

Girls groomed and filmed but attackers avoid justice

thetimes.co.uk

May 27, 2021 Thursday 5:00 PM GMT

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Section: NEWS; Version:3

Length: 1576 words

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Highlight: The authorities have been unable to break the hold that abusers have over vulnerable children

Body

Children as young as 11 years old are being reported missing repeatedly to police forces by their families and social workers. Despite the authorities knowing they are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, they have been unable to stop them running away back to their abusers.

Girl with learning disabilities was filmed

In video footage on her phone, Sarah is seen being sexually exploited by a group of men. The camera follows the teenager, who has learning disabilities, while the men can be heard laughing and taunting her.

Minnie, one of Sarah's social workers, said the footage was found on Sarah's phone but no abusers had been charged with any offences. "If you wanted to look at a worst-case scenario for failing to tackle the abuse of a child, this is it," the social worker said. "Everything that could go wrong did go wrong."

Sarah, who is from southeast England, was taken into care after her mother was unable to cope with her challenging behaviour. Social services suspected that she had been sexually exploited by older men since the age of 13. Last year, she was reported missing repeatedly from her foster placement. On one occasion she was found with an older man in possession of drugs. They were both arrested for county lines-related offences.

Sarah had not been flagged on the police's crime database as being at risk of sexual exploitation, Minnie told The Times. Despite social services telling police about the footage on Sarah's phone, no action was taken at the time to protect her.

"The police just told us they had spoken to her, that she had told them it was a consensual relationship and that she wasn't doing anything she didn't want to do," Minnie said.

Social services formally asked the police to prevent one of her abusers from seeing her but nothing was immediately done. Sarah subsequently began to invite friends with her to houses and parties run by older men, also putting them at risk of abuse.

"The police labelled her a groomer," Minnie said. "But this was probably just a 16-year-old girl trying to protect herself by surrounding herself with people who weren't a threat to her."

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Child sexual exploitation is defined as when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive someone under the age of 18 into sexual activity. Victims can include 16 and 17-year-olds who can legally consent to sex, even if they believe at the time that they are in a consensual relationship.

More than six months after Sarah's arrest, social services successfully made a court application to move the vulnerable teenager to a secure placement away from her abusers.

With prosecutions difficult to achieve for rape and child abuse, the authorities can try to protect victims in other ways, such as securing care placements for vulnerable children in other areas of the country. In extreme cases, they can ask a court for the authority to restrict a child's liberty for their own protection. There were 416 of these secure accommodation orders in England and Wales last year, compared with 302 in 2011. In 2019 there were 525.

In recent years High Court judges have complained about having to authorise requests to lock up vulnerable children in unregulated and unsuitable homes. At present, demand for secure placements for exploited children is so high that councils are having to put them in short-term rentals including mobile homes, caravans and, in one case, a tent.

Police can also issue warning notices to potential abusers, stating that they could be arrested for abduction if they are found with the child again. While these can be useful in breaking initial contact and ensuring an offender can not claim that they think a victim is above the age of consent, not complying with them is not a criminal offence and experts have described them as ineffective. Despite Sarah being moved, Minny said she was still in contact with one of her abusers.

Vulnerable 15-year-old reported missing 131 times

Samantha was described at the family court last year as "an anxious, scared teenage girl" who is "at serious risk of child sexual exploitation".

She has been reported missing at least 131 times and repeatedly found with a group of "older males who have the potential of harming her". However, only one of her abusers has been prosecuted, while the others have been given warning notices.

Samantha, 15, who is from Yorkshire and has four siblings, had a chaotic upbringing, with her parents suffering from mental illness and abusing drugs and alcohol.

A court hearing in March last year was told that she had a history of serious self-harm and had gone missing repeatedly since 2017, at first from her mother's house and more recently from foster placements and care homes.

Mr Justice Cobb, in the High Court's family division, stated that since late 2019 Samantha had been reported missing 131 times. "Samantha was, and is, also assessed as being at serious risk of child sexual exploitation by reason of her repeated abscondences and her vulnerability, particularly given that she did not, and does not, fully acknowledge the risks to herself," he stated. "She was known to associate with older males who have the potential of harming her or coercing her into actions that are a risk to herself or others."

Mr Justice Cobb found that she should be deprived of her liberty for her own protection. Samantha accepted the conditions and is now supervised while living in a holiday home rented by her council.

The judge said he would share the details of the case with Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, because of the "depressingly all-too familiar" circumstances of her having to be kept in an unregulated home because there is a nationwide lack of capacity in the children's social care system for young people with complex needs who need secure care.

Humberside police said it has had "numerous strategy meetings" with other agencies to try to protect Samantha. She has not wanted to give evidence about her abusers but one perpetrator who she was linked to is serving a 16-year jail sentence based on the evidence of others.

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A police spokesman said Samantha was "working positively to turn her life around", adding: "When and if Samantha feels able to talk to us, we will always be there."

Girl found with older men after police took no action against her father

In March last year Emma told a teacher that her father had shown her pornography and asked her to touch him sexually. The 15-year-old girl, who had previously had selective mutism, later revealed that she had been abused by him since she was 12 and was worried that she might be pregnant.

Her father was removed from their home in the northwest of England and she was put into care. The police investigated but the criminal case was dropped in September "due to evidential difficulties".

Emma, who has three younger siblings who are also under social care plans because of concerns about emotional abuse, has since gone missing 17 times. She has attempted suicide and has been arrested five times after aggression towards carers and the police.

At the High Court in February Mr Justice MacDonald said there were concerns about her being exploited for sex. He stated that in December an inspection of her phone showed that "she had been meeting with unknown male adults, raising concerns of child sexual exploitation and drug misuse".

Despite this warning, she went missing again a month later and "was found in a property in the company of three unknown male adults to whom she alleged she was being abused in care". Mr Justice MacDonald wrote that the adults became obstructive and the police were called. There is no mention in his court judgment of whether any further action was taken against the men and the force involved declined to provide more details.

The court ruled that Emma could be kept in a secure placement for her own safety. Mr Justice MacDonald said: "This is yet another case in which the court is once again faced with approving an unregulated placement by reason of a lack of any other option. The need for these resource issues to be addressed for the benefit of the highly vulnerable children with which the courts are concerned in these difficult and troubling cases remains as grimly pressing as ever it was."

Police forces said child sexual exploitation was a priority and they did all they could to locate missing children and return them safely as quickly as possible, with dedicated teams working to protect victims and pursue offenders. They said they had regular meetings with other agencies, and those children go missing more than 100 times "are the exception".

Chief Constable Simon Bailey, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection, said forces had "vastly improved" their policing of these cases, adding: "We know there is more to do. Protecting children is not something the police can do alone and we are working with social services, local government, charities and others to make sure everyone fulfils their responsibilities."

The Home Office and Department for Education said that proposed legal changes would help to target offenders and they worked with agencies to improve data on child sexual exploitation and to support vulnerable children.

*Some names have been changed to protect the victims

Load-Date: May 27, 2021