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Rotherham Residents Search For Answers in U.K. Sex Abuse Scandal Revelations of Widespread Exploitation Spur Questions Over Why Authorities Didn't Act Sooner

By ALEXIS FLYNN and NICHOLAS WINNING

ROTHERHAM, U.K.—Residents of this once-prosperous English town are united in their outrage at revelations this week that predatory gangs abused vulnerable girls here with near-impunity for 16 years. But sorting out why the pattern of abuse remained hidden so long is a different matter.

An independent report issued this week by a local council alleged that nearly 1,400 children and teens in the Rotherham area were victims of sexual exploitation between 1997 and 2013, a revelation that has sent shock waves through this town of about 250,000.

The report, citing evidence collected by caseworkers, alleges that children and teens in the area, most of them girls, were raped, beaten, abducted or trafficked to other towns in the north of England. The perpetrators, it said, were mostly men of “Asian” or Pakistani origin. Until the 2010 convictions of five local men for a range of sexual offenses, there had been few prosecutions in Rotherham.

The men’s prosecution and revelations of a more widespread pattern of exploitation have made Rotherham a flashpoint in a string of high-profile abuse allegations across Britain in recent years, some involving celebrities. Others have uncovered similar sexual-exploitation rings in other English towns and cities. The wave of claims prompted British Prime Minister David Cameron to announce a national inquiry last month into how public and private institutions across the country have dealt with abuse claims.

Assigning blame for the litany of institutional failures that allowed the abuse to continue unchecked has pulled Rotherham’s citizens in opposing directions, exposing deep fault lines of class and race.

Some residents point the finger at local officials they say were either incompetent or too cozy with politically influential members of the local Pakistani community, which makes up about 3% of the Rotherham population. Others—mainly Anglo working-class residents—have complained that the main problem was an unwillingness to criticize local Pakistanis for fear of appearing racist. Members of the local Muslim community also condemned the alleged crimes—but at the same time shifted blame to the allegedly lax social mores of the northeast England region.

“It’s a chuffing cover-up,” said Roy Haderell, a retired builder, scanning headlines that called for prominent local politicians to resign for their alleged role in the scandal.

Pressure mounted from all directions on local leaders. Mr. Cameron was among the chorus of voices clamoring for the resignation of South Yorkshire’s elected police commissioner, Shaun Wright, who headed children’s services in Rotherham Council from 2005 to 2010. Mr. Wright—whose role involves ensuring that the South Yorkshire police force meets the needs of the local community—said late Wednesday that he was resigning from the Labour Party but intends to remain in his role as commissioner.

On Wednesday, Mr. Wright apologized to Rotherham victims of abuse on his watch and said he had taken responsibility for his part in the collective failures of the Rotherham Council and resigned from his job there in 2010. He said he had used those lessons in his new post as crime commissioner to help improve how local police deal with such crimes.

“I was elected to deliver the people’s policing and crime priorities in South Yorkshire and I intend to see that duty through,” he said.

The South Yorkshire police, meanwhile, is conducting its own investigations, having this week admitted that “many mistakes were made” without detailing what they were. In a statement it said that if there is evidence that police officers failed to properly investigate child abuse allegations or covered up evidence relating to child sexual exploitation, it would be reported to the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

Rotherham is a small town in south Yorkshire whose fortunes have slumped with the death of its steel mills and coal industry. Today its main street is dotted with betting parlors, pawn shops and discount stores. The report’s findings have only served to reinforce local residents’ fears that local politicians haven’t put the community’s interests first.

Central to those concerns are worries about race. The Rotherham report into how senior municipal officials ignored years of warnings about the scale of sexual abuse in the area have led some in the town to speculate about the extent to which race relations—and nervousness about appearing politically insensitive in modern Britain—stopped authorities from asking hard questions. The report itself accused local authorities of “ignoring a politically inconvenient truth” by not pursuing evidence that many of the exploitation claims involved men of Pakistani origin.

“If worries about the race card held the authorities back, then that’s outrageous,” said Maxine Baker, a Rotherham resident for nearly 20 years.

Muhbeen Hussain, founder of Rotherham Muslim Youth Group, said to the Daily Mirror on Wednesday that Muslims were upset that authorities had failed to stop the abuse.

“Race, religion or political correctness should never provide a cloak of invisibility to such grotesque crimes,” he said

Former Labour Party lawmaker Denis MacShane, who represented Rotherham for almost two decades before resigning over expenses fraud in 2012, said there was a culture of not wanting to “rock the multicultural community boat” and admitted he should have burrowed into the issue more.

“Perhaps, yes as a true Guardian reader and a liberal-leftie I suppose I didn’t want to raise that too hard,” he told BBC radio on Wednesday, adding that nobody came to him with allegations of child abuse during his tenure. Mr. MacShane declined to comment further when contacted.

Among Rotherham’s Muslim residents similar searching questions were being asked.

As shoppers inspected saris and spices at Rotherham’s regular Thursday market, clothing store owner Abdul Wahid debated with Masarat Din, a charity worker, about the report’s findings.

“They are not Muslims,” said Ms. Din, referring to the men accused of plying young Rotherham girls with alcohol and drugs and then forcing them into exploitative sexual encounters. “These individuals are a minority. They don’t represent our British Muslim community,” she said.

Mr. Wahid said that while their behavior was inexcusable, some of the blame should be lodged with the families of the victims and what he described as a permissive English culture that encouraged such behavior. "They shouldn't be asking for cigarettes and things like that," Mr. Wahid said.

Lord Nazir Ahmed, a life peer appointed by former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, said that all right-thinking Muslims would be appalled by the behaviour of "a few senseless young people." The men involved, he added, "don't realize the damage they have done to their community through their actions."

Outside the town hall, activists from the anti-Muslim English Defence League gathered in protest, calling for Mr. Wright's resignation in hand-drawn signs.

As EDL members, some dressed in camouflage, milled around, drivers occasionally sped past and hooted their horns in sympathy.

"This isn't limited to Rotherham," said EDL activist Ian Crossland. "It's going on across the north of England."

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Years of Rape and 'Utter Contempt' in Britain

Life in an English Town Where Abuse of Young Girls Flourished

By KATRIN BENNHOLD

ROTHERHAM, England — It started on the bumper cars in the children's arcade of the local shopping mall. Lucy was 12, and a group of teenage boys, handsome and flirtatious, treated her and her friends to free rides and ice cream after school.

Over time, older men were introduced to the girls, while the boys faded away. Soon they were getting rides in real cars, and were offered vodka and marijuana. One man in particular, a Pakistani twice her age and the leader of the group, flattered her and bought her drinks and even a mobile phone. Lucy liked him.

The rapes started gradually, once a week, then every day: by the war memorial in Clifton Park, in an alley near the bus station, in countless taxis and, once, in an apartment where she was locked naked in a room and had to service half a dozen men lined up outside.

She obliged. How could she not? They knew where she lived. "If you don't come back, we will rape your mother and make you watch," they would say.

At night, she would come home and hide her soiled clothes at the back of her closet. When she finally found the courage to tell her mother, just shy of her 14th birthday, two police officers came to collect the clothes as evidence, half a dozen bags of them.

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. Continue reading the main story

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.

We know rape is ever-present, but this story calls out for something much more aggressive, like training for both boys and girls starting at . . .

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."

Notes

¹<http://online.wsj.com/articles/rotherham-residents-search-for-answers-in-u-k-sex-abuse-scandal-1409272644>

²www.nytimes.com/2014/09/02/world/europe/reckoning-starts-in-britain-on-abuse-of-girls.html