

Summary

In this research report, we report on a qualitative study on so called 'loverboys' and their victims. In particular, we have examined the concept of loverboys and the developments in the concept formation about loverboys, the proportions of the victimization, and the characteristics and need for support of victims. In addition, we have also examined how the help currently provided by support and sheltering institutions relate to this. The study's focus is on minor and adult female victims of loverboys who have been placed or are staying in institutions for youth care and women's shelters. For this study, we have examined literature and we have made an inventory of prevention projects in the Netherlands. We have also conducted interviews with social workers and experts, and with over twenty victims of loverboys. Furthermore, we have studied more than eighty case files of victims.

The study shows that the loverboy concept is a fashionable umbrella concept, the content of which is variable, depending on the need of the concept's user in the circumstances of the case. In our view, loverboys are not a new phenomenon. It chiefly involves a methodology or procedure, applied by a human trafficker who exploits the victim. Typical of loverboy methods is the so-called recruitment and grooming: to make contact, seduce and win over the victim by means of (the promise of) a romantic relationship, with the aim of exploiting the victim through prostitution or some other scheme. The applied methods have different manifestations and are variable in nature. This specific procedure, the fact that he operates within the borders of the Netherlands and that he mainly focuses on victims who are underage, distinguish the loverboy from other kinds of human traffickers. The study makes clear that the traditional picture of loverboys as for the most part 'charming' young men who operate on their own and are mostly active in the nightlife scene is outmoded. The interviews with professionals and victims reveal that a hardening and pragmatization is occurring in the working methods of loverboys; grooming periods are growing shorter and are shifting more quickly to violence and threat. In those cases in which the grooming is skipped completely, we should speak of regular human trafficking; after all, the typical loverboy method is lacking.

Victims have varying background characteristics, such as their age and ethnic origin, but often more or less share particular vulnerabilities. Having a light mental disability can make a girl vulnerable, but this also goes for growing up in problematic rearing and familial circumstances, which expresses itself, for instance, in (sexual) traumas and attachment issues. For this reason, part of the social workers consider victimhood rather to be the expression of underlying issues with regard to upbringing and family background than as a separate issue in need of isolated treatment.

Several interconnected aspects make it quite impossible to estimate the precise proportions of the number of victims of loverboys in youth care and women's shelters. First of all, this is caused by the hidden en elusive character of the working method of both loverboys and human traffickers in general. Furthermore, institutions for assistance and sheltering register loverboy problems seldom or not at all. Also, a uniform definition of the loverboy concept does not exist. Moreover, it is doubtful whether such a univocal registration would be possible and desirable when we take into account that the loverboy problem is not a univocal phenomenon, but a method that changes constantly. We can deduce from the available figures and estimates from professionals that the group of victims of loverboys who are currently staying in youth care institutions and women's shelters is not as large as the many reports in the media would have us believe.

In the Netherlands, a large number of projects and initiatives have been developed with regard to prevention of victimization and the advancement of expertise of professionals. The projects focus on various general and specific target groups; their goals vary from the transference of knowledge to influencing behaviour, and from the promotion of expertise to strengthening the chain cooperation among institutions. A minority of the projects aims to prevent repeated victimization.

A large part of the studied institutions has a broad advice and prevention programme at its disposal, (part of) which is also suitable for victims of loverboys, often in connection with the method of working within those institutions. Yet, a number of institutions do offer more specific assistance and/or treatment programmes. By their own account, both these broad and specific programmes usually suffice to offer victims of loverboys adequate help. The professionals do observe, however, a relatively high risk of repeated victimization, also connected to the relatively short period of treatment. They still consider themselves insufficiently capable of preventing this.

For the rest, the majority of professionals is pleased with the (chain) cooperation among institutions. They do state, however, that there are bottlenecks regarding contactability of institutions in crisis situations, the transfer from Youth Care Plus (closed setting) to provincial youth care (open setting), and from youth care to women's shelters. As a general bottleneck, they mention the transference of clients from one institution to another. They also advocate a thorough and multidisciplinary selection and diagnosis during the intake phase, preferably in a separate specific sheltering institution, to decide on the optimal follow-up treatment.

The victims who stay in a youth care institution or women's shelter are usually satisfied with the help and shelter provided to them. They generally receive the support they want. The help consists, among other things, of coping with trauma, training to increase independence and self-assertiveness and to build and maintain balanced relationships. Nevertheless, there is also a group of victims who think they have received insufficient specific help. In addition, the willingness among victims who are staying in youth care institutions and women's shelters to file a report with the police proves to be low, especially among those victims who suffer from the most serious (combination of) exploitation and underlying problems.

To do justice to the findings above, first of all it is useful to create more clarity about the loverboy concept. This concept applies to those cases in which a perpetrator uses the method of seducing and winning over the victim by means of (the promise of) the start of a romantic relationship, to subsequently exploit the victim (sexually and in other respects). For professionals providing assistance in youth care, it is advisable to use a focus that is broader than just that of loverboy victims, encompassing all underage victims of youth prostitu-

tion and human trafficking. Furthermore, additional insight is needed into the causes of repeated victimization. Moreover, it is relevant - prior to a definitive placement of a minor in a youth institution - to explore the chances and possibilities of the multidisciplinary screening and diagnosing of underage victims of human trafficking. We also recommend that more insight is provided to social workers into the role of offenders who apply the loverboy mode of operation, also with an eye to putting up barriers against this phenomenon.