

Where Can Children Turn?

Rachel Pain and Sally Gill analyse sources of support for child victims of crime.

It has only been acknowledged fairly recently that when family units experience crime, children can be seriously affected. Burglary, theft and violence involving the child's home, family or relatives can lead to anxiety, sleep problems and depression amongst children. Studies have also shown that children themselves are more likely to be victims of crime than adults, whether theft, violence, sexual abuse or harassment.

incidence.

Our recent study for Gateshead Victim Support adds to growing evidence that this mismatch urgently needs to be addressed. Very little research in the UK has investigated what would help young victims of crime based on consultation with children themselves. We carried out discussion groups, questionnaires and participatory diagramming exercises with over 1,000 children aged 10-16 in schools and special education

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Yet support, both from within families and from statutory and charitable services, has lagged behind this evidence. Until very recently, children have been virtually ignored as primary and secondary victims in crime surveys and audits, community safety policy, and by services such as Victim Support. While a number of agencies are beginning to provide specific support, there is still a significant gap in provision given what we now know about

units across the Borough of Gateshead. This allowed for a range of qualitative and quantitative information to be gathered, verified and triangulated with a representative range of children.

The results on crime victimisation mirror findings from other UK cities (e.g. Anderson *et al* 1994; Brown 1995; Hartless *et al* 1995) – children report far higher levels of crime than adults in comparable surveys. As Table 1 shows, experiences of property crime and

Table 1

Children's experiences of crime victimisation over the last 12 months

	Boys %	Girls %
My bike was stolen	11	6
My home was broken into	7	6
Something was stolen from me on the street	8	3
Something was stolen from me at school	12	11
Something was stolen from me on the metro	2	1
Something was stolen from me somewhere else	3	3
I was bullied	28	42
I was followed	24	25
Someone tried to get me to go somewhere with them	6	6
Someone flashed at me	7	6
Someone threatened to hurt me	24	21
I was hit	27	17
I was beaten up	10	4
I was attacked/harassed because of my race/religion*	37	20
I was glassed/bottled	3	2
I was stabbed	3	0

* of children in ethnic minority groups

(Source: Pain and Gill 2001)

violent crime were common among the Gateshead children. About two thirds of these incidents were perpetrated by other children, and a third by adults. Sexual and non-sexual harassment were also fairly common, and 28% of children in ethnic minority groups reported being attacked or harassed because of their race or religion over the last year. In incidents of harassment, offenders were more likely to be adults.

In terms of seeking and receiving support, most children reported that they had told someone when a crime happened to them (Table 2). For just over half this was a parent, while the second most likely person to tell was a friend. Younger children were more likely to have told their parents, while older children (particularly girls) were more likely to rely on friends. The support of friends was greatly valued. Relatively few children had turned to a teacher, even when the crime had taken place in school. High numbers of children, then, do not tell a known adult when crime happens – the route we have traditionally assumed is the best way for children to get support. Few children had told the police, and the older they get, the more mistrustful they become. Barely any had heard of Victim Support or other services for victims.

Table 2		When something happened to me I told...	
		(%)	
Mam or Dad	Male	52	
	Female	54	
Brother or sister	Male	11	
	Female	12	
Someone else in family	Male	14	
	Female	11	
Friend	Male	20	
	Female	27	
Teacher	Male	10	
	Female	14	
Youth worker	Male	2	
	Female	2	
Telephone helpline	Male	3	
	Female	2	
No one	Male	6	
	Female	3	

(Source: Pain and Gill 2001)

However, many said that specific services for children as victims would be helpful, and there were lots of suggestions in discussion groups as to the nature of these. As children do not always tell their parents, or trust their teachers or the police with reports of crime, they suggested that effective services for young

victims would need to be accessed directly by children rather than by referral. Accessibility – both physical and psychological – was the key issue which children discussed. The key points agreed upon were that services should:

- Offer a range of practical and emotional support to victims
- Be in familiar and friendly environments where children could drop in
- Have peer counsellors or older people (but only slightly older!) to talk to, but not involve teachers or police officers
- Be appropriate for the needs of older as well as younger children, boys as well as girls, and children from different ethnic backgrounds

The research has resulted in a junior victim support scheme being piloted in Gateshead schools which it is hoped will be extended in the future. In many similar areas, finances are tight, particularly when it comes to serving the needs of victims who often do not report crime to the police. But it is clear that children's needs as victims are not always met by their families or the wider community, as has traditionally been assumed. Given the high levels of incidence and serious impacts which crime has for children, they deserve to be prioritised.

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References:

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