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Rotherham sex abuse scandal: 1,400 children exploited by Asian gangs while authorities turned a blind eye

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More than 1,400 children were sexually abused over a 16 year period by gangs of paedophiles after police and council bosses turned a blind eye for fear of being labelled racist, a damning report has concluded.

South Yorkshire Police and Crime Commissioner Shaun Wright

Senior officials were responsible for “blatant” failures that saw victims, some as young as 11, being treated with contempt and categorised as being “out of control” or simply ignored when they asked for help.

In some cases, parents who tried to rescue their children from abusers were themselves arrested. Police officers even dismissed the rape of children by saying that sex had been consensual.

Downing Street on Tuesday night described the failure to halt the abuse in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, as “appalling”.

Following the publication of the report, the leader of Rotherham council, Roger Stone, resigned, but no other council employees will face disciplinary proceedings after it was claimed that there was not enough evidence to take action.

There were calls for Shaun Wright, the Police and Crime Commissioner for South Yorkshire (pictured above, left), to step down after it emerged that he was the councillor with responsibility for children’s services in Rotherham for part of the period covered by the report.

Details of the appalling depravity in the town and the systemic failures that allowed it to continue were laid out in a report published by Professor Alexis Jay, the former chief inspector of social work in Scotland. Victims were gang raped, while others were groomed and trafficked across northern England by groups of mainly Asian men.

When children attempted to expose the abuse, they were threatened with guns, warned that their loved ones would be raped and, in one case, doused in petrol and told they would be burnt alive.

Prof Jay wrote: “No one knows the true scale of child sexual exploitation in Rotherham over the years. Our conservative estimate is that approximately 1,400 children were sexually exploited over the full inquiry period, from 1997 to 2013.

“It is hard to describe the appalling nature of the abuse that child victims suffered. They were raped by multiple perpetrators, trafficked to other towns and cities in the north of England, abducted, beaten, and intimidated.”

She added: “There were examples of children who had been doused in petrol and threatened with being set alight, threatened with guns, made to witness brutally violent rapes and threatened they would be next if they told anyone.”

The report pinned the blame squarely on failings within the leadership of South Yorkshire Police and Rotherham council.

Professor Alexis Jay (PA)

Prof Jay said: "Within social care, the scale and seriousness of the problem was underplayed by senior managers. At an operational level, the police gave no priority to child sex exploitation, regarding many child victims with contempt and failing to act on their abuse as a crime."

It emerged that there had been three previous reports into the problem which had been suppressed or ignored by officials, either because they did not like or did not believe the findings.

Tuesday's report concluded that by far the majority of perpetrators were Asian men, and said council officials had been unwilling to address the issue for fear of being labelled racist.

The report stated: "Some councillors seemed to think it was a one-off problem, which they hoped would go away. Several staff described their nervousness about identifying the ethnic origins of perpetrators for fear of being thought racist; others remembered clear direction from their managers not to do so."

For years, the police failed to get a grip of the problem, dismissing many of the victims as "out of control" or as "undesirables" who were not worthy of police protection.

The report was commissioned by Rotherham council following the conviction in 2010 of five men who were given lengthy jail terms after being found guilty of grooming teenage girls for sex.

Police said they are currently dealing with 32 live investigations into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham and in the past 12 months 15 people have been prosecuted or charged.

Other similar high-profile cases followed in towns and cities including Rochdale, Derby and Oxford.

A No 10 spokesman said: "The failings of local agencies exposed by this inquiry are appalling."

"We are determined that the lessons of past failures must be learned and that those who have exploited these children are brought to justice."

John Cameron, of the NSPCC, said: "This report is truly damning and highlights consistent failures to protect children from sexual abuse at the hands of predatory groups of men.

"It appears there was at a senior level a collective blindness over many years to the suffering of children who endured almost incomprehensible levels of violence and intimidation. Many of these children were already extremely vulnerable and the manner in which they were let down by agencies entrusted to protect them is appalling. It is quite astonishing that even when front-line staff raised concerns these were not acted upon so allowing devastating child sexual exploitation to go unchallenged."

Responding to the criticism levelled at the police, Chief Superintendent Jason Harwin, the district commander for Rotherham, issued an unreserved apology to all the victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE).

"We have completely overhauled the way in which we deal with child sexual exploitation and that's been recognised in the report and by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary earlier this year," he said.

He added: "I accept that our recent successes in tackling CSE will not heal the pain of those victims who have been let down but we continue to deal with historic investigations with great success and will continue to thoroughly investigate any new evidence available to us.

"Our staff will relentlessly go wherever the evidence takes them and do everything they can with partners to identify offenders and bring them to justice."

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