

Rotherham child sexual abuse scandal: Allegations point to police involvement

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Over a decade after a report into the sexual abuse of at least 1,400 children by men in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013, evidence has emerged showing that local police not only knew of, but were allegedly involved in the crimes.

Five women exploited by grooming gangs have so far given statements to solicitors saying they were also sexually abused by police officers. Witness statements from 25 other victims have described police working alongside the gangs or turning a blind eye to child sexual exploitation.

Former chief inspector of social work Professor Alexis Jay's harrowing 2014 report was the fourth into child sexual exploitation in the South Yorkshire town.

Jay's report detailed vulnerable children being plied with "gifts" like drugs and alcohol, beaten, threatened and passed around for sex between adult males. Jay said the 2002 research "contained severe criticisms" of the police, council and other agencies for ignoring the problem, and warned that her estimation of victim numbers was likely "conservative."

Right-wing forces seized on media headlines around Jay's report that concentrated primarily on the ethnicity of the perpetrators, most of whom were identified as being of British-Pakistani origin. Five men were jailed in Rotherham for child sex offences against girls aged 12-16, with further cases in other similarly impoverished northern towns.

As the WSWS noted at the time:

Right-wing newspapers and politicians are utilising the report for their own ends. The scandal, they claim, has little to do with poverty and everything to do with a so-called political correctness that abandoned "white school girls" to "Muslim gangs." Such is the febrile atmosphere

surrounding the Rotherham report that fascist groups such as the English Defence League and Britain First are virtually camped out in the town, which has also become a target for the anti-immigrant United Kingdom Independence Party.

This filthy campaign helped to distract from a subsequent police investigation into historic child abuse (Operation Stovewood) and the Independent Office of Police Conduct (IOPC)'s Operation Linden—investigating complaints about South Yorkshire Police's (SYP) handling of reports of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Switalskis Solicitors continued documenting repeated allegations by the victims of the collusion and involvement of SYP officers in their exploitation. Amy Clowrey, Director of Switalskis's child abuse compensation team, said they had hoped these would be unearthed through Operations Stovewood and Linden, but "That never happened."

Operation Linden concluded in 2022 after eight years. The IOPC upheld 43 complaints against individual officers in 91 investigations. Eight officers faced misconduct and six gross misconduct charges. No officer lost their job or faced criminal charges.

Clowrey said the matter only finally went back to SYP's Major Crime Unit in October 2024, after sitting with the Professional Standards Department (dealing with officers' conduct, not criminality) for more than a year.

Since December 2024, three former SYP officers have been arrested on suspicion of historic sexual offences between 1995 and 2004. Not one has been charged.

The IOPC concluded in 2022 "that SYP fundamentally failed in its duty to protect vulnerable children and young people during that time." Former IOPC investigator Garry Harper, who worked on Linden for two years, told press

bluntly that Linden was “an abject failure from beginning to end,” and SYP “managed to evade almost any accountability.”

Switalskis passed its dossier of 30 survivor testimonies detailing abuse to SYP. The firm is attempting to bring a separate civil claim against SYP to secure compensation, but the investigation is still being conducted by SYP itself.

The dossier, reported by the BBC, is harrowing. Victims speak of being raped from the age of 12 by a serving SYP officer in a marked police car. One woman, targeted by a grooming gang when she was 11, was sexually abused by hundreds of men over five years. She was also abused by two police officers, she says, one of whom repeatedly tracked her down and demanded sex.

“He knew where we used to hang out, he would request either oral sex or rape us in the back of the police car,” she told the BBC. If she tried to refuse, she said, he threatened to contact the gang himself. Being raped once, she said, was “just easier” than gang rape by “15... 20 guys one after another.”

When “Willow” (survivors are anonymised) was forced into an illegal abortion by the gang, her youth worker contacted social services and police. She was “destroyed,” she said, when one of the abusing officers turned up to interview her. He later ripped up her statement in front of her, and the matter went no further.

Survivors allege officers had sex with girls in exchange for drugs and money, and supplied illegal Class A drugs directly to the gangs. Three women reported being beaten up as children by officers, one in a police cell.

Another officer accused of abuse of children was allowed by SYP to retire. Harper called this “At best... a reputational covering exercise.... At worst, it was out and out corruption.”

SYP told the BBC that no former officer currently under inquiry “had an allegation of rape against them at the time of their retirement.”

The decision to hand investigative authority back to SYP is a calculated slap in the face, and 13 witnesses have withdrawn from the current investigation.

Switalskis said those survivors “have no faith that SYP will do a thorough job of investigating alleged abuse by their own officers.” It added that dealing with SYP continues to be “retraumatising,” and many survivors refuse to report offences “because they do not think they will be believed and because they were treated so badly in the past.” This is more than justified.

SYP have repeatedly rejected Switalskis’ requests that

they hand the investigation to another force “due to the risk of potential conflict(s) of interest and survivor engagement.” The IOPC said they are “satisfied that there is no conflict of interest”.

Professor Jay told the BBC she was “shocked” SYP would be conducting the investigation into its own former officers, and called for the investigation to be handed to another police force or an independent body. She said there are “many, many legitimate causes for victims and survivors... to feel a total lack of trust in SYP.”

David Greenwood of Switalskis said he could not be confident there are not officers “burying evidence or just not finding evidence deliberately” because of knowledge of some of those involved. “I’m sure that the full truth in terms of the level of corruption and the extent of it in Rotherham has yet to come out.”

Jay’s report pointed to an escalating crisis fuelled by cuts to social provision. He noted that local authority funding cuts had led to a “dramatic reduction in resources available to Rotherham and neighbouring Councils.” A third of the children exploited had mental health problems, and two thirds emotional difficulties. A large number were supposedly “in care”—i.e., wards of the local authority. The spiralling growth in social inequality was accompanied by a bipartisan condemnation of a “feral,” undeserving “underclass.”

Another survivor, “Emma,” had been in care and ran away from children’s homes repeatedly. When found, she says, she was raped by a police officer in a squat. This officer targeted children in care because of their vulnerability. “He knew we wouldn’t be missed, he knew we wouldn’t be reported. He knew we wouldn’t be able to say anything. He knew that he had the upper hand.”



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