

Understanding harmful sexual behaviour, violence and misogyny by children - what the evidence shows

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The Youth Justice Board (YJB) has published a new Evidence and Insights Pack examining harmful sexual behaviour, misogyny and violence carried out by children.

The pack brings together the latest research, data and practice examples from across England and Wales.

The evidence shows that proven sexual offences by children rose by 47% in 2023-24 and a further 6% in the latest year. While the research looks into potential changes in behaviour by children, the YJB cautions that these increases may also reflect improved reporting, better detection, and changes in how cases progress through the criminal justice system.

This research shows that sexual harassment and image-based abuse are widely reported by girls in schools and peer relationships, highlighting the scale of harm experienced by young victims.

The pack also highlights the complex factors that shape harmful sexual behaviour among children, including childhood trauma, exposure to misogynistic attitudes online, peer dynamics, and wider social influences.

Importantly, the evidence highlights that preventing harm early is key. School-based programmes that teach healthy relationships and consent, work with boys to challenge harmful gender norms and strengthen bystander skills can shift attitudes and improve children's willingness to not engage or intervene in situations that could lead to harm.

Stephanie Roberts-Bibby, Chief Executive of the YJB, said:

Violence against women and girls is a serious and growing concern across society and preventing it must start early. Understanding the role harmful sexual behaviour and misogynistic attitudes play in childhood is essential if we are to prevent harm, reduce the number of victims and make our communities safer.

Children who display harmful sexual behaviour are still children. Many have experienced abuse, trauma or exploitation themselves, and effective responses must both address the harm caused and support the child to move away from offending.

The impact on victims, who are often children themselves, can be profound and long-lasting. Preventing harm and supporting victims must remain central to the youth justice system's response.

Most children who display harmful sexual behaviour do not go on to commit sexual offences as adults, particularly when they receive an appropriate response. This is why early intervention, education and strong safeguarding responses are critical.

The evidence pack also highlights the growing influence of digital environments, where algorithm-driven content can amplify misogynistic attitudes and normalise harmful behaviours among children.

More than one in four children (27%) report seeing threats or images of sexual assault online. A third (33%) report seeing content encouraging violence against women and girls. The average age of first exposure to pornography is around age 13, however some children report seeing pornography as early as primary school age.

These exposures can negatively shape attitudes to consent and expectations in relationships and increase behaviours such as coercion, harassment, abuse and obtaining consent. The evidence emphasises the importance of prevention, education and safeguarding to stop these behaviours, rather than relying solely on criminal justice responses after harm has occurred.

Trusted adults - including teachers, youth workers, parents and practitioners, play a critical role in identifying concerning behaviours early and supporting children to develop healthy relationships.

Despite improved understanding in the area of harmful sexual behaviour, violence and misogyny, the pack also identifies significant evidence gaps in the UK, particularly around which interventions are most effective in preventing harmful behaviours among children. The YJB is calling for further research and evaluation to strengthen the evidence base and support services across the system.

The pack is being shared across government as part of the YJB's commitment to working with partners across youth justice, education, safeguarding, health and media to reduce harm, challenge misogynistic attitudes and support children to build healthy and respectful relationships.

ENDS

Notes to editors

- The YJB's Evidence and Insights Pack, Harmful Sexual Behaviour, Misogyny and Violence Carried Out by Children, brings together the latest research, data and practice insights to support partners across youth justice, education, safeguarding and policing.
- Evidence shows harmful sexual behaviour exists on a continuum, ranging from developmentally inappropriate behaviour through to abusive and violent acts.
- Most children who display harmful sexual behaviour do not go on to commit sexual offences as adults.
- The YJB supports a Child First evidence base, recognising that children in the justice system often have complex needs and experiences of trauma, while ensuring the needs of victims remain central to responses.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/understanding-harmful-sexual-behaviour-violence-and-misogyny-by-children-what-the-evidence-shows>