

Our Voices Too

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY EXPLORING PEER SUPPORT INITIATIVES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Research findings

BRIEFING PAPER ONE

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a significant and widespread human rights and public health issue affecting those from every demographic¹. Research suggests that the majority of victim-survivors of sexual violence do not disclose, report or seek the support of professional services (United Nations, 2015). For those who do access support, studies identify that there is a lack of specialist services to support victim-survivors of sexual violence. For example, in the UK studies have highlighted the gap in specialist services for women affected by sexual violence (Coy *et al.*, 2009) and therapeutic services for children and young people affected by child sexual abuse (Allnock *et al.*, 2015).

A mapping of services in the UK for victim-survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation, found that the majority of interventions focus on establishing a 'therapeutic relationship', employing creative methods, providing counselling, utilising cognitive behavioural approaches and engaging in family support work (Allnock *et al.*, 2015). Beyond professional services there is little understanding of what other support young people affected by sexual violence may access, benefit from or desire.

There is increasing recognition of the role 'friends' play in supporting young people who have experienced sexual violence. For example, research has shown that young people routinely disclose information about sexual abuse to friends and that friends may provide significant support (Allnock, 2015; Warrington *et al.*, 2017). However, there is also recognition that friends may be a source of risk and harm to young people (Sanders *et al.*, 2017).

There is limited scholarship on the role of 'peers', defined in this paper as those individuals who may not be 'friends', and may not be of the same age, but have shared experiences with regards to sexual violence. This is in contrast to other fields, for example in mental health, where there is growing evidence illustrating the value of support provided by those who have shared experiences and understanding².

Young people engaged in projects at the International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking at the University of Bedfordshire have repeatedly identified an interest in exploring the potential of peer support for young people affected by sexual violence. This direct call from young people prompted the focus of this study. These calls align to findings from research studies exploring young victim-survivors' perspectives of support services which identify that some form of peer support or group work, which involves working together with those with shared experiences, may be helpful (Gilligan, 2015; Warrington *et al.*, 2017). Recent evaluations of peer mentoring initiatives (where those with lived experience support young people affected by sexual exploitation) also identify promising results (Buck *et al.*, 2017; Rothman *et al.*, 2019). It is therefore an opportune time to explore the nature, value of and challenges involved in peer based initiatives for young people who have experienced sexual violence.

1 For the purposes of this paper sexual violence is defined as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (Jewkes, Sen and Garcia-Moreno, 2002).

2 See Briefing Paper Two.

THE RESEARCH

The key questions explored in this study into 'peer support'³ were:

- What do peer support initiatives for young people (aged 10-24) who have experienced sexual violence look like and involve?
- How are peer support initiatives experienced and received by the young people and professionals involved?
- What is the value of peer support initiatives for those involved?
- What are the challenges and barriers linked to these forms of support?

A number of activities were undertaken as part of this study. This included:

- Undertaking a literature review to identify relevant evidence and key themes to explore further in the study.
- Circulating a 'call for evidence' for information about, and materials related to, peer support initiatives for young people who had experienced sexual violence.
- Developing an online survey to enable individuals to share their experiences of peer support initiatives.
- Undertaking interviews with key informants.

The call for evidence and survey resulted in limited responses and therefore the research team, through contacts and online searches, identified and proactively contacted 18 organisations and initiatives providing peer support for young people affected by sexual violence. Representatives from 12 of these organisations and initiatives responded and agreed to take part in the study. Following this, semi-structured individual or group interviews were undertaken online or face-to-face with a total of 25 key informants from these 12 organisations and initiatives.

3 Whilst the authors recognise that there are varied understandings of what the term 'peer' implies, for the purposes of this paper 'peer support' refers to a formalised supportive relationship between individuals who have lived experience of sexual violence in common. In discussing mentoring models, one form of peer support, respondents used different terms to refer to a mentor with lived experience including 'peer mentor' and 'survivor mentor'. Some respondents preferred the term 'survivor mentor' believing that mentors were at a different stage in life compared to the young people they were supporting. For consistency, in this paper the term 'peer mentoring' is used.

The respondents

Of the 25 respondents, 18 had been involved in setting up peer support initiatives and/or supporting, supervising or managing peer supporters from ten organisations and initiatives.

Table 1: Respondents with experience of supporting peer support initiatives.

RESPONDENT CODE	ORGANISATION /INITIATIVE CODE	LOCATION	PRIMARY MODEL OF PEER SUPPORT	STATUS OF PEER SUPPORTERS	TYPE OF ORGANISATION
1	A	North America	Peer mentoring	Employed	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
2	B	Europe	Group work	N/A	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
3, 4	C	North America	Specialist mentoring programme (involving mentors with and without lived experience) for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking	Employed	Housed in wider service for young people
5	D	North America	Peer mentoring	Employed	Housed in wider service for young people
6, 7, 8, 9	E	Europe	Peer-led workshops	Employed	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
10	F	North America	Peer mentoring	Employed	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
11	G	Europe	Peer mentoring	Volunteer	Peer organisation for women
12	H	North America	Specialist mentoring programme (involving mentors with and without lived experience) for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking	Volunteer	Housed in wider service for young people
13	I	Europe	Group work	N/A	Housed in wider service for young people
14, 15, 16, 17, 18	J	Europe	Peer mentoring	Volunteer	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking

The sample included a number of representatives from organisations who had mentoring models in place for young people affected by sexual violence. Three of these organisations employed individuals with lived experience of sexual exploitation/trafficking (who were not former service users of their organisations) as mentors to work with the young people they were supporting. Of these three, two were specialist services designed to serve young people affected by sexual exploitation and trafficking. The other was an organisation serving a broader group of young people, however the mentoring programme was set up specifically for those with experiences of sexual exploitation and trafficking. All three were based in North America.

Representatives from two other organisations and initiatives were, or had, designed and supported a specialist mentoring programme for young people who were experiencing sexual exploitation and trafficking. These programmes included a mix of mentors including those with and without lived experience. Both of these initiatives were located in North America and had experience of serving a broader population of young people. One employed mentors as staff and the other recruited volunteer mentors.

In addition the research team interviewed members of staff from two other organisations who had established a peer mentoring programme. In both cases mentors were current or former service users and worked as volunteers. One organisation was a peer led support organisation for women and the other a specialist service for sexually exploited and trafficked young people. Both of these were located in Europe. A further organisation represented in the study, also based in Europe, was developing a model of peer support within their organisation; supporting a service user to lead workshops for other young women who had experienced trafficking.

Due to the limited number of examples of peer support initiatives for young people affected by sexual violence, the research team also interviewed two individuals who had been engaged in group work with young people affected by sexual exploitation and trafficking. These interviewees were able to provide insights into the role of 'peers', the dynamics, and the potential value and challenges of peer support with this particular population.

Seven 'peer supporters', those with lived experience, who had, or were in the process of being trained to support other young people were also interviewed⁴.



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⁴ In this paper the term 'peer supporter' is used as a broad term to refer to individuals with lived experience of sexual violence providing support to young people affected by the issue. The term 'peer supporter' includes individuals with lived experience mentoring young people, running workshops and groups and engaging in other supportive activities.

Table 2: Peer supporter respondents.

RESPONDENT CODE	ORGANISATION / INITIATIVE CODE	LOCATION	FORM OF PEER SUPPORT	STATUS OF PEER SUPPORTERS	TYPE OF ORGANISATION
19	K	Europe	One-to-one peer support	Voluntary	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
20	L	Europe	Peer group support	Voluntary	Independent support group for university students
21	E	Europe	Peer workshop facilitator	Employed	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking
22, 23, 24, 25	J	Europe	Peer mentor	Voluntary	Specialist provider for young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking

Four of the peer supporter respondents were former service users of one organisation and had only recently received training to become peer mentors. The questions therefore focussed on their thoughts on peer support along with their desires and hopes rather than their experiences of peer mentoring. Another interview was held with a young person who had experience of leading creative workshops for young people at the organisation where she herself accessed support. A further two young people, who had initiated the development of peer support initiatives were also interviewed. One had set up a support group at her university and the other, working with the organisation who supported her, set up a support service for other young people going through the criminal justice system. All of these peer supporters were based in Europe.

Analysis

Following interviews, audio recordings were transcribed and, where participants requested that they not be recorded, written notes were typed up and checked. Two of the three researchers involved manually coded a selection of transcripts independently and discussed key themes. Anonymised transcripts were then uploaded into a qualitative software package, NVivo 11, to code data. A thematic analysis was undertaken based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis.

Ethics

The study received ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire's Institute for Applied Social Research. Prior to interviews commencing, all respondents were provided with information about the aims of the study, and information on consent and confidentiality. Respondents were given the opportunity to ask questions or seek clarifications prior to the interviews commencing and at the end were asked if they wished for any information shared during the interview to be removed from the transcript. Written consent was obtained by all respondents.

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