



Northern Ireland Affairs Committee – Tackling Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) in NI
National Crime Agency Response to the Call for Evidence

The National Crime Agency (NCA) operates throughout the United Kingdom to protect the public from Serious and Organised Crime (SOC). Our officers undertake operations against individuals and groups which operate at the high end of high harm across a range of threat types.

The NCA protects the public from SOC by degrading the most harmful Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) that pose a threat to the UK and works with policing partners, including the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), to coordinate the national operational response to SOC in the UK.

The NCA investigates VAWG-linked criminality predominantly in response to Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) and Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) but also has responsibility for investigating Organised Immigration Crime (OIC), Fraud, Firearms, Drugs, Cybercrime, Bribery, Corruption, Sanctions Evasion and Border Vulnerabilities; and we provide a number of related services to policing e.g. in respect of behavioural analysis of sexual offences committed by strangers and support for missing persons cases.

This response will set out the role of organised crime in the abuse of women and girls and what the NCA is doing to tackle VAWG, particularly in Northern Ireland.

Threat

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking is considered by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) as a VAWG threat, specifically in relation to:

- **Sexual Exploitation.** Sexual exploitation is one of the highest harm sub-threats of MSHT. Where it involves overseas victims and perpetrators offending is more highly organised and investigations are therefore more likely to engage NCA. We know OCGs recruit, transport, advertise and control victims through a variety of means.
- **Domestic Servitude.** Domestic servitude is more commonly a policing matter owing to the lack of organisation seen in the majority of cases. There are cases in which domestic servitude is seen within the county lines model which is replicated in Northern Ireland by paramilitaries. In both cases, the response to domestic servitude is a matter for policing, PSNI in the case of Northern Ireland.

Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation is increasing in scale, severity and complexity. CSA remains one of the most significant threat areas within the UK that disproportionality impacts on females. CSAE is heavily gendered with males (82% of all CSA perpetrators) predominantly abusing females (79% of victims). The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) reports that 1 in 6 girls (15% of girls) will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16, compared to 1 in 20 boys (5% of boys), with offenders being predominantly male. Half of all contact offences are committed by under 18s. The NCA estimates that 1.3%-1.6% of the UK adult population have a degree of sexual interest in children. This analysis does not distinguish across regions or administrations.



There is a clear link between Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) viewed online and contact offending, with a Finnish research report noting that 40% of CSA offenders sought contact with a child after viewing CSAM (Protect Children).

Incidence of CSAE has grown significantly in recent years. A total of 115,489 CSAE offences were recorded in 2023 across England and Wales which is broadly similar to 2022. Increasingly a wide range of CSA offences are committed entirely online, with self-generated indecent imagery, and coercion based on material shared by the victim a common feature in investigations.

In 2023, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) stated that most of the child sexual abuse imagery they saw showed only girls, and in the past three years girls have accounted for 97% of imagery. By the end of 2023, the IWF had created unique hashes of over 2.2 million images and videos.

Category of images and videos	Total number of images and videos	Percentage of which solely depicted women.
Category A	554,553	72%
Category B	934,714	69%
Category C	763,230	87%
All Categories	2,252,497	76%

Furthermore, of those sexually abused as a child, more than half (58%) experience domestic abuse and a quarter experience rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) as adults.

With young children increasingly having unsupervised access to the internet, there remains a high risk that young girls gain access to online environments where they can be exploited by their peers and adults. Furthermore 27% of 11-year olds have been exposed to pornography online, which can present other potential harms, including exposure to violent material which at a young age can influence some children to display harmful sexual behaviour.

These are troubling statistics, which serve to illustrate the disproportionate risk girls face, compared to boys.

Com Networks are a particularly troubling area where the threat has developed significantly over the last few years. These are online community forums and chat groups where material such as Extreme Right Wing (EXRW) ideologies, Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), Satanism and the occult, misogyny and animal cruelty are shared. These groups will incite their victims to conduct sexual and degrading acts: cutting and carving letters and symbols into their bodies, abusing/killing familial pets, sexually abusing their siblings/children, and in some cases the coercion of suicides. Those being enticed into these forums include children who seek to gain status within the group by seeking more extreme material and acts for shock value, with the risk that these offenders may go on to commit cyber offences and more violent offending. Offenders also seek to publicly expose other group members' victims, and revictimize them; as with some physical gang settings, victims may in



some cases not see their treatment as abuse. Within this space 76% of offenders are boys (aged between 15-17) and their victims are predominantly girls between the ages of 11-13.

NCA response

National Investigative Capabilities

The NCA hosts the National Investigative Capabilities (NIC), a series of units which are available to UK law enforcement in support of complex and serious offending. These capabilities include:

- Major Crimes Investigative Support (MCIS)
- Serious Crime Analysis Section (SCAS)
- Missing Persons Unit (MPU)

Since 1st January 2025, PSNI, through many of their functions and departments have requested assistance from the National Investigative Capabilities (NIC) teams in relation to 50 separate investigations where there has been violence against woman and girls (VAWG). These crime types include murders, suspicious deaths, rapes and other sexual offences, terrorist offences, assaults, non-accidental injuries against children and violent acquisitive crime.

Through the niche capabilities within NIC various specialist resources and subject matter experts from MCIS and SCAS have supported these investigations. This includes deployments of National Senior Investigating Officer Advisers, Crime Investigation Specialist Officers, National Interview, Search, Digital and Family Liaison Advisers as well as specialists from the Behavioural Science team all of whom have provided strategic and operational assistance.

The SCAS, who hold the national remit to support serious stranger sexual offences and murder investigations across the UK, have been notified of 32 SCAS criteria offences relating to VAWG within Northern Ireland. SCAS have provided analytical assistance on some of these cases, using an in-house database to conduct Comparative Case Analysis to highlight similarities between offences to progress investigations. The wider NIC team have also supported many of these PSNI cases with the identification of external experts (non-medical and medical) all of whom have supported these investigations in the fight against violence against woman and girls.

National Assessment Centre

The National Assessment Centre (NAC) is the NCA's centre for assessed intelligence reporting and uses data to understand the scale and prevalence of SOC, including VAWG-linked SOC, across the UK including Northern Ireland. PSNI regularly share information and intelligence with the NCA which informs these assessments. The NAC produces strategic and thematic threat assessments and products for customers across the SOC system which are appropriately shared with UK Law Enforcement partners including PSNI.

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

The NCA coordinated Project AIDANT is a multi-agency campaign of intensifications against the MSHT threat. PSNI are one of the core participants in these intensifications. In December 2023, PSNI

Protecting the public from serious and organised crime





working through Project AIDANT with the NCA, Belfast Harbour Police and Border Force supported an intensification focussed on the Common Travel Area. This intensification included engaging with passengers from flights arriving into Belfast International Airport and to Belfast Port as well as the deployment of police dogs to identify the cash proceeds of human trafficking being moved through the Common Travel Area.

Further, work conducted through CAUSEWAY, a multi-agency hub of which NCA and PSNI are members, focusses on criminal exploitation of the Common Travel Area; trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation is one such form of abuse addressed by CAUSEWAY.

Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

The NCA's CSAE Referrals Bureau (CSERB) is the central point within the NCA for receipt of referrals from industry – principally US tech companies – of information relating to online child sexual abuse with a UK nexus, predominantly received via the US National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). Any reports containing an offence that have a Northern Ireland nexus are disseminated to PSNI. The detection of CSA through industry reports has doubled roughly every five years. This trend is likely to continue. In 2025, the NCA expects to send an average of 800 total referrals per week to police forces across the UK.

To tackle the growing threat, the NCA prioritises the identification and targeting of the highest harm CSAE offenders across the following CSAE sub threats where girls are at risk:

- **Transnational Child Sex Offenders.** Transnational Child Sex Offenders includes both Registered Sex Offenders and non-Registered Sex Offenders (UK residents and nationals and foreign nationals) who are known or suspected of travel to or embed themselves in other countries for the purposes of targeting and sexually abusing vulnerable children, who are based overseas. It can, and does result, in UK Law Enforcement prosecuting UK nationals in the UK for offending against young girls in countries which are less developed in their legislation or response to CSAE.
- **Livestreaming.** In the context of CSAE, the term livestreaming refers to the real time transmission or sharing of any material depicting the engagement of a child under 18 in sexual activity. For a facilitator or creator, the offence is made out once the livestreaming of CSAE is created, regardless of whether the stream is seen by anyone else. In a recent case a 39-year-old man was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for offences linked to the livestreaming of CSAE against girls from the Philippines. Although victims of livestreaming and TCSOs are predominantly based abroad, offenders also pose a risk to UK children.
- **Network Offenders.** Online Offender Networks are groups of offenders from across the globe who come together virtually in online forums to share offending techniques, tradecraft, victim details and to generally socialise with each other. These forums create an environment which 'normalises' CSAE conduct and can lead to an escalation to more severe offending. As such, these forums and the behaviour of offenders towards girls on these forums generate a clear CSAE threat.



- **Mass Victim Groomers.** A process through which offenders apply a range of techniques to coerce or obtain the trust of a child (or an adult in order to gain access to a child), with the intent to; elicit indecent videos and images of themselves and/or others, sexualised conversation, and/or physical contact; desensitise them to the abuse/normalise the abuse in the mind of the child; incite the adult or a child to abuse (another) child and/or gain the child's compliance to maintain secrecy and avoid disclosure. The National Analysis of Police Recorded Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) crimes (2023) report for England and Wales highlights that Sexual Grooming accounts for 19% of CSAE offences with an online element. In a recent NCA Investigation Ishmael DUNCAN manipulated and blackmailed dozens of girls into sending indecent photos and videos of themselves by pretending to be a model scout and on conviction was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment.
- **Grooming gangs.** For more than a decade the NCA has led investigations into grooming gang activity in Rotherham through Operation Stovewood, which has resulted in 216 arrests and 47 convictions. Following the government accepting the recommendations in Baroness Casey's audit of grooming gangs this summer, the NCA is overseeing a police operation to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of group-based child sexual exploitation. As these are devolved matters in Northern Ireland and Scotland, the report and NCA's action focus on England and Wales, but as we establish the operation we are in touch with PSNI and Police Scotland colleagues to understand the implications in those jurisdictions.
- **Financially Motivated Sexual Extortion.** Financially Motivated Sexual Extortion (FMSE), often referred to as sextortion, is a type of online blackmail where someone is forced into paying money or meeting another financial demand (such as purchasing a pre-paid gift card) after an offender has threatened to release intimate, naked or sexual photos or videos of them. When perpetrated against someone under 18 years old, this is a form of child sexual abuse. It is likely that FMSE offenders are engaging a large volume of minors for relatively small payments. Contrary to other forms of online CSE, FMSE victims are predominantly male. An NCA social media campaign to raise awareness of Financially Motivated Sexual Extortion (FMSE) ran for a month in March 2025 aimed at 15-17 year-old boys. All UK nations disseminated the campaign via their own channels. We worked with PSNI to develop a tailored version of the parents and carers guidance that accompanied the campaign - co-branded with Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) and the PSNI. In the UK and internationally there has been significant increases in the reporting of FMSE over the last few years.
- **Com Networks.** The NCA is coordinating and driving the national response to 'Com networks'. The NCA issued an alert for law enforcement in March 2025, ahead of the public release of our annual National Strategic Assessment, to inform and raise awareness of the emerging threat in addition to signposting to further guidance and operational advice. This alert was issued to all Chief Constables, including PSNI. PSNI have been invited to join the working group looking at the strategic and operational response to this threat and help inform the national picture. In addition, an NCA representative provided the keynote speech, focusing on the Com group and youth extremism, at the National Organisation for Tackling Abuse (NOTA) conference held in Belfast in May 2025 - the audience included a variety of NGOs and



academia. PSNI are regularly involved and updated on our work through various governance mechanisms including regular accountability sessions with the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

