

# Developing an evidence base for Sexual Abuse Public Health approach

Kieran McCartan, PhD  
Associate Professor in Criminology  
UWE, Bristol, UK

With thanks to and input from Jon Brown (NSPCC) & Professor  
Hazel Kemshall (DMU)

# Social construction and sex crime

- Given that
  - both offenders and victims are members of society,
  - that sexual offences and the responses are social constructions,
  - this means that the constructions and conversations that are created around sexual violence are very important.
  - whose opinion “matters”??
    - Media discourses
    - Professional discourses
    - Policy/government discourses
    - “public” discourses

# Do we need to change current discourses?

- In the main most discourses surrounding sexual violence tend to be located in the victim-offender paradigm discussing the personal impact that the offence has.
- This gives the impression of isolated instances of sexual violence rather than a more systematic, embedded culture present in society.
- By stating that the victim and the offender are somehow unique it means that some sections of the public can disengage from the conversation.
- What can be done to educate and reformulate societal understandings of Paedophilia/CSA across a range of publics?

# Public health, prevention and engagement

- Public Health is the means of improving the health of individuals, communities and society through a variety of means, focusing on;
  - Change people's attitudes and beliefs towards an issue;
  - Increase physical and interpersonal skills;
  - Influence social norms;
  - Change structural factors; and
  - Influence the availability of and access to services.

# Public Health & Sexual abuse

- Primary (prevention)
- Secondary (responding to warnings)
- Tertiary (reintegration/release prevention)

# **THE SPECTRUM OF PREVENTION**

**Influencing Policy and Legislation**

**Changing Organizational Practices**

**Fostering Coalitions and Networks**

**Educating Providers**

**Promoting Community Education**

**Strengthening Individual Knowledge and Skills**

# Public health, prevention and engagement

- Public health campaigns, and therefore by default prevention messages, only gets through when the public thinks that it relates directly to them.
- Most CSA campaigns/messages focus on the negative impact of the abuse on one individual in a given situation by an individual offender.
- People may disengage from the message because;
  - they may struggle to engage with the story being told;
  - they are oversaturated with similar stories; or
  - they feel powerless/unwilling to help.
- If the message was more about process, structure and function then this might change the outcome, like with other crime related public health campaigns

# Public health & Paedophilia/CSA

- The causes of paedophilia are individual in nature.
- Not all paedophiles offend and those that do offend (CSA) do not do so in the same way.
- Although, the majority of CSA/Paedophiles can receive treatment for their deviant sexuality not all will succeed in treatment, but the majority will return to society at some point.
- Consequentially as members of the public here is some advice
  - towards child protection and risk management (primary);
  - that you can give individuals that you think maybe in this situation (secondary); and
  - about what the state, and other organisations, does CSA/Paedophiles so that you can have a better understanding of how these populations are managed (tertiary).

## Public health & Child Sexual Abuse/Paedophilia?

- Sexual violence public health discourses in the main are primary prevention based focusing on education, engagement and awareness raising.
- However, this message does not always get effectively conveyed by the state and/or professionals to the public,
  - especially in terms of what happens at secondary and tertiary levels, and when it does the public do not always process it appropriately.

# Therefore.....

- Sexual abuse is a wide ranging social issue that impacts all aspects of modern living from
  - family dynamics,
  - healthy relationships,
  - criminal justice policy as well as practice,
  - government spending,
  - the use of as well as control of technology,
  - education and
  - Health.
- which means that a coherent, well defined and well developed approach is need.
- A public health approach marries together psychological and societal factors in order to present a rounded and engaging message that the public, practitioners and policy makers can all buy into; however, this is a complex task.

# Network online debate 1

- The first online debate addressing “Sexual abuse as a public health problem”.
- It took place in summer 2014.
- 17 people took part spanning 5 countries and a range of professions.
- The main prompts for the debate were
  - To what extent does conceptualising and approaching sexual abuse as a public health problem help to organising our thinking in relation to prevention? How does it need to be further refined and developed?
  - Are there other approaches to sexual abuse prevention that should be considered?
  - What are the next theoretical and practical steps that need to be taken in relation to sexual abuse prevention?

# Conclusions from the debates

## Online debate 1

- A public health approach, based on a socio ecological model has great potential
- Focus should be on all Forms of sexual violence
- Sexual violence is not gender neutral
- Should draw on other prevention and community engagement models and on a building prevention momentum
- Government engagement, endorsement and buy in is key
- Sexual violence is not “out there” and we all have a role in its prevention
- Potential for the media to be used to positive effect
- Clarity needed on how communities and individuals are framing sexual violence – one prevention approach does not fit all
- Generational change, recognise progress made
- We must evaluate, review and adapt our efforts

## ATSA debate

- It would be good to review all the existing [mandatory] reporting laws, to see what differences there are, what works and why.
- Need to reexamine the role of professional ethics boards in sex offender working, making sure that everyone is aware of the law, their responsibilities and the outcomes.
- An evaluation of where different professionals get their information on sexual abuse as well as related laws/policy's.
- The need for greater school level engagement on sexual health, sexual abuse and the law. We need to focus on school principles more.
- Need a reframing statement; if we want people to change the sexual abuse dialogue to one of prevention/public health then we have to give them the tools to do it.
- We need to strike the balance between community and individual engagement,
- We need to better clarify in what we are discussing in terms of sexual abuse, offenders, victims, etc.
- There needs to be a greater focus on the role and importance of attachment in preventing, as well as responding to, sexual abuse.
- We need to develop a strong evidence base for prevention, but how do we know the field, where is the data and how should we research it.
- We need to do more work across the board on situational prevention in a host of organizations and settings.

# Discussion points

- Do we think that a public health/prevention based approach could work in the UK?
  - What would some of the benefits be?
  - What would some of the barriers be? How could we overcome them?
- How can we communicate and engage different populations in a public health/prevention approach?
  - Public/ “publics”
  - Media
  - Government policy makers
- How do we develop an evidence base for a public health approach?
  - What data should we look at?
  - What questions should be ask?
  - What theoretical positions should we take?
  - What are measures of success?