

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Section 1: Defining Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Young people's sexual behaviour ranges along a continuum: The continuum includes developmentally normative and beneficial sexual behaviour and relationships but then also harmful behaviours of varying levels of seriousness and illegality.

Not all harmful sexual behaviour is clearly illegal: Some acts may be problematic but not necessarily illegal, while the legal status of some HSB may be ambiguous.

HSB takes place online and offline, by and toward individuals and groups: It may take place inside or outside of school and may be direct, indirect, physical, verbal or written. Regardless of where and in what format it takes place, it has ramifications for young people's school and peer cultures and their personal and interpersonal socio-sexual development and experiences.

The law may not adequately capture or be able to respond to all forms of HSB: This includes acts of ambiguous legal status or that are not illegal, and as relates to the complexities of investigation and response to incidents.

Consent is a potentially defining, or highly relevant, part of HSB: Some forms of HSB are non-consensual by definition (e.g., rape, sexual assault), while other forms of HSB may be normalised – so not explicitly non-consensual – but unwanted and harmful. The presence or absence of consent in some incidents (e.g., gender and sexual shaming or (cyber-)bullying), at least from a legal perspective, may be ambiguous.

Legal definitions of consent and 'affirmative consent' may not reflect the complexities of how young people and adults determine consent: Consent communication is typically indirect and non-verbal and there can be significant ambiguity and ambivalence about what is and is not agreed to within sexual interactions by and between those involved and those witnessing or responding to incidents. Consent may be compromised in ways that do not reach a legal threshold but is otherwise problematic.

Sexual image sharing online among young people is of adult concern: Adults typically frame young people's involvement in sexual image sharing as inherently risky and irresponsible, with it being considered a key form of contemporary HSB among young people.

Evidence suggests that young people's perspectives on and experiences of sexual image sharing online are complex: It may not always be experienced as harmful to them and may sometimes take place in developmentally normative ways without any apparent aggravating factors or adverse consequences and, even, may be beneficial for exploring identities, experiencing intimacy and/or delaying physical sexual activity, at least from their perspective.

Online image sharing can involve acts of abuse and harassment that should be responded to as HSB: Image-based sexual abuse and harassment comprises a range of non-consensual acts, such as pressure to produce/share images, sending unwanted images, non-consensual production of images, non-consensual distribution and showing of images, and coercion/blackmail to share images. Young people may lack opportunities to develop a full understanding of the distinctions between consensual and non-consensual online sexual behaviours, as well as the complexities of the social and cultural conditions that may normalise unwanted acts and blame those experiencing them for their occurrence.

Current legislation is poorly equipped to adequately distinguish between contexts of image sharing among young people and image-based abuse and harassment: Outdated laws surrounding illicit imagery of minors (designed pre-smartphone era and intended to address adult offending toward children) are used to prohibit all image sharing among young people and preclude a more nuanced discussion around preventing, identifying and responding to risk and non-consensual online sexual behaviours through a harm-reduction approach.

Section 2: Explaining Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Professionals differ in their perspectives on the nature and causes of HSB: Judgments may be based on professional perspectives and experiences and may involve an element of subjectivity or speculation with evidence of 'learning on the job' regarding risks and needs.

Individual and family related factors deemed to cause or increase the risk of HSB include Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs) and Special Educational Needs (SEN): These factors may increase the risk of both involvement in and experience of HSB, due to issues related to learnt behaviour, understanding of appropriate behaviour, and so on. Yet, it may also be the case that young people with these factors are more likely to come to the attention of adult authorities and to be referred to services. Importantly, the risks factors relate to and are exacerbated by weaknesses and failures of inadequate systems that create vulnerabilities for young people.

HSB is also a matter of social and cultural norms, with gender and sexuality shaping perspectives on and experiences of HSB: Girls and young women are more likely to experience HSB and boys and young men are more likely to enact it as part of heterosexual interactional and relational dynamics. Girls can be implicitly and explicitly blamed – by themselves, other young people and adults – for 'accepting' normalised patterns of HSB and for not sufficiently identifying or acting upon HSB or other unhealthy relationship patterns. Harmful and abusive behaviours enacted by boys and young men can be attributed to essentialised renderings of the 'male sex drive' and their proclivity to seek personal and social reward and capital through HSB.

The role of gender and sexuality in HSB is complex and should not be reified along taken-for-granted heterosexual gender dynamics: Boys and young men can also experience HSB – often rooted in gendered and sexualised dynamics of shame and stigma connected to masculine heterosexuality – and girls and young women may enact HSB, but it may not always be recognised or responded to as such. Gender and sexuality diverse young people can also experience HSB, such as homophobic and sexual shaming, harassment and abuse.

Image-based sexual harassment and abuse (IBSHA) mirrors wider gender and sexual patterns in HSB: Image-based sexual harassment and abuse (IBSHA) comes under the legal framework of non-consensual image exchange including non-consensual sharing of intimate images/films (so-called 'revenge porn' but note the concerns with this terminology outlined below), non-consensual taking of images/films ('upskirting'/'downblousing') and the sending of images/films without consent ('cyberflashing'). However, there was little up-to-date understanding of these digital sexual offences among the professionals interviewed in this research, who were mainly focused on preventing primary image sharing by young people. Evidence shows that girls and young women can be disproportionately affected, while boys and young men disproportionately involved in ISBAH; yet, boys can also be targeted with abuse and may not always have access to social capital through image sharing within their local peer contexts, so, as above, should not be deemed as inherently likely to enact abuse.

Prevention and response to HSB may reinforce gendered approaches to understanding HSB that may not capture the nuance of how gender and sexuality inflect HSB online and offline: Professionals may assume the matter is solely of girls' and young women's vulnerabilities and boys' and young men's proclivities to harm, which ignores the gender and sexual diversity in young people's identities and experiences regarding sex and relationships.

Minority ethnic young people and sexual minorities may be subject to greater 'adultification' by adults and so may lack access to safeguarding: These young people may find themselves more likely to be responded to as 'perpetrators', with a potentially increased likelihood of formal action taken against them, while their experiences of HSB may not be recognised or responded to as such.

The internet, social media and networked communication technologies may create new patterns of HSB (e.g., image sharing online) and may cause HSB: Social media content may create or exacerbate pressures or demands that shape HSB, while sexual information online can be unreliable and lead to harmful behaviours. Pornography may be part of a tapestry of influence over young people's socio-sexual development, potentially to adverse effect regarding normalised sexual behaviours learnt from pornography.

Pornography that normalises sexual violence may be influencing young people's socio-sexual development: The normalisation of HSB in some pornography has generated mass concern. However, there are many forms of pornography, not all are harmful and research indicates that young people are able to discern when pornography is unrealistic and/or endorsing violence. Young people need greater support in managing the adverse effects of HSB learnt from pornography. Some young people may be more vulnerable to be impacted by pornography (including SEN young people and those with pre-existing behavioural issues).

The role of online content and media is complex and there is limited conclusive evidence on cause and effect (or direction of causation): It is more likely that the internet and social media intersects with a wider ecosystem of socio-sexual learning and development and may *digitally mediate* HSB but must be situated within a wider context. It should not be assumed that consumption of content online (including pornography) will always result in harmful outcomes. Where it does, it should be considered as a factor alongside other factors in a holistic approach to preventing and responding to HSB.

Section 3: Conceptualising harmful sexual behaviour and un/healthy relationships among young people.

Harmful sexual behaviour among young people is a matter of 'culture' not just individual incidents of acts of harm: The social and cultural norms within young people's peer and school-based contexts and the institutional structures of the school affect whether and how HSB is enacted, defined, interpreted and responded to by both young people and adults.

Just focusing on incidents of HSB may neglect the wider social and cultural contexts at play or may involve normalisation or fatalism about these contexts: Any behavioural norms identified as unfolding or becoming entrenched among young people are rooted in how they navigate and negotiate wider systemic and societal dynamics that shape sex, relationships and sexual behaviour.

Healthy relationships are important to promote when seeking to address HSB but must go beyond just listing virtues or characteristics of such relationships and also focus on skills, attitudes and literacy: There are various reasons why young people may be able to identify or define a virtue or characteristic as healthy or unhealthy but nevertheless continue to experience unhealthy relationships. The socio-emotional skills and literacy required to have and uphold healthy peer relationships need also to be addressed. There should also be a focus on the barriers and facilitators to healthy relationships as pertain to the norms that may be present within young people's peer contexts and that, in turn, affect their expectations for, attitudes toward and beliefs about sex, relationships and sexual behaviour.

Inclusive sexual citizenship offers an opportunity to develop young people's knowledge, skills and emotional literacy in ways that enable them to uphold their own and other's rights in positive, healthy and responsible ways: Rather than young people's relationships and sexual behaviours being seen as inherently irresponsible or harmful, they can claim their rights to agency and autonomy safely as they navigate the transition to adulthood, under the support of adults.

Trauma-informed response and prevention must address the needs of all those involved in and affected by HSB: This would involve recognising that those directly involved and affected, as well as the wider peer collective, may have various safeguarding needs.

Gender and sexuality sensitive prevention and response would involve careful attention to the ways that norms about gender and sexuality inflect young people's experiences of and involvement in HSB: It would not essentialise about gender and sexuality, nor, in turn, reify expected gendered or heterosexualised behaviours. Instead, it would consider how young people are affected by gender and sexual norms, including gender and sexuality diverse young people, and including as embedded within institutional cultures and perpetuated, including unintentionally, by adults.

Section 4: Preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviour in schools: Current practice.

Police involvement in preventative education needs to be carefully considered and, if undertaken, embedded within a holistic partnership approach: Preventative education may be considered the primary domain of teachers in schools as supposed trusted experts. Yet, police have important skills, expertise and credibility to bring, and teachers may not always feel equipped to educate young people about all topics comprehensively. However, topics should not be outsourced to police and should be addressed collaboratively between partners with no expectation that just educating young people about the law will be enough to fully tackle the issue of HSB.

Young people can find teacher delivered preventative education unhelpful and unengaging, while police can offer credibility: There are opportunities for police to convey important information to young people and, in turn, to build relationships and trust with young people through early engagement. This can also help police in identifying potentially vulnerable or at-risk young people to support with prevention and early response.

Police involvement in primary preventative education takes various forms: The context and style of delivery vary depending on the nature of the issue and whether it is reactive (e.g., education delivered followed an incident) or proactive (e.g., part of the planned curriculum). Assembly-style approaches are unlikely to be sufficiently engaging or supportive around sensitive important issues like HSB, unless ample time and provision is provided after the assembly to allow young people to debrief, unpack, and discuss the issues raised in the presentation in smaller groups.

Education about gender- and sexual-based violence and VAWG must be holistic and nuanced: A constructive, inclusive and impactful approach would involve recognising the diversity among young people about how they involved in and affected by HSB, mindful of how gender and sexuality norms affect HSB in complex ways.

Police may be intimidating to young people and some young people may have pre-existing lack of trust in police and/or previous harmful or otherwise negative experiences with the police: Police inevitably have both enforcement and support roles, and effective engagement with young people over the longer-term is likely to require an approach that prioritises relationships and not fear, with appropriate boundaries and transparency about police duties and responsibilities clearly communicated to young people.

Relationship-based practice, whereby the aim is to develop positive relationships between police and young people characterised by feelings of trust and safety, may help encourage young people to engage openly with police and report experiences of HSB, as well as engage with any interventions provided by police due to involvement in HSB: Punitive, fear-based approaches may be seen as effective in suppressing behaviour but there is no evidence that they have a long-term meaningful effect and may even be counterproductive. Police require training and support for frontline work with young people designed to build relationships.

Police responses to incidents can be hampered by delays and it is unlikely that incidents will be dealt with formally by police due to lack of evidence and/or public interest considerations: There are various outcomes that can result from police investigation of incidents but young people may lack faith or credibility in the process if there is insufficient transparency regarding what is likely to, and ultimately does, happen.

Abstract education about legal categories of sexual abuse and violence may not align with young people's experiences (personal or vicarious) of the justice system: Young people are not always being taught about criminal justice processes and the complexities of how incidents are responded to. Incongruence in these regards when incidents arise may exacerbate issues within the peer group and for those involved in and affected by HSB.

Young people can be reluctant to report HSB and there are cultural implorations that inhibit reporting: 'Anti-snitch' cultures are entrenched with implications for safeguarding of young people reporting HSB. Delays and uncertainty to the process and the wider ramifications for young people may cause or exacerbate poor mental health and social ostracism among both those involved in and affected by HSB.

Information sharing and multiagency working is vital but needs to be underpinned by shared professional perspectives and processes for sharing information: Police value being kept abreast of new and evolving HSB among young people, even if they do not act formally in response to specific incidents shared with them. This can help police maintain an accurate picture of HSB and ensure safeguarding of young people is informed by a full understanding of their patterns of behaviour.

Both under- and over-sharing of information is a problem, with schools potentially struggling to safeguard when they are not kept abreast of developments and outcomes from police: Incidents of HSB come to the attention of police through various channels and schools may not always be fully aware of what is happening. Schools may not always be able to safeguard effectively and may lack confidence in their ability to safeguard within a context of poor information sharing and limited resources for safeguarding.

High thresholds for statutory and non-statutory services, coupled at times with poor appreciation of the complexities of peer-on-peer abuse, may mean that young people's needs are not always identified or met in response to incidents: This is an issue of provision and funding, as well as understanding and attitudes, and may serve to reinforce assumptions about who is likely to be involved in or affected by HSB in terms of risk and need profiles.

