

Years of Rape and 'Utter Contempt' in Britain

Life in an English Town Where Abuse of Young Girls Flourished

By [KATRIN BENNHOLD](#) SEPT. 1, 2014

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Photo



Lucy, now 25, was groomed to be a rape victim starting when she was 12. The attacks, by individuals and groups of men in Rotherham, England, often happened outdoors, including an alley, and near the city's war memorial. Credit Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

But a few days later, they called to say the bags had been lost.

"All of them?" she remembers asking. A check was mailed, 140 pounds, or \$232, for loss of property, and the family was discouraged from pressing charges. It was the girl's word against that of the men. The case was closed.

Lucy's account of her experience is emblematic of what investigators say happened during a 16-year reign of terror and impunity in this poor northern English town of 257,000, where at least 1,400

children, some as young as 11, were groomed for sexual exploitation while the authorities looked the other way. One girl told investigators that gang rape was part of growing up in her neighborhood.

Between 1997 and 2013, despite numerous reports of sexual abuse, only one case, involving three teenage girls, was prosecuted, and five men were sent to jail, according to an official report into the sexual exploitation of children in Rotherham published last week.

Even now, the official reaction has been dominated by partisan finger-pointing and politics. The leader of the Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council has resigned, and the police chief is under pressure to follow suit. But criminal investigations continue, and more than a dozen victims are suing the police and the Council for negligence.

The scale and brutality of the abuse in Rotherham have shocked a country already shaken by a series of child abuse scandals involving celebrities, public officials, clerics and teachers at expensive private schools. [The Rotherham report](#) suggests that it continues unchecked among the most vulnerable in British society.

It has highlighted another uncomfortable dimension of the issue, that of race relations in Britain. The victims identified in the report were all white, while the perpetrators were mostly of Pakistani heritage, many of them working in nighttime industries like taxi driving and takeout restaurants. The same was true in recent prosecutions in Oxford, in southern England, and the northern towns of Oldham and Rochdale, where nine men of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Afghan origin were given long prison sentences in 2012 for abusing up to 47 girls. Investigators in Scotland have reportedly uncovered a similar pattern of abuse.

Sexual abuse of children takes many forms, and the majority of convicted abusers in Britain are white. But as Nazir Afzal, the chief crown prosecutor in charge of sexual violence and himself of Pakistani heritage, put it, "There is no getting away from the fact that there are Pakistani gangs grooming vulnerable girls."

The grooming tends to follow a similar pattern, according to Alexis Jay, a former chief inspector of social work who was commissioned by the Rotherham Council to carry out an independent investigation following a series of reports in The Times of London: a period of courting with young men in public places like town centers, bus stations or shopping malls; the gradual introduction of cigarettes, alcohol and sometimes harder drugs; a sexual relationship with one man, who becomes the "boyfriend" and later demands that the girl prove her love by having sex with his friends; then the threats, blackmail and violence that have deterred so many girls from coming forward.

But the report also outlined how those victims and parents who did ask for help were mostly let down by the police and social services, despite a great deal of detail known to them for more than a decade, including, in some cases, the names of possible offenders and their license plate numbers.

"Nobody can pretend they didn't know," Ms. Jay said in an interview.

Unimpeded, the abuse mushroomed. Over time, investigators found, it evolved from personal gratification to a business opportunity for the men.

Increasingly, the girls were shared not just among groups of men locally, but sold, or bartered for drugs or guns. They were driven to cities like Sheffield, Manchester and London, where groups of men raped them, sometimes overnight.

When parents reported their daughters missing, it could take 24 hours for the police to turn up, Ms. Jay said. Some parents, if they called in repeatedly, were fined for wasting police time.

Some officers and local officials told the investigation that they did not act for fear of being accused of racism. But Ms. Jay said that for years there was an undeniable culture of institutional sexism. Her investigation heard that police referred to victims as “tarts” and to the girls’ abuse as a “lifestyle choice.”

In the minutes of a meeting about a girl who had been raped by five men, a police detective refused to put her into the sexual abuse category, saying he knew she had been “100 percent consensual.” She was 12.

“These girls were often treated with utter contempt,” Ms. Jay said.

Lucy, now 25 but too scared to give her last name because, she said, the men who brutalized her still live nearby, knows about contempt. During an interview at her home outside Rotherham, she recalled being questioned about her abuse by police officers who repeatedly referred to the main rapist as her “boyfriend.”

The first time she was raped, there were nine men, she said, one on top of her, another to pin her down and force himself into her mouth. Two others restrained a friend of hers, holding open her eyelids to make her watch. The rest of the men, all in their 20s, stood over her, cheering and jeering, and blinding her with the flash of their cameras.

It was November 2002, and Lucy was 13.

When she went to bed that night, she found a text message from the man who had groomed her for months: “Did you get home all right?”

She hesitated, then texted back: “Yes, I’m fine.”

At that moment, she said, rape became normality. “I thought, ‘This must be my fault, I must have given them a signal,’ ” she said.

Unlike other victims, Lucy came from a stable family. Her parents owned a convenience store and post office. They lived in a middle-class neighborhood. “I had been brought up in a nice world,” she said. “I thought rapists were people hiding in bushes, and pedophiles were people who drive white vans and park outside schools.”

After that first rape, she said, she began to think she had overreacted, and told her friend that she had been upset because she had lost her virginity. After school, they went back to the town center. The leader of the group took her to McDonald's and rolled her a marijuana cigarette, she said. For a week, it was as if nothing had happened.

Then he raped her again, and soon the rules changed. The girls were to speak only when spoken to. They had to sit quietly in town and wait. Taxis would come by and pick them up. They were raped by different men in different places, mostly outdoors.

There seemed to be no way out. "They threatened to gang-rape my mother, to kill my brother and to firebomb my house," Lucy said.

Once, she said, when they thought she might go to the police, a man with gold teeth whom she had never seen before dragged her into his car, a dark-green Honda with left-side drive, and put a gun to her head: "On the count of three you're dead," she said he told her. He pulled the trigger on three, but nothing happened. "Keep your mouth shut," he said. "Next time there will be a bullet inside."

Eventually, Lucy's parents sold their business and moved to Spain for 18 months. "It became quite clear that leaving the country was the only way we could save Lucy," said her mother, who participated in parts of the interview.

Lucy experienced years of depression and anorexia, her mother said. She now works as a consultant on child sexual exploitation issues for police departments and charities.

"They say it's vulnerable girls these people are after," her mother said. "Well, of course they're vulnerable. They're innocent. They're children."