



THE most striking thing about Sarah is her bright smile and sweet tendency to collapse into giggles.

She chats animatedly so it's hard to believe that behind her sunny disposition lies a devastating secret - she is the victim of one of the most sickening crimes this country has ever seen.

"It was at least once a week, sometimes twice a week, and sometimes it was two in one day," she tells me in that matter-of-fact way that I've found victims sometimes recount their experiences of brutal rape.

For Sarah* it all started in Telford, Shropshire, when a group of men living close by started to take an interest in her and would come knocking on her door.

She says that right from the outset, it made her feel uncomfortable.

"I sort of knew them and I was friendly to them, but I didn't really go out of my way to hang out with them" she continues.

Nonetheless, the men continued to appear at her door. This is typical of how these gangs operate. Once they've chosen a target, usually a vulnerable or young girl, some groups use charm and gifts to win them over, others harass and bombard them with unwanted attention.

Victims of sex gangs are groomed this way for months before being unexpectedly and savagely attacked by men they believe to be their friends. In Sarah's case it was a matter of weeks.

Just a month after meeting a man introduced to her by a "friend", he came knocking on her door. She tried to turn him away but he forced his way in.

THREATS

She says she reported the rape to the police but then told them she didn't want him arrested because he lived nearby.

Two days later, before she'd even begun to process what had happened, in a manner fitting the pattern of sexual exploitation, Sarah was attacked again.

This time another man joined in. Then, barely a week later, she was raped by several men. And so began a horrendous ordeal that was to last four years.

Sarah quickly became too frightened to report it to police because the men all lived close by and some were hardened crooks.

She was visited repeatedly and says rape and gang-rape became a way of life for her. Sarah was controlled by her abusers and says she was passed around 72 men.

When she came back she had bites all over her neck and bruising

VICTIM'S MOTHER

ASSAULTED, ABUSED AND HUMILIATED TIME AND TIME AGAIN..HORRIFIC ORDEAL OF THE GIRLS WHO ARE..

VICTIMS OF THE SEX GANGS

Sarah's story is so horrific it stops me in my tracks.

She was taken to many other towns and cities in the UK to be used for sex. A chart she made shows how the men were connected through social circles or family.

I'm staggered when she absentmindedly describes a particularly chilling incident as consensual - it involved 10 men in one night. I realise that she has been so convincingly groomed and brainwashed that she knew no other pattern for healthy sexual activity.

Sarah is one of thousands of victims of gang grooming in the UK.

I first reported the phenomenon for Dispatches two years ago and case after case has since hit the headlines.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner estimates at least 10,000 children may have been victims of this kind of exploitation. At long last, the secret of this appalling crime may finally be out.

However, that has turned out to be only half the battle. Cases like this are notoriously difficult to get through the courts.

For the past three years, Dispatches has been following one of the biggest police

investigations of its kind, code-named Operation Chalice.

More than 50 officers, now led by Det Chief Insp Neil Jamieson at West Mercia Police, have worked around the clock to gain the trust of vulnerable girls, some as young as 11 when they were first abused.

They've learnt how grooming usually starts with friendship and gifts and quickly moves to coercion, threats and violence.

Officers have heard appalling accounts about men abusing girls and gang-raping them while they're held hostage for hours, or even days - all the while being forced to listen to the screams of girls in other rooms with other men.

It was thanks to the will and determination of one such parent in Telford that the police managed to get an enormously difficult investigation off the ground at all.

David*, whose daughter **IN CHARGE** Det Chief Insp Neil Jamieson

Abby* fell into the hands of a sex gang, tells how he watched his daughter's behaviour change.

"She was sleeping all day, getting numerous texts, harassing texts and calls, showering at 10.30 at night, waiting until you've gone to bed and then you'd hear the door shutting," he says.

The grooming process is so sophisticated that often the parents have no idea of the horrors their child is enduring.

Victims become very secretive about their new lives and friends and are often returned home on time so their parents don't become too suspicious.

In Abby's case David was unable to stop her because of the power the gang had over her. So he turned detective and made notes of the cars she disappeared into - registrations, makes, models. He then passed this on to the police. In one particularly horrific incident Abby

disappeared

for three days. During this time she was drugged, plied with alcohol, gang-raped and locked up.

"When she did come back, she was subdued and secretive," Abby's mum tells Dispatches. "She hid herself in her room; she had bites all over her neck and bruising on her arms."

These parents lost count of how many times they reported their daughter missing. The gang took complete control of her over 18 months. David breaks down as he explains the pernicious methods used by the gang to get his daughter to comply.

FRIGHTENED

"The main reason she carried on was because she was frightened of the threats made against us," he says in tears.

Threats made to the child about their family mean the young person being exploited often decides to take a terrible vow of silence to protect everyone.

Mike Hand, a child trafficking expert, has examined how the grooming process destroys the child's normal support systems so they become isolated. "People say why do the children keep going back? Well why

wouldn't they?" he tells me. "They haven't got anywhere to go. All their support comes from these controllers."

Thankfully, there are many who find the wherewithal to overcome the control their attackers have on them and go to the police.

Yet seeking justice brings other disturbing challenges.

Not only do the girls have to feel confident enough to report it but when the arrests take place, the threats increase in intensity, with some victims moving house.

Then there is the court case itself. The girls have told us the most gruelling part is being cross-examined by barristers and accused of lying. Sarah says she felt she was being forced to relive her ordeal.

"It was horrible. They tried to make out that it was my fault," she says angrily. "It was like it was happening again because they were just making up stuff about me." Sarah stood her ground but for Abby, the

experience was so overwhelming she became severely withdrawn.

"She couldn't talk about the trial," says her mum. "It was like she sort of went into herself. It was heartbreaking to watch her come home and have no expression."

Sheila Taylor, who works closely with child victims of sexual exploitation says it's very difficult for young people to go through the courts system.

"We need a review of our judicial system," Sheila tells me, "so they're not re-victimised, traumatised and violated by the system of prosecution."

The Director of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer, has also called for urgent reform adding that, above all, victims need to feel they will be believed.

In the midst of all these challenges, West Mercia Police somehow managed a successful outcome. In December, 2012, the Chalice case resulted in eight men

being jailed for 59-and-a-half years in total. Since then police in Telford have been trying to stop this happening again.

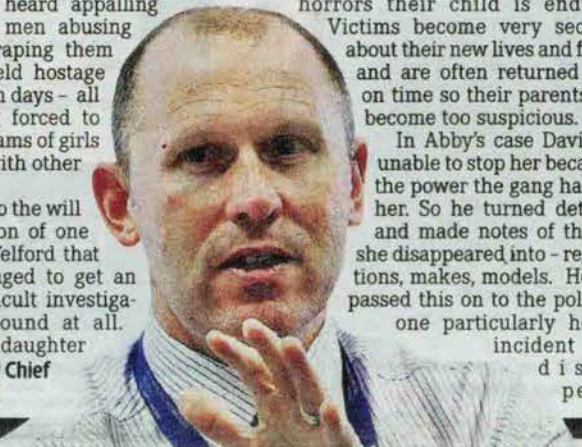
They go out on regular patrol to look for underage girls out at inappropriate hours or with older men and have the power to issue child abduction orders. There isn't a police force in the country that wants to be responsible for missing this again.

But for the girls who have been through unimaginable violence and horror at the mercy of these men, this proactive policing comes a little too late. Sarah and Abby have been damaged, perhaps beyond repair, by their experiences.

Our duty now is to prevent further damage to other children, by protecting them on two counts: not just from the despicable acts of a sadistic sex gang but also from the careless and devastating insensitivity of our own justice system.

As Det Chief Insp Alan Edwards, who earlier led the investigation, says: "We've got approximately 90-100 victims - I think we are just scratching the surface."

*Names have been changed
► C4 Dispatches 9pm tonight: The Hunt for Britain's Sex Gangs.



We need a review of our judicial system, so victims aren't re-victimised

EXPERT SHEILA TAYLOR