

**Summary of the NSPCC report ‘Would they actually have believed me? A focus group exploration of the underreporting of crimes by Jimmy Savile’, published 24<sup>th</sup> February 2014<sup>1</sup>**

**Background**

In March 2013 Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) published ‘Mistakes Were Made’, their review into the allegations and intelligence material concerning Jimmy Savile gathered between 1964 and 2012 (a summary of which is included in this series). The executive summary of that report indicated ‘serious concerns about the number of victims who felt unable to come forward at the time the assaults were committed to report Savile to the police.’ Consequently the first recommendation of the review sought to ensure that ‘guidelines are issued to all Police forces about how to deal with investigations of child abuse following the death of the alleged perpetrator.’ In light of the low reporting rate the second recommendation was aimed at identifying ways to encourage a culture in which victims feel better able to report sexual crimes.

Shortly before the HMIC review was published, and following the broadcast of an ITV documentary in October 2012, in which a number of people alleged abuse by Jimmy Savile, the NSPCC Helpline became one of the primary referral mechanisms for those who wished to report their abuse as part of police investigation Operation Yewtree<sup>2</sup>. In view of its contact with victims, in April 2013 HMIC requested that the NSPCC carry out a series of focus groups with those who had come forward. The aim was to identify common themes that prevented them from making reports to police at the time of the abuse, and to explore how the police might improve management of the reporting process, subsequent interviews and contacts.

The report of that work, ‘*Would they actually have believed me?*’, details the findings of the focus groups and identifies broad themes that recurred throughout, illustrating these with references to the specific experiences of those victims who participated. It also highlights victims’ recommendations about areas of potential change or development within police forces to improve the reporting process for those seeking to report a sexual crime.

**Methodology**

HMIC provided the NSPCC with the contact details of just under 160 victims who, at the point they made a report to Operation Yewtree, had agreed to participate later in a focus group. When followed up by NSPCC 57 of these indicated that they would still be willing to attend a focus group, with 50 agreeing to attend on specified dates. Five groups were convened, but due to further withdrawals on the day of each group a total of 26 people out of the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the report itself is dated September 2013, publication date was 24/2/14

<sup>2</sup> A joint Metropolitan Police and NSPCC report into sexual allegations made against Jimmy Savile, *Giving Victims a Voice*, was published in January 2013 and summarised in this series.

invited 50 participated in the five groups. Four were adults when their alleged offences occurred.

## **Key Findings**

### ***Delayed disclosure***

One issue which has been prominent in popular debate about the Savile allegations is why it took so long for allegations to be made and why all at the same time. The report is illuminating about this. It emerges from the focus group participants that a range of factors came together to make reporting their abuse at the time feel impossible. These included their perceptions about the likely police response, with participants feeling that the police would not have been understanding at the time, and would not have managed allegations effectively. Other factors included their own family circumstances, their uncertainty about what had happened to them (e.g. was it abuse and who was to 'blame'), and societal values about sexual abuse at the time. Participants felt that there was, and to some degree still is, a stigma attached to being a victim of abuse, and that society will at times 'blame victims', making the prospect of disclosing abuse particularly daunting. This was exacerbated by Savile's status as a high profile celebrity, a figure respected by the public.

### ***Timing of disclosure***

An important finding was that although none of this sample would have been likely to come forward had it not been for the media focus on the allegations against Savile, it was not the media that had encouraged their disclosures but the realisation that they were not 'the only one'. Had other allegations been public at the time of their abuse these participants indicated they would have been significantly more likely to report theirs. They reported that this was closely connected to the prospect of being believed. Whilst they were concerned they would not individually have been believed, they felt they would be more likely to be believed as part of a group, and that this could add weight and corroboration to each other's stories.

The significance of knowing that they were not an isolated case is an issue also identified in the Savell report into offending at Duncroft School and the Levitt Report (both summarised in NOTA News Issue 70), which supports the concept of 'building cases' partly by advising potential witnesses that they are not the only complainant.

## **Conclusion**

The NSPCC report makes recommendations about actions which could increase the likelihood of contemporaneous disclosure. However, it seems appropriate to conclude this summary by allowing one simple point to be made by the report itself, speaking for the many people whose lives were so brutally affected by Savile.

*It is also important to note that many of the factors that were important to participants were not things that required structural reform or financial*

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*investment. These included listening to the impact of abuse, as well as to the facts of an allegation; offering victims a choice in where and when they were spoken to; reassuring a victim that, they themselves are not being investigated; and providing a cup of tea/offering a drink to a victim who is finding the process of making a statement to be incredibly daunting.*

*These considerations may seem insignificant or unimportant to those who are involved in criminal investigations each day as part of their working lives, but their value to someone who is disclosing abuse for what may be the first time should not be underestimated. (Para 16.7)*

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