**Ethical Statement**

Research into ‘Gang-Associated Sexual Exploitation/Abuse of Children and Young People’

**A. Introduction**

As part of their Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England have commissioned the Institute of Applied Social Research (IASR) at the University of Bedfordshire to undertake research into gang-associated sexual exploitation/abuse of children and young people within England.

The research will investigate the links between gang activity and sexual exploitation/abuse, specifically considering:

- The scale and nature of gang-related sexual exploitation and sexual violence;
- The main pathways into gang-related sexual exploitation and sexual violence for young people living in gang-affected neighbourhoods;
- Potential models for an effective multi-agency response to the issue (prevention, identification and support, and exit strategies).

Fieldwork will be undertaken with professionals and young people in six different sites. The guiding ethical principle for the research is that no harm should come to any individual as a result of their agreement to facilitate or take part in the research. The wellbeing of research participants, gatekeepers and researchers will be a primary concern throughout. For this reason, research sites will not be identified in research publications.

**B. Rationale for the Research**

Whilst increasing consideration has been given to both child sexual exploitation and gang-associated activity in recent years, knowledge about the relationship between them is currently limited. It is anticipated that this research will provide greater understanding of the links between gang-association and sexual exploitation/violence, developing understanding about the ways in which young people can be affected by the issue and helping to inform targeted evidence-based responses to it.

**C. Approvals and Oversight**

The research has received ethical approval from the following bodies:

- The Institute of Applied Social Research Ethics Committee;
- The University of Bedfordshire Ethics Committee;
- The Association of Directors of Children’s Services Research Group;

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• Barnardo’s Research Ethics Committee.

Professor Margaret Melrose from the University of Bedfordshire is acting as Ethics Consultant to the project. Ethical considerations will also be kept under review throughout the duration of the project by the overarching Research Project Advisory Group (RPAG), the Young People’s Advisory Group (YPAG) and a local Multi-Agency Advisory Group (MAAG) in each of the six research sites.

D. The Research Team
The research team, led by Professor Jenny Pearce, has expertise in both gang-related and sexual exploitation research. All members of the research team are CRB checked and will abide by the University of Bedfordshire Research Ethics Policy throughout the duration of the research.

E. Methodology
The research will involve semi-structured interviews with young people (in the 11-25 year age bracket) and practitioners in six different research sites in England and will be conducted within a participatory action research framework that prioritises the needs and welfare of research participants. Most interviews with young people will be conducted on an individual basis, but a number of focus groups will be run in the later stages of the research with carefully selected groups of young people to consider findings and identify potential models for an effective multi-agency response to the issue. Similar focus groups will be run with professionals. Contextual data will also be collected as part of a Rapid Assessment Exercise in each of the six research sites.

F. Steps for Safeguarding for Young People
• All potential participants for the young people’s interviews and focus groups will be identified and accessed through agencies/organisations who are currently working with them or have worked with them in the recent past (referring agencies) and can advise as to any potential risks/detrimental impacts associated with involvement in the research. Should any significant risks or detrimental impacts be identified that cannot be adequately mediated, engagement in the research will not be pursued; young people will only be included in the study on the advice of practitioners that it is safe to do so.
• Workers from referring agencies will make the initial approach to young people deemed suitable for inclusion in the research to ascertain interest in participation (information will be provided by the research team to enable this) – researchers will only receive a young person’s details when they have indicated informed consent to participate and any additional consents have been obtained (see next point).
• Parental/carer consents will be obtained for young people under 16 years of age unless this is not feasible and/or contrary to the best interests in the child. For young people under the age of 13, active parental/carer consent will be required. For those aged 13-15, parental consent may be active or passive (opt-in or opt-out) depending on the policies of the referring agency. Should a referring agency require parental/carer
consents for young people aged 16/17, this can be facilitated so long as it is not contrary to the best interests of the child.

- Young people will be interviewed on an individual basis so as to limit the number of people hearing what they share, but they may choose to have a worker/supporter present with them for support so long as this does not pose any increased risk.
- Prior to commencing an interview, the researcher will check that the young person understands what they have consented to, what will happen to the information they provide and the limits to confidentiality applicable to this. Young people will be reminded that they can withdraw consent, or choose to pass on any questions, at any point during the interview. They will also be advised as to how to withdraw consent post-interview and the timeframes within which this is possible.
- Specific consent for audio-recording will be obtained, where the young person is agreeable to their interview being recorded.
- Interview schedules (and information and consent sheets) for young people will be designed/piloted with young people to ensure appropriateness of language and sensitivity of questions. Documentation will be verbally explained in order to manage any potential literacy issues. Where required, translation to other languages or additional support for those with communication difficulties can be arranged.
- Young people can choose to share as much or as little of their own personal experience as they are comfortable with. Individual interview schedules will be designed to facilitate young people talking about issues in the third party, unless they desire otherwise.
- It is recognised that bringing young people together in a focus group environment involves additional risks. For this reason focus groups will only be run with (a) existing groups of young people run by agencies in the research sites or (b) young people aged 18 or above who have exited gang-activity/association and sexual exploitative situations and are identified by referring agencies as appropriate for involvement in this phase of the research. Participants in focus groups will be actively discouraged from sharing their personal experiences, given the presence of other young people in the group.
- Care will be taken to ensure that appropriate follow up support is available for all young people who participate. Where the referring agencies are unable to/unsuitable for providing this, alternative appropriate follow-up support structures will be identified and put in place.

G. Reciprocity

Unless the policies of referring agencies prohibit this, all young people who participate in the research will receive a £10 voucher as a token of thanks for their contribution. If the provision of a voucher is in conflict with the policy of the referring agency, alternative forms of reciprocity will be explored.

H. Limits to Confidentiality

- Information shared by young people will remain confidential to the research unless they disclose information to suggest that they (or another young people or vulnerable adult)
is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm and/or there are wider public protection concerns. The same exceptions apply to information shared by professional participants.

- In the event of any such disclosures the researcher will remind the participant of their duty to pass this information on, explain how they will do this and when this will occur. Where possible, information will not be passed on without the participant being informed that this is going to happen.
- Information shared by young people will not be shared with the referring agency unless one of the above exceptions applies and further action is required.

I. Storage and Use of Data

- Participants will be clearly informed that when any information they share is to be used publicly (in research reports, presentations etc) no potential identifying data will be included – pseudonyms will be used for young people, professional participants will be identified by participant type only, referring agencies and fieldwork locations will be anonymised etc.
- All data will be handled in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act. Primary data will be securely stored on password-protected computers and locked cabinets. All original primary data (handwritten notes, recordings etc) will be securely destroyed six months after the completion of the project.

J. Outputs and dissemination

Regular updates will be provided to the funders, RPAG, YPAG and MAAG in each research site throughout the duration of the research. An interim report will be produced in summer 2012. Full research findings will be made publicly available by autumn 2013, together with a summary of the same. Young people’s outputs will also be developed and disseminated at the end of the project.

K. Further information

For further information about the research, please contact Dr Helen Beckett (Project Manager) at Helen.Beckett@beds.ac.uk or by telephone at 07725 217231.

L. Complaints

If you have any complaints about the conduct of the research these should be addressed in the first instance to Professor David Barrett (Dean of Partnerships at the University of Bedfordshire) at david.barrett@beds.ac.uk or by telephone at 01582 489267.

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