

The Risk of Online Sexual Abuse (ROSA) Project

By Nina Vaswani, Lindsay Mullen, Erifili Efthymiadou
and Stuart Allardyce

June 2022



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Who we are

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation is the only UK-wide charity dedicated solely to preventing child sexual abuse.

Around 1 in 6 children will be sexually abused. Around one third of this is carried out by under-18s. And around 9 in 10 children who are sexually abused know their abuser.

We work to stop this.

How we help keep children safe

We work to reach adults and young people to prevent abuse from happening in the first place – and, if it already has, to prevent it from happening again.

Where abuse has already taken place, we work with all those affected, including adult male and female abusers; young people with harmful sexual behaviour; children with concerning sexual behaviours; and victims of abuse and other family members. But we also work in families and with adults and young people where there has been no abuse, to help them keep themselves and others as safe as possible.

We run the Stop It Now! UK and Ireland helpline. A confidential service available to anyone with concerns about child sexual abuse, including adults worried about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts, feelings or behaviour towards children.

The Faithfull Papers

We research and evaluate our work to make sure what we do protects children, and we share the evidence with professionals and the public. We want to make best use of our expertise, our data and our insights, independently and in partnerships, to develop new strategies and interventions that help keep children safe.

We advocate for a greater focus on preventing abuse before it happens and for a public health approach to the prevention of child sexual abuse. The Faithfull Papers are a series of reports showcasing our understanding of what works to protect children to the widest possible audience – to policymakers, journalists, researchers and partner organisations in the UK and overseas.

Executive summary

Between 2018 and 2021, Stop It Now! Scotland, as part of The Lucy Faithfull Foundation, piloted the Risk of Online Sexual Abuse (ROSA) Project, an action research project based in Glasgow exploring technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour (TA-HSB) among children and young people.

Harmful sexual behaviours (HSBs) are defined as “sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult” (1). By the same token, TA-HSB involves under-18s using the internet, or other forms of technology, to engage in sexual activity that may be harmful to themselves or others (2). This includes behaviours that are inappropriate or problematic as well as those that lead to sexual abuse, exploitation and victimisation.

These can include:

- sharing self-produced sexual images without consent
- developmentally inappropriate viewing or sharing of pornography¹
- grooming and online solicitation
- sexual harassment online
- viewing, possessing or distributing sexual images of under-18s
- viewing extreme pornography (for example, bestiality or pornography involving violence) (2, 3).

Funded by the R S Macdonald Charitable Trust, the ROSA Project set out to undertake and evaluate a one-to-one psychoeducational programme for children aged 10 to 18 who have exhibited TA-HSB. Over the course of three years, the project worker worked directly with 68 young people who had exhibited TA-HSB.

We commissioned the Children and Young People’s Centre for Justice (CYCJ) at the University of Strathclyde to evaluate the ROSA Project. This consisted of analysis of anonymised administrative data gathered and maintained by the project, as well as interviews and surveys with key stakeholders, young people, parents and carers, and referrers.

This paper describes the work of the ROSA Project and summarises the findings of the independent evaluation. For the purposes of the Faithfull Paper, the report also includes some secondary analyses of young people’s behaviour and supplementary materials not included in the independent evaluation. In particular, this report describes findings in relation to young people we worked with directly as part of this project.

Findings from this project were used to inform a second part of the project, working at a secondary school in Glasgow (Shawlands Academy) with pupils, staff and parents to develop and share key knowledge, skills and messages about online safety and TA-HSB. We built on what we learnt from the direct work with young people who had displayed TA-HSB to develop a whole-school approach to preventing peer-on-peer online sexually abusive behaviour. The prevention work in the school is described in the appendix.

The full evaluation report can be found at lucyfaithfull.org.uk/faithfull-papers-research.htm

¹ Throughout the paper, when using the term “pornography” we refer to sexual materials exclusively involving adult individuals. The term “pornography” is, therefore, distinguished from sexual exploitation materials involving children, which by definition cannot be consensual.

Key points

Complexity of TA-HSB exhibited by young people

- Most young people were referred directly from social work (48%) after issues had been identified in a child protection context. Behaviours leading to referral included sending of self-produced sexual images, viewing sexual images of under-18s, online solicitation or grooming and sharing of legal pornography in inappropriate contexts.
- Only a minority of young people referred had been charged with a sexual offence (n = 11), although most behaviours could have led to their being charged with a sexual offence.
- Eight individuals were referred through diversion from prosecution. Overall, the ROSA Project served as a pathway for young people to address their TA-HSB outside the adult criminal justice system.

Characteristics and needs of young people involved in TA-HSB

- Among the 61 young people whose data were analysed as part of the project evaluation, the mean age was 14.4 years and 62% were male.
- TA-HSB is a gendered issue. Girls were over three times as likely to be victims (59%) than boys (16%).
- Certain groups of young people may be more vulnerable to being victims of or engaging in TA-HSB, in particular LGBTQ+ youth, young people with ASD and young people with mental health difficulties.
- Some young people (44%) had experienced harm and abuse. Some young men who had viewed and distributed sexual images of under-18s had themselves been drawn into such behaviour by being groomed by adults and then sent illegal materials.

How the ROSA Project was experienced

- Shame and stigma for young people and their families was considerable. ROSA staff were highly valued for offering a supportive, non-judgemental relationship, as well as knowledge and expertise. The service was viewed as filling an important gap in service provision, both because it tackled behaviour at an early stage and because it offered specific support around TA-HSB.
- The ROSA Project seemed to be an appropriate programme for young people referred. It was experienced positively by young people, parents, and stakeholders at the time, as well as contributing to young people making healthier and safer online choices in the future.

Recommendations

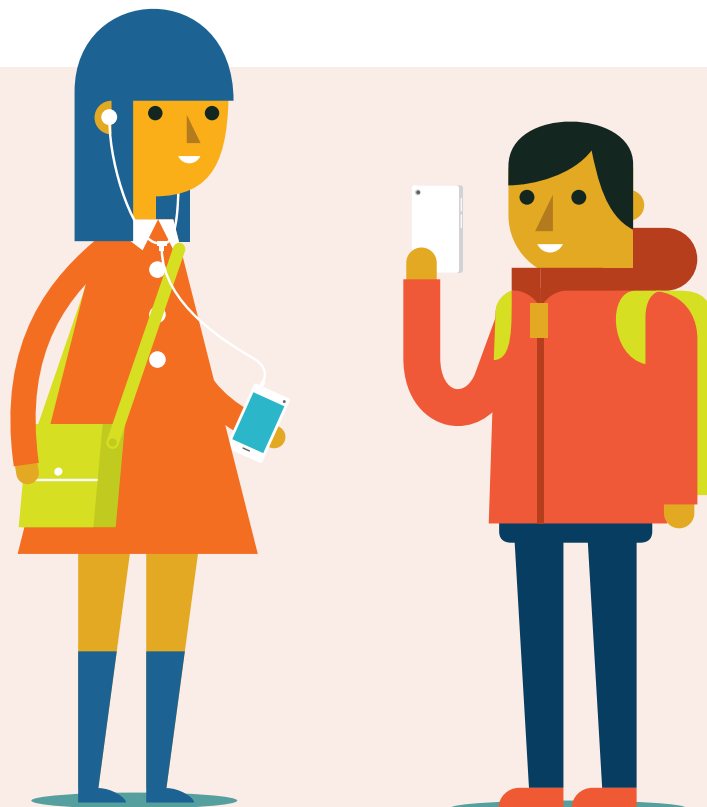
- The children and young people referred to the ROSA Project often presented with very complex TA-HSB behaviours and welfare needs. The support needed to address this, and the impact on staff capacity (for example, time spent engaging and building relationships, extension of the programme to respond to responsiveness needs, maintaining ongoing support post-programme) should be factored in to any future service rollout.
- Mainstream assessment tools, used with young people involved with youth crime generally and HSB specifically, may not be sufficiently sensitive and responsive to measuring change in key factors relating to online risk and TA-HSB. New tools scaling the specific risk and protective factors targeted by intervention programmes will need to be established in the future.

Introduction

Around one third of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by under-18s (1) and online spaces are increasingly the context for adolescent HSB or peer-on-peer sexual abuse. As in the offline world, children socialise, form and sustain relationships, and experiment with social connections online. Technology plays a part in how young people understand their own developing sense of sexuality, and provides new spaces for adolescents to explore sexual identities and to express themselves intimately with peers.

Technology can help children overcome interpersonal challenges or social isolation, but it can also be addictive, erode offline social skills and promote compulsive and disinhibited behaviours (3). Technology, and the anonymity it provides, can open up worlds that children would be too embarrassed or unable to explore in real life (3), but it can also mean that children are inadvertently exposed to inappropriate or harmful content (2). It can also afford opportunities to take sexual risks or to sexually offend (4).

Technology may also reflect and amplify HSBs in the child's offline peer culture or in wider society, through sexist attitudes, sexualised bullying or sexual harassment (5). For example, there are gendered judgements and double standards, with girls often pressured to share images of themselves but being judged more harshly compared to boys when they do (6). The above reflect attitudes driving HSB in an offline context. A recent Scottish survey found that 18% of teenage girls have been sexually assaulted, 62% have endured some form of sexual abuse and harassment and 79% feel more must be done to curb sexual harassment in schools (7). The widespread prevalence and normalisation of the sharing of self-produced images (6, 8) may create an environment in which children feel under pressure to take and share images, even if they are not directly pressured or coerced.



Why we developed the ROSA Project

The need for a project addressing TA-HSB displayed by young people was borne out by evidence.

- A study by the Scottish Government found that under-16s made up 26% of people charged with cyber-enabled offences relating to recorded crimes of communicating indecently and causing to view sexual activity or images, as opposed to 6% charged with similar offline offences (9).
- A study of referrals to a UK-wide HSB programme run by the NSPCC found that 46% of referrals involved TA-HSB (2).
- A survey of headteachers and safeguarding leads in England and Scotland found that 90% had identified instances of TA-HSB at their school, and 83% felt that this issue was increasing (10).

The widespread prevalence has left many school staff feeling that concerns such as students sharing sexual images are now unmanageable issues. The overwhelming and complex nature of problems about young people's online sexual behaviours leaves schools uncertain how to respond when issues are identified (11). To this end, the ROSA Project was established in 2017 to address growing concern among professionals, parents and carers about young people's online behaviours.

How the ROSA Project worked

The ROSA Project was designed to fill a clear gap in service provision by responding to identified adolescent TA-HSB with a preventative or early intervention approach. The project was housed in HALT, a statutory service in Glasgow for children and young people who have displayed HSB. The ROSA Project specifically aimed to work directly with young people referred because of concerns in relation to TA-HSB, allowing them access to the Inform Young People programme, an already established Lucy Faithfull Foundation programme for young people who have displayed TA-HSB. This programme involved 6–10 sessions of one-to-one early intervention psychoeducational support (12).

We deliberately left the ROSA Project referral criteria broad to see what kinds of referrals would be made and which agencies would refer to the service. The project was promoted as "a service for children and young people who had got into trouble because of their sexual behaviour online". This was in recognition that not all TA-HSB is abusive, and that online sexual behaviours that are inappropriate (for example, single instances of behaviour that may be contextually inappropriate but remains reciprocal) or problematic (for example, developmentally unusual or socially unexpected, where there is a lack of reciprocity but no overt elements of victimisation) form part of the continuum of sexual behaviours in childhood (13).

The work of the project was delivered by a full-time project worker. The project was supported by an advisory group chaired by the Principal Officer for Child Protection with Glasgow City Council, which brought together colleagues from social work, education, police, the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration and third sector organisations.

Evaluation of the ROSA Project

The ROSA Project included a research component, intended to deepen our understanding of how and why young people act in harmful sexual ways online and when and why this comes to the attention of adults. The ROSA Project maintained a routine monitoring database throughout the duration of the project. The database was analysed quantitatively as part of the evaluation and aimed to explore:

- demographic characteristics
- patterns of TA-HSB and
- the wider needs of young people referred to the ROSA Project.

The evaluation also involved a qualitative exploration of how the service was experienced by the children, family and other stakeholders.

Between early 2018 and 2021, we received 68 referrals. Sixty-one of these were included in the evaluation database (seven were young people we worked with while evaluation data were being analysed).

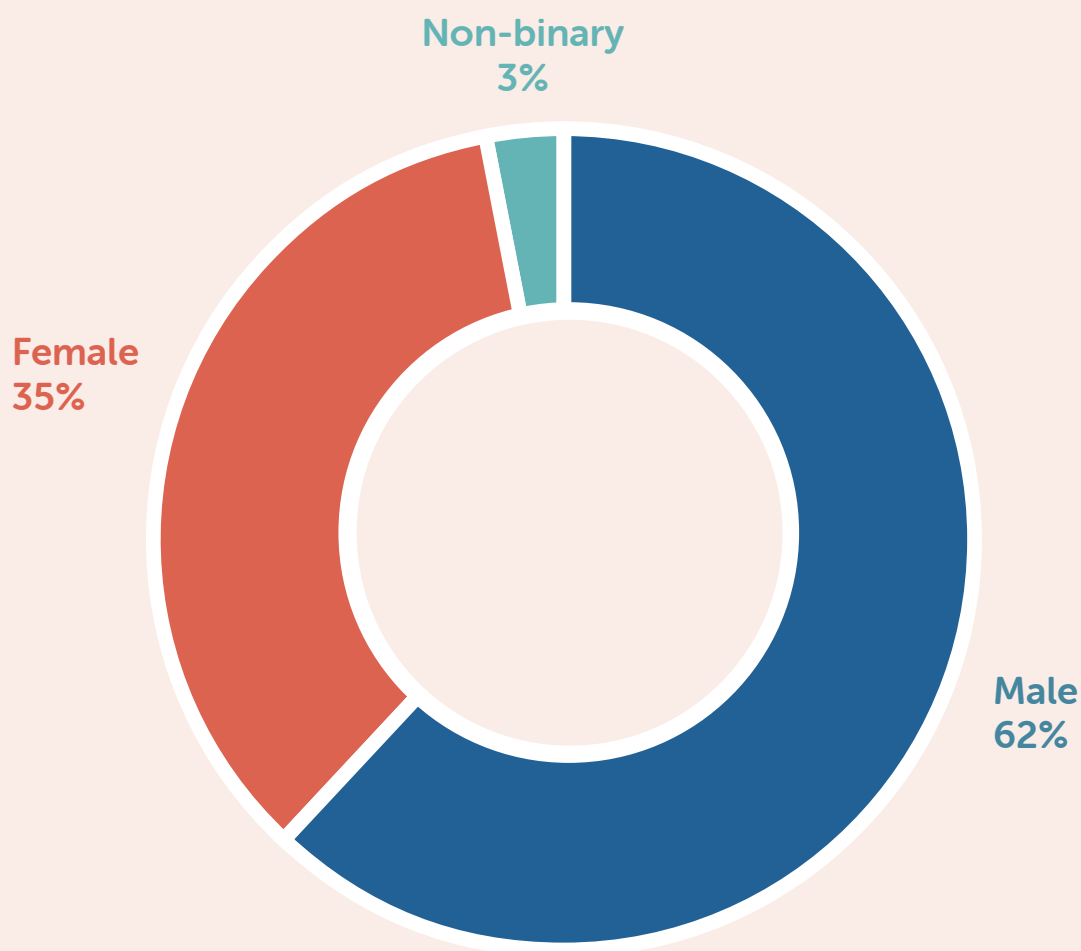
What we learned about young people's characteristics, needs and behaviour

Demographics of young people referred to the ROSA Project

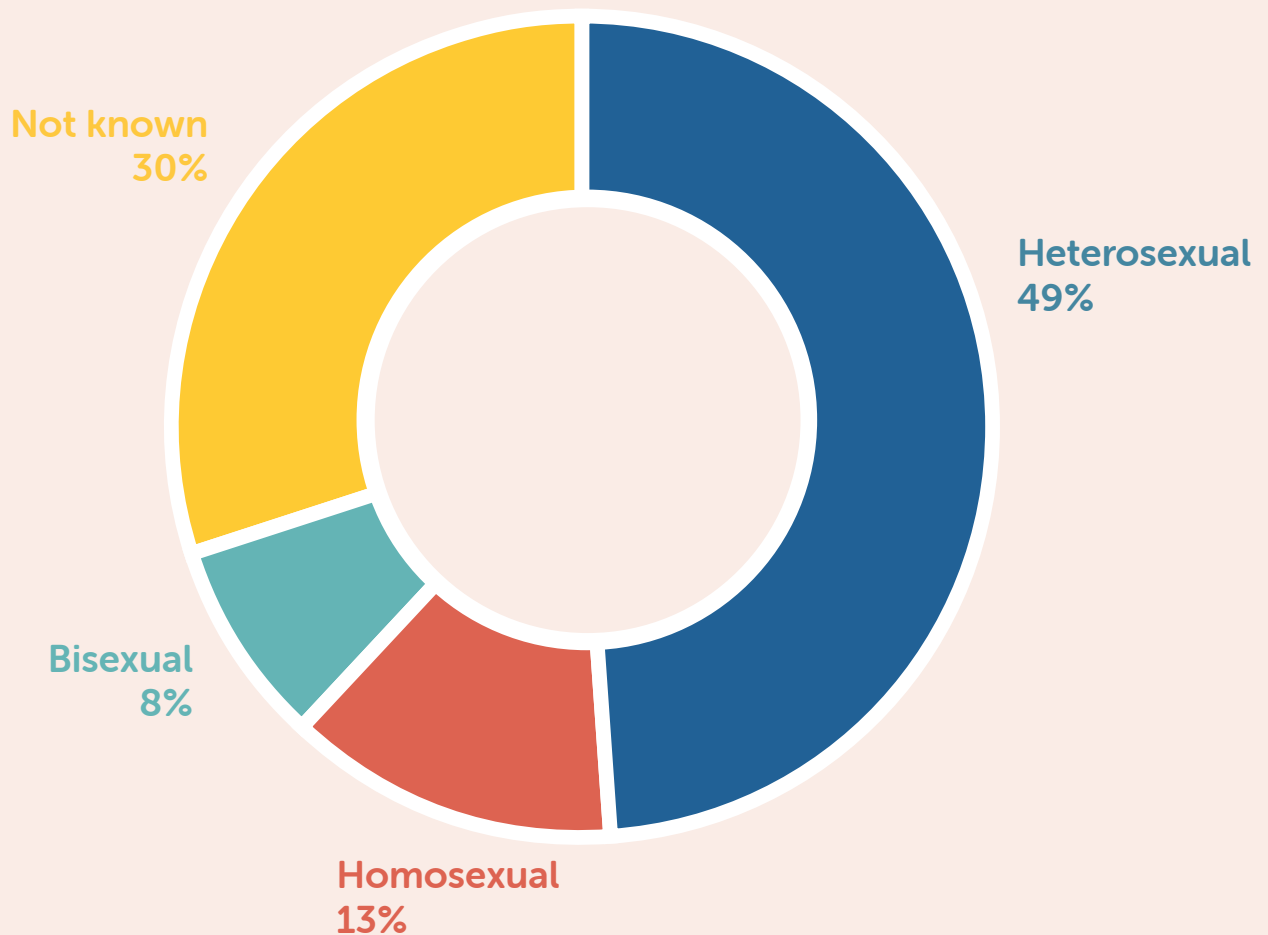
Approximately 92% (n = 56) of young people were White Scottish. Their ages ranged between 11 and 19, with a mean age of 14.4 years. More than half of all young people referred (56%, n = 34) were aged 11 to 14. Nearly two thirds of young people referred identified as male (62%, n = 38) and of the 43 young people whose sexual orientation was known to us, approximately 70% identified as heterosexual (n = 30) (figures 1 and 2).² Among males 58% identified as heterosexual, in comparison to 88% of females.

Figure 1

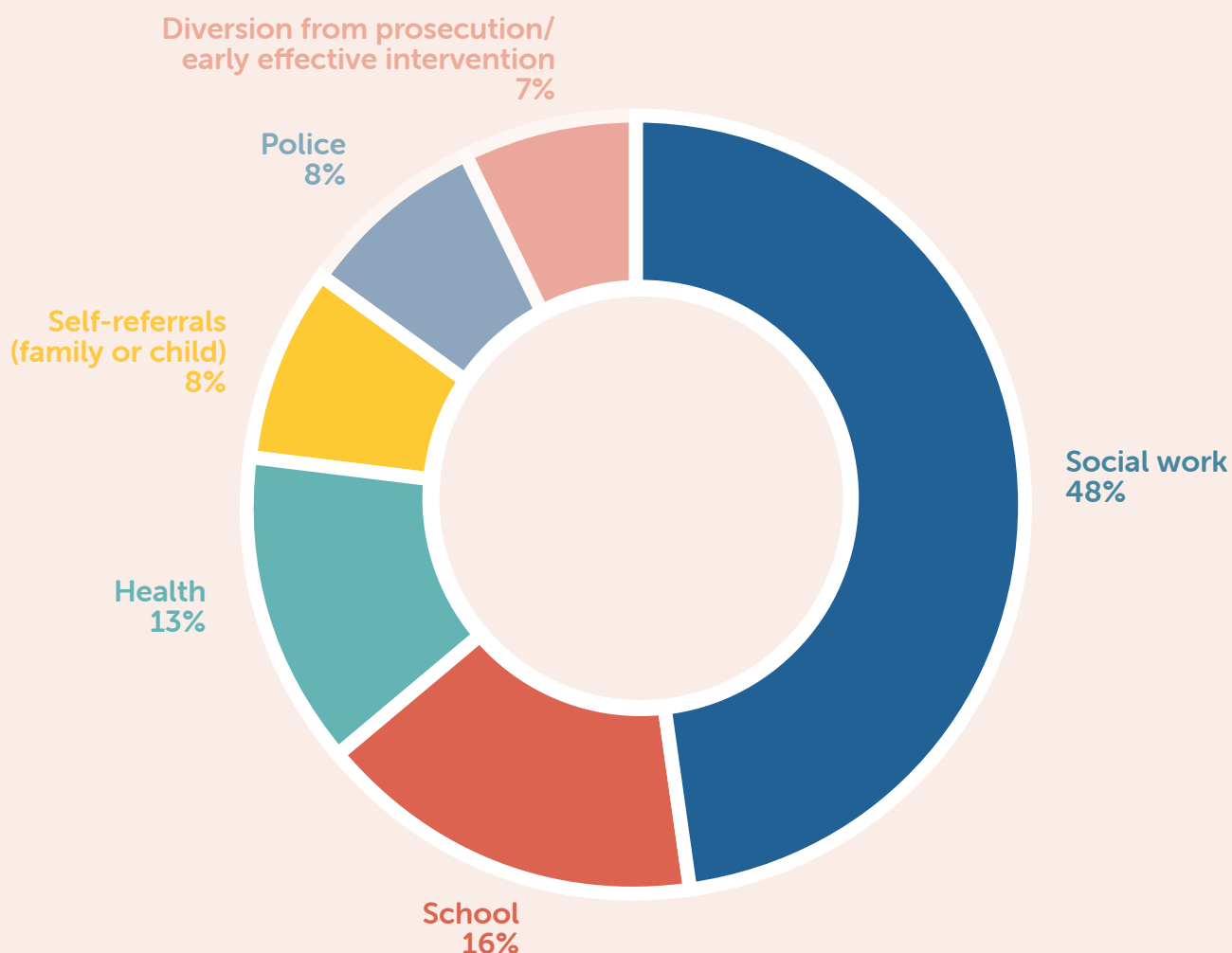
Gender of young people referred to the ROSA Project (N = 61)



² Due to the small number of young people identifying as genders other than male or female, data for these individuals have been excluded from any gendered analysis.

Figure 2**Sexual orientation of young people referred to the ROSA Project (N = 61)****Young people's technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours****Type of technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours**

ROSA referral criteria were deliberately kept loose so as not to exclude any types of behaviours or deter referrals from a project focussing on concerns about children's online sexual behaviour. A wide variety of behaviours led to young people being referred to ROSA and several young people were referred with multiple issues in relation to different kinds of online behaviour. Complexity was a key feature of many of the referrals and some of the behaviours proved difficult to classify, pointing to the fact that behaviours need to be understood within their context. Young people were mainly referred from social work (48%) (figure 3).

Figure 3**Young people's source of referral to the ROSA Project (N = 61)**

For 49% of young people referred to the ROSA Project the index behaviour involved a peer or multiple peers, including partners and ex-partners (n = 30). Online sexual interactions with younger children was the primary reason for referral in approximately 12% of cases (n = 7). In 3% of referrals (n = 2) there were no sexual interactions with others (e.g. a young person who was worried about their excessive use of legal online pornography). We were unable to classify who was involved in two cases.

In 34% of cases (n = 21), young people were referred because their sexual interactions were principally with adults. These were often complex presentations, sometimes involving young people who had been sexually exploited by adults online, or with increased risk for ongoing child sexual exploitation by adults online despite supports from protective adults. It also included those who had received sexual images of under-18s as part of a process of being groomed or otherwise exploited online and who then continued to view online sexual images of under-18s after exploitation had ended.

In 38% of cases (n = 23), young people self-produced sexual images of themselves or others (for a more detailed review of most common reasons of referral to the ROSA Project see figures 4 and 5). Female young people were significantly more likely to be reported for creating sexual images of under-18s (61% vs 39% of male young people). In 86% of cases this involved individuals sending sexual images of themselves to others. There were many different contexts for young people being involved with sharing of sexual images of themselves that then came to the attention of adults, including sharing with peers to shock, to get attention or an unwanted attempt to initiate sexual interactions with a peer. There was clear evidence that around one third of these young people were coerced into sharing self-produced sexual images by adults or peers although the actual figure is likely to be higher, as some young people would feel unable to talk about any exploitation they had suffered. However, the picture here is often a complex one with many young people's presentations resisting easy categorisation and requiring a trauma lens to be applied to these behaviours. One person, for instance, had been exploited by an adult online and was coerced into sharing sexual images with that adult. They then shared similar images with peers that caused distress.

Around 12% (n = 7) of cases involved the sharing of self-produced sexual images of peers without consent. Some of these young people involved with sharing images of peers also shared images of themselves. In at least two cases, some of the sexual images were gathered in the context of a consensual relationship and were then shared without consent after the relationship ended. Approximately 5% (n = 3) of referrals involved voyeuristic behaviour filming peers without their knowledge, in one case using a smartphone to film peers without consent in school settings, such as changing rooms and toilets.

In approximately 41% of cases (n = 25) young people were involved in a communication-type TA-HSB. This means using a public electronic communications network to convey a message or other content that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character. For example, sending unwanted or unsolicited non-self-produced sexual images or messages to a peer would be included in this category.

Approximately 49% (n = 30) of young people had been involved with viewing or distributing sexual images of under-18s, although this includes those involved with self-produced sexual images. One third of this group (n = 10) deliberately accessed illegal materials online but the picture is again complex: several of those who had been involved with viewing or downloading illegal materials involving children that they found online also shared images of self-produced sexual images of peers or of themselves. Although the numbers of sexual images that were identified were generally small, at least one young person was in possession of more than 1000 sexual images of under-18s.

Other behaviours ranged from young people actively seeking pornographic materials from peers in ways that made peers uncomfortable, viewing such materials at school, and accessing extreme pornography such as bestiality. Grooming of peers and children was difficult to quantify. This was partly because the ROSA Project was an early intervention service and behaviours that may have led to exploitation of peers or younger children were intercepted by adults before this could happen. Another reason was that definitions of grooming do not adequately describe complexities and motivations of peer to peer interactions. However, grooming was a clear factor in 8% of referrals (n = 5). In three cases fake profiles had been set up by young people to gather sexual images from school peers, and in one case a young man with a learning disability had been targeted by an online vigilante group when he agreed to meet offline with a group member who posed as a child.

Approximately 28% of young people referred to ROSA (n = 17) were described as victims only who had been exploited online. They did not present risk to others, but had been referred because of concerns about their own online safety. Sometimes this occurred in the context of sending self-produced sexual images. Our intervention with these young people was delivered in partnership with organisations who support children affected by child sexual exploitation.

Figure 4

Most common reasons of referral to the ROSA Project

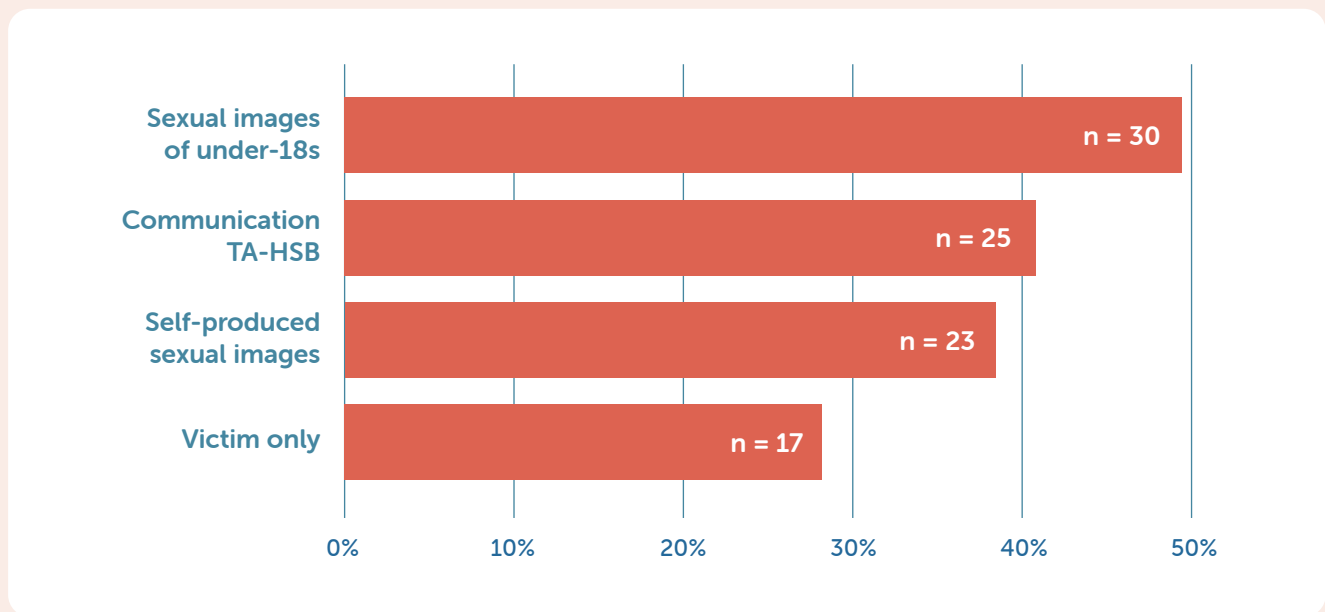
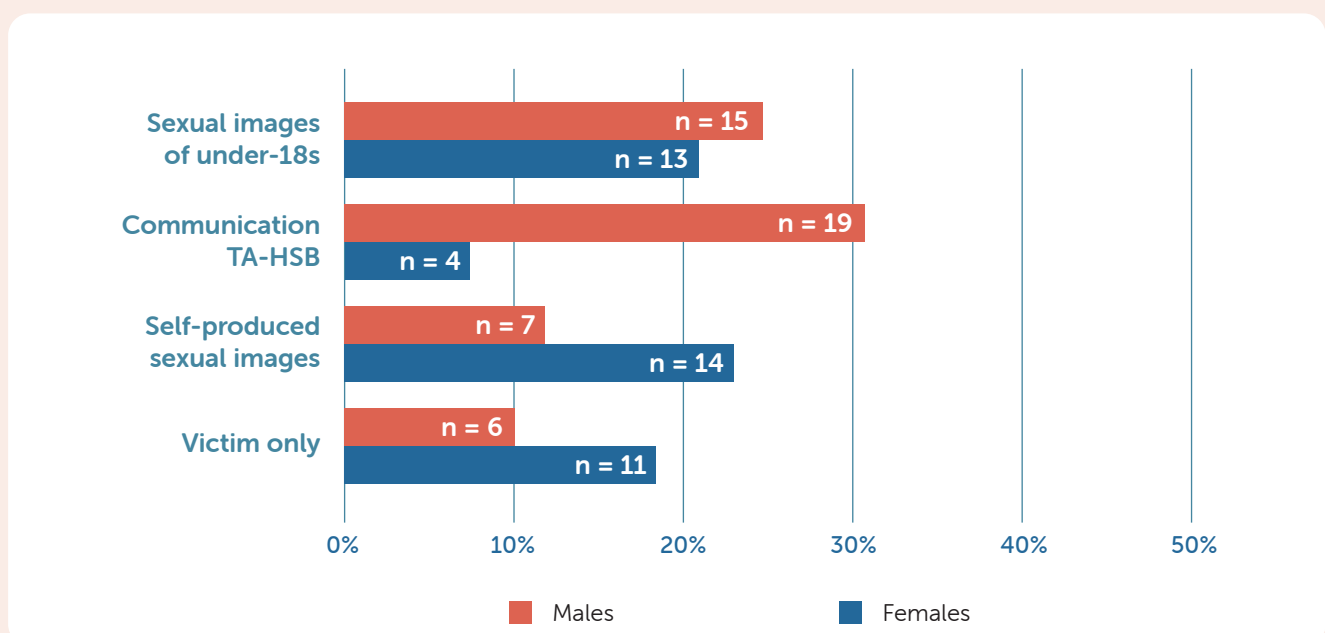


Figure 5

Gender differences across most common reasons for referral



Victims of young people's behaviours

In 75% of cases (n = 24) where there was an identified victim (n = 32), the victim was known to the young person. Approximately 63% (n = 20) of young males who had displayed TA-HSB (n = 32) knew the victim of their behaviour, as opposed to 40% (n = 4) of young females who had displayed TA-HSB (n = 10).

- The majority of reported TA-HSB appeared to be between peers.

When the victim was known (n = 24), 75% (n = 18) of young people had harmed a pubescent person, whereas 25% (n = 6) had harmed a prepubescent child (e.g. under 12). Males made up 75% (n = 9) of the young people displaying extreme TA-HSB (involving prepubescent and pubescent victims) or TA-HSB involving prepubescent children (n = 12).

- There was evidence to suggest that TA-HSB is typically a gendered crime.

Among young people who had victimised others (n = 44) only a minority (11%, n = 5) sexually victimised both males and females, yet in all other cases girls were over three times as likely to be victims (59%, n = 26) than boys (16%, n = 7).

The role of the ROSA Project as part of the criminal justice response

Approximately 97% of young people (n = 55) had engaged in behaviour that would meet the legal definition of an online sexual offence, independent of whether they were charged. However most had not been charged with a criminal offence: only 11 of the young people had been formally charged, nine of whom were male. Only one young person was convicted in the adult criminal justice system.

Most cases did not require compulsory measures of supervision, with referral to ROSA being seen as a proportionate and voluntary response to the behaviour. Eight cases were formal referrals for diversion from prosecution.³ All of these eight individuals were over the age of 16, and two had learning disabilities. Seven completed the programme of work agreed at point of referral and one was remitted to court for non-completion of the diversion programme. Overall, the project therefore served as a pathway for young people to address their TA-HSB outside the adult criminal justice system.

Young people's wider needs

Welfare needs

In 36% of cases (n = 22), young people had a mental health condition, learning disability or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), either diagnosed or suspected. Among those referred with mental health conditions (n = 22), 64% (n = 14) were male. Young people rarely presented with any physical health needs, with only two cases having known physical health issues. Similarly, no young people reported any substance misuse issues.

³ Diversion from prosecution is a Scottish-specific legal process by which the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal (COPFS) are able to refer a case to social work – and their partners – as a means of addressing the underlying causes of alleged offending, when this is deemed the most appropriate course of action. Police cautioning and conditional cautioning do not exist in Scotland.

Around 23% (n = 14) of young people referred to ROSA were described as socially isolated. Two thirds (n = 6) of young people with diagnosed or suspected ASD (n = 9) were described as socially isolated, whereas just over one sixth (n = 7) of young people whose mental health status was known and presented as neurotypical (n = 41), were described as socially isolated.

School attendance

The majority of young people referred to the ROSA Project were attending school (66%, n = 40), although of this group approximately 12% of young people (n = 7) expressed concerns about attendance or experienced other difficulties that could not be specified from referral data. All those with school concerns were male. All other young people had recently left school and were unemployed while attending the ROSA Project. Reflecting the fact that almost one third (30%, n = 18) of young people referred to the ROSA Project were aged 16 to 19, this finding indicates the importance of similar programmes being available beyond a school context.

Young people's experience of maltreatment

A history of experiencing maltreatment was recorded for 44% of young people (n = 27), through self-report or referral case notes. In 16% (n = 10) of cases, young people had experienced bullying, whether offline or online.

Approximately one quarter (25%, n = 15) of young people referred to the ROSA Project had been groomed, primarily in an online environment. It may be that rates are higher, as some experiences of grooming were abusive but not identified as such by young people. Some young men, for instance, described being groomed online – typically by other males – as online banter, which suggests that online exploitation may have a role in modelling problematic and abusive online boundaries for some young men. Some young men who had viewed and distributed sexual images of under-18s had themselves been drawn into such behaviour by being groomed by adults and then sent illegal materials. They were then told by their abusers that they would be reported to the police unless they sent more images of themselves and accessed and shared more sexual images of under-18s online.

What we learned about how the ROSA Project was experienced

Qualitative interviews with young people, parents and key stakeholders revealed a number of key findings.

Support-seeking behaviour of young people

The online world was a big presence in the lives of most of the young people we worked with. However, young people confided that when the online world became unsafe or frightening they quickly became isolated and ashamed, with no one to turn to for advice or support, as they felt embarrassed or feared getting into trouble if they approached an adult for help. Seeking help became even more difficult when young people's behaviours broke the law. In this regard, having an outlet for their worries and concerns, which was separate from their usual sources of support, was an important aspect of the ROSA Project.

There's a certain stigma around that that's ... very hard to sort of overcome when ... you've got sort of cognitive dissonance. Stuff like, 'You shouldn't be doing this, but also if you tell anyone about it, you're going to get labelled a paedophile. You're going to, you know, get harassed' ... And without knowing of stuff like the ROSA Project there's no really sort of safe way to be like, 'Hey, I'm potentially engaging in some offensive and risky behaviours – help!'

Young person

Despite feeling apprehensive about working with the ROSA Project, young people often came to view the sessions as a safe and welcoming space, whether they took place in person or online. Young people reported very positive experiences of the programme itself, valuing the way that the ROSA Project worker had adapted the content or methods to suit their age, stage and learning style.

She was... really nice and... relatable and understanding and she made stuff that was... serious more enjoyable than how... the police will talk about it or... my mum or someone like that.

Young person

Young people sometimes found it more difficult to remember or articulate specifically what they had learnt on the programme, but most reported feeling more confident about the internet and that they had gained new knowledge on the programme. Sessions about consent, sex and the law, and your digital footprint, were most frequently mentioned as being useful.

The Justice Star was used with young people we worked with to evaluate change. Progress was measured across 10 variables. However, we found that many of the variables used by this tool designed to monitor progress for young people in youth justice contexts were too broad to capture service user progress (for example, accommodation, living skills and self-care, drugs and alcohol misuse). A further area for exploration would be whether mainstream risk assessment tools – such as those designed for young people involved with youth crime generally (for example, YLS/CMI or Asset Plus) and HSB specifically (for example, AIM3, J-SOAP-II or PROFESSOR), are sensitive and responsive to measuring change in key factors relating to online risk and TA-HSB. Tools scaling the specific risk and protective factors targeted by intervention programmes will need to be established in the future to measure young people's progress on programmes offered by services such as the ROSA Project.

Parents' experiences

Relationships, trust and credibility were key features of the success of the ROSA Project. All parents described very positive interactions with the ROSA Project worker, finding her to be welcoming, non-judgemental and down to earth. Similarly, parents invariably rated highly the rapport and relationships the project worker had managed to establish with their children, despite challenges such as neurodiversity, shyness or a lack of face-to-face contact due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Parents tended to rate the service very positively and welcomed the support that it had provided to their children. They valued the fact that the service had provided a safe and objective space for young people to talk about difficult and sensitive issues. They felt that their children had gained greater knowledge and understanding of internet safety and which behaviours were permitted and which were against the law, information which was not really available from other sources. Some parents also felt that their children had gained useful insights into their own behaviours. Some parents were a little uncertain about how well their children would be able to put their newfound knowledge into practice in the longer term, citing the appealing and pervasive nature of social media or the pressures of adolescence as factors that may cause their children to return to unsafe behaviours. This suggests that post-programme aftercare may be particularly useful for parents. However, at the time of the interview no parents were aware of any new concerning online behaviours.

I think ROSA really helped him understand that there's a world out there that's not exactly benign when you're 14 ... so I think ROSA really helped with keeping [our son] safe and I also think that ROSA really helped with making him understand that, as well, despite the fact he's 14, and naïve, ultimately what he did was a crime, and why it's a crime.

Parent of a young person

It also appeared that the wider context around the children had become more open and conducive to preventing or dealing with any new concerns about online sexual behaviour. Parents described feeling supported by the ROSA Project too.

I found talking to my son after each session that he was learning some fundamentals in social interaction that he had missed due to his condition and it also helped us as a family to see he was learning about real life and the difference from online content.

Parent of a young person

Generally, parents felt that although conversations remained tricky and sensitive, their ability to have honest and informed conversations with their children about online safety had improved since working with the ROSA Project.

Key stakeholders and referrers

Referrers also described positive experiences of the project, and it was clear that it was filling a gap in service provision for children and young people at the lower range of concerns and risks. Agencies chose to make referrals to the ROSA Project, rather than other services, as it was seen as a specialist service that was pitched at the right tariff and was specific to online safety and sexual behaviour.

Key stakeholders described positive outcomes for young people who had completed the programme, in the form of reduced risk, changed behaviours and reduced criminalisation. Referrers noted an increase in young people's knowledge, and also the development by young people of strategies to reduce risks online.

I think... [it was] excellent, it's had some really, really good outcomes, and because she'll meet with them for the six sessions or whatever it is ... I think we can't overestimate the impact that's had on the young person and you know their safety as they grow up.

Child care professional

A really positive impact. Greater awareness of the legal position in relation to consent and sexual images and a deeper understanding of consent, sexual exploitation and how it applied to the young person and his situation.

Social worker

However, at the time of the initial survey to all referrers, many were unsure whether there had been an impact on children's behaviour or risks had been reduced, either because they did not have the information, because it was too early to tell, or because young people had not been able or willing to apply what they had learnt.

At follow-up (at the end of Year 3), referrers had maintained a very positive view of the ROSA Project and still saw the service as filling an important gap that other services, or families, could not meet. Due to low numbers of participating referrers at follow-up, it was not possible to ascertain their views on longer-term outcomes.

The lower than expected referral rates to the ROSA Project was also explored in the evaluation (we had aimed to work with 100 young people across two years, and reached 68 across three years). There may have been challenges around creating visibility for a new project in a large urban local authority such as Glasgow City Council, but some practitioners interviewed in the evaluation noted that professionals sometimes struggled to identify when a referral to a specialist project was necessary.

I think there's an element of normalising this type of behaviour, so... for young people exchanging pictures online, sending nudes or making a meme of someone else that's sexualised, I think there's an element from professionals that is if we were to make a referral every time we encountered an incident like this, we would be sending you referrals all day every day so there was an element of normalisation, so they only referred when it became really problematic, or when someone's parent made a complaint, you know that kind of thing, where they had to be seen to be making a response.

Social worker

Case studies of young people

Case study 1:

James, aged 16, threatening to share images of his ex-partner⁴

James was referred to the ROSA Project through the diversion from prosecution scheme. James was 16 and had been in a two-year relationship with a girl at his school. They had been consensually sexually active and had exchanged a series of intimate images. Their relationship ended and James threatened to share these images if she would not meet with him. His ex-partner was distressed by this and confided in her mother, who called the police. James was charged with threatening and abusive behaviour and voyeurism (some of the images that he threatened to share had been taken without her consent while she was asleep).

James attended the ROSA Project weekly; the diversion from prosecution scheme was explained to both him and his mum. James admitted that he had threatened to share the images but denied taking pictures without consent.

The ROSA worker completed six individual sessions with James, looking at consent and relationships, consent to share images, sex and the law, sex and the internet, pornography and victim awareness. James worked extremely hard in sessions and could reflect on his behaviour and see how abusive it had been, and understood the impact of this behaviour on his ex-partner. Not only could he identify the impact for himself, he could also identify who else was affected by his actions, and how they were affected. James came away with a clear understanding of what would happen if he was involved in any other offending of this nature and appeared to express genuine remorse for his actions.

James stated that he had found the informal nature of the sessions helpful and “not like school”, and that he “actually liked coming” to the sessions as they were interesting and he felt he was learning valuable information. His mum stated that she thought the information that James learnt from the ROSA Project should be taught in every school to stop other young people making similar mistakes. His case was remitted back to the procurator fiscal, who decided that no further action should be taken. To date, James has stayed out of further trouble.

⁴ The names of the individuals in our case studies have been changed in order to ensure their anonymity.

Case Study 2:

Noah, aged 15, charged with possession of sexual images of under-18s

Noah was referred to the ROSA Project by his parents. They contacted us directly following the police executing an arrest warrant for his downloading sexual images of under-18s. The family had been informed about Stop It Now! Scotland by police at point of arrest.

Noah described himself as coming from a loving, supportive family. An only child, he felt that his parents had been overprotective of him when he was growing up. Noah excelled at school and was an active member of the community. He was popular amongst his peer group playing basketball, football and attends church with his family. He had a girlfriend who was also 15, but said that they are not “fully” sexually active.

Noah reported that he started using online pornography when he was 14. This was around the time of the first Covid-19 lockdown and he said that he felt lonely, bored, isolated and quite sad as he was not surrounded by his peers or being active in any way. He stated that he started to use legal pornography and view adult images online. He found this behaviour gratifying as he enjoyed the sexual imagery and also the sense of risk as his parents were also at home.

He told us that he found lots of advertisements for apps encouraging conversations with strangers online and he started to use several of these apps frequently. He stated that these initial chats online were with other males who he assumed to be his own age. He then realised these were adult males when the conversations became sexualised. They asked him questions like ‘do you have a girlfriend’ and ‘have you seen a naked woman before’ and they asked him if he would like to see sexual images. Noah reported that soon he was actively involved in the sharing of illegal images online with around 30-40 adult males. He liked the feeling of being the one in control and the one who had the images they wanted and started to collect images for the purposes of sharing. This sense of control and power was exciting for him, he also stated that he found some but not all of the images sexually exciting. However, the act of sharing was more powerful for him than the images themselves.

Noah completed a programme of work addressing concerns around his behaviour. He showed insight into his offending, was able to make clear steps in adhering to an internet safety plan and is now addressing many of the issues underpinning his offending in positive ways with support from family and school.

Discussion

Young people's needs and behaviours

The evaluation suggests that certain groups of young people may be more vulnerable to being victims of or being involved in TA-HSB, in particular LGBTQ+ youth, young people with ASD and young people with mental health problems.

Among males referred to the ROSA Project 42% identified as LGBTQ+, along with 12% of females. This compares to official figures for 16–24-year-olds of around 7% (14). Adolescence is a key time for sexual development, and it may be that, in a world that still tends towards the heteronormative, LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to be exploring their developing identities online, with the additional opportunities and risks that this brings. Young LGBTQ+ people must be specifically catered for in preventative approaches, resources and interventions.

Young people presented with complex needs in relation to mental health issues or ASD. Around one in five young people (18%) referred had ASD, compared to estimates of fewer than 2% of schoolchildren in England (15). There is evidence of a potential interaction between gender, ASD and social isolation that might increase vulnerability and risk factors online, which would be important to explore in research with larger samples.

Moreover, some young men had a history of being groomed online, which seemed to drive their own online offending. **A trauma-informed approach is, therefore, needed when working with young people who display TA-HSB, to understand the context within which such behaviours emerged and developed over time.**

Even though this was an early intervention project, the children and young people referred to the ROSA Project presented with needs and behaviours that were often very complex. **The support this necessitates, and the impact it has on staff capacity (that is, as a result of time spent engaging and building relationships, extension of the programme where necessary because of responsivity needs, and maintaining ongoing support post-programme) should be factored into any future service rollout.**

How the ROSA Project was experienced

The ROSA Project has shown that significant shame and stigma are attached to problematic online sexual behaviours, which impedes the ability of young people and families to seek advice or help. Although most of the young people felt apprehensive at first about their contact with the ROSA Project, their sense of relief that they were able to access non-judgmental and expert advice and support was palpable. This was in no small part due to the knowledge, skills and personal qualities of the ROSA Project worker, who quickly made the young people feel at ease and was credible, accessible and flexible. However, many young people and their families only became aware of the ROSA Project when at crisis point (for example, after a harmful incident or arrest).

The service was viewed as filling an important gap in service provision, both because it tackled behaviour at an early stage and because it offered specific support around TA-HSB. While the shift to online provision during the Covid-19 pandemic was acceptable to all, and preferable for some, engagement did wane over the course of the lengthy pandemic. However, the ROSA Project has shown that it is feasible to deliver these types of sensitive interventions online, and in future a hybrid approach, tailored to individual needs and preferences, may prove beneficial.

ROSA Project evaluation

The evaluation intended to measure short-term outcomes from the project. Participants said it had had a positive impact on them in terms of personal benefits (such as increased confidence) and increased knowledge and learning (for example, their understanding of internet safety, consent, digital footprint, the law). Adults around the children (parents, carers and professionals) agreed that the programme could demonstrate a positive impact on their children, and also recognised that they themselves were potentially better equipped to support the young people going forward. However, the adults around the children expressed some apprehension about how well the young people would be able to apply the learning in practice, given the widespread and pervasive presence of the internet in young people's lives. While it has not been possible to ascertain what outcomes have been achieved beyond the project's immediate impact, it is positive to note that only two young people had been re-referred to the ROSA Project, and a follow-up with referrers suggested an ongoing positive impact. Longer-term outcomes were not evaluated, and appropriate measures and assessment of both short-term and longer-term impacts would be valuable in any future research.

Conclusion

The ROSA project does not provide a snapshot of adolescent TA-HSB in our schools and communities, rather it provides us with a detailed picture of the kind of young people referred to a service for young people who have got into trouble because of online sexual behaviour. The picture is a complex one, with real harm being caused by young people with complex needs and vulnerabilities, some of whom have a history of experiencing harm, adversity and maltreatment themselves. On the back of the ROSA evaluation our plans at Stop It Now! Scotland are to increase young people's access to the Inform Young People programme through training professionals to deliver this intervention model. We also plan to replicate and evaluate some of the school-based prevention work described in the appendix of this report.

Technology is a normal part of life and will form a central focus when children and young people progress through all aspects of their development, including sexual development. However, the complexities and challenges of adolescence can be intensified online, where there are easy and immediate opportunities for disinhibited risk-taking behaviour and where behaviours that may be legal offline are illegal online. Children and young people are therefore at greater risk of being victimised by online harm but also at risk of being involved in the perpetration of online harm. This evaluation has also shown that the adults around a child often feel ill-equipped to fully support them to stay safe online, especially in relation to sexual development and sexual behaviours, and wider access to training and support for both professionals and parents on this subject is urgently needed.

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Appendix

The ROSA Project and Shawlands Academy

In addition to our direct work with young people in Glasgow who had displayed TA-HSB, the ROSA Project was supplemented with wider proactive and capacity-building work with a secondary school in Glasgow. This planned approach was to work with pupils, staff and parents at Shawlands Academy to develop and share key knowledge, skills and messages about online safety and HSB and to explore the prevention of TA-HSB.

Shawlands Academy is a state secondary school in the Southside of Glasgow. It is one of Scotland's most multicultural schools and has around 1,250 students and over 100 teachers. Our work in the school evolved over time. Initially the ROSA Project worker participated in assemblies to raise awareness and promote the presence and purpose of ROSA in the school.

Over the course of the project, we established a young person steering group, with 13 young people aged 16 and 17, who met on a regular basis. The steering group gave pupils a voice and a role in identifying issues and concerns related to TA-HSB in the context of the school.

In later stages of the project, we shared with the steering group what we learnt from our work with young people who were referred to the community aspect of the ROSA Project. We then invited students to consider these insights, and help us shape the focus of the ROSA Project in their school by identifying and co-constructing initiatives that might promote the prevention of TA-HSB. These initiatives were then evaluated in the context of the school. This reflected the collaborative approach to the project working alongside young people.

Co-producing services to tackle technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour

We invited the student steering group to identify interventions at the school that might promote the prevention of TA-HSB. These included parent workshops, redesigning and delivering Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) curriculum materials for all year groups, and the piloting of an anonymous online portal at the school to enable young people who are worried about their own behaviour or someone else's to access support and advice. All of these initiatives were then independently evaluated – results can be found in the full ROSA evaluation at lucyfaithfull.org.uk/faithfull-papers-research.htm. Some initiatives were compromised by school closures because of Covid-19 lockdowns from 2020 onwards.

Parent workshops

A parents' group was run in December 2019 and the feedback from the parents who attended was very positive. The workshop was viewed as being very helpful in increasing awareness about the internet, the law, how to keep children safe online, opening up difficult conversations and raising awareness about sources of help and support. Feedback did indicate however that more flexible or accessible workshops would be helpful, with suggestions including a recorded webinar (recommendation made before Covid-19 restrictions were imposed) or workshops available at weekends.

Relationship, Sexual Health and Parenthood curriculum materials

RSHP materials used by the school were reviewed by the steering group and adapted materials with a greater emphasis on relational and sexual development online were rolled out to all year groups by the ROSA Project worker. Work with the steering group to develop peer education lessons from senior pupils to younger pupils in the school (working alongside the school Mentors for Violence Prevention bystander intervention programme on gender-based violence) had also got underway before lockdown and school closures.

Dear ROSA: anonymous portal for help-seeking young people

In December 2020 the Dear ROSA service was established as an anonymous and confidential service available through the school website to provide advice, support and information to any of the school's children and young people who had concerns about their own or someone else's online sexual behaviour. The aim was to ensure that children and young people had quick access to anonymous advice, so that situations did not escalate to abuse or exploitation and that young people could make decisions that actively promoted safety and prevented harm. This aspect of prevention work in the school was compromised by the closure of schools in January 2021, although a small cohort of young people used the portal in relation to concerns about their own behaviour online or offline.

Evaluation of the ROSA Project at Shawlands

The steering group and key stakeholders viewed the work in the secondary school as a great success, despite the huge challenges faced in implementing it and then overcoming Covid-19 disruption. It was this aspect of the ROSA Project that the steering group believed had the potential to be truly preventative and to have the greatest impact on the largest number of young people; the group saw that it was at school that many of these behaviours happened, between pupils both on- and off-site. School was also considered by the steering group to have an important role in educating and supporting young people about their online behaviours and in creating the right environment for positive outcomes and help-seeking. However, while young people at school described positive relationships with school staff, they also advised us that they would like teachers to be more approachable, educated and equipped for open and honest conversations about growing up in an online world.

Interviews with education staff showed that they perceived this work as providing hugely valuable support to teachers, as well as additional skills, knowledge and capacity. The school also valued having a direct link to a familiar service where they could refer pupils they were concerned about.

I think more and more we were seeing situations young people were in that we were concerned about with online safety, and you know speaking with young people who disclosed something to us, or very often a young person disclosed a concern about another young person to us, because yes although teachers are often very trusted and important to young people, we're still teachers and I think having someone like [ROSA worker] here was that interim person who was a bit more approachable than a teacher.

Education staff

The work that she did, it was so really, really well received and I know that some staff even went along to [ROSA worker] to say 'can you explain to me about this app, I'm concerned about this', so people did approach her about a wide range of things.

Education staff

Having [ROSA worker] here, and knowing who we can go to with referrals, and talking, even just having her here to talk through concerns around young people and her giving this amazing advice, taking on referrals from us.

Education staff

Capacity-building work in schools was welcomed and very well received by the staff interviewed, but the practical logistics of delivering this in large and busy schools, and the need for more than one school champion, should be clarified before any further school rollout. A key lesson is the importance of getting the senior management team's buy-in to any whole-school approach to prevention.

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The Lucy Faithfull Foundation
2 Birch House, Harris Business Park, Hanbury Road
Stoke Prior, Bromsgrove, B60 4DJ

Telephone: 01527 591922

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