Group-Based Abuse

1. What is group-based abuse?

Group-based abuse refers to abuse carried out by two or more individuals who act together, either through direct participation, shared responsibility or coordinated behaviour. It can involve physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or financial abuse, as well as exploitation, intimidation and coercive control.

The individuals involved may have established relationships, shared interests or positions within a family, social group, institution or wider network.

2. How does group-based abuse differ from individual abuse?

Individual abuse involves one perpetrator, whereas group-based abuse involves multiple individuals. The involvement of several perpetrators can create additional challenges, including shared intimidation, collective secrecy, manipulation, isolation and difficulties identifying individual responsibility.

3. What forms can group-based abuse take?

Group-based abuse can occur in several settings and may involve:

- Organised sexual exploitation.
- Child sexual exploitation.
- Trafficking and forced labour.
- Family-based abuse involving multiple perpetrators.
- Institutional and organisational abuse.
- Gang-related exploitation and violence.
- Cultic or high-control group abuse.
- Coordinated psychological intimidation.
- Financial exploitation and coercion.
- Organised criminal exploitation.

4. What is organised abuse?

Organised abuse generally refers to abuse involving multiple perpetrators who may operate together within an established structure, network or group. It can involve planning, coordination, the distribution of roles and the exploitation of individuals over an extended period.

The degree of organisation varies considerably between cases.

5. Does group-based abuse always involve planning or coordination?

No. Some group-based abuse is highly organised, while other incidents develop through informal relationships, shared opportunities or collective participation. Multiple perpetrators do not necessarily indicate a formal organisation or centrally directed activity.

6. What roles might individuals fulfil within a group involved in abuse?

Depending on the circumstances, individuals may take on different roles, including:

- Direct perpetrators of abuse.
- Individuals who facilitate or arrange access to victims.
- People who recruit or groom individuals.
- Those who provide accommodation or resources.
- Individuals who intimidate, threaten or silence victims.
- People who conceal, enable or minimise abusive behaviour.

Not everyone involved will necessarily perform the same activities or have the same level of responsibility.

7. How do perpetrators use group dynamics to facilitate abuse?

Group dynamics can reinforce abusive behaviour through peer pressure, conformity, intimidation, shared secrecy and the normalisation of harmful conduct. Individuals may feel protected by the group, while victims may experience increased fear because multiple people appear to be involved.

8. What is the role of coercive control in group-based abuse?

Coercive control can involve repeated behaviours intended to dominate, intimidate or restrict another person's freedom. In group-based situations, multiple individuals may contribute to controlling behaviour through threats, surveillance, isolation, manipulation or restrictions on access to support.

9. Can group-based abuse involve psychological abuse without physical violence?

Yes. Psychological abuse can occur independently of physical violence. It may include humiliation, intimidation, threats, manipulation, degradation, gaslighting, isolation and the deliberate undermining of an individual's confidence or sense of security.

10. What impact can group-based abuse have on survivors?

The effects vary between individuals and depend on the nature, duration and circumstances of the abuse. Potential consequences include:

- Anxiety and depression.
- Post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- Complex trauma.
- Dissociation.
- Difficulties with trust and interpersonal relationships.
- Shame, guilt and self-blame.
- Social isolation.
- Hypervigilance and persistent fear.
- Difficulties with emotional regulation.

Not all survivors experience the same effects, and symptoms should be understood within the context of each individual's circumstances.

11. Why might survivors find it difficult to disclose group-based abuse?

Disclosure can be particularly difficult when multiple perpetrators are involved. Survivors may fear retaliation, disbelief, humiliation or further victimisation. They may also experience confusion, shame, loyalty conflicts or concerns about the consequences of reporting individuals within their family, community or social network.

12. Why might survivors delay reporting abuse?

There are many possible reasons, including threats, intimidation, dependency, grooming, fear of not being believed, concerns about personal safety and a lack of access to appropriate support.

Delayed disclosure does not, by itself, establish whether abuse occurred or indicate that an account is unreliable.

13. What is the relationship between group-based abuse and human trafficking?

Human trafficking can involve multiple individuals working together to recruit, transport, transfer, harbour or receive people for the purpose of exploitation. Different individuals may facilitate different stages of the process.

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Trafficking-related exploitation can include forced labour, sexual exploitation, servitude and other forms of exploitation.

14. Can group-based abuse occur within families or familiar social networks?

Yes. Abuse involving multiple perpetrators can occur within families, extended family networks, friendship groups and other familiar social environments. Familiarity and established relationships can make recognising, disclosing and addressing abuse particularly difficult.

15. What challenges can group-based abuse present for therapists and support professionals?

Professionals may encounter complex presentations involving trauma, dissociation, difficulties with trust, fear of disclosure and concerns about personal safety.

A trauma-informed approach should prioritise:

- Establishing psychological and physical safety.
- Respecting the survivor's autonomy.
- Avoiding leading or suggestive questions.
- Maintaining clear professional boundaries.
- Documenting disclosures accurately.
- Assessing safeguarding concerns.
- Avoiding assumptions about events that have not been independently established.

- Supporting access to appropriate specialist services.

16. What is a trauma-informed approach to supporting survivors?

A trauma-informed approach recognises the potential effects of traumatic experiences and prioritises safety, trust, collaboration, empowerment and choice.

It avoids pressuring individuals to disclose details or revisit traumatic experiences before they feel ready. Support should be responsive to the individual's needs rather than based on assumptions about what they have experienced.

17. Should all reports of group-based abuse be treated as organised abuse?

No. Group-based abuse and organised abuse are related but distinct concepts. Group-based abuse describes the involvement of multiple perpetrators, whereas organised abuse generally implies some degree of structure, coordination or organisation.

The terminology should reflect the available information rather than assumptions about how individuals may be connected.

18. Where can survivors of group-based abuse seek support?

Survivors can seek assistance from appropriately qualified therapists, specialist trauma services, sexual violence support organisations, domestic abuse services, safeguarding professionals and organisations supporting victims of trafficking and exploitation.

Where there is an immediate risk of harm, emergency services should be contacted.

Note: Group-based abuse is a broad descriptive term rather than a single clinical or legal diagnosis. The presence of multiple perpetrators does not, on its own, establish a coordinated organisation. Individual accounts should be approached with care, professional neutrality and appropriate safeguarding procedures.