



COVID 19 AND IMPACT ON BLACK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Exploring the Sexual Abuse of UK Black Children Within And Outside The Home Before and During COVID 19

AFRUCA Briefing Paper: COVID 19 Series 2
August 2020

About AFRUCA

AFRUCA – Safeguarding Children is a national charity with offices in London and Manchester working to address child protection issues in Black and minority communities in the UK. We provide prevention and early intervention services to address child abuse issues, working with families and communities. We also provide educational services, working with practitioners in different fields to improve their skills and enable better intervention in families.

Since the onset of COVID 19, AFRUCA has experienced increased referrals into our child protection early intervention services from local authorities across the country. This shows an increasing number of children referred into the care system due to a variety of safeguarding reasons.

AFRUCA has developed a set of briefing documents to help draw attention to the range of child abuse issues exacerbated by COVID and the impact on children in Black and other minority communities.

This short briefing paper examines the impact of child sexual abuse in Black communities, with instances drawn from community intelligence, AFRUCA case work, media reports and other sources.

Introduction

Child Sexual Abuse is a taboo and silent problem in the UK Black community. CSA includes both contact (rape, penetration, touching the genitals, groping, kissing) and non-contact (sexting) and downloading and watching indecent images of children. People do not talk about child abuse and victims suffer in silence. Year on year figures from our work at AFRUCA showed that Black children are less likely to be referred into our service for sexual abuse than other forms of child abuse, especially physical abuse and neglect. Unfortunately, government child protection statistics are no longer broken down by ethnicity, so it is difficult to examine national trends. It is not clear whether the lack of referral into services is due to a lack of disclosure and reporting, for a range of reasons that could be cultural or religious or other factors. Hence, lack of service referral does not mean that child sexual abuse is not occurring. There is enough anecdotal evidence to show that child sexual abuse in UK Black communities merits further investigation.

There are many ways that COVID 19 could have exacerbated this form of child abuse. We have identified some of these below:

1. Child Sexual Abuse in the Home

- Generally, most child sexual abuse occurs within the family, household or by those known to children¹.
- Poverty, deprivation, housing, immigration status all exacerbate vulnerabilities of children to sexual abuse, incest and there would be heightened risks as a result of the prolonged lock-down.
- Many parents lack child protection awareness and so have no idea how their children can become at risk of harm from sexual abuse. Many parents have no

¹ Multi Agency Response To Child Abuse In The Family Environment: Joint Targeted Area Inspections. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-multi-agency-response-to-child-sexual-abuse-in-the-family-environment/multi-agency-response-to-child-sexual-abuse-in-the-family-environment-joint-targeted-area-inspections-jtais>

idea what constitutes sexual abuse and what they should or should not do to protect their children from abuse².

- COVID 19 has compounded the issue for many children. Excessive use of the internet, social media and other platforms during the prolonged lock-down have created additional risks of exposure to online sexual abuse, sexting, grooming, exposure and unwitting complicity in creating illegal sexual images of children.
- Many parents are ignorant of the dangers posed by use of technology by their children and are unable to provide guidance, safety and protection. They may not be aware of signs that children are being abused online.
- Domestic violence and different forms of child abuse can create avenues for sexual abuse to thrive due to parents' preoccupation with their own issues, leading to child neglect and increased vulnerability.
- Reported rise in cases of sibling abuse, sex between underage siblings. In one instance a brother was allegedly responsible for impregnating his two underage sisters.
- Immigration status of parents, no recourse to public funds, inability to work, leads many asylum seeking parents into hiding or not disclosing child sexual abuse due to fear of deportation. This same issue puts children at risk of abuse as their parents become very vulnerable to infiltration or grooming by those who want to "help" but are only interested in gaining access to the children in order to abuse them.
- The extended family nature of many ethnic communities means children are exposed to all forms of people, some whom might pose a risk of harm. Multiple occupancy homes where extended family members are welcome to visit regularly or live expose children to danger.
- Private fostering situations expose children to sexual abuse when children are living with relatives or extended family members who pose a risk of harm.
- Both male and female children can be at risk, even though girls are more vulnerable to child sexual abuse.

² AFRUCA - What is Sexual Abuse: <https://afruca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/What-is-Sexual-Abuse-Booklet.pdf>

- Female children are vulnerable to sexual harm from both male and female abusers.
- Abuse of girls by female adults could be downplayed as less harmful than abuse by male adults, hence not serious enough to merit reporting.
- Abuse of girls by male adults could be blamed on the girls - for religious and cultural reasons. Girls could be seen as “asking for it”, “showing off their bodies like whores”, hence lack of reporting or disclosure. Abuse can also lead to the child being punished for allowing herself to be in a position of being sexually abused.
- Male children are vulnerable to harm from both female and male abusers.
- Abuse by adult females of male children could be seen by the children and others as “conquests” and a sign of viral masculinity. Abuse of male children by male adults could bring about a sense of shame and self-hate. Both can lead to non-disclosure and non-reporting.
- Reporting and disclosure of child abuse in black communities can therefore be hampered by cultural and religious factors - protecting the family honour, protecting the child from shame, protecting the perpetrator, not bringing religion into disrepute.
- Children can be shamed into not disclosing or reporting abuse and emotionally blackmailed into submission with claims of impact on future life, life-long shame and future relationships.

2. Child Sexual Abuse Outside The Home - Faith Organisations

- Children could be exposed to abuse in faith organisations by faith leaders and workers. This is possible when child abusers are able to gain access to children by virtue of their work in faith organisation, using the power and control wielded over congregation members, including parents.
- Specific religious practices can create avenues for child sexual abuse, including deliverance session, private prayer sessions, private teaching sessions, night vigil.

- Specific issues around abuse of congregation members in multiple ways - financial, sexual abuse and abuse of position. We refer to media report earlier in the year about a Black church with a mainly youth congregation and allegations of sexual and financial abuse³.
- Pressure by congregants not to disclose child sexual abuse and a gang-up, bullying or ostracisation of victims.

3. Sexual Abuse Outside The Home - Gangs

- Children exposed to grooming by gangs. County Lines drug trafficking might also involve grooming via sexual abuse
- Gang rape as initiation rites to become members of youth gangs
- Female gang members might experience abusive relationships by gang leaders, including repeated sexual abuse
- Victims of country lines trafficking might be subjected to sexual abuse to pay back debt claimed to be owed by trafficker.
- Young person experiencing substance misuse might be forced into sexual abuse in return for drugs.
- Child involvement in gangs and country lines trafficking might be facilitated by parental neglect due to poverty, absenteeism, substance abuse, domestic violence and other adverse childhood experiences.

³ SPAC Nation: Allegations of Safeguarding Abuses in “Trap Houses” Linked to Controversial Church: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/spac-nation-scandal-safeguarding_uk_5dc5a907e4b00927b2329c3c

4. Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

Child Sexual Abuse can have a devastating impact on victims. It is important for parents, carers, teachers and others with close contact to be able to identify the symptoms so they are able to offer appropriate support.

Children who have experienced sexual abuse might experience trauma, feel very alone and emotionally isolated, especially if the abuser is a family member living under the same roof. They might feel shame, guilt and be stigmatised. They might not be able to disclose abuse out of fear of what would happen to the abuser if they are a close family member, their family or parent. Children may be threatened by an abuser that they would be harmed or in the case of online abuse, that their images would be exposed or put on the internet. Therefore, they might choose to carry this secret which in addition to the trauma of the abuse experienced, can severely impact on their mental health and well-being. The risk of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV is very real indeed.

5. Addressing Child Sexual Abuse

There needs to be increased community awareness and education on what constitutes child abuse, the different forms of sexual abuse and risks to children. Many parents need education to understand the risks posed to children on the internet, social media and other online platforms, so they could put in place appropriate guidance, safety measures and support for their children.

Now that children are returning to school after the prolonged lock-down, it is important that services are able to identify the symptoms of sexual abuse and offer the right support. Services must not expect that victims would be able to disclose abuse, but work to enhance their capacity to identify indicators of abuse. This is more so in the case of Black children, where specialist sexual abuse services might not be geared towards meeting their needs and priorities.

Families should be made to understand the importance of providing loving care, support and succour to affected children at this very difficult period, rather than apportioning blame. A child should never be blamed for being a victim of sexual abuse.

6. Further Reading

1. AFRUCA: Child Sexual Abuse in The African Family Environment. 2015
<https://afruca.org/position-paper/2237/>
2. AFRUCA: What is Sexual Abuse? *Safeguarding African Children Series 7*. 2015
<https://afruca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/What-is-Sexual-Abuse-Booklet.pdf>
3. Bernard, Claudia A_ Child Sexual Abuse In The Lives Of Black Children. In: Claudia A. Bernard and Perlita Harris, eds. *Safeguarding Black Children: Good Practice in Child Protection*. 2016
4. Jahnine Davis: Where Are The Black Girls in Our CSA Services, Studies and Statistics. In *Community Care*. November 2019. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/11/20/where-are-the-black-girls-in-our-services-studies-and-statistics-on-csa/>