

# The victims of sex gangs are never heard

Our complacency about organised sexual exploitation leads to few convictions, regardless of the ethnicity of perpetrators



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guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 9 May 2012 14.14 EDT

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/09/victims-sex-gangs-complacency-ethnicity>



British National party members outside Liverpool crown court as nine men were sentenced to a total of 77 years imprisonment for being part of a child sexual exploitation gang. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

Much of the media coverage and discussion of the trial of [nine men convicted of sexually abusing five teenage girls](#) is focused on ethnicity. That eight of the perpetrators are Asian appears to be more relevant than the reasons why the rape of young, vulnerable girls is so widespread and the crime so difficult to prosecute.

I have written about organised criminal gangs grooming young girls for sex on a few occasions during the past five years, such as the disappearance of [Charlene Downes](#), who was 14 when she went missing in 2003 and has never been found. What was discovered during the police investigation, however, was endemic child sexual abuse and prostitution in her home town of Blackpool. Dozens of girls were being bought and sold for a bag of chips, cigarettes and vodka by sexual predators of all ages, cultures and ethnicities.

It is my firm belief, based on interviews with a number of victims, family members, campaigners and professionals such as police and social workers, that where the gangs are of Asian origin there has been a tendency in some areas of England to ignore the issue for fear of being branded racist. I have also been clear that ethnicity of perpetrators is indeed relevant, in that folk seem to be more interested and appalled by criminal gangs raping girls when the gang is Asian. Contrary to what the British National party would have us believe, this is not an epidemic of Pakistani child abusers abusing white girls – it is more that we as a society ignore the voices of those who know best about child abuse: the victims and their advocates.

The uncomfortable truth is that there is complacency about organised sexual exploitation, which leads to few convictions regardless of the ethnicity of the perpetrators. We choose instead to blame the victims. Why otherwise would girls who are raped and sexually exploited be so routinely disbelieved? Why are we not hearing more outrage about the fact that the [victim who came forward in this case four years ago was deemed not to be a credible witness](#) by the Crown Prosecution Service? Had she been taken seriously this gang could have been detected and scores of other victims could have been spared. We kid ourselves if we think the CPS would have pushed ahead if her rapists had been white.

Despite the traumatic effects of child sexual grooming on both the victims and their families we are still not convicting many of those responsible. What we know from those victims who have dared come forward is this: the process by which offenders select and manipulate victims is organised and complex. First there is the gaining of trust. Next, desensitisation (the normalisation of abusive acts to the point where the victim comes to believe she deserves it); isolation (from friends, family members and school); and sexualisation (so that the girls "act out" their abuse in a way that results in them being seen as "asking for it" rather than abused). A deadly combination of threats and bribes secures victims' compliance.

But there is much we do not know, which is why so many of these gangs escape detection. There is also a distinct lack of knowledge about how best to protect victims, and secure convictions when they do come forward. We choose to "know" about the ethnicity of the perpetrators, when what we need to discover is how such gangs operate, where they prostitute the girls, and what happens to the money they make from this vile operation. Let us listen to the experts within the criminal justice and child protection system – and, more important, the girls and their families about how we can carry out proper prevention and risk assessment.

The truth is that the victims of the most horrendous abuse are being let down – viewed as troublemaking slags, in fact – which is why opportunist grooming gangs can get away with it so often.

Greater Manchester police apologised to the victims of the recent case, saying that now that they know more about this type of crime they would conduct future investigations differently. And yet those of us who are involved in the attempt to combat child sexual exploitation have known about these men and the way they operate for decades. The victims have told us. Why have they been sidelined once again in favour of a good old ruck about race?