

# British media incites lynch-mob atmosphere over child sex abuse

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For weeks the emotive issue of child sex abuse has dominated public discourse in Britain. This followed a sensationalist campaign initiated by the Sunday tabloid newspaper *News of the World* to “name and shame” convicted sex offenders.

The *News of the World*, published by Rupert Murdoch's News International, has been an outspoken defender of draconian law-and-order measures introduced by successive governments, with one criticism—that they do not go far enough. Its latest campaign was aimed at forcing the Labour government to introduce stricter sentencing against sex offenders.

Under the 1997 Sexual Offenders Act, those convicted of imprisonable sex offences must register their names and addresses with the police. Their names can remain on the register indefinitely, depending on the seriousness of the offence. Despite warnings from police and child welfare agencies that its actions could endanger children by driving offenders into hiding, the *News of the World* began publishing the names, photographs and approximate whereabouts of 200 of the 12,000 individuals recorded on the Sexual Offenders Register.

It promised to continue publishing the list, and justified this on the grounds of “public concern” following the abduction and murder of 8-year-old Sarah Payne in July. Under the headline “If you are a parent you must read this”, the *News of the World* claimed that there were thousands of paedophiles preying on the young. Other newspapers joined in, orchestrating a climate of frenzied retribution. The *Daily Mirror* July 18 edition front-page led with the demand that whoever had murdered Sarah should “spend his life dodging razor blades in his food, needing an armed guard when he takes a shower and fearing his throat being slashed every night. Hanging these bastards really is too good for them”.

The lynch-mob atmosphere encouraged by the tabloids sparked a series of brutal attacks across the country. On one housing estate in Portsmouth, rioting ensued for seven nights outside the homes of suspected child sex offenders, forcing four innocent families into hiding. Those demonstrating, including young children, carried placards saying “Don't house them, kill them” and other incendiary slogans.

Elsewhere in the country, several individuals were wrongly identified as offenders and subjected to arson attacks on their

homes. Two men killed themselves as a direct result of the campaign—a 57 year-old grandfather with convictions for child abuse and a 49-year old family businessmen accused of sexual offences.

The government refused to condemn the disclosures and instead organized a series of compromise meetings with the *News of the World*, children's agencies and Sarah's relatives. Only when the campaign led to serious disturbances involving hundreds of people did some Labour MPs call for an end to “mob rule” and for legal action against the *News of the World*.

The *News of the World* finally called a halt to its campaign earlier this week, but made clear that it was only temporary and would be restarted unless the government adopted the measures it demanded. Any politicians who obstructed this would be “named and shamed” the tabloid threatened.

With the support of many children's agencies and the Payne family, *News of the World* is demanding the introduction of a “Sarah's Law”, modelled on Megan's Law in the United States. This was implemented by the Clinton administration in 1994 following the murder of 7-year-old Megan Kanka in New Jersey by a convicted sex offender. Under Megan's Law, states are able to circulate details of convicted sex offenders to schools and youth organizations, and the police can conduct door-to-door notifications in the paedophile's neighbourhood. The law takes different forms in different states. Offenders in Louisiana can be made to wear special clothes or carry sandwich boards announcing their crimes. Sex offenders in Oregon can be forced to display a sign in their windows.

The measures being argued for by the *News of the World* pose a serious threat to democratic rights that goes far beyond the relatively small number of individuals ostensibly being targeted. Under existing legislation, those employed in children's services in Britain are already subject to police checks and child welfare agencies have access to the Sexual Offenders Register. What is contentious in the “Sarah's Law” proposals are the public availability of the register and calls that “indeterminate sentences be imposed in appropriate cases”.

The Blair government has so far rejected calls for making the register publicly available, based on police advice, but has welcomed the campaign's proposals, saying that they “make an important contribution to the debate and demand very serious

consideration". Blair is particularly interested in establishing the principle of indeterminate sentencing. The government had previously stated its intention to introduce such sentences for all those deemed to be suffering "severe psychological disorders" regardless of whether they were convicted of a crime, but this met with strenuous opposition because of the dangerous legal precedent it would establish.

The government is not adverse itself to utilising public concern over paedophile activity to undermine personal liberties more generally. It has used the issue to justify censorship of the Internet and to argue for state surveillance of e-mails.

There is no question that child sex abuse is a matter of great concern, but this does not legitimise the hysteria over predatory paedophiles being whipped up by the media and sections of the political establishment. All this has accomplished is to induce panic and fear amongst many parents.

Photographs and stories about Sarah and her anguished family appeared every day in the media. Barely a household in Britain did not know the missing child's name, with Sarah's distraught parents appearing almost daily at press conferences and news bulletins pleading for their daughter's safe return. Every mother, father and grandparent was encouraged to identify with the Payne family's distress and to imagine how they would feel if it had been their own child. When news broke that the young girl's body had been discovered, thousands of people, including entire families, made their way to the field next to the A29 road to lay wreaths, turning the area into a shrine.

Several psychologists have made clear their concern at this phenomenon. The outburst of collective grief went beyond the very human instinct to sympathise with another's loss. It expressed the way in which thousands feel they too are under threat, up against terrible odds in a harsh, cold world. It was in this climate that the *News of the World* was able to manipulate the inarticulate fears of parents for their children to suit its own political agenda. At no time was the British public encouraged to make an informed consideration of the issues involved.

Paedophilia is a complex phenomenon, bound up with broader problems of both a social and psychological character. The idea that it can be eradicated through a series of judicial measures is false. Indeed the insistence on treating the sexual abuse of children simply as a criminal offence has only helped to exacerbate the problem. In the US, there is much evidence to show that Megan's Law has had no appreciable effect in cutting down child sex abuse.

It has long been acknowledged that the majority of child abusers—70 percent—were themselves abused as children. Many of those who go on to have sexual feelings towards children consequently see this as normal, or are so psychologically damaged that they do not possess the normal restraints to such anti-social behaviour. But the near exclusive emphasis on prison and retribution means that two-thirds of those discharged

have not even been through a sex-offender treatment programme. Home Office figures show that such programmes reduce re-offending by 25 percent. With additional resources and supervision after release a success rate of preventing re-offending of more than 90 percent can be achieved. Instead of developing such initiatives and allocating the necessary resources for psychological investigation and treatment programmes, whenever this is possible, authorities simply imprison paedophiles and then release them onto the streets, only to offend again.

An emphasis on law-and-order measures to combat what is undeniably a psychological disorder points more generally to the inability of the existing order to respond to any social problem in a progressive fashion. The calls for harsher sentences for paedophiles, and even castration or death, are of a piece with the implementation of "three strikes and you're out" sentencing for offences as varied as burglary and possession of drugs. In today's world, the powers that be no longer seriously believe in either prevention or cure, only punishment.

The sensationalist media coverage also paints a highly distorted picture. The figures for the number of children abducted and killed in Britain by a stranger have remained static for years—between five and ten annually. Just 50 of the 110,000 men convicted of sex offences involving children fall into the category of predatory paedophiles.

Children are considerably more likely to be killed by their parents than a complete stranger. In the last month alone there have been at least three cases in which a father, believing his own life to be at an end, has killed his entire family. One, a ruined businessman, killed his wife and four children before committing suicide. Children are also far more likely to be at risk of sexual abuse by a relative than someone unknown to them. The majority of those on the Sexual Offenders register for child abuse are family members.

Such facts are ignored because they jar with the campaign by press and politicians alike to uphold "family values". The statistics prove that for many young people the family is not the paradise it is made out to be. But for the media and politicians to acknowledge this would call into question social policies that make millions wholly dependent on the family unit, regardless of its shortcomings and resulting traumas. In doing so, official policy actually reinforces the conditions that can give rise to the abuse of the young and vulnerable.



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