



Thematic Briefing #1:

Responses to boys and young men affected by
peer-on-peer abuse - work across
MsUnderstood local sites

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Introduction and summary

MsUnderstood (MSU) is a partnership between the University of Bedfordshire, Imkaan and the Girls Against Gangs Project, founded in 2013 to build responses to young people's experiences of gender inequality generally, and peer-on-peer abuse specifically. 40 local safeguarding children's boards applied by support in October 2013, and since January 2014 MSU has directly supported 11 of them, in six sites across England, to develop their response to peer-on-peer abuse, including gang and non-gang associated serious youth violence (SYV), child sexual exploitation (CSE), teenage relationship abuse (TRA) and harmful sexual behaviour (HSB):

- Sheffield
- Buckinghamshire
- North London Cluster (Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey and Islington)
- Lambeth
- Greenwich
- Croydon

The partnership is supporting these six sites across two phases. Phase one involves an audit to identify strengths and areas for development of each site's response. Phase two comprises a support package building on the identified strengths. Drawing upon the audit reports produced for all six sites, this briefing paper outlines the nature of support for boys and young men affected by peer-on-peer abuse in the local areas we support.

The MSU audit reports, upon which this briefing is built, documented multiple interventions with young men impacted by peer-on-peer abuse including 1:1 support in the form of mentoring, youth work, sexual health and youth offending service provision. Across the sites there was universal recognition from senior managers and practitioners of the need to further develop work with boys and young men, both those who abuse others and those who are abused themselves (not necessarily mutually exclusive categories). In particular, audits identified a consistent need to work beyond interventions with individual young men and their families to identify mechanisms for ensuring safety in the public environments in which young men spend their time. There is significant potential to meet this gap given that all sites had access to some form of

engagement with young men in either schools or on the street. In order to achieve this, sites need to address the fact that presently:

- Interventions do not consistently address the multiple forms of peer-on-peer abuse that may be experienced by young men, focusing heavily on gun and knife crime and relatively less on domestic abuse and sexual exploitation
- Work on harmful sexual behaviour remains under-developed and often lacks strategic leadership in local areas. Where more effective practice is identified in this regard it remains focused on individuals who sexually harm and is less able to accommodate sexually abusive peer groups

Once the methodology and structure of this briefing is outlined, the remainder of this document provides a detailed account of the strengths of local responses to boys and young men and the thematic areas of work most in need of development. It concludes by identifying how the MSU partnership will work with sites over the coming year to develop responses to boys and young men, as well as considering whether the themes identified in this briefing reflect a national picture.

Methodology, governance and ethical arrangements

MSU recognises that young people's experiences of peer-on-peer abuse are informed by a range of environments in which they spend their time, including their homes, peer groups, schools and other public places in their neighbourhoods (Firmin 2015, Firmin and Curtis 2015a). The MSU audit was designed from this theoretical perspective, and sought to identify the extent to which intervention, assessment, profiling, training, multi-agency working and strategic planning engaged with all of the environments associated with peer-on-peer abuse as well as the individuals affected by, or engaged in, the phenomenon (Firmin and Curtis 2015b). Audits were not conducted as pieces of independent research – they were conducted under the authority of local safeguarding children's boards who worked with us to build a picture of their local response, and as such were conducted under the auspices of local reviews rather than a university study.

Site audit reports documented the findings of this process and made recommendations regarding the content of the MSU support package. With the consent of our sites, this briefing summarises the thematic conclusions related

to boys and young men that were identified across the reports following a manual analysis. Analysis of reports sought to identify findings that related to boys and young men as both those who had been abused by, and well as those who had abused their peers.

The report analysis process was undertaken in two stages:

- Stage one was used to extract all findings related to boys and young men from each report
- Stage two synthesised the extracted findings to identify themes that were shared across the six reports, and highlight examples of promising practice¹

Structure

This briefing is structured by identifying the strengths across the six MSU sites (11 local safeguarding children boards) followed by the thematic areas in need of development. The briefing concludes by outlining the work that the six sites are currently undertaking with MSU to further develop their work with boys and young men, and outlines how MSU intends to explore whether the picture painted in this briefing reflects the national context.

Across the six MSU sites, the audit process identified evidence of work with boys and young men affected by peer-on-peer abuse. Practice in the MSU sites is currently delivered across a continuum from preventative work on healthy relationships through to forensic interventions and multi-systemic therapy for individuals who have demonstrated abusive or harmful behaviours. While there was less evidence of work to address young men's victimisation the potential to do so was present in all sites. Documented with reference to practice with individuals, families, peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods, the remainder of this sub-section highlights examples of promising practice related to young men's experiences of peer-on-peer abuse.

¹ For the purposes of this briefing promising practice is defined as responses that were either: being used to develop consistency in the response to boys and young men impacted by peer-on-peer abuse; worked with young men across the siloed issues featuring in peer-on-peer abuse cases (for example cutting across harmful sexual behaviour and serious youth violence); sought to understand or intervene with the environments in which boys and young men were exposed to, or engaged in, abusive behaviours

1. Work with individual young men

Some individual services, particularly in youth offending, have developed resources to support discussions around young men's attitudes, beliefs and experiences of teenage relationship abuse as part of wider interventions.

All sites recognise AIM2 as a route to assessment and intervention for young people with harmful sexual behaviour. Given that the majority of those identified with harmful sexual behaviour were young men, this is a finding of importance for this briefing.

Some sites have developed processes and protocols to ensure that an awareness of AIM2 is supported by a consistent approach to referral. Two of these examples are outlined below:

Hackney's sexual exploitation profile, developed from information shared through the Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) forum, has identified that the majority of incidents reported to date involve young women being sexually exploited by male peers. In addition to collating and analysing information in relation to young people identified as being at risk of or subject to sexual exploitation, the MASE meetings have begun to collate information relating to young men for whom concerns have been expressed about sexually harmful or exploitative behaviour towards their peers. Plans are now in place to develop a process for holding Multi-Agency Planning (MAP) meetings to ensure that there are multi-agency plans in place to provide support and intervention to young men who are felt to be at significant risk of abusing others. These will follow a similar format to MAP meetings held in relation to young people identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation. Whilst plans are still in their relatively early stages it is hoped that this development will go some way towards ensuring that these young men's needs are being considered and addressed, that all agencies recognise that doing so is an essential part of a safeguarding response and that intervening proactively at an early stage may reduce the risk of behaviours becoming more entrenched.

The forensic Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in the Thames Valley is well established, and a tiered consultation and assessment/intervention service is outlined in order to provide input to young people who are causing concern to others by their behaviour. As the service is part of specialist CAMHS services there is an emphasis on consideration of emotional wellbeing or mental health need and high risk, as well as considering concerning cases where the level of risk or need may not be clear. Structured risk assessment (SAVRY or AIM2) is part of this process and this aids the formulation of cases. Other services can be supported through regular consultation and supervision arrangements around case working.

Separately commissioned but linked to this team is the Buckinghamshire Child and Adolescent Harmful Behaviour Service (CAHBS) which is commissioned to offer consultation, assessment and intervention for young people with harmful sexual behaviour. The service uses a psychological framework which includes the AIM2 and other structured risk assessments. This service provides training on sexually harmful behaviour to local partner agencies in conjunction with the local safeguarding boards under its commissioning arrangements. This training supports increased awareness of child sexual development, assessment of problematic behaviour and basic interventions, and not only does it help support professionals in their work, it means that referrals are more appropriate and concerns are more clearly identified.

Case example:

Pete (age 14) was accused of sexually touching a female peer in the toilets at school. When the complaint was made, the school called social care and the police. Social care called CAHBS who were able to support with immediate safety planning and the assessment of Pete and his needs. The police pursued the case and asked CAHBS and YOS their view on an out of court disposal. The AIM2 framework was used to support the decision making. Once given a youth conditional caution (YCC) Pete was asked to undergo an AIM assessment and intervention at YOS and this was supported and supervised by CAHBS. Once the YCC was complete, CAHBS were able to remain involved for a brief time to ensure safety planning continued once other agencies withdrew.

2. Work with young men's families and home environments

- When conducting assessment on boys and young men who have abused, or been abused by, their peers, the nature of their home environment is often considered by professionals across the six sites.
- In a number of sites therapeutic approaches are being used to improve familial relationships as means of responding to peer-on-peer abuse. The use of multi-systemic therapy for both gang-affiliated young men and those who harmful sexual behaviour, as well as family group conferences and family nurse partnership, was identified during the audit process.
- Professionals within MSU sites recognise that parental capacity to safeguard young people can be undermined by the impact of risk factors outside of the home environment. In response to this parent-led projects are being established in some sites, developing peer support for parent/carers whose young people, including young men, had been impacted by gangs and serious youth violence:

The Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) Gangs Project has been developed to promote and pilot the use of NVR parenting support for families in Greenwich whose children are involved in criminal/ gang activity. The collaboration between Oxleas, St. Giles Trust and the Royal Borough of Greenwich ensure practitioners and parents are able to be fully aware of the risk factors and possible implications of their child being involved in gang activity and receive support from council and police while NVR parenting is implemented in the home. The programme involves home visits to assess and support individual family needs, in parallel with a series of group sessions.

Parents or carers attending the programme gain:

- A better understanding of gang culture
- Strengthened family relationships
- Support for the whole family
- Freedom from feelings of powerlessness
- An increased presence in their child's life
- Hope for the future

3. Work with young men's peer groups

- All MSU sites have access to preventative and early intervention activities for young men. In addition to sexual health services and relationship and sex education in schools, most have some form of youth work provision, including that which is detached. Young men make up the vast majority of young people accessing youth service provision in the sites, and do so in their friendship groups. As a result, most sites have a number of routes to access and engage with young men's peer groups as a means of responding to peer-on-peer abuse, and do not need to rely on an individual referral to begin an intervention.
- In addition to engaging with groups of young men, detached activities appear to provide an opportunity to reclaim public spaces in which young men may have felt that they are at risk of harm.
- Most gangs units, and the analysts who support them, routinely produce maps which document associations between young men, particularly those who are affected by or involved in serious youth violence. Such data provides a potential evidence base on dynamics of peer groups involved in, or affected by, peer on peer abuse, and their association to vulnerability and resilience, upon which to develop group interventions.

4. Work with young men's schools

- Some schools within MSU sites are actively working with local partners to address concerns about peer-on-peer abuse, including referring young men with harmful sexual behaviours. Such approaches are facilitated when schools: have trusting relationships with their Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH); are working alongside safer schools police officers; are engaging with specialist external services.
- A number of schools in MSU sites have commissioned, or accepted, early interventions for young men with harmful behaviours and attitudes. During the audits, schools were identified using interventions that were primarily intended to tackle serious youth violence to provide young men with the opportunity to discuss concerns regarding consent, sex and relationships. Such work is generally conducted in single gender groups, before bringing young

men and young women together to engage in peer learning exercises as demonstrated by the delivery of Growing against Gangs in a number of London schools

5. Work with young men in public spaces

All MSU sites have access to, or have developed, activities that are intended decrease tensions and violence in local neighbourhood settings, including the use of football sessions and activity buses, all of which are mostly accessed by boys and young men.

The youth bus is used around the borough of Croydon to provide support and activities to young people in targeted areas. This work is geographically targeted by a variety of intelligence from Housing ASB, Police, Gangs Team, the wider community and young people. The street based team provide weekly contact to groups who are spending their leisure time in parks, in the stairwells of flats, around local shopping centres and out on their local streets. The relationship between the youth team and the young people is entirely voluntary, they can choose to engage or not, working in this way the team are often a privileged witness to the realities of what young people experience out on the streets in their local neighbourhood. The youth bus offers young people a safe place to sit and talk to experienced youth workers about a variety of different issues and workers will prompt discussion on topical issues. Young people are signposted to a variety of different services and the youth bus carries a lot of resources for young people should the need arise to discuss something further. Youth workers also dispense the local condom distribution scheme and offer Chlamydia testing.

6. Strategic support, multi-agency working and data collection

- Across all MSU sites practitioners are afforded the opportunity to engage in training related to peer-on-peer abuse. Training on gangs and serious youth violence, and increasingly training on sexual exploitation, considers the experiences of young men as those who are abused, as well as those who may abuse others
- Some strategic documents, particularly those concerned with serious youth and gang-related violence have recognised that young men can be groomed into abusive behaviours. For example, Barnet's serious youth violence strategy and [Lambeth's Violence Needs Assessment](#)

identify work with boys and young men as strategic priorities for preventing all forms of peer-on-peer abuse

- Some sites have developed safeguarding protocols for responding to harmful sexual behaviour, such as [Buckinghamshire](#), and/or established strategic and operational multi-agency groups to coordinate harmful sexual behaviour interventions such as in Sheffield and Hackney
- A number of multi-agency partnerships in MSU sites are using analytical data to identify young men of concern, and target appropriate interventions. At some gangs panels, this has included identifying young men being groomed into peer-on-peer abuse as observed at a gangs action group meeting in Enfield. On other occasions data has been used to identify links between young women being discussed at sexual exploitation panels and young men identified at serious youth violence panels

The purpose of the MASE Analyst role in Camden is to deliver analytical support in the form of reports, presentations, recommendations and advice on children and young people up to 25 years old who may be at risk of sexual exploitation and supporting the implementation and development of the MASE through the analysis of crime and missing incidents and intelligence. The MASE Analyst reviews all risk assessments completed on young people deemed vulnerable to/at risk of CSE and pulls together and shares any intelligence with various professionals.

The MASE analyst attends the Bronze panel where gang members are discussed and has oversight of the young people discussed at the Youth Disorder Panel (YDP). Intelligence is shared about males heard at these panels and the links they may have with females/males discussed at MASE meetings. Open source social media tracking is used to establish any links/communication between young women discussed at MASE and males discussed at YDP and Bronze. The MASE analyst regularly meets with the Serious Youth Violence Coordinator to discuss any links between gang members and males/females at risk of CSE.

7. Strengths - conclusions

Collectively therefore, the response to boys and young men impacted by peer-on-peer abuse in the six MSU sites engages with individuals, families, and to a lesser extent, environments beyond the home that are associated to peer-on-peer abuse. A range of statutory and voluntary agencies are engaged in the current response, which receives variable strategic recognition. Both training and analytical support are increasing practitioner and policymaker understanding of the phenomenon at local levels. However, it is clear that the response is at its strongest when responding to serious youth and gang-related violence, and in managing young men as those who abuse others. The response to the victimisation of young men in general, and their involvement in the sexual and physical abuse of partners and female peers, requires consideration, as does a more consistent account of the environments in which peer-on-peer abuse occurs as the following sub-section outlines.

Findings: Ten priority areas for development

As indicated above, in order to build on the strengths outlined in this briefing there are ten areas in need of development for responding to young men's experiences of peer-on-peer abuse:

1. Practitioners across agencies require more information about young men's own experiences of harmful sexual behaviour or grooming so that they are better equipped to identify their victimisation as well as their abusive behaviours.
2. The majority of targeted work with young men focused on their involvement serious youth violence (understood as knife and gun crime), and needs to routinely discuss relationships and sex as part of this provision.
3. The largest gaps in relation to provision and training appear to be for young men who are:
 - Being victimised, particularly sexually harmed
 - Sexually harming in groups as opposed to on their own
 - Physically or emotionally abusing female partners as opposed to male peers
4. Interventions with, and assessments of, young men's families/carers are yet to routinely consider, and address, the impact of external

influences on the parental capacity to safeguard. As a result familial support, including parenting programmes, is often delivered without addressing external factors that impact upon familial relationships.

5. Despite examples of effective engagement, inconsistency amongst school responses to peer-on-peer abuse is a challenge for all MSU sites. Examples of inconsistent practice include non-recording or referral of incidents of harmful sexual behaviour or partner abuse in schools; managed moves of those who have been abused between schools rather than those suspected of abusing; and school cultures which reinforce harmful ideas about gender roles and relationships which in turn underpin peer-on-peer abuse.
6. Neighbourhood interventions related to peer-on-peer abuse are largely confined to responding to anti-social behaviour and gang-related violence, and are yet to routinely engage with patterns of peer-on-peer exploitation or teenage relationship abuse. Given that street-based work largely engages with boys and young men this is an under-utilised resource as part of a multi-agency response to peer-on-peer abuse.
7. During audits, concerns were raised about the relocation of young men, particularly those impacted by serious youth violence. Some sites feel ill-equipped to manage the impact of gang-related violence on the young men placed in their local area, and the impact that they in turn have on other young men they are placed with (if within a residential children's home).
8. Local strategies need to provide a consistent account of boys and young men's involvement in, and experiences of, peer-on-peer abuse. For example, many sexual exploitation strategies are built upon assumptions that all perpetrators are adults or fail to provide an account of safeguarding responses to young men with abusive behaviours. There is little strategic recognition of the need for services for boys and young men suspected of abusing partners, and serious youth violence strategies often refer to young men as 'choosing' involvement in gang-related violence in the absence of any consideration of grooming or coercion.

9. Despite most sites having structures, services and processes with the potential to engage with young men in their friendship groups this is arguably the area of work in most need of development. Many peer group interventions offered to young men do not address gender, sexuality or consent in a way that challenges harmful attitudes. Where group work of a more specialist nature is being offered in schools or by youth offending services, individual young men are referred into a group setting as opposed to such interventions being offered to pre-existing peer groups, thereby limiting the ability to challenge and change the behaviour within harmful peer networks.
10. Whilst many practitioners understand the importance of peer influences on young men and have a working knowledge about peer networks, this knowledge is rarely utilised to intervene with peer groups as a whole. For example, whilst analysts and practitioners provide gangs teams with extensive knowledge about abusive peer networks, their interventions remained primarily focused on individuals.

The vast majority of interventions afforded to individual young men were delivered in the absence of any broader contextual intervention to address factors that may have been driving their abusive behaviours. For example, young men who were being groomed into gangs in their local neighbourhoods, or being exposed to sexual harassment at school, may be expected to change their behaviours following a mentoring intervention but in the absence of their neighbourhood or school being made any safer.

Conclusions, recommendations and responses

In auditing the response to peer-on-peer abuse in 11 local authorities in England we have identified strengths and areas for development in supporting boys and young men affected by the phenomenon. The potential to deliver peer group interventions and an increased concern around harmful sexual behaviour can be utilised to build a more consistent and effective continuum of support. Building on these strengths will be important for addressing the 10 primary gaps that currently exist in responding to young men who abuse their partners, inconsistent strategic positions on young men who exploit their peers and the need to address the victimisation and grooming of young men in the round. Cutting across all of this is a need to work more contextually in response to boys

and young men impacted by peer-on-peer abuse, paying particular attention to the influence of peer, school and neighbourhood environments on their sense of agency and safety.

In response to our findings, MsUnderstood made a number of recommendations to the 11 local authorities we audited, and committed to support them in delivering against these until May 2016. With specific reference to boys and young men, the following activities will be delivered within the MSU sites, aimed at building on the strengths and addressing areas in need of development, outlined in this briefing:

1. The Hackney response to young people suspected of abusing their peers will be observed and captured in a framework to be shared across the local authorities in the North London cluster. It is envisaged that this process will initiate the piloting of a consistent response to, and record of, young people who abuse their peers across these six boroughs, the majority of whom are currently boys and young men.
2. Workshops and train-the-trainer programmes with specialist services in Buckinghamshire, supported by a contextual case file review process, will identify the local response to young people who abuse their peers across a continuum from primary through to tertiary prevention. The train the trainer exercise will ensure that all participating services will provide consistent messages on the nature of peer-on-peer abuse when delivering training in the future.
3. The development of peer-mapping techniques in Buckinghamshire, and support for analysts to map peer networks in the North London cluster and Lambeth, will assist in the identification of young men who have been groomed to abuse and in the development of evidence-based interventions with young men's peer group.
4. Support to youth work practitioners who support boys and young men in Lambeth and Greenwich, will ensure that professionals understand, and feel equipped to challenge, peer attitudes which can underpin or challenge abusive social norms with friendship groups.

In addition to our work in local sites, we are interested in the extent to which the picture painted in this briefing is reflected in other areas around the country. During the coming six months we will be contacting other local safeguarding

children boards to ascertain their levels of work with boys and young men at present, identifying whether our current work programme will also be of benefit to them, and whether any examples promising practice can be shared with our sites.

For more information on any examples of promising practice documented in this briefing, or for questions on our national survey, please contact us on info@msunderstood.org.uk.

www.msunderstood.org.uk

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Bibliography

[Firmin, C and Curtis, G \(2015\) 'Practitioner Briefing #1: What is peer-on-peer abuse?'. MsUnderstood Partnership, London](#)

[Firmin, C \(2015\) 'Practitioner Briefing #2: Auditing your local response to peer-on-peer abuse'. MsUnderstood Partnership, London](#)