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## The Times view on protecting vulnerable girls from abuse: Missing Children

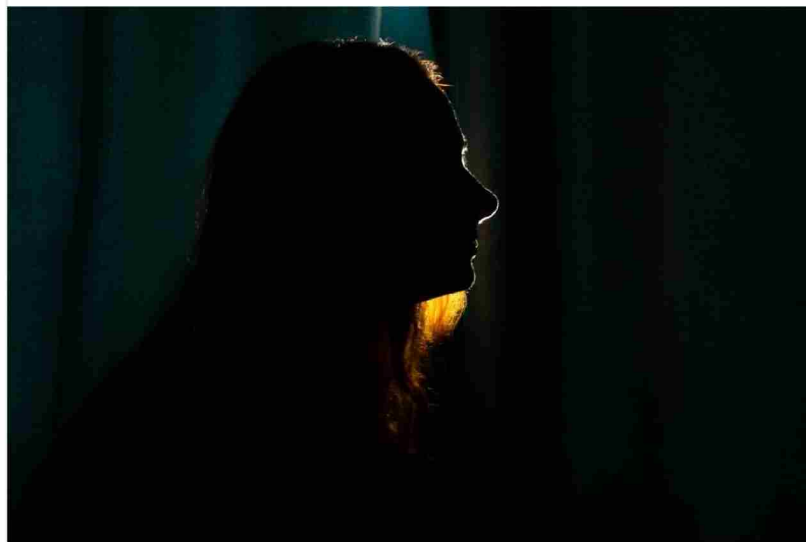
Many police forces are still not doing enough to safeguard those at risk, a Times investigation reveals

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**I**t is ten years since *The Times* first started to reveal the horrific scale of child sexual abuse in Rotherham which, due to a combination of incompetence and political correctness on the part of the police and local authorities, had been kept hidden from public view. In the months and years that followed, it emerged that [more than 1,400 children had been abused](#) in that town alone, many supposedly under council care, while the authorities looked the other way. Since then hundreds of men from towns across Britain have been jailed for their part in grooming gangs that plied vulnerable girls with alcohol and drugs before passing them among their friends to be abused. That makes it all the more troubling that not only is child sexual abuse still widespread but it appears that some police forces have not learnt the lessons.

[Our investigation](#), based on freedom of information requests submitted to all 54 of the country's police forces, reveals that children as young as 11 have gone missing 55,000 times in the past three years. These "missing episodes" are recorded when a child considered at risk of sexual exploitation disappears and their parents or social workers call the police. At least 26 children have been reported missing 100 times or more, including one child in Yorkshire known to be vulnerable to sexual abuse who was reported missing 197 times in three years. What is particularly concerning is that internal police reports show that in many cases there is little chance of the exploiters being investigated. Despite the law being clear that a crime may have been committed even when a groomed girl believes sexual activity to have been consensual, many police forces are giving up on some vulnerable girls as "lost causes".

No wonder that Nazir Afzal, the chief prosecutor who brought the Rotherham grooming gangs to justice, worries that the police may have "gone back to their old ways". Similarly Sarah Champion, the Labour MP for Rotherham, has described the fact that so many children are going missing so often as "shameful".

It is true that convictions are hard to achieve, particularly if a girl believed to be a victim of sexual exploitation refuses to give evidence. It is also true that the police's task has been made harder by problems elsewhere in the social care system. A lack of secure accommodation, for example, has meant that many vulnerable girls and young women have been housed in caravans and other temporary accommodation where they continue to be preyed upon by grooming gangs.

Nonetheless our investigation, including evidence that police forces [tried to redact details](#) from releases under freedom of information requests (but left underlying text legible), shows that many police were themselves aware of serious failings in their handling of child sexual exploitation cases. In Hertfordshire, for example, about half of cases in 2019 were not recorded correctly. In Lanarkshire, the county's 15-year-old IT system was deemed inadequate for the changing nature of child sexual exploitation crime, while West Yorkshire police acknowledged their database on offenders could not easily be searched by officers.

All these police forces insist they have made efforts to address the problems contained in the reports. It is also important to recognise that there have been marked improvements in tackling child sexual abuse. Successive home secretaries, including the present one, have rightly put the issue high on their agenda. Priti Patel launched her own Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy in January. Even so, our investigation shows that too many children are falling through the cracks of a system in which too few perpetrators are being investigated and too little information is shared between police, social services and other agencies. A decade after Rotherham, that is something that should shame us all.

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