

Depraved Paedos and Other Beasts: The Media Portrayal of Child Sexual Abusers in Ireland and the UK.

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is a significant social problem in Ireland and the UK. Research shows that there are significant differences between the reporting of sexual offences in the process and the reality of such offences on the ground. This paper is part of a major study that examines those differences and looks at the role that language plays in the media construction of perpetrators of child sexual abuse in Ireland and the UK. It is based on a content analysis of print media as well as a sample of typical perpetrator portrayals on various victim advocacy websites. Findings indicate differentiation of perpetrators based on age, profession, gender and ethnicity. This paper focuses on one aspect arising from the study, that of tabloid demonisation of offenders post-release. Far from serving the work of combating child sexual abuse, the 'monsterization' of offenders creates a major problem for society in terms of rehabilitation and child protection. This paper also looks at the effect of the News of the World 'name and shame' campaign and its social outcomes.

Keywords

Sexual abuse, sex offender, child, mass media, reporting, Megan's Law, civil rights

The sexual abuse of children is a heinous event, and one that is all too prevalent in society. In Ireland, a national prevalence study was undertaken by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland in 2002 and the results were startling. According to the SAVI (Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland) report¹, 42% of women and 28% of men stated that they had been abused at some stage in their lives. 20% of women reported contact sexual abuse in childhood with 5.6% of all reporting rape, and 16.2% of men reported contact sexual abuse in childhood with 2.7% of all reporting rape. This is a horrific reality that needs to be understood and tackled. The role of the media is critical.

By way of response to SAVI, I undertook a year-long research project examining how the mass media represent the issue of sexual abuse of adults and children over a ten year period, from 1993 to 2002. This was done initially by sampling newsprint content from a randomly selected five weeks in each year of The Irish Times, The Times (London) and the New York Times. Preliminary findings of that research indicate that there are twice as many stories about child sexual abuse as adult abuse, that they tend to be significantly longer than those about adult sexual abuse, and that female victims predominate in both categories. In addition, stories of abuse by authority figures predominate, with a clear predominance of stories of abuse by clergy. Familial incest underplayed and often unnamed. There is a major gap between national prevalence statistics and newspaper reporting: for example, 75% of all stories of child sexual abuse in The Irish Times sample referred to clergy whereas the SAVI report indicates that clergy & religious teachers are responsible for about 3.2% of all child sexual abuse. These data are reported elsewhere.

This paper focuses on a specific sub-problem that arises in relation to the issue of child sexual abuse – that of the social treatment of offenders post release from prison – and one that is urgent in terms of social policy. The media role in the demonisation of child sex offenders is clear. Sample tabloid headlines include the following:

- DON'T SEND YOUR EVIL PERVERT OVER HERE; CHILD RAPIST FLEES TO BRITAIN
- BEASTS ON LOOSE
- CHILD RAPE MONSTER GETS LIFE; BEAST ABUSED YOUNG GIRLS FOR 16 YEARS
- CHILD RAPE BEAST IS CAGED FOR LIFE
- TELEVISIONS ARE NOT A HUMAN RIGHT FOR EVIL SEX FIEND INMATES
- SSPCA AXE CHILD PERV

The News of the World, in the summer of 2001, launched a 'name and shame' campaign targeted against British paedophiles, with the stated aim of publishing details of all 100,000 of them

In December 2001, the News of the World retreated from the campaign. The Independent had referred to the campaign as the more extreme folly that continued to engage in scare mongering, sensationalism and incitement to vigilante action. Typical of the News of the World campaign was the inflammatory language that we have come to expect from the tabloid press: "the monster had attacked before"; "monsters are

walking time bombs” ; “hunt for the child sex monster”; “the clusters of child-sex beasts” ; “prisons that house sex beasts”; “a sex beast living in their midst”; “tough new laws on sex beasts”; “evil, predatory paedophiles”; “a dangerous, evil man”; “hundreds of evil menaces ... escaped future supervision”; “child-sex fiends all prowling the streets “; “a dragnet to catch the fiends”; “give the fiends no hiding place”; “sex fiends in the Republic have vanished”. The image painted is a nonsensical one, of the whole country overrun by paedophiles, fiendishly plotting to trap every child, to the degree that nowhere is safe. The banner headline on the campaign, with a picture of Sarah Payne, was “Everyone in Britain has a child offender living within one mile of their home.” This is more than sloppy journalism: it is irresponsible scare mongering.

In the US, Megan's Law requires that parents must now be informed when offenders move into their local area after being freed from prison: it has been criticized, with some commentators arguing that it can force paedophiles underground rather than let them be monitored and treated, and has provoked vigilante attacks.

Evidence of such attacks abound. In the wake of the News of the World campaign, some parents in Portsmouth had their children carrying banners saying, "Kill Them" and vigilantes gathered outside the homes of suspected paedophiles, shouted abuse and threw stones. An innocent man with a name similar to one of those listed by the newspaper had his windows broken and abuse hurled at him. Two vigilantes were jailed for life at the Old Bailey for murdering a retired sea captain whom they wrongly suspected of being a paedophile, by firebombing his flat in Grimsby. In another incident, a suspected paedophile was battered to death with a toaster, frying pan and iron bar by vigilantes in Glasgow. In Gwent, a group of protestors, who could not tell the difference between a paediatrician and a paedophile, hounded Dr Yvette Cloete, a respected paediatrician, from her home.

These attacks are not unique to Britain. Media reports can readily be found about such vigilante actions, often targeted against innocent people by mistake, in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, and elsewhere. Nor has Ireland escaped. Recently a crowd marched on the apartment block where a man, convicted of child sex abuse and recently released having served his sentence as required by law, was living. He subsequently moved to a different location. Immediately after that move two tabloid newspapers published false information about him, alleging

that he had moved into a specific part of Dublin, and so causing unnecessary fear and alarm to be triggered in that local community.

The question that these episodes raise is a critical one for society. How should society react to those men who are convicted of sex offences upon their release from prison? The fear of parents and communities is completely understandable. The desire for complete protection of children is beyond criticism. But if the protection of children is paramount, as it should be, it must be asked whether the kind of strategy seen in such street protests as witnessed in Dublin and elsewhere actually works, and whether the 'name and shame' philosophy proposed by some newspapers is a real benefit to society.

There are a number of issues here. In the first place, the safety and security of children must be a priority. To that end, the treatment, monitoring, and support of released offenders is critical. Anything that would push offenders underground is therefore a counter productive strategy. The experience of Megan's Law in the US has shown that this is precisely the outcome under certain conditions. Released offenders who are not monitored, or who are not provided with therapy, are much more likely to re-offend than those who participate in therapy and maintain social contact with family and friends. The campaign by some segments of the tabloid press actually serves to undermine the safety of children by attempting to effect the complete demonisation and marginalisation of sex offenders.

The tabloid practice of tracking down those who have served their sentences and who are trying to create new lives for themselves is especially reprehensible. Usually done under a guise of 'informing the public', the lurid language, provocative banner headlines and nasty photo captions make it clear that increased sales is the primary interest of such coverage. One recent manifestation of this has been the publication of the home address of the family of a sex offender recently released from prison after serving a lengthy sentence for child abuse, even though the offender in question had not lived with his parents for more than 20 years. It would appear that self-serving rhetoric and greater profits are more important than either the protection of society or the generation of a genuine debate.

Second, there is the issue of the civil rights of sex offenders. Despite the unpopularity of the position, it has to be said that these offenders also have rights. They are, in fact, free in the eyes of the civil law. In his article in The Daily Telegraph 27 December 2001, Joshua Rozenberg noted that

Lord Woolf, the British lord chief justice, had suggested that a few dangerous but unconvicted paedophiles could be locked up for the public's protection. He was roundly criticised by civil liberties campaigners, penal reform groups and newspaper leader writers. Lord Woolf accepted that his proposal would involve "a huge infringement of the individual's rights. But we must think of the rights of those who would be offended against as well. They have rights and they deserve protection." It is staggering to think of a judge advocating the imprisonment of some on the basis of what they might do rather than what they have done. Why stop at potential child abuse in such a context? Why not imprison some mentally ill, some violent people, some potential rapists?

This is, of course, the nub of the issue: an apparent conflict between the rights of children to protection and the rights of released offenders on completion of sentence. Such opposition only exists if the offender's intention is to abuse children. If his intention is to get on and live his life in a non-abusive way then we can all work to the same end. In practical terms, a risk assessment model needs to be developed which is accepted as a standard to enable professionals in child protection to determine the best courses of action. The protection of children need not become an infringement of rights of others, but rather the vindication and protection of the rights of all could become a collaborative affair. In practice there is only a conflict of rights to the degree that there is a danger of recidivism. But it is also clear that the recidivism rate rises with alienation, such as loss of contact with family, loss of access to therapy, and loss of support networks. Such losses occur when offenders are driven underground by tabloid campaigns. Anything that can be done to prevent recidivism is a further step in the protection of children.

Third, there is a significant danger to children when society focuses only on offenders released from prison. We now know from the SAVI report that one in five women and one in six men reported experiencing contact sexual abuse as children. As regards perpetrators of such abuse, "24 % of perpetrators against girls were family members, 52 % were non-family but known to the abused girl and 24 % were strangers. Fewer family members were involved in child sexual abuse of boys. 14 % were family members with 66% non-family but known to the abused boy. Twenty per cent were strangers. Overall the perpetrator was another child or adolescent (17 years old or younger) in one out of every four cases."

SAVI² also highlights how unhelpful it is to work with a stereotypical view of sex offenders: "A relatively small percentage of perpetrators fitted

the current stereotype of abusers of children: strangers were in the minority - over 80% of children were abused by those known to them. Fathers constituted 2.5% of all abusers with clerical/religious ministers or clerical/religious teachers constituting 3.2% of abusers. The most common other relative or authority figure categories were uncles (6.2%), cousins (4.4%), babysitters (4.4%), brothers (3.7%) and non-religious/clerical teachers (1.2%)."

The problem of child sexual abuse in Ireland is possibly far greater than most people wish to acknowledge or confront. It is quite evident that a reasoned debate on the issue, its origins, consequences and future strategies is badly needed. In is here that the media could make an enormous contribution, in the stimulation of such a debate.

The lack of treatment spaces for offenders is particularly worrisome. Tabloid media reports reported in outraged tones about a specific offender who had not undergone treatment while in prison. They failed to indicate what his psychotherapist pointed out: he had already been through 500 hours of therapy prior to imprisonment, that his taking of a place on a treatment programme would have been of no benefit to him and would have denied another offender a place. Again, the media have a role to play here, in informing the public about the nature of paedophilia and sex offences in general, in promoting a campaign for the provision of adequate psychological services for those in prisons, and in examining the situation of sex offence prisoners on release.

In particular it would be helpful to see a focus on the kind of material found in the Lundstrom Report for the Irish Prison Service³, dealing with the development of a new multi- disciplinary sex offender rehabilitation programme for the Irish Prison Service. Among its core recommendations together was the recommendation for juvenile community based sex offender programmes in each region of the country. Lundstrom looked at what is available here through the experiences of all involved in the delivery of the current programme, and made comparison with the best and most integrated systems in the UK, Canada and the US. She argued for an integrated approach from conviction/admission to release, community care therapy and supervision, and built -in sanctions backed up by the Courts.

It would be a dangerous step if our society were to hold that the solution to child sexual abuse is to be found in the targeting of those who have served

their sentences. While such a strategy may well appeal to some instinct in us, it is not particularly helpful and could well be dangerous. Child sexual abuse is a society-wide phenomenon. It demands a society-wide response. Driving the problem underground is as at least as bad as pretending it does not exist. Children deserve better.

Notes

¹ McGee et al, 2002.

² McGee et al, 2002

³ Lundstrom, 2001

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