



National Rapporteur on Trafficking in
Human Beings and Sexual Violence
against Children

Broad perspective on victimhood

Backgrounds on victims of sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation

Summary

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Summary

Victims of sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation appear to differ from their peers in a number of respects in terms of their backgrounds. In addition, victims are more likely to have existing vulnerabilities and to have experienced problems before falling victim to such abuse. This research provides a broad perspective on the complex situations of young people who experience sexual violence and exploitation.

The research describes personal and environmental factors of victims and how they differ from persons of the same gender and age. It does not explain why they fell victim to sexual violence. Nor does it demonstrate causal links between victims' characteristics and their experience of sexual violence. Characteristics and backgrounds are never the reason they become victims. However, they can contribute to a situation in which a person is more vulnerable to experience sexual violence. In order to protect young people more effectively and to provide victims with the right form of support, these insights are crucial.

METHODOLOGY: SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL AND CBS DATA

Personal and environmental characteristics of victims of sexual violence against children and victims of sexual exploitation were researched using by using the socio-ecological model and data from Statistics Netherlands (CBS).

According to the socio-ecological model, child development is an interaction between the characteristics of an individual and various layers that surround them. These circumstances, which are unique to each and every individual, bring with them both development opportunities and development risks. This also applies to young people who have fallen victim to sexual violence or sexual exploitation.

At the heart of the model is the individual. This layer is all about personal characteristics and circumstances that affect a person's development. In this research, the focus for this area is on any child safeguarding services received, as well as on help and treatment for mental health problems or substance misuse. In addition, special attention is paid to the presence of a mild learning disability. Surrounding this is the micro environment: the person's most immediate environment, which in this research includes characteristics of the home situation and school. Then come factors that have a less direct impact and relate more to the macro system in which an individual finds themselves: having a migration background and previous contact with the police as a victim or a suspect.

Statistics Netherlands has compiled data files on victims of sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation and the aforementioned background characteristics. Thea research population is compiled of individuals who were recorded in the police records system as victims of these crimes over the period 2015-2019. In order to be able to compare the characteristics of these victims with non-victims, a control group was set up for both populations. These control groups were matched on gender and age. Finally, the statistical findings were compared with the knowledge and experiences of professionals who work with victims of sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation in the form of qualitative interviews.

Victims far more likely to have received prior child safeguarding services

Before they fall victim to sexual violence or sexual exploitation, many victims have already been struggling with a wide range of problems. Almost one in three child victims of sexual violence and child victims of sexual exploitation received youth child safeguarding services in the year prior to falling victim to such abuse. That is respectively three and six times more often than is the case for peers. In addition, the problems for which they need child safeguarding services appear to be serious. For example, secure residential placement is common: almost one in three victims of sexual violence against children and as many as almost two in three victims of sexual exploitation resided in secure residential placement facilities. In addition, compared to peers, victims of sexual exploitation are more likely to have received help with mental health problems or substance misuse in the year before victimisation. Professionals recognise that victims are often already struggling with personal problems. They also recognise that drug use is a vulnerability that occurs among victims of sexual exploitation in particular.

Mild learning disability occurs often

Many victims of sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation have a mild learning disability: this is between thirteen and eighteen times more common among them than in the control groups. In these cases, the victimisation appears to be relatively more serious. For instance, rape occurs twice as frequently among victims of sexual violence against children with a mild learning disability than it does among victims without. Moreover, these victims are three times more likely to be victimised again. In addition, victims with a mild learning disability are more likely to feature in police systems as suspects in crimes than victims who do not have such a disability.

Young people with a mild learning disability appear to be extra vulnerable. They are more likely to be struggling with other problems. For example, they often reside in institutions, or live without one or both parents for other reasons. Their parents are also more likely to have a mild learning disability themselves. In addition, these victims are more likely to be receiving child safeguarding services and help with substance misuse.

Unusual home situation may point to vulnerable environment

The home situation of victims of sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation differs in a number of ways from the home situation of their peers. For example, child victims are more likely to be living in a youth institution or in single-parent families. Adult victims of sexual exploitation are also more likely to come from single-parent families. In addition, they are much more likely to live alone compared to peers. They are also less likely to have a job or to be a full-time student. Lastly, both child and adult victims of sexual violence and sexual exploitation more often live in low-income households than those in control groups and their parents often deal with physical and/or mental issues.

Greater likelihood of dropping out of school early

Victims of sexual violence and sexual exploitation generally have a lower level of education than others of a similar age. Level of education does not pose a direct risk in terms of experiencing sexual violence. However, characteristics of the school environment may be relevant in terms of how the sexual violence or the sexual exploitation takes place, the likelihood victimhood is detected and the type of support that is available. It is therefore worrying that before the sexual violence or exploitation has taken place victims are more likely to be early school

leavers. This could point to potential difficulties at school or in other areas, such as the home situation or mental health. Existing research also indicates that difficulties at school correlate with the likelihood of a young person falling victim to sexual violence or sexual exploitation.

Relationship between a migration background and falling victim to abuse is not clear

Victims of sexual violence against children in the police records less often have a migration background than is the case among peers. This may indicate that sexual violence against children is less common among children with a migration background. However, it is also possible that their victimisation is less likely to be reported, or that professionals are less likely to detect victimisation in this group. Other research indicates, for example, unconscious biases may play a role in failing to identify victims with a migration background or identifying them too late.

Victims of sexual exploitation on the other hand more often have a migration background compared to those in the control group. A number of interviewed professionals who work with these victims refer in this context to the influence of honour culture and to the shame and taboo around sex and relationships. Nevertheless, as is indicated by these contrasting findings, the relationship between migration background and victimhood is complex and still little understood.

Victims likely to already be known to the police

Almost one in five victims of sexual violence against children is already known to the police as either a victim, a suspect, or both. In the case of sexual exploitation, this figure is almost four in five victims. The exact mechanisms behind the victim-offender overlap and the ways that victimhood and offending relate to each other when it comes to victims of sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation remain unclear.

The victims who were already known to the police are also shown to be more vulnerable than those who were not. This group is more likely to be an early school leaver, to have a mild learning disability and to have received child safeguarding services prior to the sexual violence or sexual exploitation taking place. There is a significant overlap between the child victims who were already known to the police and the victims who were known to child safeguarding services shortly before they fell victim.

Victims who do not make a statement are often extra vulnerable

It is noticeable that the percentage of victims of sexual exploitation who, when the exploitation is known to the police, go on to make a statement is extremely low: 19%. This figure is higher for sexual violence against children: 49%, but this varies according to the specific type of offence. If you take into account all the personal and environmental factors investigated, it appears that victims who do not make a statement are often more vulnerable than victims who do. For example, they are more likely to come from single- or no-parent households and their level of education and household income are lower. In addition, they are more likely to be receiving child safeguarding services and treatment for mental health problems.

Broader perspective is needed

It is clear from the findings that victims of sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation have different backgrounds to others of a similar gender and age. This may mean that a different approach is required when it comes to protecting these victims. Indeed, this research indicates that sexual violence and sexual exploitation often occur in a context where there are other or even multiple problems and vulnerabilities. So, to tackle sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation effectively, we must look beyond the sexual violence and exploitation alone.

For example, it is important that the support that is provided for victims of sexual violence and exploitation takes into account the fact that they are likely to experience problems in many aspects of their lives. Such as when referring them for care and treatment. This must take into account any cognitive and adaptive limitations, additional mental health problems or attachment issues. It is also important to have a good understanding of victims' home situation, so it is clear to what extent the immediate environment can provide support in victims' recovery. Or whether, in addition to help with recovery, help can also be provided with financial problems and debts. Moreover, officers must also have a knowledge and understanding of victims with a mild learning disability, attachment or mental health problems, in order for them to interpret the behaviour of this group of victims correctly and support them effectively during criminal proceedings. This will ensure that this target group is taken seriously in criminal law and given a fair position in which their rights as victims are guaranteed.

The focus on and extent to which relationships and sexuality can be discussed in school, through approved prevention programmes, for example, may help with the identification of and provision of support for victims. It is also important to understand the social context of victims. Sexual violence occurring in a peer-to-peer setting require different responses than an incident of sexual violence involving a stranger.


In preventive approaches and early detection too, proper account must be taken of the unique circumstances of each and every individual. Previous research indicates, for example, that people with a mild learning disability are not offered enough tailored sexual education, and that young people with a mild learning disability may not be adequately prepared for independence because they have been overprotected. Professionals suggest that cultural differences may pose a barrier to the reporting and detection of sexual violence. More research is needed into the role of a migration background in falling victim to sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation and into the best way to provide support.

Finally, more research is also needed to enable us to understand the barriers perceived by victims who do not make a statement with the police. Are the approach and the processes used by the police in line with the characteristics and needs of victims? Do they receive sufficient and appropriate information and is there sufficient appropriate support available for these victims, not just for victims who live at home, but also for child victims who live in an institution, for example.

Every victim is different

The correlation between vulnerabilities and experiencing the sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation does not lend itself to stereotyping. For some victims, a single factor plays a role, while for others it is a combination of factors.

The government must do its utmost to identify victims of sexual violence and exploitation as quickly as possible, protect them and provide them with the right care. The government must use the broad perspective provided by this report to improve the approach to sexual violence against children and sexual exploitation.



The National Rapporteur investigates the nature and extent of human trafficking and sexual violence against children in the Netherlands.

In the annual monitoring reports and the thematic studies, the emphasis is on monitoring and improving the strategies for tackling human trafficking and sexual violence against children. Based on information from a wide range of sources, the National Rapporteur advises national and local government, other administrative bodies, international organisations and professionals who provide help and support, on how to prevent and combat human trafficking and sexual violence against children.

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