

Child sexual exploitation in the UK is all too common. But notions of gangs and grooming are a distraction and hinder our efforts to combat the problem.

Last month, the government published a new action plan on child sexual exploitation, an issue that has been consistently ignored by local authorities and the public at large. [Tim Linehan](#) argues that denial and racist attitudes have hindered efforts to combat the all too common problem of child prostitution in the UK.



Despite authoritative reports outlining the scale of the problem of child sexual exploitation, going back almost twenty years, three quarters of local authorities had not implemented government guidance put in place in 2009. Yet this should not surprise us. Child sexual exploitation – or child prostitution – is so disturbing that we tend to do anything we can to ignore its real causes.

In 1997 The Children's Society produced a poster which read 'Why travel 6,000 miles to have sex with children when you can do it here in England' to make the point that while the public attention focused on sexual exploitation of children abroad, particularly in the far east, the reality of child prostitution in England (and throughout the UK) was being ignored. I was part of that campaign, and I remember the shock I felt at examining Home Office figures showing that a girl of 11 had been cautioned for 'an offence relating to prostitution'. She was one of hundreds of children under 16 who had been arrested and cautioned or convicted. However welcome the [guidelines are that families and children Minister Tim Loughton announced last month](#), the injustice that a child can still be prosecuted for offences relating to prostitution (there is no law against prostitution as such) remains. In other words, the law allows for a child to be punished for being abused.

Thankfully, police tactics have changed markedly since the 1990s. Whereas then, around 500 young people under 18 were cautioned or convicted every year for being sexually exploited, the numbers are now in single figures, and all those cautions are girls over 16. Police treat sexual exploitation, rightly, as a child protection matter nowadays. Moreover, the 2003 Sexual Offences Act has increased penalties against those exploiting children.

But the way we talk about child prostitution has changed less. For example, ever since projects for sexually exploited children were first opened by Barnardo's there have been reports of Asian gangs at work. This information was, very sensibly, not publicised by Barnardo's because they knew that their workers depend on the goodwill and support of the local population – also largely Asian – to gather information about the girls so they can help them. Publicly highlighting the racial profile of the perpetrators would inevitably turn the community against them. And, with great prescience, they guessed how the media would react. In January, Jack Straw spoke out about the imprisoning of two gang leaders in Derby in January for offences relating to child prostitution, pointing the fingers specifically at Pakistani gangs. But the issue requires a more sophisticated reading, and in order to get a better understanding of child prostitution we need to examine history.

In 1845 Henry Mayhew wrote about prostitution in London Labour and the London Poor. He described how some prostitutes were controlled by 'bullies' and 'fancy men', mostly 'disreputable Jews'. In the later 1800s a group called the social purity movement mounted a huge campaign against foreign men who were apparently abducting young English girls. The movement claimed Belgian 'bullies' came over to Britain to kidnap and 'seduce' young middle class girls and abduct them to continental Europe where they were forced into prostitution. They chose English girls because there was (and is) no law against women of any age entering prostitution, whereas the penalties in Belgium were high.

In fact investigations showed that that the white slave trade was almost entirely a fabrication. A select committee was set up and learned that 13 year old girls could be procured 'without any difficulty whatsoever' in London and that juvenile prostitution was rampant. The committee, established to investigate the white slave trade, instead found 'beyond doubt that juvenile prostitution, from an almost incredibly early age, is increasing to an appalling extent in England, and especially London.' The notion of a white slave trade was dismissed.

When The Children's Society published its findings about child prostitution, a docu-drama, *No Child of Mine*,

was broadcast. The film depicted a child whose parents prostituted her. Debate in the newspapers raged, not about the fact of child prostitution, but whether it was ethical for a young actor to play the part of a young girl who was being prostituted. Further research published by The Children's Society, [*One Way Street*](#), published in the late 1990s revealed that of 60 women working in prostitution, half had started out before the age of 14 including two started out at the age of 12. The inescapable message is that where there is prostitution, there is child prostitution.

And what is child prostitution anyway? Sex is a commodity that can be exchanged for a bed for the night, for a fix, for a meal for somewhere to stay or simply for cash. The definition of prostitution is not as simple as it sounds. One of the interviewees in *One Way Street* was from a woman who had been abused by her uncle from the age of 7. He gave her sweets. By her early teens she was selling sex and had made the seamless transition from being abused at home to being abused on the streets.

The history of child prostitution is one of dissembling. In Britain we find it difficult to talk about the fact that child prostitution exists. We want to blame it on foreigners. We want to say that it's unethical for actors to depict such realities. We simply don't want to admit, even now, that child prostitution exists. It is easier to conceive of the problem as one created by Asian or Pakistani men, Belgian bullies and Mayhew's Jews, and that's that.

Yet the inescapable fact is that child prostitution is part of British life. It's a product of deprivation, poverty, abuse and a series of hardships that break the spirit, devalue a sense of self to the degree that some young teenagers feel that the risk to their lives is inconsequential. It may be true that some Asian or Pakistani gangs are particularly active in child prostitution. But if gangs vanished overnight, child prostitution would remain with us.

That's the hard truth to face up to. Notions of racial groups and 'grooming' are a distraction. The idea that men come along, identify vulnerable girls and exploit them has some truth in them, but it also masks a deeper reality of children whose lives are a state of such emotional confusion that affection, abandonment, violence, love and abuse become fused into a single crushing experience of life-long neglect and exploitation.

It's much simpler to blame Asian gangs, Belgian bullies and street-wise groomers. It simplifies the problem of poverty and neglect and exonerates the fundamental injustices in society that are at the root of sexual exploitation. It allows us to look the other way and, tragically, in doing so, prolongs the abuse of children.