

# Wellbeing of Professionals Working with Suspected Victims of Child Sexual Exploitation

The present study examined police officers' and social workers' experiences of investigating child sexual exploitation (CSE) cases and the impact on their welfare. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with frontline social workers and law enforcement professionals. Practitioners reported that they seldom reacted emotionally during forensic interviews because they were attending entirely to the victims while gathering evidence. Although some practitioners employed post-interview stress management techniques, anticipatory coping strategies were seldom adopted, and most coping methods were employed outside of the workplace (e.g., spending time with family). Practitioners focused on the needs of young people, almost to the exclusion of their own. Many did not consider the negative emotional impact of CSE cases on their welfare. These findings have important implications for practitioner wellbeing. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- Practitioners rarely considered the emotional effects that CSE cases might have on them or ways to psychologically prepare themselves before meeting with young people.
- Practitioners reported a variety of ways they managed the impact of working with CSE which most often occurred outside of the workplace; a number of these ways could be actively promoted and developed within police forces and local authorities, especially preventative coping strategies.

KEY WORDS: child sexual exploitation; wellbeing; qualitative research

**I**mproving police officers' and social workers' engagement with child victims enhances decision-making in criminal justice and child protection arenas, ensuring better protection and treatment of minors (Hershkowitz, 2011). Although child sexual exploitation (CSE) is widely recognised as a serious problem (Barnardos, 2014), there has been little academic research on the professionals who serve the victims. Law enforcement professionals and social workers may be taxed emotionally when interacting for long periods with uncooperative victims of crime, and lack of cooperation is common in CSE cases. The present study interviewed police and social workers about the impact of working on CSE investigations on their wellbeing.

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**'Little academic research on the professionals who serve the victims [of CSE]'**

**‘Many CSE victims are reluctant to cooperate with the authorities’**

**‘CSE cases often involve both sexual abuse and violence, features that characterise the most stressful cases for officers’**

**‘It is unclear whether CSE authorities systematically employ any coping strategies... before interacting directly with suspected victims’**

## CSE

In the UK, CSE is defined as the sexual exploitation of minors when young persons, or third parties, receive ‘something’ (e.g., money, affection) in exchange for sexual activity. Offenders exploiting minors have power over them due to their status (e.g., age, intellect, finances) and frequently use violence, coercion and/or intimidation to maintain their control (HM Government, 2009). Many CSE victims are reluctant to cooperate with the authorities (Lindholm *et al.*, 2014; Pollock and Hollier, 2010). Some might fear reprisals should they disclose and others may be loyal to offenders (Srikantiah, 2007). Suspected CSE victims who have experienced the most severe abuse may be the least likely to cooperate with service agencies (Srikantiah, 2007). Imminent threats from offenders may also lead suspected victims to deceive law enforcement, especially during the initial stages of investigation (Moosy, 2009).

## Practitioner Wellbeing

Conducting CSE investigations may affect practitioners’ wellbeing. CSE cases often involve both sexual abuse and violence, features that characterise the most stressful cases for officers (Brown *et al.*, 1999). Many CSE cases are protracted, taking several months or years before they come to trial, which delays the experience of practitioner fulfilment (Sewell, 1994). The large numbers of victims and the long work hours associated with CSE may also compromise practitioners’ wellbeing (Cornille and Woodard Meyers, 1999) as might the victims’ resistance, hostility, and non-compliance.

To manage difficult emotions, police officers may attempt to remain objective by disengaging from their emotions during the investigations (Evans *et al.*, 1993; Violanti, 1999). The use of humour, peer support, training/education, organisational support, mental and physical fitness, and encouraging a sense of control may also foster their wellbeing outside of their interactions with witnesses (Burke, 1998). Officers who seek social support and disclose traumatic events to their spouses are less likely to experience psychological distress than their peers (Davidson and Moss, 2008).

Recently, researchers have examined how practitioners might psychologically prepare themselves immediately before encounters that are expected to be emotionally difficult. Officers who investigate internet child exploitation have described the importance of mentally preparing themselves before viewing traumatic images in order to get into the right ‘head space’ (Burns *et al.*, 2008). However, it is unclear whether CSE authorities systematically employ any coping strategies, including psychological preparation, before interacting directly with suspected victims of CSE.

Because work of this sort can profoundly affect the wellbeing and mental health of the professionals required to investigate CSE, the aim of the present paper was to investigate the impact of prolonged CSE investigations on the practitioners involved and their coping strategies.

## Method

### *Sample*

Approximately 30 law enforcement officers and ten social workers specialising in CSE were approached via email by their supervisors; 15 CSE practitioners consented to be involved in the research (10 law enforcement personnel, 5 social workers) and participated in semi-structured interviews by one of three interviewers. The word 'practitioner' is used as an umbrella term referring to a law enforcement officer or social worker. Interviewers had graduate-level psychology degrees and extensive experience working on child maltreatment cases. Participants had worked in social care or law enforcement for between four and 30 years, and had focused on CSE cases for between 0.5 and 3.75 years. Practitioners participating in the study were recruited from a single UK constabulary and local authority.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Interviews were conducted individually, audio-recorded, lasted 1 to 1.5 hours, and transcribed. Interviewers met throughout the course of data collection to discuss emerging themes, possible modifications to interview structure, and to monitor quality. All interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the participants. One interview was conducted via telephone, and because its length was comparable to that of the others, it was included. The authors received institutional review board approval and obtained an official partnership with a local constabulary and city council to conduct the research. Participants were assured of confidentiality by the researchers as well as by their employers.

The semi-structured interviews focused on rapport-building ('How did you first approach [suspected victim]?') and practitioner wellbeing ('How often, if at all, do you consider your wellbeing or stress levels?', 'What, if anything, do you do at work to protect your wellbeing?', 'How do you psychologically prepare yourself before interviewing a young person?'). Other questions explored practitioners' experiences of going to court, their thoughts about the young persons' eventual disclosures, and the Rotherham case (in the news at the time of the interviews, see Jay, 2014). The present paper focuses on the findings related to practitioner wellbeing.

Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that interviewers asked participants to expand on apparent references to common themes, and references that appeared unique or needed clarification. Expansions were requested using open-ended questions (e.g., 'Tell me more about what you mean by that.'). Appendix 1 (see online Supporting Information) shows the interview script.

### *Coding*

Informal discussions between the authors took place periodically following interviewing and transcribing sessions, highlighting possible key concepts addressed in the interviews and effecting minor changes to the semi-structured interview script (e.g., maintain focus on the participant emotions rather than their reports of the young persons' emotions).

**'Participants had worked in social care or law enforcement for between four and 30 years'**

**'The semi-structured interviews focused on rapport-building and practitioner wellbeing'**

**‘A thematic analysis approach was used’**

**‘Each theme was illustrated using exemplary extracts from the interviews’**

**‘Upsetting aspects of CSE cases included themes of helplessness, including the heinous nature of the crimes’**

**‘Practitioners also found it upsetting to learn that some CSE victims could have been detected sooner’**

After all interviews were completed, an initial list of potential themes was collaboratively generated by the interviewers after they had independently reviewed a subset of the transcripts. The initial list of potential themes was refined after discussion of each transcript, with new themes being added to the coding scheme in order to ensure that the themes were exhaustive.

A thematic analysis approach was used (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved a systematic process of identifying patterns of meaning in respondent accounts. The analysis comprised several steps: (1) familiarisation with the data by reading each transcript repeatedly; (2) generating initial labels to capture the ideas expressed; (3) clustering labels representing similar ideas to produce a tentative list of themes for each interview; (4) comparing themes across interviews to create a ‘thematic map’ of the data; and (5) defining and refining themes to produce a consolidated set of themes; these were grouped into broad domains to provide an organising structure. Attention was paid to ensuring that each theme was illustrated using exemplary extracts from the interviews (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). The research team discussed different ways of conceptualising and representing the data, and modifications were made before reaching agreement on the final set of themes.

In accordance with good practice guidelines for qualitative research (Pistrang and Barker, 2005), ‘credibility checks’ were undertaken once the final list of codes was determined by the interviewers. The first author/interviewer took the lead in the analysis and coded all transcripts; the second author/interviewer read a subset of the transcripts and audited the first author/interviewer’s documentation of the analytic process.

## **Results**

### *CSE Aspects That Affected Practitioner Wellbeing*

Upsetting aspects of CSE cases included themes of helplessness, including the heinous nature of the crimes: ‘Hearing the graphic stuff that happens to these girls is the worst thing for me’ (Practitioner 12); ‘It’s horrible stuff that you are hearing day in and day out. It is the worst side of child protection social work. The stories are horrendous’ (Practitioner 6). Others reported being unable to protect witnesses from harm, and thus finding it difficult to resist making an arrest until the completion of thorough evidence gathering when they knew that the perpetrator was continuing to victimise children.

Practitioners also found it upsetting to learn that some CSE victims could have been detected sooner:

‘She’d been left in a neglectful situation, her dad was an alcoholic, took it to conference and got the support she’d never had but she was 14–15 by then and it was too late’ (Practitioner 6)

‘I came across a girl who disclosed she’d been raped and when we looked into it a lot further, we found out that the male had been investigated some years before, he was a much older male. And at the time, I felt that if the police had investigated this girl may not have been raped. So I did find that really difficult.’ (Practitioner 15)

It was also disturbing for practitioners to consider how the offenders treated and viewed their victims:

'I just think they're horrible human beings because they have no respect or thoughts for any of these girls. They are like animals in a way; they are purely sexual objects for them. They have no respect or care for them.' (Practitioner 7)

'These groups of men and young men treating a group of girls this way, as opposed to the individual. I don't know, there is something about the wholesale treating a group of young girls that way. Because they were all girls. I find it really hard, found it really difficult... I've listened to interviews with perpetrators before and things but with this particular group they didn't hide their absolute disdain and disregard for her. Absolute. They thought it was okay to do it. "She comes from a village of prostitutes, that's why we can do it". "Yeah but she was 12, so?" And they said "she's retarded, we can do what we like to her, we didn't think she would tell".' (Practitioner 8)

### *Feelings When Interviewing Young People*

Most practitioners reported feeling none or little emotion when interviewing witnesses. Only a handful mentioned sentiments of professional responsibility, privilege, or slight nervousness. A clear theme that emerged was that practitioners almost exclusively focused on the victims' emotions.

#### Focus on Evidence

Many practitioners reported that they were focused on collecting evidence rather than on their own emotions:

'I don't know if it's because I've been doing it for a long time, but [getting emotional during an interview] doesn't happen. Because I'm focused on what I'm doing... When I'm interviewing I tend to get really focused on what I'm listening to so it's often just, I'm just really interested in what they're telling me. I'm really thinking about what do I need to ask next and how does that link into what I know about the investigation... so I tend to be very, very focused. I tend not to have an emotional response to it particularly.' (Practitioner 7)

Statements such as: 'staying in the zone' and 'putting on a game face' were common.

#### Ignore Emotions

A few practitioners mentioned that they switched off their emotions when interviewing:

'We ignore it. You get on because you're not there for yourself.' (Practitioner 8)

'You've got to be able to switch off the emotional side and be quite hardened to what's happened, but be able to support [the young person] and have your goal to work towards.' (Practitioner 13)

#### Conceal Emotions

The few practitioners who reported experiencing negative emotions during the interview were careful not to convey their feelings to interviewees:

**'Disturbing for practitioners to consider how the offenders treated and viewed their victims'**

**'Practitioners almost exclusively focused on the victims' emotions'**

**'They switched off their emotions when interviewing'**

**'Careful not to convey their feelings to interviewees'**

**‘They experienced the emotional impact after the interaction’**

**‘It’s going to be tough, but not as tough for me as it is for them’**

‘You can’t really let on that you’re upset, it’s very difficult so you almost just have to detach yourself to a degree to be there and be that practitioner and get through that.’ (Practitioner 2)

‘During the interview, sometimes it’s hard to keep the horror in. You have to work hard to keep that facial expression calm because some of the things they come out with are a real shock. Often we know what might come, but often we don’t.’ (Practitioner 6)

**Latent Emotions**

Several practitioners indicated that they experienced the emotional impact after the interaction:

‘Often it’s fine during the interview; it’s after that you sit there and think, yeah that was quite daring and tiring, yeah.’ (Practitioner 5)

‘I think you are so focused on what you are doing and the questions you are asking and listening to what they are saying, trying to make sure you don’t miss anything, making notes, you don’t have time really for it to hit you then, and it tends to, for me anyway, after I dropped the child off, that you are so conscious of being there for the child that you don’t really think about how it has affected you or how it’s impacted on you... When you are just doing something mindless like gardening or something where you let your mind wander, it is those kinds of times that I think about it, and it would affect me more than when I am with the young people... Especially if it’s been quite a long or a heavy interview, you can feel sometimes for the rest of that day, or sometimes the following day, feel quite emotionally tired.’ (Practitioner 1)

**Managing Feelings through Empathy**

In order to keep their focus on the young people, two social workers described using empathy to manage affect:

‘When I’m going in to one of those interviews that it’s going to be really tough and I’ve just got to get through it and I think a lot of the time you think as difficult as it is for me to sit down and hear this, it is not something I’ve personally experienced. It’s more difficult for that person retelling that tale because that’s a personal experience to them.’ (Practitioner 2)

‘During the interview I focus on the child, because if I’m feeling bad, just think about how they are feeling. That helps me get perspective. We really don’t need video recording of social workers bursting into tears and actually police struggle hugely with the emotions. We’re supposed to be calm and give no comment for the young person’s benefit. So during the interview that’s what I do. In terms of preparing myself psychologically, it’s big deep breaths and then off we go. A mental deep breath. It’s going to be tough, but not as tough for me as it is for them.’ (Practitioner 6)

*Psychological Preparation before Forensic Interviews*

The participants were asked about how they psychologically prepared themselves before interviewing young persons. Many practitioners were surprised by the question. For example, one police officer said:

‘What, difficult for me as the interviewer? Not so much really, for me... it’s more really about the victim really, we don’t really think about how it affects us to be honest with you. It’s not one of our considerations in the planning of it, we don’t really think about that, it’s all about the victim. I think if we’re finding it harder than the victim then there’s something going wrong there to be honest with you [laughs].’ (Practitioner 12)

A police officer who reported struggling with his/her emotional reactions to cases stated: ‘It’s about managing the victim really. I’m afraid managing us comes way down the list’ (Practitioner 4). Most investigators stated that they prepared for interviews by researching the cases and planning what questions to ask but neglected emotional preparation. Several explicitly reported that they did nothing to prepare themselves psychologically.

When asked directly, a few practitioners mentioned some kinds of psychological preparation, including: a small self-pep talk at the beginning of his/her career, taking a deep breath before meeting with a young person and reminding him/herself to ‘be there’ for the child. At other points in the survey, some practitioners alluded to pausing in order to personally reflect:

‘And I’ve been to see girls and they just tell you to f\* off and everything. They will slam the door in your face, they will call you names, whatever. So it’s very hard to sort of be nice, nice rapport-building when you’re kind of getting that. Part of you wants to say “sod you then, live your life and we won’t help you” because that’s all we’re doing, we’re trying to help you and so it can be very frustrating to make them see that and understand that and that can build up a bit of anger inside sometimes when you’re in the interview. So I think you have to be aware of when you’re getting angry and have a little pause or something you know.’ (Practitioner 12)

‘I think it is just giving myself time to go “wow, that’s huge” now is not the time for me to be processing how huge that is, and then kind of re-focus back on the young person.’ (Practitioner 1)

#### *How Often Do CSE Practitioners Consider Their Wellbeing or Stress Levels?*

Fewer than half of the participants (40%) reported actively managing their wellbeing, but when they did, it was in relation to fluctuating external demands, such as caseload size. A few proactive participants mentioned prevention (e.g., taking time off when possible) and/or temporary leaves of absence earlier in their careers which had increased their attunement to stress. Others viewed work-related stress as something that they thought about frequently but could not manage effectively. A few practitioners reported not thinking about stress at all, although they reported that some aspects of CSE investigations were upsetting.

#### *Managing Emotions Outside of Work*

Most practitioners focused on strategies to cope with their emotions after interactions with young people because they did not report emotional reactions during the forensic interviews. Many mentioned debriefing with colleagues as opportunities to ‘process the case’ and frequently used humour to decompress. Some practitioners mentioned that it was important to speak to colleagues who could relate to their concerns. Many debriefings were spontaneous, taking place shortly after interacting with young people, and variably effective at

**“It’s all about the victim”**

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**‘Schedules prevented emotional debriefing’**

relieving negative affect. Some practitioners noted that their schedules prevented emotional debriefing because they did not coincide with those of their colleagues. Four practitioners highlighted the value of having more structured, reflective, formal debriefing about cases rather than spontaneous debriefings. Underscoring that sentiment, one officer emphasised the need for process-oriented supervision sessions in which the psychological impact of the investigations could be directly discussed with practitioners by specially trained CSE supervisors.

Practitioners mentioned the importance of managing their time:

‘The way I deal is that I don’t do overtime, a lot of people do overtime and stuff like that whereas, for me, it’s very much home-work balance is really important to me. And I think that’s why people do end up going off sick and things, it’s they spend too much time at work. So, for me, I do make a considered effort to actually not do overtime; even if I need the money, I’ll just turn it down.’ (Practitioner 12)

**‘Importance of allowing workers time off when needed’**

A supervisor underscored the importance of allowing workers time off when needed, even if higher management might not recognise its benefits: ‘Sometimes I’d say “you need to go home, don’t come in tomorrow”. But I wasn’t allowed to tell anybody that, I couldn’t tell upstairs that’s what I was doing’ (Practitioner 8). One practitioner mentioned the importance of taking lunch breaks and keeping control of her diary. Even when she needed to respond immediately to a young person, she tried to take into account the amount of time that she spent working in order to preserve her wellbeing.

Many practitioners mentioned spending time with family and friends in order to maintain their wellbeing, noting the level of support that they received from family and appreciating the care, concern, and support expressed by significant others. Some highlighted the benefits of discussions with family members who might offer lay perspectives on the case. On the other hand, practitioners also worried about burdening their partners (‘I never take work home, because obviously my wife’s not been a police officer, it’s unfair to her to burden her with any problems’ (Practitioner 9)) or felt guarded about not being able to discuss cases for reasons of confidentiality.

A few practitioners described keeping their personal and practitioner lives separate:

‘I am able to divide between work and home. And I have done for probably half my service as well. [Interviewer: “And how do you figure that out?”] It cost me a marriage, and a divorce, that’s how I figured that out. I was able to determine home is family life, and differentiate between the two and keep them separate.’ (Practitioner 9)

‘I have a real divorce between my career as a police officer and my home life. Absolutely. I don’t get into it at all... when I’m with [my mum-in-law] and we’re having a coffee and she says, “Have you read this?! Five paedophiles a week are being given money for raping a child!” I just have to say, “Oh okay” always at the time. Because I can’t engage with that conversation at all. I just get too angry.’ (Practitioner 10)

Other coping strategies included exercise, listening to music, relaxing, and distraction. One practitioner reported the importance of having solitary personal time:

**‘Practitioners also worried about burdening their partners’**

**‘Other coping strategies included exercise, listening to music, relaxing and distraction’**



## Wellbeing of Professionals Working with CSE Victims

'I have some veg, twice a week and that really for me is my time where nobody can ring me, nobody can call me, nobody can say "Mum", just I find those few minutes, twice a week, is really really my time. And that is important to me. Because it's not a long period of time, but it's regular and I enjoy it.' (Practitioner 15)

Few participants reported smoking, alcohol use and/or isolation as coping methods.

### *Work-Life Balance*

The CSE work negatively affected the personal lives of more than half the practitioners to the extent that they 'lived and breathed' CSE cases for extended periods of time. One practitioner mentioned:

'To be honest, CSE just took over the whole of my life, long hours, lots of work, home life outside of work, so if I wasn't at work I was juggling home life, family life, and there wasn't a lot of time left for me, which is one of the reasons why my stress levels and anxiety went up towards the end because there was just not enough hours in the day to achieve the goals that we had been set.' (Practitioner 4)

'I actually put my life on hold, it felt, for a year... I couldn't face anything. I just wanted to be alone and I was exhausted. I was tired.' (Practitioner 8)

Practitioners who reported that their work lives dominated their personal time also reported that resigning or taking leave helped. Although occupational support services were mentioned, they were not available in all jurisdictions and were not routinely utilised.

### **Discussion**

The present study investigated police and social workers' experiences of working with CSE cases and the effects on their wellbeing. Many practitioners reported being negatively affected by CSE cases, as in other research showing that sexual abuse and violence are especially distressing case features for law enforcement (Brown *et al.*, 1999). The negative effects of working on these challenging cases might influence practitioner emotional and physical health due to prolonged exposure to a range of emotions, including distress, frustration, and fatigue. Although some practitioners employed post-interview stress management techniques (Burke, 1998) outside of the workplace, these coping strategies were seldom employed preventatively. The professionals focused on the needs of the young people, almost to the exclusion of their own, and it is possible that some practitioners' wellbeing suffered as a result. Thus, the findings suggest the need for organisations to consider carefully how practitioners' wellbeing can be managed when they work on difficult cases.

Several practitioners emphasised the need to take time away from work in order to maintain balance in their lives. Thus, it may be especially important for agencies to actively develop workplace venues or procedures to equip staff with preventative coping methods. Interventions might include resilience training, mindfulness workshops, flexible work schedules, and process-oriented supervision sessions, during which practitioners can receive both task-oriented feedback and process-oriented supervision. Future research could examine the

**'CSE work negatively affected the personal lives of more than half the practitioners'**

**'Coping strategies were seldom employed preventatively'**

**'Interventions might include resilience training, mindfulness workshops, flexible work schedules and process-oriented supervision sessions'**

**‘Emotional distancing might actually prevent practitioners from being perceived as genuine and caring’**

interplay of workplace interventions, practitioner wellbeing, and successful case management.

In accordance with prior research describing how officers disengage from their emotions (Violanti, 1999), respondents reported not experiencing any affect during forensic interviews because they were attending entirely to the victims’ needs. It is possible that practitioners may assume that they should withhold their emotional responses for the benefit of the young people. However, because many young people want the professionals who work with them to be ‘human’, this emotional distancing might actually prevent practitioners from being perceived as genuine and caring. Moreover, it is possible that emotional distancing in the absence of positive coping resources might increase the likelihood of practitioner burnout.

### **Limitations**

Officers appeared to talk candidly about their experiences but it is impossible to eradicate the influence of the researcher and participant characteristics (e.g., social desirability) on the data collected (Evans *et al.*, 2013). Future research might benefit from using a mixed methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative measures to assess coping strategies (Lepore and Revenson, 2007). Observational methods, including the documentation of actual interactions, would also be useful to address the limitations and bias associated with the retrospective recall of complex social interactions (Pistrang and Barker, 2005).

Finally, it is possible that working on CSE cases may affect practitioners’ attitudes about parenting and concerns for their own children. Because the present survey did not ask practitioners about this topic specifically, such information was not obtained. Future work might consider how practitioners who are also parents potentially adapt their parenting style given their experiences at the workplace.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study was funded by the BASPCAN, the Jacobs Foundation and the Nuffield Foundation. We sincerely thank the practitioners whose time, passion, openness, and professional experiences made this study possible. We also extend special thanks to Maisie Ahern, Rhianna Ilube, Charlotte Leach, and Eleanor Prince for their valuable assistance with data preparation.

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## Wellbeing of Professionals Working with CSE Victims

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