

Prostitution as a Business: Criminal Pimping Networks

Parents speak out:

“We talk of international trafficking. We are not saying we should not do anything about that. But look here, they are passing these children from gang to gang just like they are doing with girls brought from abroad. Girls are not seeing money changing hands. That’s what is happening”.

Prostitution as a Business

While not all underage girls enter prostitution through criminal networks, many do. Through offering family support to parents and children abused through prostitution CROP has identified a highly organised and profitable web of crime. CROP has a dual focus unique amongst voluntary organisations: to find ways to address the criminal activities of those perpetrating widespread abuse of girls in the U.K. today, and to offer family support to parents and children abused through prostitution.

Knowledge of criminal networks first emerged as a result of CROP research undertaken four years ago as part of a Home Office study on prostitution. As awareness of traditional methods operated by pimps grew, the work of CROP identified increasingly sophisticated and extensive grooming and pimping operations. This knowledge base continues to expand as new families contact CROP for assistance. Networks of men formed around a central core of male relatives of various ages can be described as commercial firms. They are in the business of making money and girls are the work force. Their business strategy is to identify, groom and pimp a growing number of underage girls.

Grooming for prostitution starts with identifying girls in various locations, such as shopping malls, schools, leisure facilities – any location where informal interaction is possible. For the girl the first stage is fun and often begins with boys of the same age or not very much older than she is. Depending upon the location, the role boys play may have direct oversight by older men in the organisation, for example in shopping malls where the man in charge of the boys identifies who to approach, talk with, invite to go for a coffee and end by suggesting meeting in town. When the contact is made in town and a relationship begins to be established, the girl is introduced to a man, often described as a relative, a few years older than the boy. The process is the same in other locations, although oversight and direction of the boys may be less obvious. In schools boys in the same classroom undertake the same role, and after contact is made girls are introduced to a man described as an older brother or cousin sitting in an impressive car at the school gates. Boys play a very important role in establishing initial contacts, which enables girls to be passed upwards in the criminal network.

The next stage has an exciting beginning. During the first part of this stage the grooming aim is to make the girl more accessible to the next male and his influence. This is a skilled operation. The young man to whom she has been introduced begins by showing a great interest in the girl. He takes her out in his car, which may be parked at the school gates, and possibly she enjoys the envy of her friends, and on to clubs and other venues she would not normally experience until older. Cigarettes, alcohol and drugs become part of the experience. He gives her a new name, for example from Ann to Cecilia, as part of acquiring a new identity. He gives her presents, including a mobile phone if she does not have one, and maintains constant contact with her through verbal and text messages. She finds this very flattering and becomes convinced he loves her.

By inducing feelings the girl experiences as love, he can begin to encourage isolation from family, friends and school. The vulnerability of girls is age related, with grooming usually beginning between 12 to 14 years, a time of relative inexperience. At this age it can be difficult to believe, or even think, that his attention and interest may not be genuine. Older girls are likely to be more savvy and less trusting, which explains why the early teenage years are the best for introducing grooming for prostitution. Sexual experience is unlikely to start before 13 years when legislative punishments for sex with a minor are less and girls are expected to make a formal complaint. From the point of view of the criminal prostitution business once a girl reaches the age of 13 years the criminal justice system offers valuable support for their activities, however unintended that may be.

Achieving a break with her parents may take time and effort, but he has prior experience of the process while her parents do not. He knows how to turn to his advantage responses such as family rows, parental attempts to discipline, to restrict the amount of time spent out the house and, if parents know him, in his company. His efforts can end with the girl permanently moving in with him or someone else or asking to be accommodated by the local authority, often alleging parental abuse. The pimp instigates the move, as moving away from the family home into local authority accommodation or elsewhere increases his access to and over her.

During the time of traumatic break from the family, friends and school, the grooming process begins to develop threatening aspects. If not before, girls will be introduced to alcohol, drugs and criminal or pseudo criminal activities to further their entrapment. For example one parent reported that, “they took her in the car to get cash from the machine and asked her to hold a credit card. Then they said it is a stolen card and we have drawn two grand on it and now your fingerprints are all over it. ‘If the police come you will be in trouble’. A 13 year old would believe it”. Other threatening strategies include taking incriminating photographs of girls who may or may not be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

When a girl’s complete isolation from her family, other supporters and previous life is achieved, or well on the way to being achieved, he then can begin to introduce her into prostitution. This may start as a request for her to help him out of a temporary financial problem by having sexual relations with another man, or a demand that she have sex with other men as she has to pay him back for the drinks, mobile phone, lifts in his car, and presents. Sometimes it may start with group rape. Whatever tactic is used to gain her acquiescence to sexual activity with another man or men, once achieved the pimp then has the control he needs to enforce her continuation in prostitution.

During this time parents and other family members experience conflicting feelings. “Its like – sometimes I could have knocked down our daughter. Sometimes we blamed her. We felt she wanted to be with these people.” Blame alternates with despair, tears and temper at not being able to stop their daughter from being abused. “We all used to sit down to eat and then the car honking and she used to run and we did not know when she would be back.” Schools too, could blame the girl and worry about the school reputation. “They said she is old enough. She has got to learn to take the consequences of her own behaviour.” Police too, could blame the girl and the parents for choosing or allowing her to choose a life in prostitution and could refuse to become involved. “Every single thing – no matter what we said – they just did not want to know – THEY JUST DID NOT WANT TO KNOW”. Blaming the victim also took more collusive forms such as returning underage girls to flats where sexual abuse was known to take place.

In the third and final stage pimps pursue a number of strategies to control the girls they have inducted into prostitution. These include alternating affection with violence and abuse, illegal drugs and other criminal activities. His violence and that of the men who pay for her become accepted as inevitable and her obedience to her pimp's demands is seen as the only way to reduce physical and sexual harm. As can happen with domestic violence, the violence and abuse becomes a regular event that the girl resigns herself to. The same question, 'why doesn't she leave?', may occur to those who have not lived through this experience. Girls explain their inability to leave in different ways. One mother said, "I recall her saying, 'It's like as if he is inside me, controlling me and telling me what I am allowed to say or do and what I am not allowed'" and another girl said, "Mum! He has brainwashed me so that I cannot leave him ever. I am like his possession."¹

Violence from criminal prostitution businesses can include emotional abuse, rape, threats to and attacks on parents, siblings and other family members. Class A drugs are likely to be involved at an early stage as drug addiction makes girls more amenable and desperate. Drugs are often embraced as a coping strategy. A girl is likely to regard her controller as a boyfriend, rather than acknowledge the reality of the situation. Even as he continues with his violence and abuse, a girl may continue to view him as her boyfriend as he sells her the drugs she now desperately needs. Prostitution becomes the only way to earn enough money to pay for her daily use of drugs.

Pregnancy is another strategy that extends his control whether the result is an abortion or a child. Through pregnancy he gains control not only over her sexual performance, but also over her reproductive life. If the result is a child her need to earn increases and he may subject the child to actual or threatened abuse, including kidnapping or child abduction, in order to obtain more money from her. If the result is an abortion, he resolves what she may see as a problem, earning her gratitude. If she wants the child, but he insists on an abortion, his control is extended. For example, CROP encountered two girls in one year who had been subjected to forced abortions carried out by medically unqualified associates of the pimp resulting in horrific physical injuries. In defining and exploring vulnerability to pregnancy amongst 13 to 18 year old girls, induction into prostitution requires greater attention by health authorities and other agencies.

Statutory agencies can be unaware of these processes and unable to distinguish the early grooming stages from normal teenage courtship, as the first point of contact involves local boys around the same age of the girls and both are from the same area. Their contact may seem harmless, even when older young men later become involved. Similar age and locality may have a significant impact on statutory agency involvement, for example social services. If child protection investigations by social services occur, meetings focus on individual girls. Usually there is no arena for meetings in which information and concern about the boys and men can be shared and grooming networked businesses identified. Policing too, can be influenced by similarities of age and locality as the extent of the criminal network is not immediately obvious, given that police forces are organised locally through a divisional structure and a headquarters that covers only part of the operational area of the criminal prostitution business. These criminal networks may extend over different police force areas.

¹ Brainwashing is described as having five major components: isolation, control, uncertainty, repetition and emotional manipulation. Immaturity is of major assistance in achieving brainwashing and all these elements are evident in grooming. See Kathleen Taylor (2005) *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control*, London, Open University Press.

The organisational head of the criminal network is hidden from view with possibly three or more layers to the criminal organisational structure.

Criminal grooming and pimping businesses can involve many girls, while in comparison the number of men is relatively small. The boys and men may be associated through sub-networks. Only the men at the centre of the business know everyone who is involved: boys, men and girls. Men in criminal pimping networks also have the added advantage of guidance, if needed, by those above them in the organisation. These younger men may report to another much smaller layer of men and ultimately to an older male relative, the firm's managing director. Boys are also learning the business and after leaving school may be able to participate at the next level.

As CROP works from the ground up, tracing the connections is hampered by the men's use of different names as well as the slow and patient way in which information is of necessity gathered from girls and parents. Parents who are desperate to protect their daughters may know only a small part of what has happened and is happening to their daughter and possibly more than one daughter. Girls too have networks of siblings and friends through whom criminal grooming and pimping networks can make contact with new girls. For statutory agencies, a full network analysis needs to incorporate both in order to identify vulnerable girls and the members of the business.

Criminal prostitution businesses have support from other commercial organisations. Taxi firms play an important role in all the geographical areas where CROP works. Girls in prostitution are taken to different locations, both indoor and outdoor venues. The youngest girls are unlikely to be seen on the street as they may attract attention from the police who monitor the street scene. Girls are taken to different cities over a wide area of England; a practice best described as trafficking. Indoor locations may be organised by the criminal prostitution firm or by others more external to it. The supply and sale of drugs is another area of linked, but possibly separate criminal business interests – as is pornography.

CROP has identified a highly organised and profitable web of crime. Girls are exposed to levels of violence, torture, and abuse that most professionals cannot conceive of. As a result of the intricate grooming and control methods, the extensively organised business and the tendency of society to blame the victim, the plight of the majority of girls goes unrecognised by statutory authorities that have the role and duty to protect them. As a result the business continues to make good profits with little interference.

One parent concludes that, "The issues of the human rights of the child and parent's rights to family life without any conflict, and the right to psychological support have no value".
