

# Child sex rings

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## Abstract

Details of 11 child sex rings identified in one working class community were obtained by interviewing investigating police officers and examining health and social services records. The rings contained 14 adult male perpetrators and 175 children aged 6-15 years. Most perpetrators used child ringleaders to recruit victims; others became a "family friend" or obtained a position of authority over children. Secrecy was encouraged and bribery, threats, and peer pressure used to induce participation in sexual activities. Offences reported included fondling, masturbation, pornography, and oral, vaginal, and anal intercourse. Eleven perpetrators were successfully prosecuted; all but one received a sentence of three years or less. Behavioural problems were common among those children who had participated for a long time.

Child sex rings are difficult to detect and may be common. Many children are seriously abused as a consequence of them.

## Introduction

Child sexual abuse is increasingly recognised as both common and serious, with estimates of incidence ranging from a minimum of 1%<sup>1</sup> up to 38% of women under 18 years.<sup>2</sup> Reports from the United States and the United Kingdom have emphasised the high proportion of perpetrators who are family members, with fathers and stepfathers implicated in up to half of all cases.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, perpetrators who are unknown to the child or family are responsible for only about a quarter of reported cases.<sup>4</sup> Their participation may be limited to a single sexual encounter or consist of repeated sexually abusive episodes. This latter group ranges from adult and child relationships through child sex rings to child prostitution and the multimillion dollar child pornography industry.<sup>5</sup> By definition child sex rings consist of an adult perpetrator (or perpetrators) and several child victims who are aware of each other's participation.<sup>6</sup> To alert professionals to this type of abuse we report on 11 child sex rings identified from July 1984 to May 1985 in south Leeds.

## Subjects and methods

After the initial identification of a child sex ring in 1984 a special unit of police officers interviewed the perpetrator and his victims (about 20 schoolgirls). It rapidly became apparent that many of the victims had participated in other sex rings, and painstaking investigations resulted in nine more rings being identified. The resulting publicity led to the disclosure of an 11th ring involving an adult homosexual man and several boys. By mid-1985 all 11 rings had been identified and prosecutions in these cases have now been completed.

The perpetrators and their victims were all residents of south Leeds, which is a predominantly working class community. All but one of the rings identified were from a single police division (Holbeck) with a total population of 162 812. Details of the perpetrators' and victims' age, sex, past and present history of sexual abuse, and of the organisational aspects of each

sex ring were obtained by interviewing the investigating police officer. Information obtained was verified by examining the records of the police, social services, and the health service whenever possible; to maintain confidentiality this was always done by a member of the relevant agency. Details of the outcome of prosecutions against the perpetrators were obtained from the police and courts of law.

## Results

The 11 rings contained 14 perpetrators who were all men, their ages ranging from 30 to 82 years. They usually operated independently, with four to 50 children in their rings at any one time. Three groups were led by adult perpetrators who were in one case brothers, in another neighbours, and in a third acquaintances who had met in a pub. Three rings were completely independent, having no connection with the perpetrators or victims of other rings. Loose ties between the remaining eight rings existed as victims often participated in several rings either simultaneously or sequentially. Although the perpetrators in the interconnected rings were in some cases aware of each other, no direct contact or ties between them existed. Eight of the 14 perpetrators were known to have been previously implicated in a sex ring and three had previous convictions for sexual offences against young people.

A total of at least 175 children (171 girls) participated in the 11 rings, their ages ranging from 6 to 15 years. In several of the larger rings a distinct pattern emerged with each having a ringleader and two or three deputies who, in addition to participating in sexual acts, actively recruited younger girls for the perpetrator. Girls were aged between 6 and 14 years when recruited, and in many cases their participation was limited to one visit at which they observed or participated in sexual activity. Those girls who remained in the ring after the initial visit became in some cases a deputy or ringleader, usually between 12 and 14 years old; six ringleaders were identified by the police. Each participated in an average of three rings (range one to five) and several of the ringleaders had been or were considered to be at risk of sexual abuse within the family home. Girls invariably ceased participating in sex rings before their 16th birthday. In one ring the victims were all prepubertal boys.

Fondling or masturbation was the commonest offence and was detected in all but one ring, in which the perpetrator took pornographic photographs. At least half the perpetrators had vaginal intercourse with some of their victims, and in a slightly higher proportion the victims reported oral intercourse. Children in two of the rings reported actual or simulated anal intercourse.

All but one of the rings were initially created by an adult perpetrator who actively recruited children. The other was formed by the victims of an earlier ring in which the perpetrator had been apprehended, actively seeking and inducing an adult to become the group's new leader. None of the children were gathered from existing formal groups such as children's societies and clubs or from children's homes or hostels. Perpetrators in the eight interconnected rings gained access to new recruits by using a ringleader who persuaded schoolfriends to join the ring. The three independent rings were developed by perpetrators who deliberately became friendly with the children and their families. In one independent ring the perpetrator had acted as a community "babysitter-childminder."

New recruits were introduced into the groups' sexual activities at an early stage and usually progressed sequentially from observation through fondling and masturbation to intercourse. Participation in the sexual activities of the group was encouraged and maintained by combinations of threats, bribery, and peer pressure. The perpetrators and ringleaders encouraged secrecy, and even after the arrest of the perpetrator this often inhibited the investigation of the rings.

Of the 14 perpetrators, 11 were successfully prosecuted; their sentences ranged from nine months (suspended) to five years. All 11 defendants pleaded guilty and received reduced sentences; this avoided the trauma for the children of having to appear as witnesses. In several cases the difficulties of obtaining evidence prevented the defendant incurring more serious charges. One prosecution was completely withdrawn owing to insufficient evidence. One of the two remaining perpetrators was admitted to a psychiatric unit; the other had a cerebrovascular accident and subsequently received a caution from the police.

Behavioural problems were common among the victims, particularly

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*Perpetrators, victims, and offences*

	Interconnected rings								Independent rings					
Ring	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11			
Perpetrators:														
Age	82	65	66	65	34	56	60	52	32	30	70	43	60	33
Previous rings	2	?	About 4	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Previous convictions	+	+	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	—
Sentence or outcome	Psychiatric unit	2½ yrs	2 yrs	9 months suspended	9 months suspended	5 yrs	1 yr	2½ yrs	2 yrs probation	—	2 yrs	3 yrs	Cerebrovascular accident—caution	2 yrs
Children in ring:														
Girls	9	12	20	12	—	50	—	9	4	—	30	?	20	—
Boys	0	0	0	0	—	0	—	0	0	—	0	—	4	0
Offences:														
Fondling	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	—	+
Oral intercourse	+	+	+	—	—	+	—	+	—	—	+	+	—	+
Anal intercourse	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—	+
Vaginal intercourse	—	+	+	—	—	+	—	+	—	+	+	—	—	—
Pornography	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	+	—

those children who had participated for a long time in the rings. All six ringleaders continued to have behavioural problems after disclosure and in some cases they have refused or discontinued therapeutic programmes. Those children who were not as deeply enmeshed in sex ring activities have generally not come to the attention of the authorities because of disturbed behaviour.

## Discussion

In recent years many isolated but extensive child sex rings have been reported by the press, the largest including over 400 preschool children.<sup>7</sup> Several of these rings operated in children's homes or hostels where a male warden or assistant abused resident children, sometimes over many years.<sup>8</sup> The adult in this situation has legitimate access to children, and his position of authority enables him to recruit victims relatively easily. Other perpetrators have gained access to children by working in nurseries, schools, or children's societies and clubs, or alternatively by becoming a close "family friend." The latter method of obtaining victims was used by three perpetrators in our series, but in most cases a child "ringleader" recruited new victims by offering financial rewards. This technique is common in rings operating in poor working class communities, whereas children from all social classes are at risk from the perpetrator who obtains a position of authority over children.

Burgess *et al* have identified 11 child sex rings in the United States, which included 84 children.<sup>9</sup> They described in some detail six of these rings containing 36 children and noted many features that were common to the 11 rings we have identified.<sup>6</sup> Perpetrators in the North American rings were all men who operated alone or in pairs; they had a wide age range (23-74 years) and at least two had previously sexually abused children. Victims in the six rings were also of similar ages (6-14 years) and in three of the rings one child acted as a ringleader, recruiting other children. The six rings were all maintained by a combination of bribery, threats, and peer pressure, which after disclosure remained powerful enough to impede police investigations. Alcohol or drugs, or both, were used in several of the rings, as was adult pornographic material, and this was similar to our experience. There were, however, some major differences between the two groups of rings. Predominantly girls participated in the 11 rings we report (171 out of 175) whereas boys were more commonly abused in the North American rings (49 out of 66). None of the south Leeds rings operated in an organised manner to provide pornographic material or sexual services, whereas several of the North American rings evolved from isolated child sex rings into commercial enterprises.

In their follow up study Burgess *et al* identified in the victims four long term response patterns that were found in almost equal proportions.<sup>9</sup> They called these responses: integration of the event, avoidance of the event, repetition of symptoms, and identification with the exploiter. Victims in the first group had mastered anxieties caused by the abuse and could discuss it objectively, whereas children avoiding the event suppressed their anxieties and refused

to discuss the abuse. Repetition of symptoms resulted in children becoming anxious under stress and having persistent feelings of guilt and self blame for participating in the ring. Children who identified with the exploiter resolved anxieties by impersonating the abuser and thereby validating their activities in the ring. Children in this group particularly show extreme and antisocial behaviour and regard the authorities negatively.

Long term behavioural problems are common among these children, and prostitution is a commonly reported sequel of sexual abuse in childhood. Burgess *et al* found victims often had serious behavioural disorders and that six children had become prostitutes and three pimps. They reported that poor prognostic factors included the use of victims for pornography and participation in ring activities for over one year. The acting out of behaviour learnt in the sex rings was common, with five victims repeating sexual acts on younger children. We identified similar behaviour with, in one case, a deputy ringleader attempting to castrate a young boy when she was babysitting. Although it is too early to report the long term outcome for children in the Leeds rings, many of the ringleaders and their deputies continue to have very disturbed behaviour. In addition to behavioural problems other signs of sexual abuse may indicate participation in sex rings. Most common are physical abnormalities, such as anogenital injury, venereal infection, and pregnancy, and psychological or psychiatric disorders—particularly low self esteem and depression.<sup>10</sup>

Movement of children between rings was common and appears to be unique to the victims of the eight interconnected rings. It was usually initiated by the ringleader to obtain greater rewards or to replace a perpetrator who had been apprehended. In one extreme case girls seeking a replacement perpetrator deliberately approached men in their homes. After several visits to a previously non-participant man's home, during which the girls acted in a sexually provocative manner, he was recruited as a replacement perpetrator for the ring. This event emphasises how abnormal and sexualised the behaviour of children involved in a sex ring may become.

Adults convicted of sexual offences against children have a higher rate of reconviction than other sex offenders.<sup>11</sup> Although the numbers are small, the reconviction rate among the perpetrators in this study suggests that participation in a child sex ring is associated with a particularly high rate of recidivism. In this context the present system for preventing offenders from establishing contacts with children after release from prison is inadequate. Convictions for sexual offences against children are difficult to obtain, particularly for the more serious charges. Thus sentences are often short, no psychotherapy is available, and, without adequate safeguards, early release of offenders may expose further children to the risk of victimisation.

Recent publicity has focused on intrafamilial sexual abuse and has emphasised that as many as three quarters of perpetrators are family members or friends. Abuse by perpetrators who are outside the family circle has been given less emphasis, perhaps because it is usually thought to consist of a single isolated episode. Our findings suggest that this is untrue and that prolonged sexual abuse of large

numbers of children in child sex rings may be common. The lack of information about such abuse is easily understood in the light of the pressures used by perpetrators to ensure that ring activities are kept secret. The known tendency of children to retract statements after disclosure of sexual abuse also makes investigation of sex rings particularly difficult.<sup>12</sup> Parents, public, and professionals must be trained to consider the possibility, and to recognise the warning signs, that a child may be taking part in a sex ring. Children need guidance on how to recognise and avoid inappropriate sexual activities from an early age.<sup>13</sup> They should be encouraged to inform adults immediately of attempted abuse even when this is accompanied by threats or other inducements to maintain secrecy.

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# Green College Lecture

## Serendipity and insight in immunology

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Immunology, being a branch of biology, is concerned with mechanisms which operate in, and have operated to produce, living creatures as they have evolved on earth. Despite the endeavours of the international astronomers' search for extraterrestrial intelligence, seeking messages from other regions of the universe predicated on the assumption that other intelligent beings would use the 21 cm hydrogen or the hydroxyl spectral lines for transmission, the answer to date is silence.<sup>1</sup> There is no guarantee that similar mechanisms function anywhere else than on earth. Consequently, immunological discoveries, unlike those concerning the laws of chemistry and physics, which are reckoned to be valid throughout the universe, cannot be expected to have cosmic significance.

Generalisations in biology are, as far as we know, limited to the past, present, and future behaviour of particular elaborate organisms whose rules we try to discover. Of course, they do not disobey the laws of physics and chemistry, though they probably transcend these as they have hitherto been formulated at the molecular, atomic, or subatomic level. But even the discovery of something as exciting as the genetic code in DNA and all our recent knowledge about how it is translated and regulated concern particular devices which have permitted living organisms to survive and evolve. These devices are so subtle and ingenious that it is difficult to conceive of any others which would perform as well. If self replicating entities capable of independent existence and

combining some of the other properties which we associate with life had arisen in quite another way, different devices would presumably have evolved.

### The process of scientific discovery

I state these truisms by way of introduction, because I would not wish to be thought to denigrate the power of insight. Great minds in mathematics and physics, spurred by observations of the natural world, may be able to arrive at verifiably valid generalisations by purely mental processes. They demonstrate thereby that the processes of mental logic conform in some fascinating way with causality as it operates in the physical world. In biology, however, we can begin to obtain understanding only by observation and experiment, which provide facts on which to build hypotheses to pull the facts together and, we hope, predict how a particular system will behave under different conditions.

The process of scientific discovery by experiment was discussed by Peter Medawar in his essay *Induction and Intuition in Scientific Thought*.<sup>2</sup> He emphasised the importance of hypothesis (or, if not so clearly formulated as to be dignified by this term, of hunch) in the design and choice of experiments and rightly added: "A good methodology must, unlike inductivism, provide an adequate theory of the origin and prevalence of error . . . and it must also make room for luck." Luck, of course, will not help unless the researcher recognises it as such, and so implicit in luck is the prepared mind that can take advantage of it.

There is another term for luck which has become established in our vocabulary, presumably because it fills a gap rather than being simply a grander term. This is serendipity. Literally, it means something from Ceylon (Sri Lanka nowadays, Serendip to early Western writers). It was coined by the eccentric minor English writer Horace Walpole, Fourth Earl of Oxford and of Strawberry Hill fame, in a letter written in 1754 to Sir Horace Mann. Walpole

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