

The Sexual Abuse of Children by Strangers: Its Extent, Nature and Victims' Characteristics

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This paper reports a school-based questionnaire survey conducted among 2420 children aged nine to 16 years. It examines the extent of stranger abuse, its nature and the characteristics of victims. The research contains complex messages in terms of the 'seriousness' of stranger abuse and identifies a number of challenges to understanding this phenomenon. It highlights the need for much more sophistication in debates over, and policy and practice responses to, stranger abuse. Copyright © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Background

The abuse of children by strangers has become one of the most emotive issues of our time. Where this abuse involves the abduction, sexual assault or murder of children, then the reaction may be explosive. This was clearly evidenced in the events which followed the abduction and murder of eight year old Sarah Payne in West Sussex in the summer of 2000 (Hill, 2001). This led to vigilante action against suspected abusers in several parts of the United Kingdom. This, in turn, was followed by a highly controversial 'outing' campaign, against child sex abusers, launched by the country's largest circulation Sunday newspaper. So intense did these protests become that they began to influence the pronouncements and actions of Government ministers, along with those of spokespersons for statutory and voluntary agencies.

While this state of affairs was triggered by a particularly tragic incident, it is possible to see it as part of a process whereby 'paedophiles' are being constructed as society's arch folk-devils (Gallagher, 1998). Within this construction, the term 'paedophile' is, essentially, shorthand for strangers who sexually abuse children. In this way, the current furore over 'paedophiles' marks a return to the misconceptions which previously surrounded child sexual abuse (CSA). Up to the late 1980s, in the United Kingdom, it was not widely recognised, or at least accepted, that CSA was perpetrated predominantly by persons who were known to their victims (Corby, 2000).

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A number of studies have confirmed the level of concern felt among the general public towards stranger abuse. For example, a survey by a national children's safety charity, found that the greatest fear among parents/carers was that their child might be abducted (Kidscape, 1993). Another study showed that the main reason parents/carers drove their children to school was the fear that they might be 'molested' (Hillman, 1993). Sixty per cent of parents/carers reported that the risk strangers posed to their children was a 'major worry' (McNeish and Roberts, 1995).

Much of the recent debate around criminal justice policy reflects the notion that CSA is largely perpetrated by those outside victims' families, including strangers. Legislation consequent upon that debate includes the Criminal Records Bureau (Police Act 1997), provision for extraterritorial legislation (Sex Offenders Acts 1997), the creation of Sex Offender Orders (Crime and Disorder Act 1998), and a series of other measures currently under consideration (Home Office, 2000).

Some have taken issue over the response to the (supposed) threat of stranger abuse. A number of commentators have pointed out that 80–90 per cent of sexual abuse is perpetrated by persons known to the child (such as family members, other relatives and neighbours), with strangers accounting for only 10–20 per cent of cases (Grubin, 1999). Kidscape (1993) cites official figures which show that between 1987 and 1991 40 children were killed by strangers compared to 231 who were killed by persons they knew, often parents or carers. Misconceptions over the threat posed by stranger abuse place children at greater risk (Furedi, 2001). Some have argued that parents/carers have—as a result of their anxiety over stranger abuse—restricted children's freedom to such an extent that it has affected their psychological (Mental Health Foundation, 1999), social (Innocenti Research Centre, 2001) and physical development (Bateson and Martin, 1999).

Given that stranger abuse occasions intense social concern, it is a paradox that there remains a dearth of knowledge. David Finkelhor and colleagues have looked at incidence (Finkelhor and others, 1992), risk factors (Finkelhor and others, 1995b) and the means by which children resist assaults (Asdigian and Finkelhor, 1995). Two other strands of work relate indirectly to stranger abuse. The first is concerned with the effectiveness of prevention programmes (Wurtele and Miller-Perrin, 1992), and the other with victim surveys, whether from a criminological (Aye Maung, 1995) or a child protection (Kelly and others, 1991) perspective.

While there is, then, some useful literature on stranger abuse, its scope is limited such that understanding remains poor. This means that many key questions on the extent and nature of the problem, and its implications for policy and practice remain to be answered.

Methodology

The research comprised three main stages: a school-based questionnaire survey; interviews with a sample of victims and non-victims of stranger abuse (and their parents/carers) identified through the survey; and a search of police records concerning reported stranger abuse cases. This paper discusses findings from the school-based questionnaire survey.

Sample

Questionnaires were administered to 2420 children aged nine to 16 years drawn from 103 classes in 26 primary and secondary schools located in three local authorities in northwest England. Schools were selected from four types of area: inner city, outer suburbs, peripheral council estate and rural. The first eligible school to be approached was the one whose pupil population most closely matched that of the area from which it was drawn in terms of socio-demographic profile. If the first school declined to take part, the next closest match was contacted, and so on, until a school agreed to participate. A total of 53 schools were approached, of which 26 (49 per cent) agreed to take part.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was concerned with: the children's socio-demographic characteristics; lifestyle; victimisation and accidents *outside the home*; and fears and anxieties. Victimisation questions covered theft (attempted and accomplished), harassment, physical incidents and sexual incidents (attempted and accomplished). If children had *ever* experienced any of the above types of victimisation, they were asked to tick a number of boxes to indicate the specific acts which had occurred; provide a short description of the most recent incident; and tick a further series of boxes concerning other features of the 'last' incident, including to which of the following three categories their assailant belonged: 'People I knew', 'People I had seen before' or 'Strangers'. Children appeared to have very few problems with this.

Procedure

Questionnaires were usually administered to children during lesson times. Children were told that the survey concerned their safety outside the home; the questionnaire included questions on things which might have happened to them when they have been out; and that the aim was to increase children's safety. Children were briefed on completing the questionnaire in private, with researchers helping them with any queries. Teachers were not normally present during administration of the questionnaire. Once completed the children were given a debriefing.

The survey was carried out between April 1996 and January 1997. Few practical, methodological or ethical problems were encountered. This may be due to the considerable care and attention invested, including extensive work and consultation during the piloting stage.

Piloting involved administering an initial draft of the questionnaire to ten girls and boys aged nine to 16 years, in one-to-one situations. Following redrafting, the questionnaire was given to 363 children in seven primary and secondary schools located in local authorities other than those in the main study. At both stages, the researchers engaged in discussion with respondents to ensure they understood the questions.

Methodological issues

Special methodological issues arise in research with children (Lewis and Lindsay, 2000) and on sensitive topics (Gallagher and others, 1995). As both of these featured in the current research, their possible impact upon the findings must be addressed.

Table 1: Non-response rate to victimisation and accident questions

Question	N	%
Theft	54	2
Harassment	84	3
Physical incidents	168	7
Sexual incidents	311	13
Accidents	148	6
Total sample	2420	100

Survey response rate. Some children did not take part, either because their parents/carers did not give permission; they were absent or otherwise engaged on the day the questionnaire was administered; or the school advised against it. Figures for the number of 'missing' children were available for 68 (66 per cent) of the 103 separate classes taking part in the research. Of the 1865 children in these classes, 316 (17 per cent) did not complete a questionnaire. Although this is a relatively low non-participation rate, it may have led to some bias in the findings.

Sensitive questions. Table 1 lists the victimisation and accident sections in the order in which they appeared on the questionnaire, with the non-response rate for each. There was a steady rise in the rate at which children failed to answer questions as they proceeded through the questionnaire. Some of this was probably due to children's decreasing motivation and their running out of time. These factors do not appear to be sufficient to explain all non-responses, particularly those regarding sexual incidents. For while the non-response rate climbed from 2 per cent (for theft questions) to 13 per cent (for sexual incident questions), it fell back to 6 per cent for the accident questions. Taking into account response levels which precede and follow them, there seems to be an additional 6–7 per cent non-response for the sexual incident questions. Some children may have found these questions too embarrassing. Others, perhaps engaging in consensual sexual activity, considered this an invasion of their privacy. However, it is likely that some of the non-respondents (as well as some of the children who answered this question in the negative) were victims of sexual incidents but did not wish to report this on the survey, for understandable reasons (Leventhal, 1998). Some victims may have been even less inclined to report incidents given that the questionnaire was not anonymised. (Children were asked to provide their name and address in order that some of them could be contacted to take part in follow-up interviews.) Thus, this survey may represent an underestimate of the prevalence of sexual abuse incidents.

Comprehension. Figure 1 shows, with original emphases, 'screening' questions for sexual incidents. These are modified from Anderson and others (1994) and the British Crime Survey (BCS) (Aye Maung, 1995).

There is a risk that children misinterpreted these questions, with some of them over-reporting and others under-reporting incidents. For example, some children may have thought that 'Touch you in a way that you didn't like' included being physically struck by someone (although they had previously completed questions on physical incidents). In

- Has anyone EVER done, or tried to do, any of these things to you when you have been away from home?
- Touch you in a way that you didn't like
 - Tried to touch you in a way that you didn't like
 - Got you to touch them in a way that you didn't like
 - Tried to get you to touch them in a way that you didn't like
 - Got you to go with them when you didn't want to
 - Tried to get you to go with them when you didn't want to
 - Showed you a private part of their body which you didn't want to see
 - Or, has nothing like this ever happened to you

Figure 1: 'Screening' question on sexual incidents

practice, children's detailed descriptions of the 'last' incident, their non-responses (see above) and other information they provided, suggested that they did understand the questions. This is illustrated by the following vignette, obtained from a ten year old girl who had ticked the box 'Tried to get you to touch them in a way that you didn't like':

I was playing with my friend in a street near where I live. A man came on a motorbike. He shouted at us for 10p. He said we could sit on his bike. Then he pulled his trousers down and said come over here, and then he grabbed Sarah's [pseudonym] hand and then he grabbed my hand. I struggled and got my hand away and then he got Sarah's hand and touched his penis. I ran back but I waited for Sarah. I didn't know what to do. I stuck to the wall frightened. Sarah got away. Then we ran to her house and then to mine and then told our mums and they phoned the police. They caught him. He'd done it to someone else. The police told us.

Ethical issues

The authors were aware of the ethical issues involved in conducting research with children and on sensitive topics. Consequently, a series of measures was deployed to ensure that the research was ethical. These included liaison with ChildLine and the distribution of ChildLine contact cards to all participants; briefing and debriefing sessions for all participants; lengthy pre-testing of the questionnaire; the use of male and female researchers in the administration of the questionnaire; and the sensitive handling of any 'issues' which arose as a result of the survey.

In the event, this aspect of the research gave rise to only a very small number of 'problems'. These were of three main—and sometimes overlapping—types: children who became upset during the survey; children who reported previously undisclosed abuse; and children who reported current abuse. The researchers sought to provide support to children in all of these situations. This support took a variety of forms, including comforting the child, encouraging the child to talk to someone else (whether a relative, friend or agency worker), liaison with teaching staff and contact with other agencies. The authors feel that these situations were, in general, handled quite satisfactorily. However, this experience did underline the challenges faced in carrying out research on sensitive topics and with 'vulnerable' populations—including the requirement, sometimes, to balance the interests of different parties—and the need to ensure that ethical issues are fully considered, and prepared for, in advance of fieldwork.

Table 2: The prevalence of all sexual incidents

Victim status	N	%
Never victimised	1648	78
Victimised	461	22
Sub-total	2109	100
Stated	2109	87
Missing	311	13
Total	2420	100

Findings

Extent

Any sexual incident. As Table 2 shows, just under one-quarter (22 per cent) of all the children answering this question reported having been involved in a 'sexual incident'. The BCS found that 7 per cent of 12–15 year olds reported being 'sexually harassed' by men (Aye Maung, 1995). The current study incorporated a wider range of behaviours including, for instance, incidents perpetrated by other children. Aye Maung (1995) has noted, that some methodologies may be more conducive than others towards reporting sensitive topics.

Prevalence of stranger-perpetrated incidents. In respect of the 'last' sexual incident, the largest group (44 per cent) of perpetrators consisted of 'known' persons. Table 3 shows that strangers were responsible for an almost equally large proportion of these incidents (41 per cent). Persons whom the child had only 'seen before' made up a relatively small proportion of incidents (13 per cent).

If 'last incidents' are representative of all incidents—and taking into account that 22 per cent of the sample experienced some form of sexual incident—then the proportion of respondents enduring a stranger-perpetrated sexual incident would have been 9 per cent. In the recent prevalence survey carried out by NSPCC, 4 per cent of respondents stated that they had been sexually abused as a child by a stranger (Cawson and others, 2000). Some of this difference may be explained by the current study's focus upon a broader

Table 3: Victim-perpetrator relationship in sexual incidents ('last' incidents only)

Relationship	N	%
Known	175	44
Stranger	161	41
Seen before	50	13
Combination	9	2
Sub-total	395	100
Stated	395	86
Missing	66	14
Total	461	100

Table 4: Repeat victimisation.

All incidents experienced by child	'Last' incident experienced by child					
	Known		Stranger		Seen before	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Once	53	45	80	66	19	54
More than once	65	55	42	34	16	46
Sub-total	118	100	122	100	35	100
Stated	118	67	122	76	35	70
Missing	57	33	39	24	15	30
Total	175	100	161	100	50	100

range of incidents and its use of a methodology which meant that sexual incidents were more 'accessible'. For example, use of a questionnaire, as compared to an interview format, should have made the situation less fraught. Similarly, asking about recent experiences should have led to fewer incidents being forgotten.

Repeat victimisation. Some of the most important developments in criminology over the past decade have been in the area of repeat victimisation (Pease, 1998). In the present study, children were asked to record the number of times 'anything like this happened to you'. Table 4 indicates that children who were victimised by strangers were less likely to suffer re-victimisation. One-third of 'stranger-victims' experienced repeated incidents, as against over one-half of the children who reported that the 'last' incident was perpetrated by a person known to them. While these results indicate, then, that stranger incidents are more likely to be 'one-offs', they also suggest that a sizeable minority of these victims may be quite vulnerable.

Other incidents. It is important to consider these findings in the context of other types of incident which children experienced. As is clear from Table 5, by far the most common incident to befall children was an accident. Eighty per cent of respondents suffered an accident when they were 'out'. This included being struck by cars, bitten by dogs and falling off bicycles. Thirty six per cent of these victims went to see a doctor as a result of their 'last' accident. Among all types of incident listed in Table 5, stranger-perpetrated sexual abuse was the least common.

The remainder of this paper is restricted to a discussion of 'last' incidents perpetrated by strangers.

Table 5: Prevalence of all stranger-perpetrated victimisations, and accidents

Incident	Children reporting (%)
Accident	80
Harassment	32
Theft/attempted theft	24
Physical	11
Sexual	9

Table 6: Specific types of act involved in 'last' sexual incident

Act	N	%*
Perpetrator indecently exposed self	65	44
Perpetrator tried to get child to go with him/her	41	28
Perpetrator touched child	27	18
Perpetrator tried to touch child	21	14
Perpetrator tried to make child touch him/her	8	5
Perpetrator made victim go with him/her	4	3
Perpetrator made victim touch him/her	1	1
Stated	147	91
Missing	14	9
Total	161	100

*The total percentage exceeds 100 as some victims reported more than one type of act per incident.

Nature of incidents

As Table 6 reveals, by far the most common type of incident involved acts of indecent exposure, being cited by almost one-half (44 per cent) of all 'stranger victims'. An example of one such incident, involving a ten year old girl, is given below. Less than one-fifth (18 per cent), said they had been 'touched' by a perpetrator. Extrapolating, some 2 per cent of all the children in the survey would have been touched by a stranger in a sexual way and only 0.1 per cent would have been made to touch a stranger in a sexual way. Thus, while the prevalence of all stranger-perpetrated incidents was higher than might have been anticipated, many children were reporting less serious incidents, with few children experiencing acts which involved physical contact.

Me and my sister were in the park at night and a man was walking up and down and then he stood in a corner and pulled his pants down at us.

The number of children who reported that a stranger had 'tried to get them to go with him or her' (28 per cent) is disquieting. While a very small proportion (2 per cent) of the entire sample, these acts are potentially extremely serious. It is possible that some children misinterpreted this question, because of the rather general way in which it was worded, and had in mind quite innocuous incidents. However, it was the authors' impression, based upon an examination of the vignettes children were asked to provide, that they were reporting bona fide attempts by strangers to get them to go with them to places such as parks, cars and residences, as the following account, from a ten year old boy, illustrates:

I was in my old street and I was playing cricket with my friends and a car drove through and then stopped and reversed back up to me and shouted to me to get in her car. I said 'No!' and ran off to my house. The car drove off. All I can remember is that it was a white car.

The figures in Table 6 also contain some reassurance. Approximately ten times as many perpetrators *tried* to get children to go with them (41) as achieved this (4). Similarly, more perpetrators *tried* to get the child to touch them (8), than succeeded (1). Although children appeared to be less successful in preventing perpetrators from touching them (21 and 27 respectively), these results suggest that children can, and do, resist stranger assaults.

Table 7: The age of victims at the time of the survey

Age	Victim		Non-victim		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
9	19	11	161	89	180	100
10	19	6	302	94	321	100
11	13	5	248	95	261	100
12	20	6	307	94	327	100
13	35	12	266	88	301	100
14	23	8	265	92	288	100
15	23	8	254	92	277	100
16	6	9	60	91	66	100
Sub-total	158	8	1863	92	2021	100
Stated	158	98	1863	82	2021	84
Missing	3	2	396	18	399	16
Total	161	100	2259	100	2420	100

Victim characteristics

Age. Older children should report more stranger-perpetrated incidents, given that they have been exposed to this risk for a greater length of time. Table 7, though, indicates that there was no clear relationship between prevalence and age. For example, nine year olds—the youngest group in the survey—included the second highest proportion of victims.

A number of factors, relating to aspects of the children's reporting behaviour, might explain Table 7. Older children may have felt more inhibited about their victimisation and less inclined to report it. Younger children were arguably more likely to misinterpret the question and thus 'over-report' incidents, possibly in an effort to meet perceived researcher expectations.

In the course of the survey children were asked when incidents had occurred. To make this task more feasible, children were invited to select from periods which, it was thought, might be quite prominent in their lives. As Table 8 shows, their answers were fairly evenly distributed across three of these periods. This may be misleading, however, as these

Table 8: When sexual incidents occurred

Period	N	%*	Weighted for standard 12 month period (N)
Current school year	40	30	96
Last summer holiday	12	9	72
Previous school year	42	31	50
Prior to previous year	41	30	n/a
Sub-total	135	100	—
Stated	135	84	—
Missing	26	16	—
Total	161	100	—

*Based upon 'last' incidents.

Table 9: The gender of victims of stranger-perpetrated incidents

Gender	Victim		Non-victim		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Female	110	11	884	89	994	100
Male	50	5	989	95	1039	100
Sub-total	160	8	1873	92	2033	100
Stated	160	99	1873	83	2033	84
Missing	1	1	386	17	387	16
Total	161	100	2259	100	2420	100

periods are of different durations. The approximate time covered by each of the first three periods was as follows: 'current school year'—an average of five months; 'last summer holiday'—two months; 'previous school year'—ten months. The final column gives the number of incidents which would have occurred in a standard 12 month period.

Table 8 shows that, unsurprisingly, children reported fewer incidents from the more distant past. These figures are, themselves, likely to be influenced by a number of factors, such as forgetting, a decrease in the rate of long-past victimisation among younger children, and the possible existence of 'high-risk' periods, in particular summer holidays.

Gender. Table 9 shows that girls were more likely to report stranger-perpetrated sexual incidents than boys—the prevalence being 11 per cent and 5 per cent respectively. This finding is in line with numerous other studies which show that girls are sexually victimised more often than boys (Finkelhor, 1994).

Ethnicity. As the number of children in 'non-white' minority ethnic groups was small, they have been amalgamated into one group for this discussion. This is unsatisfactory but unavoidable. Table 10 shows little difference between the two groups in terms of the proportion of children victimised in stranger-perpetrated sexual incidents—the figure being approximately 8 per cent for both groups.

Area. For the purposes of this paper, the location of schools was taken to indicate the type of area in which children lived. The rate of victimisation, as indicated by Table 11, showed a steady and marked decrease from the inner city, through the peripheral council estates and suburbs, before reaching its lowest point in rural areas. The rate of

Table 10: The ethnicity of victims

Ethnicity	Victims		Non-victims		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
White	133	8	1592	92	1725	100
Minority ethnic groups	24	8	271	92	295	100
Sub-total	157	8	1863	92	2020	100
Stated	157	98	1863	82	2020	83
Missing	4	2	396	18	400	17
Total	161	100	2259	100	2420	100

Table 11: Victimization by local environment in which child lives (as measured by school location)

Area	Victim		Non-victim		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Inner city	56	11	454	89	510	100
Estate	49	9	500	91	549	100
Suburb	33	6	490	94	523	100
Rural	23	5	438	95	461	100
Sub-total	161	8	1882	92	2043	100
Stated	161	100	1882	83	2043	84
Missing	0	0	377	17	377	16
Total	161	100	2259	100	2420	100

victimisation in the inner city was, at 11 per cent, more than twice that of rural areas (5 per cent). These findings are in line with those of the BCS (Aye Maung, 1995) but at variance with other estimates (for example, that of Mawby, 1979). These findings did not result from differences in gender composition or response rates of children. Forty five per cent of the children answering this question in the inner city schools were girls, as against 53 per cent in the rural schools. The non-response rate (among girls, for example) was 12 per cent in the inner city and 9 per cent in the rural areas.

The precise connection between prevalence and area of residence is unclear. It may be related to any one of a number of factors, such as lifestyle or reporting behaviour, where perpetrators lived or their targeting choices. Aspects of the built environment may facilitate or deter perpetrators.

Conclusion

This research shows that the debate over the seriousness of stranger-perpetrated sexual abuse is complex. On the one hand, the findings offer some reassurance, with only a small minority of children experiencing such incidents and with many of the reported incidents involving 'less serious' acts. That children were almost nine times more likely to hurt themselves through an accident when they were out, than be accosted sexually by a stranger, also helps to put these incidents into perspective. Having said this, some children were 'touched' by, or were made to 'touch', perpetrators; others were subject to attempted 'abductions—some of which were completed; and almost three-quarters of all victims said they had been 'very' or 'quite frightened' by their experiences (Gallagher and others, in preparation). Levels of victimisation were higher among girls than boys, and for children from inner city areas and peripheral council estates, compared to those from the outer suburbs and rural areas.

Other results call into question commonly held notions concerning stranger abuse. For instance, being accompanied by their peers did not protect children as much as might have been expected, and children were as much at risk from other children and young people as they were from adults (Gallagher and others, in preparation). These results indicate that there is much which remains to be understood about stranger abuse, such as why some

children can resist assaults, or make disclosures, while others do not; and what are the precise methods by which children resist assaults.

This research has also highlighted the existence of issues surrounding the protection of children, and their place in society more generally. For example, if efforts to protect children are rendering them less 'street-wise' (Weale, 1995), then this may be placing them more at risk from strangers when they are out alone. Schools showed a marked variation, by area, in their willingness to take part in the research reported here. The refusal rate among schools in the inner city and peripheral council estates was 42 per cent. This compares with rates for schools in the outer suburbs and rural areas of 57 per cent and 58 per cent respectively. These differences were due, in part, to the preparedness of schools to deal with possible parental/carer concerns and objections over their children's participation in 'sensitive' areas of research. Ultimately, they suggest that the extent to which a school contributes towards a child's safety may depend upon the area in which it is located. As Matthews and others (1998) have noted, there is an eagerness on the part of adults to move children on from some of the places they like to 'hang around' with the result that they move on to less supervised spaces such as parks where, as this research suggests, they may be more at risk.

The authors intend to address the above, and related, issues through further analysis of data not only from the survey but also from the child and parent/carer interviews and the police record searches. However, it is already clear, from the findings presented in this paper, that it is essential to move away from a situation in which the debate over stranger abuse swings from the 'shock and horror' of tabloid headlines to one where anxious parents/carers are dismissed as 'paranoid' (Furedi, 2001). Rather, a much more balanced, considered and informed discourse is needed. This should start with an acknowledgement that stranger abuse, while a rare phenomenon, is one in which individual incidents may be serious and where many victims are disturbed by their experiences. In addition, the popular, or at least media, construction of stranger abuse, needs to be challenged. In this construction, stranger abuse is seen to consist of men offending against girls, serious sexual assault, extreme violence, and abduction. A debate which recognises that stranger abuse involves, for example, a range of victims, types of act, perpetrators and locations, is likely to be far more relevant and worthwhile than one based upon stereotypes.

Much of the official response to stranger abuse—certainly in terms of proactive measures—is confined to protection 'programmes' carried out by teachers, police and voluntary bodies, such as Kidscape and the NSPCC, with children in schools. While questions remain over the precise benefits of this work (Finkelhor and others, 1995a), it does not seem unreasonable to assume that these initiatives do enhance children's safety. However, that these programmes exist almost in isolation, only serves to highlight the widespread neglect of stranger abuse in terms of policy and practice. This neglect is well illustrated by *Working Together*. Reference to stranger abuse in the current edition of *Working Together* is minimal (Department of Health and others, 1999). While the previous edition of this guidance did not contain a great deal more mention of stranger abuse, it did at least merit its own sub-section (Home Office and others, 1991). Research has shown stranger abuse to be 'marginalised' within the police, with these cases invariably being dealt with by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) (Hughes and others, 1996). This is in stark contrast to intrafamilial abuse cases which are, almost without exception,

handled by specially trained officers in dedicated child protection units. This has produced what is, in effect, a fragmented child protection service within the police, where some children (namely the victims of stranger abuse) may ultimately not receive as good a service, not only from the police, but also other agencies. That said, it does appear that this situation is being remedied with the Association of Chief Police Officer's support for the introduction of a 'standards-based' investigation service. This policy will ensure that all investigations into the sexual abuse of children are conducted to the same standard (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 1999).

If a sophisticated response to stranger abuse is to be developed then it should incorporate all aspects of the 'mainstream' child protection system; namely, prevention, detection, investigation and management, and treatment. It is only through this, that all the needs of children in respect of stranger abuse can be met. Should such a response come about, then it might also, hopefully, reverse the current position in which the tabloid media and 'anti-paedophile' mobs have come to hold such sway.

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