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## Constructing victims as offenders: Challenges in responding to the dysfunctionality in sexual abuse.

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All too often, professionals and the public alike can view abuse as involving those who cause harm, and those who have harmed. This dichotomous view, in which people become labeled and understood as either “offenders” or “victims” overlooks the often-horrific circumstances that the people involved have endured. For example, it can be a common experience that children who grow up in adverse environments become an easier target for those seeking to exploit their vulnerabilities. Often, those same children may be implicitly or explicitly coerced into illegal behaviors. This is one example of the pernicious nature of sexual abuse; one never knows how young people will respond to circumstances that are by definition difficult to survive.

This is clearly evidenced in [a recent story](#) about young people who had been victimized in the Rochdale sexual abuse grooming scandal in the UK. In recent years in England and Wales, there have been a series of gang-related grooming scandals coming to light. Quite often, these scandals involved victims who had not been listened to, respected, treated properly or believed. Sometimes they were prosecuted for crimes directly linked to their own abuse (for example, a girl becoming agitated and arrested for disorderly conduct when the police wouldn't believe that she was being abused), or at least seen as being as complicit in their own abuse. The girls in question were often arrested for other illegal behaviors as well. These unacceptable responses often derailed cases, made the crown prosecution service wary, and caused serious harm to these children in later life (i.e., mental health, social and employment issues). This kind of double victimization by the system who neglected their abuse and punished its symptoms is manifestly inhumane. The public is witness to the impact of trauma and adverse experiences on the development and life course of these girls.

Research shows us that those who have been victimized by sexual abuse and other crimes often have multiple interrelated vulnerabilities. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that victims of crime are dysfunctional in other ways that could lead them into contact with the



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*We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.*

*The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.*

*The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment, or Sage Journals.*

system. Our hope is that this case leads more adults to see these multiple vulnerabilities and to understand problematic behaviours holistically so that we can provide the correct tailored support to the individual. Seeing multiple vulnerabilities as causal factors, in a rational choice sense, that lead people to be “willing” victims only does more harm.

Ultimately, we hope that more professionals can understand developmental and life-course challenges appear to normalize abuse in the lives of young people. It is simply not the case that adversity causes young people to seek out abusive situations. When society can change our perspective on the people that come into our services to be more prevention-focused and trauma-informed, we can understand that we need to change our language and ways of working to better support them.

One clear example of this need to shift our understanding is the language used around sexual abuse as opposed to sexual exploitation. In sexual exploitation, we talk about gifts, compliance, and aspects of choice, whereas in sexual abuse we often do not. This is problematic because sexual exploitation is itself a form of sexual abuse involving very similar victim-access behaviors. The use of terms such as “gifts” gives the impression that the victim is a willing accomplice and, therefore also guilty. This draws attention away from the fact that they have been victimized and labels them as “problematic”, which can impact them personally, legally, and socially. Another example is the still widely held belief in a “just world”. People, including professionals like police officers ([Sleath & Bull, 2012](#)) still far too often tend to perceive the victim’s misfortune as deserved, also in sexual abuse cases. As we know, this belief in a just world is related to victim-blaming and might explain why we tend to have that blind spot for these adverse life events.

Fortunately, we are starting to see some changes around this. One of the authors’ (Kieran) neighboring police force in [Gloucestershire](#) have made a commitment not to arrest young people for low-level anti-sociality linked to their victimization (and stands in contrast to the case in Michigan in which a [girl was jailed](#) for not doing her homework). This means that they can focus on supporting the young people by addressing the causes of their victimization and making sure that the individuals responsible are held to account.