Definition

For the purposes of this research, institutional abuse was defined as:

The sexual abuse of a child (under 18 year of age) by an adult who works with him or her. The perpetrator may be employed in a paid or voluntary capacity; in the public, voluntary or private sector; in a residential or non-residential setting; and may work either directly with children or be in an ancillary role.

Thus, in addition to including abuse in residential settings such as children's homes and boarding schools, the research sought to incorporate cases which occurred in

foster care, along with those in a range of community-based 'institutions', such as schools, clubs for children and childminders' homes.

The author recognizes that this is a broad definition and one with which some colleagues may take issue. However, it is felt to be justified on a number of grounds. First, all the adults to which this definition applies share the same basic relationship with children, in that they are involved with them in a 'work' capacity. Secondly, this definition is put forward on pedagogic grounds. The author believes that an understanding of institutional abuse should begin with an analysis of cases drawn from a diverse range of settings—subsequent to which issues can be refined—rather than prejudging those issues and arguing that only a narrow set of children are involved, such as those who are 'looked after' or in residential institutions. Finally, it is felt that this definition is in line with current trends, particularly in respect of government policy which, as argued above, is taking an increasingly broad interpretation as to what constitutes 'working with children'.

Sample

Cases of institutional abuse were identified through searches of child protection records held by social service departments and the police in eight English and Welsh local authorities. The eight areas were selected to be representative of England and Wales in terms of a number of factors, including 'regions' (using a modified version of the Registrar General's Standard Regions (Dale and Marsh, 1993) and type of local authority. The resultant distribution of authorities is shown in Table 1.

The eight areas (combined) were compared with England and Wales as a whole on a number of key demographic and socio-economic variables, using Census data (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1992). Table 2 shows that, in terms of these measures, the eight areas were broadly representative of England and Wales.

Case identification

Searches were conducted among the records for all child protection referrals which had been made to social services or the police from January 1988 to December 1992

Table 1 Local authorities in which child protection records were searched

Area	Type of authority	Region
1	Shire county	South-East and East Anglia
2	Shire county	North-West
3	Metropolitan	Yorkshire and Humberside
4	Metropolitan	London
5	Shire county	Wales
6	Shire county	South-West
7	Metropolitan	North
8	Metropolitan	Midlands

Table 2 Comparison of eight areas (combined) and England and Wales on demographic and socio-economic variables

Variable	Eight areas %	England and Wales %
Under 18-year olds in population	22.6	22.6
Local authority housing	22.8	19.8
Single parent household	4.0	3.7
Ethnically white population	94.2	94.1
Male unemployment	9.8	9.7

inclusive. The record searches took place between March 1992 and October 1993. Approximately 20,000 files were searched.

For a case to be included in the research there had to be information in the file to substantiate both that a child had been sexually abused, and that the abuse had been committed by a worker in the institution which the victim attended or where he or she lived. The most common form of evidence was a disclosure by a victim. Other forms of evidence included physical symptoms, admission by perpetrators, witness statements and pornographic photographs of children.

Researchers did not, in the course of searching files, attempt to interpret what had occurred in a case but were guided solely by the written statements of agency workers. If the latter judged that the evidence was indicative of CSA by a staff member of the institution, then the researchers accepted this. Conversely, if an agency worker expressed doubt over, or rejected, suspicions of institutional abuse, then the case was not included in the research. In the main, agency workers rarely questioned the veracity of 'a case', especially where children had made disclosures. Having said this (and exercising a degree of caution on account of the small numbers involved), there was some evidence of differences between institutions, with agency workers being more prone to raise queries in respect of children in foster homes.

Results

The extent of institutional abuse

Incidence

The record searches identified a total of 65 substantiated cases of institutional abuse across the eight local authorities in the five years from 1988 to 1992. There was, then, an average of 13 cases per annum, or 1.6 cases per local authority per annum. The eight local authorities combined accounted for approximately 7 per cent of the population of England and Wales (the precise percentage is withheld in the interests of confidentiality). If the findings from the eight areas were typical of the country as a whole, then, in the same five-year period, there would have been between 920 and 930 cases of institutional abuse in England and Wales, or about 185 cases per annum.

During the course of the fieldwork, a record was kept of the total number of social service and police files searched. The substantiated institutional abuse cases

accounted for 1 per cent of all child protection referrals to social services, and 3 per cent of CSA referrals. The equivalent figures for the police were 1 and 2 per cent respectively.

These figures suggest that the sexual abuse of children in institutions is not a statistically major problem. It should be stressed, though, that this study was based upon *referred* cases. Victimization surveys have found that very few cases become known to social services or the police. Kelly *et al.* (1991), for example, found that 5 per cent of sexual abuse cases were referred to any agency. Furthermore, only those cases where allegations or suspicions could be substantiated were included in this analysis. Therefore, the incidence of *all* institutional abuse is likely to be much greater than that implied by these figures for referred and substantiated cases.

Types of institution

Cases were found to have occurred in three main types of setting: community-based institutions, foster homes and residential establishments. Table 3 shows that community-based institutions accounted for the largest number of cases although abuse by foster parents also made up a sizeable proportion of cases. From these results it would seem that—contrary to impressions created by media reports—residential institutions, which include children's homes, make up a relatively small proportion of institutional abuse cases.

As institutional abuse is the subject of considerable official and public concern, it is important that these research findings are interpreted in as accurate a manner as possible. With this in mind, it was felt that a number of caveats should be highlighted before presenting further findings.

The first concerns the representativeness of the data. As already emphasized, this study is based upon referred cases. As a number of studies have suggested (e.g. Jones, 1994), the likelihood of detecting abuse varies between different types of institution, being particularly low in establishments for 'looked after' and special needs children. Thus, the figures presented here probably underestimate the extent of abuse in residential institutions, and possibly also in foster homes, relative to that in community-based ones.

Secondly, the incidence of abuse in a particular type of institution, as measured by this research, will have depended to a degree upon the number of those institutions that existed in the eight fieldwork areas. Although it was not possible to gather this information in full for the eight areas, there would clearly have been major

Table 3 Categorization of cases of institutional CSA

Type of institution	<i>n</i>	%
Community-based	34	52
Foster home	22	34
Residential	9	14
Total cases	(65)	100

differences in the total number of each type of institution. This is reflected in national figures. For example, while there are 23,000 state primary schools in the country (NCH Action for Children, 1998), the total number of children's homes is only 1,186 (Utting, 1997). Therefore, in interpreting these findings it is essential to bear in mind that baseline figures may vary considerably according to type of institution (Table 4), occupational group (Table 5) and sector (Table 6).

The final caveat concerns the analysis of subsets of data. Having obtained the sample, it was recognized that cases of institutional abuse could be assigned to one of three major categories: community-based institutions, foster homes and residential establishments. As each of these categories is quite distinctive, it was felt that most of the subsequent findings should be presented on the basis of this classification. However, this means that some of the analyses are based upon quite small numbers and they should, therefore, be treated with a degree of caution.

Table 4 indicates the specific type of institution in which community and residential cases occurred. Schools were the most common setting for community-based cases, making up almost one-half of the total in this category. The second largest group of community-based cases, making up one-fifth of the total, occurred within private residences. This finding is mostly explained by cases involving music tutors who abused children during the course of lessons, usually within their own homes. The other major setting for these cases were voluntary organizations, such as the Scouts, youth clubs and sports clubs.

There was a similar degree of diversity within residential institutions, with cases being reported, for example, in children's homes, special schools and boarding schools. What was particularly striking about these figures was that children's homes accounted for only a minority (33 per cent) of all residential cases, and an even smaller proportion (5 per cent) of all institutional abuse cases.

Table 4 Types of institution

Institution	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Community</i>		
School	15	44
Abuser or victim's home*	7	21
Voluntary club	6	18
Religious building	3	9
Playscheme	2	6
Family centre	1	3
Total cases	(34)	100
<i>Residential</i>		
Children's home	3	33
Special school	3	33
Boarding school	2	22
Hostel for homeless young people	1	11
Total cases	(9)	100

* Some children were abused in the home of their childminder or music tutor, or in their own home by a music tutor

Occupations

Table 5 lists the occupations of abusers in community and residential cases. The largest group of abusers in community institutions were teachers and headteachers. Two other groups were of note: (private) music tutors and religious workers, making up 15 and 9 per cent of cases respectively. In addition, two of the ten school teachers taught music and two of the voluntary organizations were based in churches. As to why these two occupational groups or contexts should feature so prominently—other than by dint of their extent in the general population—is unclear. In the case of music tutors it may be related to the fact that much of their interaction with children takes place on a one-to-one basis. In respect of clerics it may be due to the authority they are able to wield over children.

Just as Table 4 showed that institutional abuse is not just a problem of children's homes, so Table 5 shows that it is not just a problem of social work, either. Although social workers accounted for a majority of the abusers in residential establishments, in terms of institutional abuse overall they featured in only 8 per cent of cases. This compares, for example, with the 25 per cent of cases where the abuser had a formal connection with the education system (ten community-based teachers, three residential teachers, three community-based 'support staff'). Having said this, it must be remembered that the single biggest occupational group among institutional abusers were foster parents, accounting for 34 per cent of cases. Thus, institutional abuse

Table 5 Abusers' occupation

Occupation	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Community-based</i>		
Teacher/headteacher	10	29
Music tutor	5	14
Cleric*	3	9
Scoutleader	3	9
Childminder	2	6
Youth club worker	2	6
Playscheme worker	2	6
School volunteer	1	3
Family centre worker	1	3
Gym club instructor	1	3
Photographer (schools)	1	3
Education welfare officer	1	3
School caretaker	1	3
Schools liaison officer	1	3
Children's entertainer	1	3
Total abusers	(35)	100
Not known**	(8)	–
<i>Residential</i>		
Social worker	5	56
Teacher	3	33
Hostel worker	1	11
Total abusers	(9)	100

*These clerics were from a range of religious faiths; namely, Catholic, Jewish and Sikh

** Six of these perpetrators were co-abusers of one of the childminders and two were co-abusers of one of the playscheme workers

does have major implications for social work albeit, perhaps, more in terms of foster care than residential care.

Sector

Table 6 indicates the sectors from which institutional abuse cases were drawn. In the light of the above discussion, it is not surprising that the large majority of cases (62 per cent) occurred in the public sector. However, a sizeable proportion—over a third—were known to have occurred outside the public sector. For example, almost one-fifth of cases occurred in privately-owned institutions, incorporating occupations such as music tutor, boarding school teacher and childminder.

It could be argued that ‘religious’ and ‘voluntary (church-based)’ cases should have been listed under ‘voluntary’. Had this been done, this category would have been the joint second largest, accounting for 19 per cent of all cases. As has been demonstrated in respect of the Catholic church (Moore, 1995), for example, the response of some religious authorities to cases of child abuse has been a source of particular controversy. In view of this, it was believed to be important to separate out the extent of abuse in these settings.

Nature of cases

Victims

Table 7 shows that most cases of institutional abuse involved a single victim. That the cases in this study involved small numbers of victims, in contrast to the large numbers of children in some of the high profile residential abuse cases (Merseyside Police *et al.*, 1999), is probably due to a number of factors. These include abusers, such as music tutors, having access to fewer children; the lower levels of control abusers were able to exert over children, particularly in community-based institutions; and the sexual predilection of abusers. Having said this, the research cannot make any allowance for undetected victims, of which there were bound to have been some.

What was also notable about these findings was that the largest cases did not occur in residential establishments, as might have been expected, but in community-

Table 6 Sectors in which institutional abuse cases were based

Sector	Community %	Foster %	Residential %	Total %
Public	42	91	62	62
Private	24	9	25	19
Voluntary	18	–	12	11
Religious	9	–	–	5
Voluntary (church-based)	6	–	–	3
Total cases (=100%)	(33)	(22)	(8)	(63)
Not known	(1)	(–)	(1)	(2)

Table 7 Numbers of victims

Number	Community %	Foster %	Residential %	Total %
1	36	68	87	54
2	24	27	–	22
3	9	5	–	6
4	12	–	–	6
5–9	9	–	13	6
10+	9	–	–	5
Total cases (=100%)	(33)	(22)	(8)	(63)
Not known	(1)	(–)	(1)	(2)

based institutions. The three largest cases occurred in a voluntary family-centre (30 victims), a primary school (22 victims), and a church-based youth club (11 victims). Similarly, community institutions had the highest proportion of multiple victim cases: 63 per cent compared to 32 per cent of foster homes and 13 per cent of residential establishments. It is likely that the difference between community institutions and foster homes was due to the former providing access to greater numbers of children. However, if this was the sole factor, then higher numbers of victims would have been predicted for residential institutions. Neither does this finding appear to be related to the tendency, identified in some studies (for example, Rowlands, 1995), for perpetrators to abuse boys in groups but girls singly. As shown in Table 8, the largest number of community-based cases were those involving girls only. Similarly, two of the three largest cases in the study—the primary school and the church-based youth club—comprised girls only. Thus, the explanation for this finding remains unclear.

Table 8 reveals that in community-based institutions, and in institutional abuse cases overall, the number of girls-only cases slightly exceeded those involving boys only. By contrast, foster homes and residential institutions represented two extremes. In foster homes, an overwhelming majority of cases involved only girls, whereas in residential institutions most cases involved only boys. Without knowing the total population of girls and boys in foster homes and residential institutions in the eight areas, it is impossible to put these figures into their proper context. It is unlikely, though that this finding is due entirely to there being more girls in foster care and more boys in residential institutions. As suggested below, it appears that perpetrators were very specific in the gender of the children they abused. It is quite probable that they targeted particular institutions in the knowledge that this would give them access to children of the gender they wished to abuse.

Ninety-two per cent of cases involved children from only one gender group. This finding is to be expected, in part, since one-half of all cases involved only one victim. Even taking this into account the specificity on the part of abusers as to the gender of their victims was striking. The existence of single-sex institutions did not appear to be a significant factor in explaining this finding. The three largest cases—each of which involved children of the same gender—all took place in mixed-sex institutions.

Table 8 Gender of victims

Gender	Community %	Foster %	Residential %	Total %
Girls only	50	62	22	50
Boys only	44	24	78	42
Girls and boys	6	14	–	8
Total cases (=100%)	(32)	(21)	(9)	(62)
Not known	(2)	(1)	(–)	(3)

In the course of the file searches, the victim’s age was recorded at the points when the abuse started, stopped and was referred to an agency. Information concerning ‘start’ and ‘stop’ dates was frequently missing. Consequently, the following analysis is restricted to the child’s age when the abuse was referred. As Table 9 shows, the majority (55 per cent) of children were in the oldest age band; specifically, young people aged 12–17 years.

The age of victims in these cases was, of course, delimited by the age group for which the institution catered. Having said this, it is still possible to make some worthwhile observations on the age of victims in institutional abuse cases. First, victims of institutional abuse tend to be somewhat older. This is to be expected since many institutions and contexts, such as schools, voluntary clubs and music teaching, have minimum age limits for accepting children. At the same time, some children were quite young when they were abused. The abuse to 23 children in community-based institutions, for example, was reported when they were between the ages of 6 and 11 years. All these children would have been abused between, or below, these ages. They accounted for 38 per cent of victims in community institutions whose ages were known. Two further ‘community victims’ were abused below the age of 6 years. In common with the inquiries into abuse in Newcastle nurseries (Hunt, 1994; Barker, *et al.*, 1998), this research has shown that institutional abuse can involve very young children.

Abusers

The overwhelming majority (92 per cent) of institutional abuse cases, as shown in Table 10, involved abusers who acted alone. Interestingly—in the light of reported cases of organized abuse in children’s homes (Gallagher *et al.*, 1996)—multiple

Table 9 Age of children at time of referral

Age	Community %	Foster %	Residential %	Total %
0–5	3	27	–	9
6–11	38	27	27	34
12–17	57	42	73	55
18+	2	4	–	2
Total children (=100%)	(60)	(26)	(11)	(97)
Not known	(75)	(4)	(1)	(82)

perpetrators did not feature in any of the residential establishments identified in this research, although it must be acknowledged that this particular finding is based upon a small number of cases.

Whilst relatively rare, multiple abuser cases were quite diverse. This is well illustrated by the three community-based cases. The first of these consisted of two Scout leaders who abused three adolescent boys. The second case initially involved one perpetrator who abused a boy with learning disabilities whom he met whilst working on a holiday playscheme run by a voluntary organization in the Home Counties. (This man was also employed in a local authority nursery in London.) He then got this boy to introduce him to his friends whom he subsequently abused. After this, the perpetrator arranged for his two co-abusers to sexually assault these children. These three men comprised what might be thought of as the typical 'paedophile ring'. The third case centred around a female childminder who sexually abused her neighbour's four children and two of her own children. She appeared to be the 'ring-leader' of a group of abusers comprising her adult daughter and her own cohabitee, and four other abusers living in the same town to whose homes she took the children to be abused.

Two of the foster cases were perpetrated by multiple abusers. One case comprised both foster parents while the other involved the foster father and his adult stepson. The total number of abusers in foster homes was, though, considerably higher than these figures would imply. In three cases—initially involving allegations against a foster father—the investigation went on to uncover sexual abuse by a second perpetrator acting independently. Two of these perpetrators were the birth sons of the original abuser, and one was a stepson. In two cases, the perpetrators abused the same child as the foster father, and, in the third case, a sibling of the original victim was abused.

In a further two cases, there were indications in the file that a foster parent had had one or more co-abusers. As this information was not sufficiently clear regarding the number, identity and role of these other persons, they were not included in the main analysis. However, taking into account all the cases where it was known, or suspected, that there was more than one person sexually abusing children, then 32 per cent of foster cases could be said to have had an element of 'multiple perpetrator' abuse.

In common with cases of CSA in general (Creighton, 1992), the vast majority of abusers were male. As Table 11 shows, 96 per cent of institutional abusers were male. The three female abusers were drawn from only two cases. One of these cases

Table 10 Number of abusers

Number	Community %	Foster %	Residential %	Total %
1	91	91	100	92
2	3	9	–	5
3	3	–	–	2
7	3	–	–	22
Total cases (=100%)	(34)	(22)	(9)	(65)

involved a foster mother acting in concert with the foster father. The other case involved the female childminder and her adult daughter referred to above.

In common with victims, a good deal of information concerning the age of perpetrators, especially at the points when the abuse commenced and ceased, was missing. Therefore, the following discussion is again restricted to the age of perpetrators when the case was referred. (In order to avoid excessively small numbers in some cells, the three main institutional abuse categories are combined in this analysis.) Table 12 reveals that the largest group of abusers were those aged 40–49 years. Determining what these data mean in terms of abuser characteristics is difficult as they are influenced by a number of ‘extraneous’ factors, such as the time taken to detect cases and the age distribution of those working with children. Having said this, it is at least clear that institutional abusers are drawn from a broad spectrum of ages. In the community-based cases, for example, one of the perpetrators (a playscheme worker) was 24 years of age and another (a music tutor) was 71 years of age when the abuse was referred. In both these cases, victims were still in contact with the perpetrator when the abuse was detected.

Targeting

One of the issues to have been highlighted in the literature on extrafamilial abuse is the targeting of ‘vulnerable’ groups of children, by perpetrators, in the belief that they are more susceptible to being abused and less likely to disclose it (Gallagher, 1998). In the context of this study, the only vulnerabilities which were recorded in agency files in any systematic manner were those relating to special needs and previous maltreatment.

Table 13 shows that special needs were recorded for one or more victims in a

Table 11 Gender of abusers

Gender	Community %	Foster %	Residential %	Total %
Male	95	96	100	96
Female	5	4	–	4
Total abusers (=100%)	(43)	(24)	(9)	(76)

Table 12 Age of abusers at time of referral (all institutions combined)

Age (years)	<i>n</i>	%
19	1	2
20–29	6	13
30–39	9	20
40–49	16	35
50–59	10	22
60–69	2	4
70–79	2	4
Total abusers	(46)	100
Not known	(30)	–

small minority (17 per cent) of all institutional abuse cases. That some victims had special needs was, to some extent, predictable, as some of the abuse took place in institutions catering for this group of children. However, this does not necessarily mean that the degree of targeting was any the less. What it may signify is that abusers were targeting entire institutions as much as individual children.

Another means of exploring the issue of targeting is by considering community-based institutions. There were five community-based institutions in which at least one of the victims had special needs. Three of these institutions—a primary school, a holiday playscheme and a church-based youth club—catered for children from the general population. In the absence of information on the numbers and proportion of all the children with special needs in a given institution to which the abusers had access, it is difficult to be categorical as to the extent to which this group was targeted. Having said this, the findings in respect of community-based institutions would seem to provide some evidence in support of this contention.

Table 14 reveals the nature of special needs among these victims. Two types of special need were particularly common: learning disability and challenging behaviour, recorded in 70 and 50 per cent of cases respectively.

Table 15 indicates that, in approximately one-third of all cases, at least one victim was known to have experienced some form of maltreatment prior to being sexually abused within an institution. This earlier maltreatment invariably occurred within a family setting. The proportion of cases in foster homes and residential establishments where victims had been maltreated previously was particularly high, at 55 and 44 per cent respectively. Given the nature of these institutions, it is to be anticipated that many of these children would have had a history of maltreatment. However, this finding might also support the argument, put forward in respect of special needs, that abusers target certain types of institution as much as particular children.

Again, one way of assessing the extent of targeting is by examining community institutions. Of the five cases in community-based institutions where victims had

Table 13 The extent of special needs among victims

Special need	Community %	Foster %	Residential %	Total %
Some	15	14	33	17
None	85	86	67	83
Total cases (=100%)	(34)	(22)	(9)	(65)

Table 14 The nature of special needs (all institutions combined)

Special need	<i>n</i>	%
Learning disability	5	50
Challenging behaviour	3	30
Learning disability and challenging behaviour	1	10
Learning disability, physical disability and challenging behaviour	1	10
Total cases	(10)	100
Not known	(1)	–

Table 15 Previous maltreatment

Maltreatment	Community %	Foster %	Residential %	Total %
Some	15	55	44	32
None	85	45	56	68
Total cases (=100%)	(34)	(22)	(9)	(65)

been maltreated previously, three—a mainstream secondary school, a childminder’s home and a holiday playscheme—catered for children from the general population. This would appear to lend further support to the idea that vulnerable children were specifically targeted.

The most common form of maltreatment was sexual abuse, followed by neglect, encountered in 52 and 43 per cent of these cases respectively (Table 16). Other forms of maltreatment, namely physical and emotional abuse, were relatively rare. This raises the question as to whether abusers might target the victims of certain forms of maltreatment more than others.

While there was some evidence that certain groups of children had been targeted, it appeared that other victims were quite ‘unexceptional’. In his study of organized abuse, Gallagher (1998) found that abusers target children on the basis of a range of vulnerabilities. Compared to special needs and previous maltreatment, many of these vulnerabilities, such as low self-esteem, social isolation and material disadvantage, are less overt or may be considered less germane to a child protection investigation. Thus, it may have been that some of the ‘unexceptional’ victims had vulnerabilities which agency workers, for whatever reason, chose not to record in their files.

In the course of searching agency files, it was fairly clear that many victims did not possess any particular vulnerability but rather were quite ‘ordinary’. In some cases, perpetrators seemed to believe that it was relatively easy to entrap children in an abusive situation. They were probably bolstered in this belief by a number of factors, such as the power they had over children by virtue of being adults; children’s fear of not being believed or being blamed for the abuse; and children’s anxiety as to the consequences of making a disclosure. Abusers were exploiting what could be described as children’s ‘natural vulnerability’.

This natural vulnerability of children was almost certainly exacerbated by the status, power and authority which many of the abusers, in positions such as teacher,

Table 16 Nature of previous maltreatment (all institutions combined)

Maltreatment	<i>n</i>	%
Neglect	8	38
Sexual abuse	7	33
Sexual and physical abuse	3	14
Sexual and emotional abuse	1	5
Neglect and physical abuse	1	5
Physical and emotional abuse	1	5
Total cases	(21)	100

religious leader or foster parent, enjoyed and exploited. Other abusers, including some of the voluntary workers, were held in high esteem by local agencies or parents. In all these cases, children experienced added difficulty in both resisting, and disclosing, the abuse.

Evidence to support this view came from cases in which perpetrators were able to abuse a whole series of children. In one such case, the abuser who was first a teacher and then a headteacher, was known to have assaulted at least 22 girls in a succession of three different primary schools. Although the abuse was common knowledge among the children in the schools, including the boys, and had been carried out over a 13-year period, it was officially detected only when a mother overheard her two daughters discussing the abuse they had both experienced.

Special needs and/or previous maltreatment was reported for victims in 43 per cent of institutional abuse cases. Irrespective of the extent to which special needs or previous maltreatment, or other vulnerabilities, were the basis of targeting, these findings have clear implications for the therapeutic needs of institutional abuse victims, which are likely to be acute.

Entrapment

A second issue to be highlighted in cases of extrafamilial abuse is the ‘entrapment’ of children by perpetrators. Entrapment—sometimes referred to with the more euphemistic and less appropriate term of ‘grooming’—is the process by which perpetrators draw children into abusive situations and make it difficult for them to disclose. As Gallagher (1998) has shown, entrapment consists of a number of techniques, but chief among these is the involvement of children in increasingly intimate physical contact, and the provision of a variety of inducements, whether these are material, illicit or emotional in nature. To facilitate these techniques, the abuser will often seek to ‘distance’ children from their parents, or any other persons, who might represent a source of safety.

Table 17 reveals that entrapment was not uncommon, being reported in one-third of cases. There was, though, considerable variation between different types of institution. It was used in over one-half of all community cases, but in only 9 per cent of foster homes. Residential institutions occupied something of an intermediate position.

One possible explanation for this variation lies in the degree of control which workers in different institutions have over children. At one extreme are foster homes which, like ‘ordinary’ family homes, are relatively closed and private contexts where carers have a significant amount of control over the lives of children. Where there

Table 17 The extent of entrapment

Entrapment	Community %	Foster %	Residential %	Total %
Some used	53	9	33	35
None used	47	91	67	65
Total cases (=100%)	(34)	(22)	(9)	(65)

is such a ‘power differential’, the abuser may have less need to embark upon a process of entrapment but may simply coerce a child into an abusive situation and then into silence. At the other extreme are the community institutions in which staff have much less responsibility for children’s lives. In addition, there are usually other significant persons, such as parents/carers and other family members or friends, in whom children may be able to confide. In these circumstances, the abuser has to use a good deal of manipulation to draw children into an abusive situation and then to deter them from disclosing.

Alternatively, it may be that children in some institutions possess vulnerabilities which make them more susceptible to abuse. This vulnerability may be manifest in a variety of forms, such as special needs, previous abuse or neglect, or material disadvantage. It may be, in circumstances such as these, that perpetrators need to employ much less effort to construct abusive situations and to prevent detection. The fact that children in foster homes and in many residential institutions are far more likely to possess these vulnerabilities may help explain why entrapment is used less in these situations.

Table 18 shows that abusers used seven distinct techniques to entrap children. Given the relatively small number of cases upon which the analysis is based, this diversity of techniques is marked. This facet becomes even more pronounced if consideration is given to the range of practices incorporated by each of these techniques. ‘Physical contact’, for example, included one case where the abusive process was initiated by the perpetrator giving the child a ‘piggy back’ ride in which his bottom would be touched over his clothing; a second case where ‘hugs’ and ‘kisses’ were given to girls for ‘performing well’ at a voluntary gymnastics club; and a third where the abuser played a ‘secret game’ referred to as ‘naked hide and seek’ in which all the participants were unclothed. When the abuser caught a child he would rub his own penis against the child’s buttocks.

Discussion

These findings would appear to suggest that institutional abuse is, in terms of its numerical extent, a relatively minor issue. However, if the importance of institutional abuse is to be properly assessed, a number of other considerations have to be taken

Table 18 Forms of entrapment used by abusers (all institutions combined)

Form of entrapment	<i>n</i> *	%
Initiating physical contact (touching) with child	10	43
Taking child away from institution	9	39
Giving child extra attention	5	22
Giving money to child	5	22
Behaving in a sexual manner with child	4	17
Providing child with illicit goods**	2	9
Providing child with games or toys	1	4
Total cases (=100%)	(23)	–

* More than one form of entrapment was used in some cases, thus percentages do not total 100%

** For example: cigarettes, alcohol, drugs or pornography

into account. The first of these is that individual cases may, particularly in terms of numbers of children, be very large. The three largest cases in this study involved 30, 22 and 11 victims respectively. Some institutional investigations, not included here, have been enormous. The investigations in children's homes in Cheshire and Merseyside, for example, involved 13,563 witnesses, 885 complainants and 162 suspects (Merseyside Police *et al.*, 1999). Secondly, the present study relates to sexual abuse only. The 'Pindown' inquiry has been only one of a number of reports to highlight the range of maltreatment which children may experience in institutions (Levy and Kahan, 1991). Most crucially, reported cases probably represent only a small proportion of all institutional abuse cases. Overall, then, institutional abuse, in respect of 'numbers' alone, should be seen as a significant problem.

Institutional abuse is also significant in respect of the distinctive nature of cases. Those presented in this paper did share some of the characteristics of CSA more generally. In common with child protection register cases (Creighton, 1992), for example, most of the abusers were male and acted on their own, and the majority of the victims were female. However, the present sample was quite distinct from other CSA cases in a number of key respects. These included the proportion of victims who were male, the targeting of certain groups of children and particular types of institution, and the use of entrapment techniques by abusers. Other studies have underlined the distinctive nature of institutional abuse. Faller (1988), in her study of abuse cases in North American 'daycare', found that many of the abusers were 'paedophiles' in that they 'actively sought situations which afford them the opportunity to sexually abuse', rather than being 'regressed offenders' whose 'primary sexual orientation was towards adults'. Institutional abuse is also important, then, to a broader understanding of CSA.

The distinctive nature of institutional abuse has implications for policy and practice. As Barter (1998) found in her study of cases referred to the NSPCC, the nature of institutional abuse is such that it raises a series of unique investigative issues surrounding areas such as multi-agency working, witness support and the independence of enquiries.

While highlighting the distinctive nature of institutional abuse, it is recognized that this study has—through the use of a broad definition—identified a diverse set of cases. For example, while a large majority of victims in residential institutions were male, most of the those in foster homes were female. Similarly, while there was evidence of entrapment being used in over one-half of community-based institutions, it was used in only a small minority of foster homes. Notwithstanding this, the author still feels it is important to employ a wide definition of institutional abuse. The main reason, in addition to what has been said above, is that the large majority of issues which arise in respect of institutional abuse—such as staff supervision, the inspection of institutions and parental awareness—are (or should be) relevant to all the cases and others like them.

Having argued that this research attests to the significance of institutional abuse, it is acknowledged that the cases upon which it is based were reported in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since that time, there have been major developments in policy and practice, and also in public awareness. One of the key developments has

been the Utting (1997) review of safeguards for children living away from home. Having had all of its 20 principal recommendations, and most of its 130 detailed ones, accepted by the government, it is expected that the review will result in a major reform of systems for protecting this group of children (Valios, 1998). The changing context of child protection in institutions has also been witnessed in terms of practice, as exemplified by the vetting of individuals who wish to work with children. Although reliable information is not available, evidence provided to the Utting review, for instance, suggests that a range of organizations are adopting more stringent procedures, in respect, not only of vetting, but also of a whole series of employment procedures, such as job advertisements, mandatory probationary periods, and staff supervision and training.

It is likely that these changes have had an important effect upon all aspects of institutional abuse, including prevention, detection and investigation. Thus, it could be concluded that institutional abuse does not pose the same problem as it once did. However, such a view should be considered premature, if not complacent. A series of reports have highlighted ongoing problems in the response to institutional abuse. A study of children in foster care by Wallis and Frost (1998), for example, found that only one in five children were aware of complaints procedures and that children were, in any case, extremely reluctant to complain for fear that they would be placed in residential care. The Social Services Inspectorate (1998) in a review of 27 local authorities, found that, although there was a general commitment to enhancing the safety of 'looked after' children, they were still being put at risk through poor social work practice. A House of Commons Health Committee report (House of Commons, 1998) identified widespread managerial incompetence in respect of efforts to protect children in care. That there should still be shortcomings in the protection of 'looked after' children—a group that has been the subject of such attention—suggests that institutional abuse remains a formidable challenge.

Although community institutions have not witnessed the equivalent of the notorious children's homes cases, or been subject to such intense official attention, this should not be taken to mean that abuse is not also significant in these settings. On the contrary, this study has revealed that more than one-half of all known institutional abuse cases occur in the community. Furthermore, examination of individual cases shows that these abusers are as big a threat to children as those in foster homes and residential establishments. Indeed, given the relative lack of official scrutiny, it could be argued that these settings should—following the implementation of many measures for the protection of children living away from home—become the main focus of concern.

The findings on targeting and entrapment by abusers underline the need to continue to take institutional abuse seriously. Almost one-half of cases involve victims with special needs or histories of maltreatment. Evidence of entrapment is present in over a third of cases. These results suggest that many institutional abusers are very intent on sexually abusing children and use a good deal of planning to bring it about. This concurs with a number of reports, such as those on Frank Beck in Leicestershire children's homes (Kirkwood, 1993) and Ralph Morris at Castle Hill residential special school (Brannan *et al.*, 1993), which found that these perpetrators

were effective, not only in facilitating abuse but also in avoiding detection. Individuals such as these are likely to pose a permanent danger to children. Risks may be reduced, but it should never be assumed that they have been totally removed.

Conclusion

Although institutional abuse accounts for a small proportion of referrals to social services and the police, it constitutes a significant challenge in terms of child protection. This stems, primarily, from the size of individual cases, their distinctive nature and the special problems they pose for policy and practice. Measures implemented over the past decade have reduced the risk to children in institutions but there are still many issues to contend with—even for ‘looked after’ children, as a number of official reports have highlighted. There are also more fundamental weaknesses in the responses to institutional abuse.

Chief among these is the narrow focus of child protection efforts. Many of the developments in this area have been ‘scandal-driven’ rather than being based upon any proactive assessment of children’s needs. Consequently, institutional abuse has come to be seen as a problem of children’s homes or of social work or public services. As this research has shown, though, it involves all institutions, sectors and occupational groups. Policies to protect ‘looked after’ children (and those in other residential establishments) are very important, but it is essential that there is an equivalent investment for children in community-based institutions, particularly those in the voluntary and private sector.

While emphasizing that institutional abuse is not the sole concern of social service departments (SSDs), it has to be acknowledged that they do possess a special responsibility in this area. This derives from the fact that they manage some of the key services to children, such as foster and residential care, in addition to which they have statutory duties in respect of the inspection and registration of many others, such as boarding schools, childminding and playgroups (although the government proposes to remove some of this latter role). Therefore, it is equally incumbent upon SSDs to take a broad perspective regarding institutional abuse, and not to become preoccupied with particular settings, such as residential care or foster homes.

It seems fairly clear that there is some targeting by institutional abusers of particular groups of children, for example, those with special needs or histories of maltreatment. Having said this, some victims of institutional abuse are relatively ‘unexceptional’ and their abuse only highlights the ‘natural vulnerability’ of children in the face of adults who have malign intentions towards them. Just as protection efforts must take into account all institutions, so, too, must they consider all children.

Institutions already have a major role in the lives of children, whether this is in terms of their care, education, leisure activities or social life. With developments in government economic and educational policy, and also in the light of more general social trends, this role is set to increase. The National Childcare Strategy, for example, is intended to bring about a major expansion in child-care places (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). Unfortunately, far from deriv-

ing benefit from institutions, some children have suffered a great deal of harm. If institutions are to maintain, and possibly expand upon, their responsibilities, then it is essential that every effort is invested in ensuring the safety and welfare of children, irrespective of their background or the institution they attend.

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