

# Child Criminal Exploitation in Wales

Nina Maxwell and Catrin Wallace

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# 1.0 Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

Child criminal exploitation is a complex social and cultural problem that has arisen due to a combination of economic and social factors. Much of what is known about child criminal exploitation relates to county lines, a model of drug supply where individuals, groups or organised criminal gangs manipulate or coerce children and vulnerable adults into transporting and storing drugs and money. This report was commissioned by Health and Care Research Wales to capture the voices of children with lived experience of exploitation, parents and professionals regarding how children are targeted, groomed and involved in county lines in Wales. Findings from this report will be used to develop a toolkit that underpins an effective community response aimed at improving the outcomes for children and their families.

## 1.2 Method

Data collection was undertaken between October 2020 and May 2021. This period coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures and as such all data collection was undertaken remotely, either by telephone, Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Data collection was undertaken with three main groups:

1. Practitioner-led and researcher-led interviews and focus groups with 21 children who had lived experience of criminal exploitation.
2. Interviews with 15 parents who had at least one child who had been criminally exploited. This included 13 mothers and two fathers.
3. Interviews and focus groups with 56 professionals comprising representatives from British Transport Police, children's services, education, health, housing, probation, youth offending services, the third sector and Welsh Government.

To preserve and anonymity, this report uses pseudonyms when quoting participants.

## 1.3 Main findings

### 1.3.1 How does child exploitation manifest in Wales? Findings from professionals

- Driven by ongoing demand to buy a range of substances including cannabis, cocaine, spice and prescription medication, child criminal exploitation manifests in three main ways in Wales: county lines, blurred lines and localised dealing.
- The adoption of the term county lines may detract attention from children who are exploited by family members or local individuals or groups even where these groups were adopting a similar model and levels of violence as the county lines groups .
- The presence of gendered notions regarding child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation poses the risk that sexually exploited boys and criminally exploited girls will not be identified or safeguarded.

- The distinction between child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation can serve to obscure the range of perpetrators, criminal activities, and the range of physical and sexual abuse children suffer when they have been exploited.

### **1.3.2 What makes children vulnerable to exploitation? Children's views**

- A consistent theme across findings was the extent to which children were exploited due to the promise of financial gain and the assertion that making money through dealing drugs is easy. This served to minimise their perceptions regarding the risks and dangers inherent in their involvement.
- Exploitation occurred across statutory, further, and higher education. Transitions, inclusive practice, school sanctions, and school exclusion were linked to heightened vulnerability to exploitation.
- Peer influence was particularly salient for children as they strive to retain friendships and status. This can lead to the imitation of negative behaviours such as involvement in drug dealing activities or other forms of criminality.
- Cannabis was used as a hook exploitation. This was either through introducing children to cannabis or reinforcing the child's existing use. Drug dealers used 'strapping' where children were given drugs but then expected to pay for them later.

### **1.3.3 How are children involved in these activities? Findings from parents**

- While parents had noticed changes in their child's attitudes, behaviours and peer groups, a lack of knowledge about exploitation meant that this was often not identified, understood or addressed.
- Transition from primary to secondary education and secondary education to further education, and managed school moves emerged as a critical periods where children were groomed as they strived to form new friendships.
- Indoctrination emerged as a core grooming tool where children are told that the people who were exploiting them are their new 'family'. This is reinforced in two main ways. First, exploiters presented themselves as friends, role models, and in some cases father figures. Second, children were coached in techniques to deter their parents from seeking support.
- On reflection, parents felt that missing episodes were the biggest indicator of exploitation. However, at the time, parents dismissed their children staying out late or staying overnight with friends as normal reactions to factors such as family arguments, parental separation, negative peer groups or difficulties at school.
- Serious violence was closely linked to child criminal exploitation. Children were both victims and perpetrators of violence. Many parents had experienced violence and threatening behaviour from their children and threatening visits from drug dealers to their workplaces or homes.

### **1.3.4 Effective approaches and interventions for child criminal exploitation. Findings from professionals**

#### ***Community-based approaches***

- Professionals were unanimous that child criminal exploitation necessitated new ways of working as current safeguarding practice is focused on intrafamilial abuse of children under the age of 12.
- While some local authorities had been working to address extrafamilial harm and risk posed outside the home for several years, contextual safeguarding, an approach that is aimed at understanding and responding to extra-familial harm, has provided a name for this way of working.
- What appeared to be new, was the establishment of multi-agency strategy meetings focusing on exploitation including the consideration of hotspot areas and peer influence. This posed challenges of how best to collate and understand this information so that risk indicators were assigned appropriately, kept up-to-date, and associated with proportionate responses.
- Following the reduction of youth clubs and youth services, the need to create safe spaces within communities for children was highlighted. This was premised on the need for community acceptance of children using places and spaces and community engagement to promote safeguarding in the wider community.

#### ***Service-based factors***

- Where a young person was alerted to services through a missing episode, there was a need for return interviews to gather information that could be used for the identification and evidence gathering of those individuals responsible for exploiting children.
- Young people who are or who become looked after may have heightened susceptibility to exploitation as drug networks manipulate their desire for a sense of belonging and the opportunity to earn money.
- Service thresholds emerged as a barrier to engaging with children. This was compounded by the focus upon intrafamilial harm and the challenges professionals faced in capturing the necessary evidence of exploitation.
- Several barriers were noted in relation to statutory services and engaging children. These included the time limited nature of service delivery, adherence to office hours, staff turnover and absences, which all served to detract from supporting children and the development of good relationships.
- A strategic response with clear governance was deemed vital for coordinating the different agencies. This was particularly pertinent where children failed to reach service thresholds but where risks had been identified.
- Multi-agency working emerged as both a barrier and a facilitator in engaging with children. It facilitated the sharing of concerns amongst multiple agencies, including children's services, education, health, police, probation, third sector organisations and youth offending services, in the development of an appropriate plan to address concerns. It emerged as a potential barrier where children and families were receiving numerous interventions delivered by a range of different agencies.

### ***Professional-based factors in engaging children***

- Criminally exploited children did not always present as stereotypical victims which rendered them more likely to be perceived as complicit in their criminality. This was exacerbated where children were reluctant to disclose that they were being exploited.
- There are inconsistencies in relation to the age children are transitioned to adult services. This ranged from 16 years in health services to 25 years in some third sector organisations. Nevertheless, professionals questioned the extent to which a child with a history of exploitation could make an informed choice when they were deemed to be an 'adult'.
- Mixed findings emerged in relation to the use of formally charging children. Most professionals emphasised the need for a safeguarding approach. However, it was suggested that where children are not formally charged under Section 45, Modern Slavery Act 2015, this may leave them vulnerable to continued exploitation. Limitations were noted in current service responses to parents as they are underpinned by traditional models of child protection where parents are the perpetrators of harm. This perpetuated the notion that there are deficits in the family.
- Findings highlighted the need for a shift in mindset towards working with parents. Indeed current practice often fails to acknowledge the challenging nature of parenting adolescents. Where service providers place additional pressure upon families this could result in them opting for their child to be voluntarily accommodated by the local authority.
- There is a need for alternative approaches that are focused upon increasing parent and family resilience as well as offering them support when their child is at risk of being exploited. This is particularly pertinent as parents remain connected to their children after service provision ends.

### **1.3.5 Effective approaches and interventions for child criminal exploitation. Findings from parents**

#### ***Exploiter-based barriers***

- Exploiters used a range of techniques to trap children within the exploitative relationship. These included debt bondage either where the county lines group steal the package from the young person or where they introduced children to cannabis use or encouraged existing cannabis users to fall into increasing amounts of debt.
- Where children are drawn into debt their parents or siblings may be adversely affected. This can serve to deter the young person from seeking help.
- Parents may be frightened to seek help due to threats of violence against their child or themselves. Exploiters capitalised on parent fear of service involvement especially if they were anxious about their child being taken into care or arrested.
- County lines groups disconnect children from their family and friends and coach them into making false allegations of abuse against their parents to deter them from seeking help from services.

#### ***Family-based factors***

- Parents felt their concerns were dismissed especially in relation to missing episodes where their children were over the age of 17. Where children were over the age of 18 parents

reported they were not entitled to receive information or kept informed of whether their child was engaging with services, police or involved in the court system.

- Parents called for system change. This included the adoption of a rights-based approach so that their and their children's voices were heard, increased training for teachers and other professionals, access to youth workers, and flexible, whole family support.
- In response to indoctrination, children parents emphasised the need for them to maintain a connection with their child. This was especially pertinent as parents remain with their children before, during and after they have been exploited.
- The emotional and psychological impact of exploitation requires specialised mental health support for children and parents. Where this support is aimed at children consideration is needed regarding what help and support children feel comfortable accessing.

### **1.3.6 Effective approaches and interventions for child criminal exploitation. Findings from children**

#### ***Youth-based barriers to engaging with services***

- The culture against snitching, debt bondage and fear of violent repercussions to themselves and their families renders children reluctant to engage with services.
- Mixed findings emerged in relation to the impact of parenting measures such as increased monitoring and contacting the police.
- Children's awareness of professional safeguarding duties can be a barrier to service engagement.
- The significance of children's relationships with their teachers and the positive impact of remaining in school was highlighted.

## **1.4 Discussion**

- The changing landscape of drug dealing has been underpinned by the exploitation of children. This has been facilitated by a lack of understanding in relation to county lines and child criminal exploitation, gendered stereotypical views and the age at which children tend to be groomed.
- There has been concerted effort in Wales to address and prevent child criminal exploitation. This has included practice guidance for the Welsh Government, establishment of the Wales Violence Prevention Unit and local developments, such as the creation of exploitation multiagency meetings.
- There was a need for approach and interventions that address both push and pull factors which make children vulnerable to criminal exploitation. This includes preventative work at the child, family, system and community levels.
- At the child level, consideration is needed regarding school inclusion and exclusion practices. This may include training for teachers and other professionals in child criminal exploitation and the early identification of children's needs so they can be supported to remain in school.
- At the family level, the challenges of parenting adolescents and impact of exploitation of parents and siblings must be addressed. This may include development and provision of

whole family approaches aimed at increasing the knowledge of child criminal exploitation and strengthening parent-child relationships.

- At the system level, a more nuanced approach to the binary distinction of victim and perpetrator is needed, the inclusion of child family voices and collaborative decision-making and the development of flexible service provision equipped to work with extrafamilial risk and harm to adolescents.
- At the community level, there needs to be the creation and maintenance of safe spaces and places for children as well as the gathering of intelligence that can be used to identify adaptations to the county lines models and development of appropriate preventative and safeguarding strategies.

## 2.0 Introduction

Child criminal exploitation refers to children who are involved in criminal activity for the personal gain of an individual, group or organised criminal gang (All Wales Practice Guide, 2019). More specifically, the term refers to children up to the age of 18 who have been involved in criminal activities through an element of exchange, whether it appears consensual or involves manipulation or coercion through violence or the threat of violence (ibid). Much of what is known about child criminal exploitation relates to county lines, a model of drug supply that has attracted increasing attention in recent years. According to the National Crime Agency (2019), county lines is a term used:

to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other forms of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

An estimated 1000 different county lines operate across England and Wales, with the vast majority originating from London, West Midlands and Merseyside (National Crime Agency, 2019). It has been estimated that there are over 100 lines bringing drugs into Welsh towns. As each line makes over £800,000 profit per year (Grierson, 2019) it has been argued that county lines have emerged predominantly due to economic factors. These factors have been fuelled by the saturation of drug dealers in urban areas which resulted in some urban-based street groups seeking out new markets (Robinson et al, 2019; Andell and Pitts, 2018; Windle and Briggs, 2015). This has led to a shift away from the traditional drug supply model characterised by ‘local drugs for local people’ (Harding, 2020a:40) supplied by urban-based wholesalers and bought by one or two local crime families who have distributed these drugs through their criminal networks. County lines represent a more dynamic, proactive model of drug supply that has blurred the boundary between wholesalers, retailers, street gangs and organised crime networks. In doing so, drug supply has become a fluid operation run by urban-based groups and adapted to local contexts in order to increase profitability and evade detection by the police and other agencies. There has also been the increased use of violence as these groups have endeavoured to establish a foothold in new markets based in rural, coastal and border towns and ward off competition from existing dealers and other urban-based groups (Pepin, 2017). Findings from a review of the Home Office Ending Gang in Youth Violence Programme (Harding and Cracknell, 2016) demonstrated that the transition from traditional drug supply to county lines has not been uniform but rather it has manifested differently in different areas according to the local context, structures, dynamics and actors (Harding, 2020a). Such differential presentation across areas, and agencies, has rendered it difficult to reach consensus as to the nature of the problem and the identification of effective solutions. Hence, child criminal exploitation and county lines represent what Rittel and Webber (1973) termed a ‘wicked problem’. Wicked problems are complex social and cultural problems comprised of multiple independent factors which are defined according to individual perspectives. Such problems require the creation of effective solutions that can be implemented across agencies and tailored to the local context.

In order to aid understanding and inform service responses, Harding (2020a) proposed an evolutionary typology of county lines, based on findings from a study of how London-based urban

street groups established county lines in the Home Counties. According to Harding (2020a), the first of the four county lines models refers to ‘commuting’ (Coomber and Moyle, 2017, Harding, 2020a). This is perhaps the most well-known manifestation of county lines. It involves urban-based dealers commuting into rural, coastal and border towns to sell drugs. Once established in these areas, the second county lines model represents the transition towards professionalisation, with urban-based groups establishing local bases in each town through the creation of a satellite hub. At this stage,

Networks, users, products and so on have all been identified, clarified, sourced and set in place. Levels of resistance have been assessed and tested by CL [county lines] operatives. The next logical strategic objective is to build the lines to make them more profitable. (Harding, 2020a:43)

Consequently, the second manifestation places impetus on dealing from accommodation ‘cuckooed’ or taken over from vulnerable adults. This enables the county lines groups to operate 24-hours a day and increase sales. The satellite hub also requires the grooming and recruitment of local children as runners to transport large amounts of money, drugs and weapons across and between areas. Although they may be used to perform other tasks such as cutting and bagging drugs, collecting debts and taking over or ‘cuckooing’ premises (National Crime Agency, 2019). According to Harding’s (2020) typology, the third county lines model adapted in two main ways in order to consolidate the market and expand by taking over local drug networks and initiating new lines into more rural locations. First, county lines groups began using other properties such as caravans and Airbnb properties to evade police detection. Second, there was an increase in the targeting, coercion and exploitation of local children unknown to local authorities and deemed less likely to attract police attention (Ministry of Justice, 2019, The Children’s Society, 2019). County lines has continued to evolve with market and product diversification emerging as the fourth model (Harding, 2020). This was characterised by the consolidation of lines, reduction of county lines networks, franchising and expansion into new towns along with expansion of the target market to include the night-time economy and new users. County lines groups also diversified their products to include a broader range of recreational drugs such as Fentanyl, Steroids and Spice. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new models of county lines as the lockdown and social distancing measures have increased visibility of movement between and within towns and cities. Hence, county lines groups have increased the use of private cars rather than trains, disguised runners as key workers and moved drug dealing activities to supermarket and hospital car parks (Brewster et al., 2020; Harding, 2020b). According to Harding (2020b), COVID-19 measures removed numerous established dealers from the streets as they adhered to the lockdown measures. This resulted in a shift towards the exploitation of more naïve children, including those with special educational needs and greater use of social media to lure children into drug dealing where ‘[u]nsuspecting children can be pulled into the orbit of the gang without realising it’ (ibid).

Across all manifestations of county lines, exploitation has been a key element (Harding, 2020a, National Crime Agency, 2019, Home Office, 2018). There are a number of factors that make children vulnerable to child criminal exploitation. Spencer et al.’s (2019) thematic review of exploited children in Croydon found that many were living in poverty, with poor housing or housing instability, multiple adverse childhood experiences, including physical abuse, parental substance misuse, parental criminal activity, neglect, parental mental health or absent parents. Similarly, the National Crime Agency (2017) have highlighted a number of characteristics that make children

vulnerable to criminal exploitation, including children with behavioural difficulties, school exclusions, children looked after, those who are missing, drug users, and those with physical or mental health issues. These characteristics denote an interconnection of safeguarding issues (All Wales Practice Guidance, 2019). Yet, many local authorities do not have local protocols and policies in place and even those that do may misinterpret or misconstrue child criminal exploitation (Children's Society, 2019). Where children come to the attention of services, findings have shown that there has been a professional tendency to criminalise children and perceive their involvement in serious violence and involvement in drug supply as a lifestyle choice which has served to obscure their vulnerability and right to safeguarding (Chard, 2019; Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018; The Children's Society, 2018; All Party Parliamentary Group, 2017). Yet, under the Children Act (1989) children have a right to protection until they are 18. According to Harding's (2020a) typology, urban-based groups have exploited professional perceptions and service knowledge gaps. The transition from commuting to satellite hubs represent an adaptation to the county lines model; as services became aware of young men transporting drugs out of the cities into rural areas, olders were placed locally to groom local children. Hence, county lines groups have evolved to exploiting children unknown to services and less likely to attract attention. This compounds the challenges in identifying which children are vulnerable to child criminal exploitation and ascertaining how many children are being exploited. Dame Black's Review of Drugs (2020:22) states that an 'unprecedented number' of children have been drawn into the drugs trade. While national intelligence is improving, there are no figures of how many children are being criminally exploited (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services., 2020; National Crime Agency, 2019). The Children's Commissioner for England (2019) estimated that 2000 children from London could be linked to county lines groups. There appears to be a dearth of literature relating to child criminal exploitation and county lines in Wales.

To our knowledge, the only studies specifically focusing on the Welsh context are a rapid evidence assessment undertaken by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Gwent (2020) and a mixed method study by Caluori, Corlett and Stott (2020). The former involved analysis of 13 children in Gwent identified as having the most frequent offending behaviours. Ten of the children were deemed to have been exploited or at risk of exploitation. The report found that while the average age of the cohort was 15, disruptive behaviours and disengagement from school emerged far earlier. Most children were identified as having a special educational need with many also having speech, language and communication issues which limited the extent to which they had integrated into the wider school environment. Hence, these children tended to form friendships with other children with similar vulnerabilities and challenges. Missing episodes emerged as a key indicator that a child was being exploited. In some cases, children had gone missing over 50 times. The latter study by Caluori et al. (2020) was undertaken during the initial stages of the COVID-19 lockdown measures and included analysis of data relating to drug offences, missing episodes and child criminal exploitation in Merseyside and North Wales as well as interviews with professionals and academics from England and representatives from North Wales Police. Caluori et al (2020) concluded that looked after children were disproportionately targeted and recruited by county lines groups and a growing number of looked after children were placed in settings that did not protect them from criminal exploitation. They also concluded that there was inadequate information sharing between agencies and that the county lines model was highly adaptable. The extent to which these findings reflect the Welsh context has been queried due to a lack of clarity as to what data sources were used. Although the North Wales Regional Safeguarding Board (n.p.) supported the conclusion that a consistent approach to child criminal exploitation is needed, calling for a

toolkit to support safeguarding and information sharing across agencies. Such a toolkit would enable the development of a co-ordinated response from the police, the National Crime Agency, Government departments, local government agencies, and voluntary and community sector organisations (Ministry of Justice, 2019) and complement the Safeguarding Children from Child Sexual Exploitation Guidance (Welsh Government, 2021). Under this guidance, children who are at risk of extrafamilial harm should be safeguarded under the same procedures as children at risk of intrafamilial harm (Part 7 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014). This states that professionals have a duty to report children at risk, where the child is experiencing or is at risk of abuse, neglect or other kinds of harm, and where they have a need for care and support. Yet, many children fail to meet social care thresholds so that risk assessments can be undertaken, which means that children may only become known to services when they are at crisis point or where their behaviours are entrenched (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). It has been suggested that current child protection policy is focused upon familial abuse and fails to encompass extra-familial harms arising from peer groups, local communities or online (Chard, 2015; Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). Firmin (2018) has recommended that service thresholds should be viewed through a contextual lens, assessing the extrafamilial risks children experience and acknowledging the limited influence parents and carers have on peer relationships outside of the family. Indeed, under the Care and Support (Eligibility) (Wales) Regulations (2015), local authorities have a responsibility to intervene where a child's needs are greater than the family can support alone. Yet, research findings have shown that when criminally exploited children are brought to the attention of services, professionals and parents experience difficulties in accessing support (Spencer et al., 2019; Children's Society, 2019). Such provision appears hindered by the nature of child criminal exploitation and the evolving manifestations of county lines; it targets children with overlapping safeguarding issues, and those with no safeguarding issues, exploits children as victims and manipulates them into criminality as perpetrators. Consequently, social care responses differ according to perceptions of level of risk and how much support is needed (HMICFRS, 2020). Pitts (2019) has highlighted the need for community networks to develop understanding of county lines activity in local areas, identify service gaps and develop appropriate services. Such a response should also include the voices of the children and parents who are affected by child criminal exploitation and county lines (Maxwell et al., 2019). This is particularly pertinent as the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (SSWA) is underpinned by the principles of co-production, where professionals should be empowered to work with those in need of care and support to identify appropriate solutions.

Against this backdrop, this research was commissioned by Health and Care Research Wales to capture the voices of children with lived experience of exploitation, parents and professionals regarding how children are targeted, groomed and involved in county lines in Wales in order to inform the development of a toolkit that underpins an effective community response aimed at improving the outcomes for children and their families. The objectives of this research were to examine:

- How does county lines manifest in Wales?
- What approaches and interventions are most effective in the identification and prevention of child criminal exploitation?
- How can contextual safeguarding be used in practice across services?

In doing so the research adopted a qualitative action research approach and consisted of three main phases:

**Phase one:** Engagement with children, parents and stakeholders from children's social care, education, health, housing, police, probation, youth offending services, and youth services.

**Phase two:** Coproduction of a toolkit based on findings from phase one and engagement with a research advisory group consisting of an expert panel of children, parents and professionals.

**Phase three:** Dissemination of the toolkit and preliminary evaluation and refinement based on interviews with children, parent and professionals using an action research model.

This report presents findings from phase one of the research: analysis of the qualitative interviews undertaken with children who have experienced exploitation, parents of children who are being exploited and professionals from statutory and non-statutory agencies across Wales.

## 3.0 Methods

Data collection was undertaken between October 2020 and May 2021. This period coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures, and as such all data collection was undertaken remotely, either by telephone, Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Ethical approval for data collection was obtained from the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Cardiff University. Data collection consisted of:

- interviews and a focus group with children,
- online and telephone interviews with parents,
- online interviews with professionals.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was analysed thematically using a ‘code-and-retrieve’ approach (see Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) facilitated by NVivo 12 software. In accordance with ethical guidelines, pseudonyms have been used for participants and information that could be used to identify participants has been removed. This section provides a summary of each element.

### 3.1 Interviews and focus groups: Children

Children were invited to share their views regarding how children are targeted, recruited and involved in child criminal exploitation, what service provision is available and what helps or hinders children from seeking support. To promote youth engagement, they were invited to participate through gatekeepers in the form of the services they were currently engaged with. While this strategy excluded some potential participants it enabled the identification of children under the age of 25 with lived experience of exploitation and provided children with the opportunity to provide informed consent. Several children declined the invitation to participate due to concerns surrounding potential repercussions to themselves or their families from their exploiters. To further support youth engagement, a flexible strategy was adopted (Table 1) enabling children to engage with the project in three different ways via two different modes: ‘practitioner-led’, where the young person could take part with a worker from the organisation or service they were engaging with, or ‘researcher-led,’ where they could take part with a member of the research team via Microsoft Teams or the telephone. Regardless of mode of participation, children were invited to share as much or as little of their own experiences as they felt comfortable discussing.

The sample consisted of 21 participants. Of these, 18 had lived experience of criminal exploitation and four participants were identified as at-risk of child criminal exploitation. Three participants were adult males. While all three males were older than the pre-specified sample, they provided valuable insight into the journey from becoming involved in criminal activities through incarceration and transfer onto more positive pathways. Of the 18 participants under the age of 18, two were female and 16 were male. Most participants lived in South Wales (n = 15) with the remainder living in Mid or West Wales. This apparent skew reflected data collection strategies as opposed to county lines manifestation. Of the 21 participants, three were adults who had previously been incarcerated for drug dealing. The remainder were aged between 12 and 18 years, with a mean age of 15 years. Initial analyses revealed that the practitioner-led group were younger (average = 14 years) than the researcher-led group (average = 16.5 years). However, further examination

revealed that the four children deemed to be at-risk of criminal exploitation were younger than the remainder of the practitioner-led group. All four children were aged between 12 and 13 years. When the at-risk group were removed from the practitioner-led group, only a slight difference in mean age between the groups was noted (practitioner-led = 15.5 years, researcher-led = 16.5 years).

## 3.2 Interviews: Parents

Parents were invited to share their experiences regarding how their children had been targeted, recruited and what activities they had been involved in. They were also asked what help they had sought and how effective this had been in supporting them and their child. Parents were recruited to the study through research advisory group networks and professional interviewees. A call for parent/carers was also disseminated via a range of media, including e-newsletters to foster parents and Twitter. This resulted in three parent interviews. Anecdotal evidence suggested that this poor response rate was due to the need to identify parents at the right time, that is, where they felt able to discuss their experiences as well as concerns regarding potential repercussions from discussing their experiences. To promote parent engagement, data collection was extended to England which resulted in a further 12 interviews. Hence, the sample consisted of 15 parents who had at least one child who had been criminally exploited.

Of the 15 parents who participated, eight were living in Wales and seven were living in England. Of those living in Wales, most were from South Wales with the remainder living in West Wales. The sample consisted of 13 mothers and two fathers. One mother and father were interviewed together. The Welsh and English samples differed in three main ways. First, the average number years of exploitation; parents living in Wales reported an average of 2.5 years while parents living in England reported an average of 6 years. Second, a lower proportion of parents living in Wales were from an ethnic minority than their English counterparts. Third, parents living in Wales were four times more likely to be married to the child's father than parents living in England. Despite these differences, findings have been collated across both samples as they provide a comprehensive picture of exploitation across different family backgrounds and locations. Further, this sample provides insight into the nature of exploitation from initial grooming to longer term involvement, with four parents reporting that their child had been incarcerated at least once due to their drug dealing activities. Combining samples also aided the preservation of anonymity which is an important consideration where children may still be involved or vulnerable to exploitation.

## 3.3 Interviews: Professionals

The online interview invited professionals to share their experiences of how children were targeted, groomed, what activities they were involved in, and the barriers and facilitators for service engagement. Professionals were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling based on three criteria. First, professionals whose role involved contact with children who were at risk or involved in child criminal exploitation. Second, professionals were sought from statutory and non-statutory organisations, with particular focus upon staff from children's services, education, health, housing, police, probation, youth justice and youth services. Hence, the chair of the All-Wales Heads of Children's Services and Business Managers from each of the six Regional Safeguarding Boards were invited to nominate a representative to be interviewed. Third,

representation was sought from each of the 22 local authorities in Wales. In order to identify professionals who met the three recruitment criteria, speculative emails were sent to two hundred professionals across statutory, voluntary and third sector organisations across Wales. This resulted in a sample of 56 professionals, which represents a 28% response rate. Of these, 35 participated in an individual semi-structured interview and 21 elected to participate in a focus group. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants according to sector and geographical area. It is important to note that the sample was self-selected so it may be skewed towards professionals who had an interest in child criminal exploitation and/or the capacity to participate in an interview.

Table 1: Breakdown of stakeholders

Pseudonym	Role	Sector	Region
Daniel	Police Inspector	British Transport Police	Wales
Joshua	Police Officer	British Transport Police	Wales
Lyra	Mental Health Specialist	CAMHS	West Wales
Isaac	Mental Health Nurse	CAMHS	West Wales
Holly	Social Worker	Children's Services	Gwent
Georgia	Leaving Care Coordinator	Children's Services	Mid and West Wales
Mark	Service Manager	Children's Services	Gwent
Nick	Safeguarding Manager	Children's Services	West Wales
Olivia	Practice Lead	Children's Services	West Wales
David	Service Manager	Children's Services	North Wales
Bethan	Youth Services Manager	Children's Services	North Wales
Felicity	Education Coordinator	Children's Services	North Wales
Evan	Homelessness Coordinator	Children's Services	North Wales
Amy	Manager	Children's Services	North Wales
Faith	Missing Children Worker	Children's Services	North Wales
Christopher	Service Manager	Children's Services	Mid and West Wales
Freya	Safeguarding Officer	Children's Services	Mid and West Wales
Robert	Youth Manager	Children's Services	Gwent
Amelia	Safeguarding Officer 2	Children's Services	Mid and West Wales
Helen	Youth Worker	Children's Services	Gwent
Paul	Deputy Headteacher	Education	North Wales
Ava	Deputy Headteacher	Education	Cardiff and Vale
Jade	Nurse	Health	Cardiff and Vale
Josie	Nurse	Health	Cardiff and Vale
Adrien	A and E Consultant 1	Health	Cardiff and Vale
Rhys	A and E Consultant 2	Health	Cardiff and Vale
Lucy	Safeguarding	Health	Cardiff and Vale
Leah	School Nurse	Health	Cardiff and Vale
Ryan	Police Lead	Police	England and Wales
Noah	Detective Sergeant	Police	South Wales
Chloe	Coordinator	Police	Mid and West Wales
John	Detective Inspector	Police	South Wales
Chester	Probation Officer	Probation	South Wales
Yvonne	Probation Officer	Probation	Gwent

Jane	Service Manager	Third Sector	South East Wales
Eve	Safeguarding Manager	Third Sector	South East Wales
Carys	Director 1	Third Sector	Wales
Abigail	Service Manager	Third Sector	Gwent
Megan	Victim Support Caseworker	Third sector	North Wales
Sion	Coordinator	Third Sector	Wales
Briony	Practitioner	Third Sector	North Wales
Harry	Director	Third Sector	England
Fiona	Project Worker	Third Sector	Gwent
Mandy	Director 2	Third Sector	Wales
Gemma	Lead Coordinator	Third Sector	Wales
Peter	Project Officer	Third Sector	West Wales
Melissa	Missing Children Worker	Third Sector	Gwent
Craig	Manager	Third Sector	Wales
Joseph	Training Officer	Third Sector	Wales
Ethan	Substance Misuse Manager	Third Sector	West Wales
Philip	Representative	Welsh Government	Wales
Owen	Service Manager	Youth Offending Services	Cardiff and Vale
Andrea	Substance misuse worker	Youth Offending Services	West Wales
Oliver	Officer	Youth Offending Services	West Wales
Wendy	Service Manager	Youth Offending Services	Cardiff and Vale
Matthew	Youth Worker	Youth Offending Services	Cardiff and Vale

In terms of geographical coverage, one third sector professional from England was interviewed as this organisation was specifically aimed at supporting families affected by criminal exploitation. The second largest category of professionals represented Cardiff and the Vale followed by Gwent, North Wales and West Glamorgan. The lowest number of interviews were undertaken with professionals from Cym Taf Morgannwg. Regarding sector, most professionals were from third sector organisations. Professionals from this sector were divided between those who had been commissioned to deliver services by Children's Services or the police, and representatives of charities or voluntary groups that had been established by professionals with an interest or personal experience of exploitation. The next highest sector was Children's Services followed by the police.

## 4.0 How does child exploitation manifest in Wales? Findings from professionals

Findings revealed three ways in which child criminal exploitation manifests in Wales: county lines, blurred lines, and localised dealing. Generally, professionals from law enforcement, youth work and those with specialised exploitation roles adopted the broader term, 'child criminal exploitation' to encompass all three manifestations. Conversely, other professionals differentiated between county lines, which they perceived to include exploitation, and local drug dealing, which in their view, did not. This highlighted differences in the terminology adopted and perceived differences in the nature and perpetrators of exploitation.

### 4.1 County lines, blurred lines and local drug supply

While the majority of professionals alluded to a distinction between county lines and more localised drug supply, further analysis revealed three modes of drug supply across Wales: county lines, blurred lines and local drug supply. These three models were driven by ongoing demand for drugs from a market that included existing users, weekend users and students who wanted to buy a range of substances from cannabis to cocaine, ecstasy tablets, Ketamine, MDMA, and Spice. Following the Covid-19 pandemic there had been an increase in the sale of prescription medications, this included Xanax in South Wales and Diazepam in North Wales. Caluori et al (2020) reported that they witnessed the adaptation of the county lines model in real time in North Wales, with county lines groups altering their use of transport, accommodation and vulnerable people during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings lend some support to Harding's evolutionary typology (2020) in terms of market consolidation and product diversification. However, professionals appeared more likely to report the presence of county lines and child criminal exploitation where it involved Harding's (2020a) commuting model and as such children being trafficked into Wales carrying drugs, money or weapons. The extent to which children were perceived as being criminally exploited was less well-defined in relation to blurred lines or local drug supply. While the latter reflected traditional drug supply, or 'pre-county county lines' in Harding's (2020a) terminology, blurred lines emerged as a new model of drug supply where existing crime families imitated the county lines models. The term blurred lines was coined by Cullen et al. (2020) and defined as:

When local groups, often youths, mimic the activity of external gangs dealing class A drugs locally, using exploitation and violence but without actually travelling out of the area. For example, although there appears to be no external county lines run by gangs into some parts of Wales, the characteristic model of using children as a workforce by local crime groups appears to be in place. (Cullen et al., 2020: 11)

According to professionals, blurred lines constituted 'export areas' where drugs were held and managed prior to distribution into import areas across Wales for sale to the customer (National Crime Agency, 2017). Export areas were operated by local people rather than external networks and as such, some professionals differentiated this from county lines even where areas had a 'line' e.g. the Barry line, they tended to be perceived as 'just drug running, old fashioned, sort of, running

the drugs' (Joshua). Nevertheless, some blurred lines had started to adopt a similar model to the county lines drug networks exhibiting the same levels of violence in order to maintain control over the area against threats from county lines networks.

Finally, several professionals alluded to local drug supply which was primarily viewed in relation to family-based groups, or crime families following the traditional drug supply model (Harding, 2020a). In these communities, professionals deemed criminality as normalised for children. Some children were drawn into these activities as they sought to emulate older siblings or cousins or where they were encouraged to learn the 'family business' (Gemma). In this respect professional perceptions as to how children became involved in criminality was related to the binary distinction between victim and perpetrator (Cullen et al, 2020). Yet, Leah posited that even where children grow up in families or regions where criminality is normalised, this may not be a conscious choice by the young person as they may be forced by family members or unwittingly duped into dropping off a package on behalf of a relative:

I can think of one particular family where there's one of the ring leaders, he's the younger brother, of known drug dealers so that's all he's known, so as soon as he's got to 15 or 16 years, his brothers have got him running for them. (Leah)

Some children had been subjected to threats or actual violence if they refused, as Megan described, 'the lad had been beaten up because he'd been refusing to go out and deal for his father'. Where children were exploited into the family business, professionals noted challenges around 'breaking the cycle' (Bethan). Moreover, it was noted that once children had a criminal record this rendered them trapped within exploitation. Therefore, many professionals deemed the term county lines to be problematic as it can serve to obscure the different manifestations of child criminal exploitation and the extent to which the nature of the criminal behaviours and risks to children are the same (Olver and Cockbain, 2021, Bonning and Cleaver, 2020). Moreover, the adoption of the term 'county lines' may detract attention from children who are exploited by individuals in their local community or family members.

## 4.2 Gendered perspectives

In addition to the potential limitations of adopting the term 'county lines', findings also revealed that the separation of child criminal exploitation from child sexual exploitation was unhelpful. Some professionals alluded to gendered notions of exploitation. This is perhaps not surprising given that the majority of professionals reported working with higher numbers of criminally exploited boys. Nevertheless, findings suggested that the number of criminally exploited girls was increasing. One police representative reported that around half of cases involved girls (Chloe). Despite this increase, many professionals demonstrated gendered perspectives with girls considered to be less likely to be criminally exploited than boys and where boys were considered to be 'more open to child criminal exploitation' (Fiona). Implicit within this statement was a notion of agency where girls were seen to be victims whereas boys were seen to be more active participants in the process. As a result, some professionals perceived boys to have been 'recruited', rather than 'groomed', into child criminal exploitation as Ryan described:

We spoke to colleagues and everyone else, and they thought we had two heads on, and they were saying well you know it's not grooming is it, it's recruitment

and we said, well would you say that about a child that's been recruited for CSE? You wouldn't, you would say groomed. (Ryan)

Hence, the adoption of a gendered approach meant there was a tendency to link girls with sexual exploitation and boys with criminal exploitation. The consequences of this were twofold. First, boys appeared less likely to be asked about or disclose sexual exploitation. This included plugging, where drugs are concealed within the gastro-intestinal tract:

And if you don't put them there yourself they will hold you down and insert them themselves, they don't care, and when you look at gender, male, female, more places to hide them, they'll put them there, they don't care. So, you're looking at injury potentially, degrading treatment, sexual assaults that take place. (Craig)

Where boys were found with the paraphernalia needed for plugging, such as Vaseline and condoms, Ryan noted that they were more likely to boast about the number of girlfriends they had rather than disclose that they were being exploited. But rather than being perceived as victims of sexual abuse or exploitation, many professionals reported that boys are deemed to have agency in their involvement. This was summarised by Olivia:

Part of criminal exploitation is sexual exploitation when they're made to insert into their back passage or you get things like spooning where they actually physically take it out. It's horrendous. But people lose sight of that kind of aspect ... we'll call them drug dealers, they're dealing. They're not dealing. They're being exploited. (Olivia)

The adoption of gendered interpretations could also negatively impact girls. By associating girls with sexual exploitation there was a risk that where girls were being criminally exploited this could go undetected,

I think girls constantly go under the radar, I mean, I, for example, had a referral for a young lad and there was a girl with him and they didn't do anything about her. They stopped and searched him, sent her home, she was 14, female, with him, referred him in, and I said, what about the girl, and they actually admitted to me, we don't actually always think about the girls. (Megan)

Nonetheless, the majority of professionals reported that girls could be criminally exploited, and in many cases professionals perceived this in terms of what Barnardo's (2014) have termed the 'boyfriend model' where exploiters groom girls through the establishment of normal relationships. Several examples of the criminal exploitation of girls were presented, with some girls having risen above the rank of runner into more senior roles within the drug network. Therefore, reiterating professional concerns about the term county lines, a few professionals highlighted that gendered notions could obscure the nature of criminality and abuse that exploited children suffered, as John explained:

County lines is not just straight drug running, it's forcing people into sexual exploitation, you know, boys and girls, men and women. It's forcing them to do other things than run drugs, it's forcing them into stealing, it's forcing them into

labour. You know, because there is no such thing as a single victim on this, a single category, normally if you've got a victim, they've been exploited in lots of ways. (John)

Consequently, some professionals, particularly those in law enforcement or specialist child criminal exploitation roles, questioned the usefulness of the distinction between child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation. Hence, this report adopts the term 'child exploitation' to reflect the range of perpetrators, criminal activities, and the range of physical and sexual abuse children suffer when they have been exploited.

## 5.0 What makes children vulnerable to exploitation? Findings from children

### 5.1 Youth culture and materialism

The majority of children had been exploited into criminality with the promise of money. Drug dealing activities offered children the opportunity to be included in the mainstream consumerism displayed by the lifestyles and branded attire worn by popular rap artists portrayed in the media (cf. Young, 1999). Consequently, children who were unable to afford such items were clearly visible and at risk of feeling socially excluded. Children reported that exploiters capitalised on the lack of financial and social capital (Bourdieu, 1985), targeting children who either lacked the means to buy expensive goods or those who were attracted by the promise of an extravagant lifestyle:

Like drug dealers, they bribe them with like the best phone, like, nice tracksuits, nice shoes, like stuff like that ... Like kids my age, if they're seeing, like someone, say in a nice tracksuit, like £1,000 tracksuit, £1,000 coat, £500 shoes, £1,000 iPhone or just like a, or if someone else offered them just a ... job, they would probably pick the, like the tracksuits and that. (Cameron)

Implicit within this offer was that making money was easy. Children stated that children do not perceive the risks to themselves, either because they perceive themselves to be 'the big man' as Isaac describes below, or because they do not believe it will happen to them. Indeed, there was a sense that children are targeted during the period of early adolescence where self-regulatory competence has yet to develop (Steinberg, 2004). According to Isaac this was compounded by the seeming lack of sanctions that can be employed against children:

If anyone tries to slap you up it's illegal, like your mum, teachers, if anyone tries to do anything you can report them. You get me. Here you could do like, for them, for 14-year-olds, 15-year-olds, myself, they could do whatever they want. That's what they think. That's what they think. They think I'm the boss now. I can do this; I can do that. I can smoke, I'm a big man. I want a girl. I want to do this, you get me. I want to go to parties. That's what they think. That's what they want. I want to drink; I want to make friends. (Isaac)

Yet, children were aware of the sanctions that could be used against them by the people who were exploiting them:

They told me how much I needed to give them. They'd say, you fuck up and you pay for it. If you're dealing weed locally [for a local dealer] and fuck up you might get a slap. But this is different. You fuck up with them [county lines] and I think you're dead. (Liam)

Participants reported that children continued their involvement even after being subjected to serious violence.

## 5.2 Education instability

In support of previous findings an association was found between child criminal exploitation and instability in school or college, through fixed term or permanent exclusions and/or absenteeism (Children’s Commissioner, 2019; Clarke, 2019; Youth Violence Commission, 2018). Regarding educational instability and exclusion this appeared to be linked with a range of factors including bullying, additional learning needs and/or issues around behaviour. According to several children, absenteeism could be used as a warning sign of potential child criminal exploitation as they described the journey from decreasing attendance rates, to staying out late, through to a distancing between themselves from family members. Findings showed that increased absenteeism and distancing from school and further education was also true where children had previously achieved well at school. Disengagement and distancing from school coupled with a history of challenging behaviour was found to be the cause of school exclusion for children in the Rapid Evidence Assessment (Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Gwent, 2020) in Newport, Wales. Hence increased absenteeism may be the precursor to exclusion.

They basically kicked me out. And I thought, “Yeah, there’s no hope” and I literally felt absolute crap. So since then – I just went on a crazy one (Jordan).

This could serve to fuel susceptibility to exploitation as children became excluded from opportunities afforded by education as well as socially excluded from their peer groups. Moreover, school exclusion gives a young person more time to engage with negative peer groups and criminal activities (Smith and Hughes, 2019).

## 5.3 Peer influence

The influence of peer pressure and negative comments from close friends was emphasised by children at risk of exploitation. This group reported that children often strive to retain friendships and status which can lead to the imitation of bad behaviours including involvement in drug dealing activities or other forms of criminality. Jordan described the subtle process of grooming and recruitment which ‘older boys’, or drug dealers, embarked upon:

Some people see these groups of boys outside their house – always chilling and money and drinking - and they think that’s the right way to live their lifestyle. So for example, let’s say there’s a gang outside your house. A group of boys wearing nice clothes and what not. So young kids are always looking at them as their idols. Some of them, they even give the youngsters some money. Some little change. So when they grow up – it’s like they have this respect and love for that person. It could be as little as one pound, two pound or five or ten. (Jordan)

In some ways this process is akin to a parent-child relationship, where the older boys give children pocket money. This process builds trust and develops a relationship through which exploitation can occur. Indeed, having established themselves as idols, Jordan went on to describe how children approached the exploiters asking if they could ‘work’ for them:

And they said, “Yeah, I want to be with you.” And then it comes to that point – they go, “I need money.” Alright. “Can I work for you?” That’s the first question

they ask you. And then you're like, "Yeah." You don't approach them. Don't approach them because you need to know what they're like. Are they going to snitch? There's so much to it. Yeah. (Jordan)

The influence of peers is particularly salient during early adolescence (Innovation Unit, 2019).

## 5.4 Debt bondage

As well as giving children pocket money, cannabis was used as a hook for exploitation. This occurred in two ways, either through introducing children to cannabis or reinforcing the young person's existing use. In terms of vulnerability, findings from Dame Black's Review of Drugs (2020) demonstrated that children known to children's services and deemed to be gang-affiliated were eight times more likely to use drugs. Drug use was also used to block out or forget problems. For Isaac, this followed physical abuse from his father and his feelings of being unloved and misunderstood:

Me, what I'm thinking in my head right now, because time ago I was thinking in my head like no-one used to love me, nobody used to love me, the crack used to love me, the weed used to love me, you get me. No-one used to love me.

In these cases, drug dealers used 'strapping' or 'on tick', where children were given drugs and allowed to pay for them later, to draw the young person into debt:

So they will target them. So they will start scoring from them, there are girls on a bag a week, I've seen it, can I crash at yours and then a week or two later, she's on a 5 a day habit and she can't afford to pay for it so they put her on the game. (Rob)

Children reported that the potential for violent consequences for losing money or drugs was explicit. This was particularly pertinent in engaging with the police, as 'if the police took £500-stuff-worth off them, then the children would have to pay dealers £500' (Cameron). When this occurred the '...boy then has to go and explain that they've had the stuff taken off them. That's when it gets nasty' (Rob). Being given the chance to sell drugs in order to repay debts can be an appealing alternative to the violent consequences of debt bondage, including kidnapping, sexual violence, and torture (Robinson, McClean and Densely, 2019).

## 6.0 How are children involved in these activities? Findings from parents

Findings revealed that while parents had noticed changes in their child's attitudes, behaviours and peer groups, a lack of knowledge about exploitation meant that in most cases this was not identified. These changes were compounded by the age at which children are targeted as adolescence is normally associated with changes in behaviour and a move towards independence. Hence most parents rationalised initial shifts in behaviour to adolescence, perceiving it to be a normal stage of development towards the forging of their child's own identity. This rationalisation was heightened by the manner in which grooming occurs. Findings suggested that the grooming process includes several different stages, although not always in the sequence Celeste described:

So it was almost like baby steps because the behaviour changes started, then the violence, extreme violence against me, and just disengaging with family and education and other activities. So it's almost like a step-by-step process. And then at that point, there was a lot of missing episodes to the point where it was really unexplainable in terms of where he was going and who he was with.  
(Celeste)

Considered in isolation, each step could be attributed to particular circumstances or triggers such as teenage mood swings, natural detachment from family or challenges within education. A common theme was parental disbelief that this could happen to their child or that their child could be involved in such serious activities. Several parents explicitly stated that they did not want to know what activities their child had been involved in. In this sense, parents struggled with the knowledge that exploitation had rendered their child both a victim and perpetrator. Indeed, even after many years parents expressed shock and disbelief that this could have happened to their child and their family. Most parents described trying to 'get back' the child they had before the exploitation occurred:

Trying to get back the child that I had, which was a respectful, a kind, a loving child, because he turned completely, like a disastrous monster, you know, it was just awful. (Celeste)

Hence, the sample were unanimous that this could happen to any child regardless of family circumstances or financial means.

### 6.1 Transitions

Findings highlighted three main transitions that could have a negative impact on a young person's vulnerability: primary to secondary transition, managed moves and transition to college. First, reference was made to the transition from primary to secondary education as this denoted a period where children may change and extend their existing peer groups. Indeed some children may struggle to form new peer groups, especially those with quieter personalities or additional learning needs as numerous smaller primary schools coalesce into one larger secondary school. Helen

noted that some secondary school children are specifically targeted regardless of which school they attend:

No, he didn't struggle with the change or anything. I think it was just a thing that was going on where children are targeted in the secondary school ... certain groups of children in different secondary schools all close to each other, and even if your child is at another school a child from another school would still get in contact with your child. (Helen)

In a few cases, parents had discovered that their own adult friends had groomed their children. Consequently parents were unsure who to trust. This highlighted the extent to which drug dealers had infiltrated the lives of exploited children and their families. There was also evidence that drug dealers mined the contacts from children's phones so they could extend their dealing activities. Once groomed, children were given burner phones through which they received instructions as to where to drop off quantities of drugs (ranging from weed to Class A substances).

The notion that certain groups of children were targeted, supported national findings that have shown an increase in the recruitment of children from affluent backgrounds as a strategy to evade police detection (The Children's Society, 2019; Home Office, 2018; Hudek, 2018). This was further supported by Jay who noted that there was no obvious financial incentive for their child to become involved:

Because he's quite privileged in the fact that he has everything from home anyway. He's obviously got mum and dad, both working. He has exactly what he wants, he has all of the trainers he needs or whatever clothes, so he's never needed or wanted for anything. (Jay)

Second, children who had experienced managed school moves represented a vulnerable group. School exclusion may serve to decrease the young person's confidence, sense of belonging and disrupts existing peer networks. Further, placement in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) can lead to a reduced timetable which means giving the young person more time to themselves. Indeed, it was suggested that some children are encouraged to misbehave in school so that they will be placed in a Pupil Referral Unit for this reason, *"It goes as far as misbehaving at school so that he would get put in a PRU, because they know that a PRU is less hours"* (Celeste). Once there, Jake stated that, *"it's like you open them to the wolves"* as drug dealers capitalise on the young person's feelings of low self-worth and increased availability:

Once someone's, you know, giving you certain things and telling you you're good when you've been told you're shit at school and you're no good, it's easy to build that sort of, yes, that feeling of being part of something and feeling important and respected by an adult. (Jake)

The impact of transition and school moves were also apparent at the further education level. It was suggested that drug dealers may infiltrate further education establishments by obtaining a place on one of the courses purely to recruit new entrants (Lillian). This reinforced the notion that exploiters manipulated periods in the young person's life where their social network was disrupted and when they are actively seeking a new group and the sense of belonging. Findings from Cullen et al. (2019) have also shown a shift towards the grooming of university students due to an

increase in student drug use. This has been particularly highlighted in areas where universities are close to major towns and where campuses are easily accessible.

## 6.2 Indoctrination

Indoctrination emerged as a core theme across all the interviews. According to parents this began in the manner in which grooming occurs and is then reinforced through the notion that peers are 'family'. One parent provided an in-depth description of how their son had been befriended by someone only a few years older:

It's like a relationship, because at that age if your girlfriend buys you something you go for dinner, you know, it's like that, it's fucking weird. He would just be, like, yes, he takes me out for food, that's a big thing this food, he takes me out for food, let's get some food and stuff. Like, yes, it's just the relationship builder, it doesn't matter what a kid has got, it's being made to feel important and powerful, isn't it, at a young age when you've had that taken away (Jake).

These relationship building activities were used to develop trust and create the circumstances where children look up to the people who exploit them, perceiving them to be friends, role models and in some cases father figures; even though they may only be a few years older than the child (Clayman and Skinns, 2012). In this sense, county lines group members can have 'quasi-celebrity' status within the community (Storrod and Densely, 2017). In doing so, grooming was presented as a sophisticated process which placed the responsibility on the young person as they perceived their involvement to be a conscious choice to join the peer group and adopt the lifestyle. Grooming also served to undermine existing parent-child relationships and a disconnect the child and their family,

What happened, they really, really drum into them, the people they get involved with, that we're your family now, your family is non-existent, your family is nothing, they don't do anything for you, we will look after you (Zoe).

There was some evidence that this disconnection was reinforced in two ways. First, where parents challenged their child's behaviours or attempted to impose boundaries or sanctions. In these circumstances, children challenged whether their parents actually loved them and emphasised how it was only their new 'family' that really understood and cared about them. Second, it was suggested that children may be coached in techniques to deter their parents from seeking support. Elaine described how she called her son's bluff when he had threatened to report her for abuse if she contacted the police or Children's Services.

## 6.3 Missing episodes

Missing episodes was deemed to be "*the biggest clue of all*" (Anita). Indeed, going missing has been established as a key indicator of exploitation and should be used as a warning sign that a child is being exploited or an attempt to evade their exploiters (Bonning and Cleaver, 2020, Wigmore, 2018, , 2017, Sturrock and Holmes, 2015). Differences were noted in the distance travelled by children during missing episodes with some sent large distances away from home while others were staying in local trap houses. In some cases, first episodes of going missing were

linked to a particular trigger, such as a family argument. Indeed, difficulties in family relationships are one of the most common reasons a child goes missing from home (Hutchings et al., 2017). Findings also showed that missing episodes could be a gradual process from staying away from home with friends as Becky described:

He just started to disappear and not come home, to the point where I originally thought, alright, he's just going through some teenage stuff and he was staying at a couple of different friends' ... I knew he was safe and made sure he had food and whatever and he was coming home very sporadically. But then he stopped staying at those two friends' and I didn't know where he was. (Becky)

In addition to normal teenage stuff, changes in behaviour were attributed to specific issues such as parental separation, negative peer influence, or difficulties at school. This meant that initially parents rationalised these behaviours and dismissed them as a reaction to the changing family circumstances. This highlighted a consistent theme across parent interviews where parents were aware that their child was behaving out of character, but with little to no knowledge of child criminal exploitation, other explanations were posited.

Findings were mixed in relation to the pattern of missing episodes with some children gone for a 24-hour period whereas others were missing for weeks. The majority of parents described not knowing where their child was or who they were with. Many described having made repeated attempts to contact their child to persuade them to come home and check whether they were still alive. In two cases, parents had received Snapchat videos of their child. For Becky the video showed, *“where he was in a [trap] house with what looks like drug addicts and some other children”* (Becky), while Ella had received a video of her child being harmed, *“he got beaten up, he was attacked ... filmed it and then I got sent the video of it. It was awful and he ended up in hospital”*. Where parents described patterns of frequent, shorter episodes there appeared to be little they could do in requesting support from the police or other services:

By then I think someone ... was sending him even further away and that's when I had to start saying *“Look, he's disappearing just for 24 hours”* but that's where the loopholes fell for me. They [services] said *“Well, he always comes back the next day, so it's not classed as missing and I thought okay then, so I can't literally do anything.”* (Kiara)

This posited a significant challenge to parents as they were unable to obtain support from the police in returning their children home. Even when the police did respond, the young person was not classed as missing if they said they were staying with friends. Moreover, findings demonstrated that when children went missing either the young person or a peer sent a text message to parents assuring them that their child was okay. In one case, the need to maintain communication meant that the parent had forged links with the exploiters purely so they could check their child was safe.

## 6.4 Violence

Violence was a consistent theme across the findings. Many parents had experienced violence and threatening behaviour from their children. In addition, several parents had experienced threatening visits by drug dealers at work or at home. There was a sense that serious violence was an expected

part of drug dealing activities manifesting in three ways. First, parents noted the use of violence carried out as part of initiation ceremonies. Second, violence was used to exert power and control over children. This included threats of violence towards children and their families:

They will just give instructions, of where to go or they'll, you know, in most cases threaten them. Because I remember my son used to come to me and say, "Mum, you don't understand, he's bigger than you, he's bigger than everybody. I can't explain, Mum, it's too much. I can't, Mum, just please, trust me, trust me." But I could see the fear in his eyes. (Amanda)

Findings also demonstrated that children were often victims of actual violence. This included being beaten with metal implements, stabbed and slashed in the face. One parent recalled they thought that this would have signalled an end to their child's involvement yet reported that "*it didn't, it made it worse*". Third, power and control were assigned to children. This was aligned with advancement through the hierarchy as children moved from being 'runners' around the age of 13, where they collected and delivered drugs, to 'elders', involved in the recruitment and trafficking of other children around the age of 15. This included being responsible for a trap house.

You know, they desensitise to it all, it's called food, you're giving them their food, they're the addicts, the government aren't helping them, we're giving them a service, and that's how it's sold to them. So, everything is desensitised to that point and you're given power at that age that you're in control. (Jake)

This control involved children as young as 14 years exerting control over drug addicts in their 30's and 40's. Research findings have shown that where children are criminally exploited they can be both the victims and perpetrators of violence (Maxwell et al, 2019). The use of debt bondage can render children increasingly desperate in their attempts to pay off these debts or retain their status as they feel trapped in a situation where there is no help available to them (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018).

# 7.0 Effective approaches and interventions for child criminal exploitation. Findings from professionals

## 7.1 Community-based approaches.

According to professionals, child criminal exploitation necessitated new ways of working, as current safeguarding responses tended to be based on ‘kids under 12, or where there’s family abuse’ (Nick) rather than extrafamilial harm and risks posed in the wider community. Findings suggested that some local authorities had already begun working to address extra-familial harm but it has only relatively recently been given the name, ‘contextual safeguarding’ as a set of principles that can be used to guide the safeguarding of peer groups and places rather than focusing on an individual young person. What appeared to be new, was the establishment of multi-agency strategy meetings focused on exploitation and increased consideration of places where children may be more susceptible to exploitation (All Wales Practice Guidance, 2018). These child-focused meetings were aimed at producing a set of agreed upon actions that went beyond risk management to include consideration of the child’s overall well-being and prevention of future harm. Adoption of a wider stance enabled the connection of seemingly disparate information in order to identify particular negative peer groups and/or places where children were at risk. Mixed findings emerged in the mechanisms that services used to do this. Broadly speaking, three themes were identified. First, in some local authorities this was undertaken through a primary professional whose role enabled them to collate and share information with other professionals and across agencies:

I may speak to a young person who may only give me one name, if that, but then I might go and speak to another young person, maybe a week down the line, and they maybe give me some more information. So, it is about collating that information together and then, obviously, what I do with that information, I share that within children’s services and I also share it with the police. And, if it’s an out of county young person I share that with their local authority ... It’s like being a detective, basically, and figuring out the clues (Faith).

This echoed findings from Catch 22’s report on gang involvement in England (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015:46) where professionals likened their approach to ‘bringing together the pieces of a jigsaw; without a specific multi-agency focus on the issue, children could easily fall through the cracks’. This required the need to adopt a patient, consistent approach to build a trusting relationship with children and enabling them to share information they felt comfortable disclosing.

Second, other local authorities had more formally adopted contextual safeguarding principles and established processes to facilitate this. This included the creation of peer and/or place mapping that existed alongside individual child care and support plans. In these areas, the aim was to disrupt exploitation by creating safe places and spaces for children. For Olivia, this was denoted by a change in her working practice:

When I first started, it's really hard not to get into your social work assessment brain, because you're so used to doing the same flow, you're following the same legislation, the same guidance and it doesn't tell you to think about their peer network and it doesn't tell you to think about the community that they're spending time in. It tells you, "What's mam doing, what's nan doing and what's school doing?" and that's it. (Olivia)

A potential challenge of this approach was how best to collate and understand this information so that risk indicators were assigned appropriately and kept up to date.

You need to be very explicit in terms of what kind of risks that we're looking at and that, if say ten people are on a list the police see that and they don't automatically think they're all going to go out and stab someone, actually, one of them might be really bad and the rest might just be associated by postcode or something. So, that already has been an issue I think in that sense. (Yvonne)

Similar findings have been reported by Wroe (2021), who found that this process is reliant upon the simplification of the complexities of children's lives and then the translation of identified risks into work with the young person by multi-agency partners who often have conflicting priorities. Findings from Lefevre et al. (2020) found that implementation of contextual safeguarding in the London Borough of Hackney was associated with improvements in the assessment of extrafamilial risk and harm. However, they concluded that it was too early to determine the impact of contextual safeguarding and child level outcomes.

Finally, some areas had encompassed consideration of peers and places within exploitation strategy meetings. These conversations were undertaken between the different agencies present at the meeting and enabled the development of plans that could be used to disrupt exploitation activities or working together to make places safe for children such as adding appropriate lighting or increasing police presence in particular areas. The challenges across all three approaches included the need for buy-in from all agencies, the establishment of information sharing agreements and avoiding duplication of work so that children were not repeatedly asked the same questions by different professionals.

Aligned with the consideration of the environment surrounding a young person and their relationships with peers was the need for community acceptance of children using places and spaces:

There's a difference between hanging around in a bus shelter and being a large group of kids joking and doing what kids do, as opposed to being threatening, and causing damage, and causing problems, and the public struggle to see the difference between those two. (Nick)

Several professionals highlighted this difference in relation to McDonald's as a commonly identified place for children to congregate. On one hand, it was noted that McDonald's was popular with children as it provided access to free Wi-Fi and provided a place for them to meet friends. On the other hand, where children were constantly popping out to cars then this was identified as a problem as they could be using it as a base to deal drugs. Rather than preventing children from spending time in McDonald's most professionals reported the need to make this space safe for

children by disrupting exploitation and training staff in safeguarding. The findings alluded to the need for cultural change where community members contribute to safeguarding and accept children need places to spend time. Against this background, the 'decimation' (Faith) of youth clubs and youth services was noted as both a safe space for children and as a way of supporting vulnerable children and stopping them from 'falling through the cracks' (Faith). Indeed, findings from the YMCA (2020) revealed that spending on youth services, which include universal services such as leisure, culture and youth centres as well as targeted services for vulnerable groups, have reduced by more than a quarter in all areas of Wales since 2010/11. Hence, the need for preventative community-based youth services was emphasised.

## 7.2 Service-based approaches.

Findings revealed that the nature of statutory service provision can serve as a barrier to engaging children in four main ways: the manner in which children are identified as being at risk or involved in exploitation, responses to children who are looked after, service thresholds, and multi-agency working.

### 7.2.1 Identifying children

Generally, findings revealed professional preference for early intervention as this was perceived to be more effective than attempting to divert children away once they were 'embroiled' in exploitative relationships. Mixed responses emerged in relation to the extent to which schools identified children at risk of exploitation. While it was suggested that teachers were able to spot 'red flags' (Ava), visible indicators tended to include absenteeism or behavioural issues. This placed the onus on teaching staff to go beyond the overt behaviours elicited by the child to identify evidence of potential exploitation away from the school environment. Similarly, children who were looked after and living independently in semi-supported living arrangements may become known to Children's Services due to 'concerning patterns of behaviour' (Mark). In practice, this meant that by the time professionals were alerted to potential exploitation this was often after the young person was already involved:

They [schools] would see on the surface that they were potentially at risk but then, once workers were involved, they were already involved in drug trafficking, running - all of that already. (Abigail)

This was associated with children's inability or reluctance to divulge exploitation to professionals (discussed in more detail later).

Regarding police involvement, this tended to be either in response to missing episodes or where a young person had been identified committing an offence or through a police operation. Despite differences in the manner in which the police forces in Wales operated, it was noted that all four forces had implemented specialised child criminal exploitation teams. This meant that where the police were involved in missing episodes a multi-agency strategy meeting was held either where a young person was found at an address and suspected of being exploited or where a young person had three missing episodes. Where children were previously unknown to services, the missing episode could 'open a whole can of worms' (Amy) whereas children known to services appeared to

evoke a more preventative response to avoid escalation. The importance of return interviews was highlighted in relation to establishing why the young person had gone missing:

So, we do try and find those reasons, and very much get from the young person's point of view to identify themselves those reasons, rather than making assumptions, which sounds really obvious, but I think sometimes that does happen, doesn't it, that people think, oh well, they went missing because they're this, this or whatever, so that's really important for our scheme. (Jane)

Where missing episodes were deemed to be in response to a breakdown in family relationships, several professionals referred to the use of mediation to re-establish relationships. Where children who were looked after went missing from care homes, this was linked to restricted information sharing between agencies and the extent to which the service receiving the referral was made aware of the potential risks for the young person.

Many professionals noted a gap in the extent to which professionals sought information regarding where children had been, who they were with and what activities they had been involved in. Wider research findings have demonstrated inconsistencies in the use of return interview across local authorities, with children from out of area placements more likely to receive poor provision (All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017). It was suggested that more focus was needed on the pursuit of those individuals responsible for exploiting children,

Because, otherwise, a child is going to be forever, you know, used in that scenario by those adults. Until you take those adults away, the child's just going to continue to go around in that cycle, which is what's happening. (Freya)

Therefore, it was suggested that increased use of investigation was a vital safeguarding tool. This was particularly pertinent where children were found to be in possession of drugs, money or weapons obtaining an arrest and conviction was deemed relatively easy:

It is literally all there, because they would have been caught in possession of either drugs, cash, or both. Often other things as well, like a phone line with messages on sort of directing them or requesting to purchase drugs. Often, they would have been seen involved in a transaction and the commodity would have been recovered from the other person (Noah).

There was some evidence to suggest that the police were beginning to target their actions beyond children to the elders and above. In the meantime, where children became known to the police through an arrest, intelligence or through a police operation, a referral was made to Children's Services.

### **7.2.2 Children who are looked after**

Findings revealed that young people who are or who become looked after may have heightened susceptibility to exploitation as drug networks manipulate their desire for a sense of belonging and the opportunity to earn money. According to Mark, this was compounded where young people believed that the benefits of involvement outweighed the risks. In this respect, young people may perceive the drug network as a 'family and support network that they might not have had if they

were in care' (Yvonne). More specifically, findings revealed four main groups of children who were looked after. First, young people in foster care were reported as having heightened vulnerability as some young people experience foster care breakdowns around the age of 14. In these situations, they may be placed in supported accommodation.

If anyone is going to be recruited that's where they come from, it really is unfortunate and as soon as they go into that supported accommodation that's, I dread it when they say that's where they're going, I really do, because what happens in those buildings is awful. (Robert)

Allied to placement breakdowns, it was noted that where young people experienced multiple placement breakdowns this can leave them 'dipping in and out of either sofa surfing or a bed and breakfast sometimes, or they're back on the streets' (Lyra). Second, where young people experienced family breakdown around the age of 16 they can become looked after. According to Leah, in these instances, young people may be accommodated in a hostel, after having presented themselves as homeless to Children's Services:

So, the very nature that they're in the hostels at 16, they've probably not got the best of backgrounds and so when I get to meet them, when I get informed about them, they are usually quite far down the path anyway because they've been living with their parents and not having a great time of it. (Leah)

Third, unaccompanied asylum seekers may be placed in semi-independent living at the age of 15. This group emerged as particularly vulnerable as they have limited social and economic capital rendering them susceptible to exploitation (Mark). Findings highlighted the need for greater awareness of the different forms of accommodation so that housing decisions could be made on the basis of what was best for the young person. Fourth, young people may be accommodated away from larger cities in England to care homes in Wales. This emerged as particularly noteworthy given the number of care homes in some regions. In support of findings from Caluori et al. (2020), a lack of information sharing was highlighted from the placing local authority as well as to other organisations in the placement area. Consequently, care home staff may not be informed about the potential risks surrounding young people. In some cases this only came to light after the young person went missing. For police, this often meant that they were unaware they had young people in their area who may have been embedded in county lines.

He was placed in a care home in our force area and within a day or two he had managed to get somebody to pick him up, take him back to wherever in a vehicle. So it's those kind of things you know. I don't know, I don't think there's a robust process in place with moving children from one part of the country to the other and the risks and the risk management around that child. (Chloe)

While Chloe highlighted the need for a robust risk management process, the above quote alluded to how the young person 'managed to get somebody to pick him up'. This reflected a perceived sense of the young person's agency in their actions rather than a response to being placed a large distance away from the home area (Nick). While findings suggested that this was a minority view, several professionals alluded to the young person's agency. For example, Lyra noted that where young people are placed in hostels following family breakdown they are 'legally free, they go well of the rails because they are not living at home anymore, they can do what they want'. This notion

of doing what they want was also associated with the limited liberty and freedom young people are awarded when they are looked after. This was introduced by Melissa:

He was away for a week and it was outrageous what they got him to do ... but he had a big adventure. His life was boring and being in the city, it was just, it was parties and getting out ... his life was isolated, boring, dull. Young people in care don't necessarily have the liberty and freedom to party and play in the same way, they really don't. (Melissa)

While this highlighted a vulnerability that could be exploited, Melissa alluded to the young person actively seeking excitement especially as she went on to query 'what has gone in your world' for the apparent lack of remorse exhibited by the young person. In this respect, looked after young people sometimes as young as 14 years of age - were described as 'streetwise' and who knew 'exactly what they are doing' (Georgia). Conversely other professionals noted that young people may not always understand the severity or consequences of their actions. This was also manipulated by exploiters as they minimised criminal activities.

When they're recruiting the young people, they're minimising things, like, "All I want you to do is take this to there," you know, they're not saying I want you to go and tax this guy from this thousands of pounds worth of drugs with this knife are they, because no young person in their right mind would say yes, I'll sign up for that (Andrea)

Similarly, Melissa's young person rationalised their activities on the basis that there was no individual victim. This supports findings from interviews with parents who commented on the language their children used, such as 'feeding' drug users rather than supplying them with addictive substances.

### 7.2.3 Service thresholds

Where children were identified as at risk or involved in exploitation, service thresholds emerged as a barrier to engaging with children. The potential for children to slip through the net due to current social care service thresholds has been noted elsewhere by the Children's Society (Turner, Belcher and Pona, 2019). Professionals highlighted social care's focus on intra-familial harm and as such, the difficulties inherent in initiating a child protection response for exploitation. This was compounded by the challenges faced by referring agencies in capturing the necessary evidence,

So, one of the other things we're picking up on is that if children don't hit that threshold of risk, that can be quite a big problem in terms of accessing services (Gemma)

Where cases had resulted in placement on the child protection register this was associated with the presence of visible risk factors. For example, one young person was placed on the register under neglect where a parent 'failed to report' (Ava) their child having gone missing overnight. According to Megan, the lack of visible risk and lack of professional knowledge of child criminal exploitation often meant that cases were not taken forward:

They're just not seeing it, I suppose, or they see the vulnerabilities but haven't got the proof, that's what they want, they want confirmed knowledge and it doesn't work like that. If there is suspicion, there is suspicion and sometimes it's very much a gut feeling, you know, and you have to continue to look at the red flags, but I think it's really easy to say it's all OK when it's not. (Megan)

As Mark explained, Children's Services require children to present with ongoing risk in order for a social worker to be assigned. Yet, exploitation may present with fluctuating risks and it can take time for the young person to divulge what is happening in their lives, 'if they're embroiled, they're embroiled, and they need intensive work for at least a year' (Megan). In practice even where cases are assigned, Children's Services is a time limited service where 'you'll get a social worker for 6 to 12 months, and that'll be it, really' (Mark). Whereas Megan noted that six months is insufficient time when children are being exploited especially as time is needed for workers to establish a relationship with the young person. The notion of developing relationships was also deemed problematic due to the high level of staff turnover which is often associated with the social care workforce (Waddell and Jones, 2018, Hussein et al., 2011,). Staff turnover can impede the development of trust with children and parents. In addition to staff absence, turnover and service hours emerged as a barrier to youth engagement. A few professionals reported that service provision that operates only during office hours may be unsuitable for addressing exploitation. This was based on the notion that 'things can happen overnight' (Ava) for exploited children necessitating an immediate response.

The difficulty again, though, with the limits of services, is that window isn't always between nine and five and often, actually, it's past five, it's in the evenings that they get to that fearful point and there is no one to actually disclose or divulge to if they are at that pressure crack moment, as well. (Ava)

Evidence from Malloch and Burgess (2011) highlighted that difficulties in accessing services and emergency duty social workers can lead to some children being held in police stations for long periods of time.

#### **7.2.4 Multi-agency working**

Multi-agency emerged as both a barrier and a facilitator in engaging with children. Findings highlighted that Children's Services in different regions and/or different local authorities had adopted different practices around child criminal exploitation. Several local authorities had adopted exploitation as an umbrella term for both child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. This was often associated with the development of specific tools aimed at the assessment and support of exploitation cases. In some cases this also led to the development of a specialised 'Exploitation Worker' role. While many professionals reported that this role worked well, it was suggested that workload demands could reduce the specialised worker's capacity to engage with children:

I would like to see some sort of scoring matrix or formula to prioritise those who are being exploited. Because, speaking to a missing person's/exploitation officer this week she said, we've got a huge cohort but I've got no way of prioritising who needs our attention and the attention of others over any other boy. (John)

This suggested the need for a triage system or the recruitment and/or training of staff to meet the demand. Although in some local authorities, peer mapping was being used to denote which children were exploiters, influencers and which ones were on the periphery. This was being used to inform levels of need and service responses.

Local differences were also noted in the nature of meetings held, ranging from missing, exploited and trafficked meetings to exploitation strategy meetings where the risks surrounding children were discussed. Generally, multi-agency strategy meetings were convened by Children's Services and attended by education, health, police, probation, youth offending services and third sector organisations such as St Giles Trust and Barnardo's. These meetings were aimed at the sharing of concerns so that a plan could be developed to address these concerns and culminated in the development of support plans. In some local authorities, but not all, this was regardless of whether the young person's needs met service thresholds. Where multi-agency meetings emerged as a potential barrier this was where children were referred to interventions from multiple agencies.

I've noticed this over the years working within the service, if a child displays that behaviour let's refer them to that service, and once the referral has gone in we've done our job because they're displaying that behaviour, they need that service. So, if a child is displaying five or six different behaviours, they'll have five or six different services. (Leah)

This was compounded where family members were also referred to services or where the need for a whole family approach had been identified. In these cases multiple professionals from multiple agencies could be involved with one family. Aligned with this was a lack of clarity around governance. This was particularly emphasised where children were subject to statutory provision from multiple agencies:

We need to compile that strategic response and pull the agencies together. So, there are some kind of disparate type of activities from the police and from Youth Justice and from Children's Services. But a lot of it is disparate, and it's not strategically pulled together or got that umbrella over it in terms of that senior leader really pulling us together, child exploitation, NRMs, what's our position, what's our principles, and so on. (Owen)

The need for a strategic response was deemed vital for coordinating the different agencies. This was particularly pertinent where children failed to reach service thresholds for statutory interventions but where school staff and/or third sector organisations were 'seeing an emerging pattern or recognising that this could be the next young person who is specifically targeted' (Ava). In these cases, it was suggested that a community, or contextual, response was needed to effect change before the situation escalated to police involvement. In doing so, heightened awareness of what services were available and their service remit was deemed to be a key component in engaging with children.

## 7.3 Engaging with children and families. Findings from professionals

In terms of professional-based approaches, two main themes emerged, working with children and working with parents. Both themes signified a shift in the traditional methods of working with children and parents. For some professionals, this included a shift from the adoption of a criminal justice perspective to one of safeguarding:

You know, we know that there's been that age old, oh well, he's drug dealing, but actually we're not seeing that as a safeguarding concern and what that actually means. (Freya)

To a large extent, this reflected embedded notions of the implied agency of adolescents and where drug dealing and other forms of youth criminality may be viewed in terms of adolescent culture or a lifestyle choice. Whereas for parents, a shift from perceiving them to be the sources of risk to an important source of information and safeguarding support was recommended.

### 7.3.1 Working with children

The vast majority of professionals noted the allure of drug dealing for children in terms of the vast sums of money that could be made and the lifestyles with which exploiters present. This was seen as particularly persuasive for children from deprived backgrounds and those who may have limited access to legitimate employment options (Spicer, 2021, Whittaker et al., 2018). Implicit within this assumption was that some children were complicit in their exploitation rather than having been victims of exploitation. This notion may be reinforced by the manner in which children presented to services, as they did not tend to represent stereotypical victims but rather, 'they think they're part of the gang. They think they're cool' (Chloe). In their small study of professionals in England, Blakeburn and Smith (2020) have also noted that children displayed 'bravado' presenting with behaviours more conducive to being a perpetrator rather than a victim. Indeed, children may be both victims and perpetrators (Bonning and Cleaver, 2020, Moyle, 2019, Whittaker, et al., 2018). Yet they may be reluctant to define themselves as vulnerable or a victim, opting instead to perceive themselves as having the agency and ingenuity to provide for themselves, especially where they lacked the legitimate means to do so (Ellis, 2018). This can serve to mask their vulnerability and need for support. This can be further exacerbated where children actively resist engagement with professionals (Shaw and Greenhow, 2020). Reluctance to disclose may also be reinforced by the manner in which professionals attempt to engage with children:

Say, for example, there are concerns, you go, you speak to the child. You just ask this child, "Right, is there anything that he or she made you do that you didn't want to do?" They're not going to just tell you so they just say, "No." And that's it, you accept it and I've done it myself as a police officer. I think back and I think, "How on earth do I expect these kids to disclose when you just turn up at the door, you ask a few questions and then you go away?" It's mad. (Chloe)

Similar findings have been reported from a study of children at risk of sexual exploitation in North Wales (Hughes and Thomas, 2016), where children demonstrated acute awareness that the return

interview followed a set script. Conversely, Chloe highlighted the need to create 'reachable moments' where services provide environments where children feel safe and able to talk to professionals. This supports research findings that have shown that reachable, or critical moments in children's lives must be accompanied by resources and opportunities to foster change (Thomson et al., 2002).

For some children age appeared to be related to engagement. Professionals reported that children over the age of 18 may be more willing to engage with professionals than those under 18. It was suggested that this is because children under 18 were more 'guarded' (Andrea) due to their concerns around initiating a child protection response. Age-based differences were also noted in relation to different sectors. For health services, children were seen by paediatric services up until the age of 16. Over the age of 16, children were treated by adult services. This was found to be a deterrent in engaging with children:

So sometimes we'll have a 16-year-old on a nine-bed ward with very elderly patients, and the whole environment just isn't conducive to disclosures. We are working with wards to try and get them into single cubicles and things like that, but it isn't always the best environment. (Jade)

While some third sector organisations reported that they worked with children up until the age of 25, Children's Services work with children until they are 18 years of age at which point they are transferred to Adult Services. According to professionals, this was somewhat arbitrary and resulted in a reduction in service provision:

You can't be one day off your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and at risk of exploitation, turn 18 and then no longer be at risk of exploitation, that just doesn't make sense. And you can't then go from making an uninformed choice at 17 to making an informed choice at 18 when you've spent the last three years being groomed. So, there is something around how ... we understand mental capacity and what that means for early adults when you've been exploited. (Nick)

By definition, by 18 children were deemed to be responsible for their actions and as such, had no formal recourse to the National Referral Mechanism. According to Holly, such a view engendered teenagers as having too much agency for their actions. These findings lend support to the concept of adultification, which refers to a more retributive model of criminal justice for children (cf. Feld, 1998). This was also associated with questions around engagement as there is currently no legal mandate to work with 18-year-olds who do not consent.

Where's your legal mandate in order to safeguard them, and that's not really been fleshed out anywhere. So, there is a problem, because if they tell you to bugger off, and they're 18, unlike in Child and Family Services where we have a legal mandate that we can intervene and that we can do things, the legal mandate in Adult Services don't really exist for those purposes. (Nick)

Consequently, the extent to which exploited children were mentally able to consent to receiving support was queried. So while some professionals cited examples of using techniques such as motivational interviewing 'just to get them on that journey' (Abigail) towards receiving help, this

was dependent upon initial engagement from the young person. Such approaches were deemed vital as children may be coached about what to say to professionals.

The exploiters are telling them, you know, they won't touch you, NRM, and they're almost teaching the child as well. If they're on a formal court order, how to manipulate, how to get out of that order; how not to engage, how to show false compliance ... They do school them in that, in terms of how to get around that aspect of having to comply and fulfil the aspects of a formal court order. (Owen)

Findings highlighted increased use of Section 45, Modern Slavery Act 2015 which provides a statutory defence for children who have been forced, threatened or deceived into criminality by their exploiters. For some professionals, heightened knowledge of Section 45 and the National Referral Mechanism was perceived to constitute the young person's false compliance. The apparent use and misuse of legislation was compounded by a current lack of professional knowledge around the assessment and management of exploitation. Moreover, several professionals cautioned against using Section 45 for children under the age of 18 as it could be used to provide them with a 'cloak of invisibility' (Noah) as:

...it means that those children are more at risk because they're not getting charged with offences because, if they keep rolling out that defence, they're not getting charged, they go back into that same pot, that same environment they were in before, where they're being made to deal drugs, they're vulnerable to violence. (Noah)

As Noah noted, while it appeared to be counterproductive, formally charging and criminalising a young person under the age of 18 increased the likelihood of a service response which is more conducive to a safeguarding approach. Yet, over the age of 18 this could result in imprisonment.

Regardless of age, where children were reluctant or unwilling to engage with professionals, findings highlighted the ease with which a young person's guilt could be assumed, especially when found with large quantities of drugs. This placed the onus upon professionals to go beyond the visible evidence and to consider how the young person had paid for the drugs, who had paid for their ticket and who had arranged for them to sell the drugs in that particular location. This highlighted the need for a 'definite shift in mindsets' (John) from the criminalisation of children to safeguarding them from exploitation:

Because once you've convicted a child then that's their life mapped out for them and regardless of how streetwise or how cocky they are when you're dealing with them, or how difficult they are when you're dealing with, they're still children and that's how we should be dealing with them. (John)

This is supported by the Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2019) which adopts a children first, offenders second approach that is aimed at the prevention of re-offending through the creation of safe environments where children are supported to thrive whilst being protected from harm. Findings also demonstrated the need for more investigative practice to look beyond children to those higher in the drug dealing chain. As Moyle (2019) has noted, many police

crackdowns inevitably lead to the arrest of street-level runners rather than those at higher levels in the county line group hierarchy.

### 7.3.2 Working with parents

Most professionals reported that few referrals were elicited from parents as they were often unaware their child was at risk or involved in exploitation. Once children were suspected or known to be exploited, limitations as to how services responded to extra-familial harm were reported. The majority of professionals reported that traditional models of child protection were adopted, underpinned by intra-familial harm where parents were viewed as the perpetrators of harm. In doing so, where children were placed on the child protection register which retained the implication that there were 'deficits in the family' (Ava) even where the exploitation was perpetrated by the young person's peers or adults unrelated to the child. This meant that,

We accidentally alienate parents who are a supportive factor because [parents are saying] 'oh, you're sitting there saying I'm a bad mum' when actually that's not what I'm saying. But now your son is on the child protection register ... which again goes against your record as if she's [Mum's] abused him when it's actually not the case (Matthew).

Such alienation could undermine professional relationships with parents. Moreover, it could place parents under increased pressure, especially where professionals signposted them to parenting courses or information on setting boundaries. It was suggested that such measures were unsuitable and ineffective,

have you ever tried to get a 16 year old boy to school, he's bigger than you, to physically get them there if they don't want to go, like, that's not fair ... not all parents are colluding or OK with what's going on, some of them are just scared stiff or just don't know how to deal with it and are not getting any help (Megan)

Findings demonstrated that current practice fails to acknowledge the challenging nature of parenting adolescents. This was seen to create tension between enabling children to have their freedom to socialise with friends and the potential for extra-familial risks. For Nick, this necessitated a change in the way in which services operate for adolescent safeguarding,

So, you've now got to come to a million meetings because of a child that you have no influence over because of other people's influence on them and the people that are influencing each other, they're nowhere to be seen. They're carrying on with their life, but I'm going to put you through this process which actually feels really critical because actually it's geared towards a different age group and a different set of circumstances, but I'm gonna put you through that anyway because that's what's open to me, and then I'm going to look in shock and horror when you tell me where to shove it.

Placing additional pressure upon families who were struggling to manage their children could result in them opting for voluntary accommodation, especially if they had other children to care for. Yet, placing children in care and disconnecting them from their families could serve to increase their ongoing vulnerability to exploitation. Therefore, current child protection practices were deemed

detrimental to working with parents as they could further stigmatise parents whose children were involved in criminality and serve to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. According to findings from the Child Practice Safeguarding Panel's (2019) national review of safeguarding children at risk of exploitation, approaches that actively involved parents in safety planning and implementation tended to be more successful. Such approaches needed to offer parents flexible support available outside office hours and delivered by skilled professionals to support them 'in knowing how best to respond to and protect their children in the challenging circumstances they face' (Child Practice Safeguarding Panel, 2019:30).

## 7.4 Exploiter-based barriers in engaging with children. Findings from parents

Following findings as to how children were groomed and involved in child criminal exploitation, the nature of exploitation emerged as a key barrier to engaging children in service provision. Within this overall theme, three sub-themes emerged regarding the strategies used to trap children within the exploitative relationship: debt bondage, distancing children from parents, and carers through indoctrination and cultivating a culture against seeking or accepting help from professionals.

In addition to the debt bondage manufactured by county lines groups where they steal packages from their own runners (Andell and Pitts, 2017) and reiterating findings from children, parents observed the link between exploitation and cannabis use. Parents reported that cannabis use was a way of rendering the young person indebted to the drug dealer. As a result, they become trapped, either having to sell drugs to fund their own personal habit or to pay off their debts. Such findings allude to the need for services to address substance misuse, yet funding for drug treatment services has reduced in recent years resulting in limited capacity and a lack of specialised clinical staff (Black, 2020).

In Helen's case, her son asked her to help him escape by paying off his debt. However, as she described below, he was not released either due the high interest rates applied to his debts or because he had been manipulated into obtaining money from her,

I thought let's just clear all these debts but then I don't know if that was a trick that they had got him to do on me or he literally was in a difficult situation where it's like "No, I've still got the debt, I've lied" it was actually more and more and I was like "Well, we're going to have to get people involved now to help me because this is literally out of control" (Helen).

In several cases, children had stolen from their parents' friends and neighbours in order to pay off their debts. While this supports findings that children have become increasingly desperate to free themselves from debt, this also served to further isolate and stigmatise both themselves and their parents from the wider community (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018, Andell and Pitts, 2017).

The notion of being trapped was also evident for parents. As county lines groups groom and exploit children by befriending them and infiltrating the child's life, this has a negative impact on parents, siblings and other members of the wider family. Yet children were often unwilling or unable to accept that they had been exploited,

Like, even though they're groomed, the first time he was sat there, "My friends, no, they wouldn't this, they wouldn't that." (Moir)

This meant that where parents attempted to address what was happening by imposing boundaries, removing or restricting contact with negative peers, or by seeking professional help, this fed into the narrative used by exploiters to indoctrinate their children. Consequently, children perceived these parenting attempts as evidence that their parents did not care about them, did not understand them, and did not want them to earn money.

Many parents had sought to distance themselves from the people who were exploiting their children. This included moving to another area, sending their child to stay in other countries or seeking voluntary accommodation for their child. This was based on the belief that removing their child from the risk would end their exploitation. There was also evidence that this provided parents with respite from the challenges of supporting their child, "*that was the only time I could breathe a sigh of relief, because then there was no longer police at the door and so forth*" (Fiona). However, there was little evidence to support the effectiveness of removing the child from the location. Numerous examples were given of children returning to their exploiters, either under their own volition or where exploiters met them outside residential homes. Parents were unclear how their children had been found but suspected this was via their mobile phones or gaming communication channels. Indeed, findings from Firmin's (2019) research into the use of relocation as a safeguarding mechanism highlighted that where children were physically distanced from their peers, they maintained online contact to promote their feelings of safety, status and belonging in the unfamiliar environment.

## 7.5 Family-based factors in engaging with services. Findings parents.

For parents, there were three factors perceived to facilitate service involvement. These included working with families, maintaining a connection with children, and addressing the harms caused by exploitation.

### 7.5.1 Working with families

In support of previous findings, some families felt that their concerns were dismissed (Children's Commissioner, 2019, Maxwell et al., 2019). This was especially apparent where they were reporting frequent missing episodes or where their children were over the age of 17. Indeed, age hindered the extent to which parents felt they were able to support their child. Once over 18, they were not entitled to receive information or kept informed of whether their child was engaging with services, police or involved in the court system,

It just felt like I was a nuisance and it was constantly, 'oh no, we can't give you that information. He's over 18. You need consent.' (Jake).

Regardless of child age, parents felt that by failing to listen to their initial concerns, services were denying children the opportunity for early intervention and/or diversion away from exploitation. This is particularly pertinent given findings from Maxwell and Corliss' (2020) review of youth violence, which found support for a developmental approach, where the first acts of violence tend

to be observed around the ages of 10 to 14 before peaking around the ages of 16 to 17 and then declining into early adulthood. Indeed, the notion of children maturing away from exploitation was raised by several children and parents. However, research findings have shown that such maturing out of crime is not an automatic process but rather it is reliant upon the presence of facilitators such as employment, opportunities and positive relationships (Factor, Pitts and Bateman, (2015). In other cases, families found themselves subject to child protection investigations or blamed for their child's behaviour, as Amanda summarised,

So it's like I'm trying to save my family and yet, at the same time, I'm being criticised and scrutinised in whatever I do. And yet there is no physical support, there's no support that – because they don't understand, they don't get it (Amanda).

The notion of being scrutinised was evident even where parents had contacted Children's Services for help,

It's a joke. I went down to a crack house one day, hammered on the door and put my foot in the door so they couldn't shut it like literally got him out of there and brought him home and they're assessing whether I'm fit to care for him (Ella)

This reflects both the nature of service provision that is aimed at assessing intra-familial abuse and the exploitation of children and services as children are encouraged to make false allegations against their parent. Exploitation requires a shift in focus to extra-familial abuse and safeguarding risks encountered in the community (Firmin, 2019). Hence some parents called for system change,

I think it just needs additional support put in place. There needs to be an overhaul of the system really, there just needs to be a lot of changes within the system. The system needs to recognise their vulnerabilities and understand the issues that they're facing. And potentially, be able to support them rather than kind of criminalise them (Becky).

The extent to which this support should be provided by statutory services produced mixed views. Some parents felt that there were no other services, so if not Children's Services, Youth Offending Services and the Police then there would be no help available. Whereas other parents reiterated children's views regarding snitching, as Jake stated,

I had one good one, actually, but you're not going to have that impact with these kids with social workers, not a chance. It's part of the system, isn't it, you know, the kids see them as part of the system, the police, the no snitching, no grassing, it's all part of that.

The sense that 'I had a good one actually' highlighted the extent to which the value of support is associated with individual factors, including the knowledge, personality, and approach adopted by individual professionals regardless of profession. Hence it became evident that parent and youth engagement with services was dependent upon the availability of a workforce who understand exploitation and how to connect with children. In relation to service provision, four themes emerged. First, parents were best placed to notice when their children were displaying potential

indicators of exploitation so their voices must be heard. According to Andell and Pitts (2017:33), this requires the adoption of a rights-based approach so that children and families have more control,

over the practices of the professionals working in their communities by equipping them with the relevant knowledge and skills, while opening-up access to the places where key decisions are made. But, crucially, it also supports them in taking collective action to confront and exert control over the people who are threatening them and tearing their neighbourhoods apart.

This included situating services within the communities and acknowledging that children were particularly at risk in specific contexts. For example, research findings from Arial, Sherman and Newton (2020) showed a reduction in crime in hot spot areas following 15-minute foot patrols by police officers four times per day, four days per week over six months.

Numerous references were made to bad areas or schools where children were more likely to be targeted. This was also highlighted as a means of prevention, as Zoe described her son's fear of being 'sucked back in',

I think he's still got concerns of I think maybe bumping into any of these people again and being sucked back in, because he doesn't want to go places ... It's like he just doesn't want to be seen in case someone approaches him, I'm not sure if it's because of fear or he doesn't want to be looking weak and saying, no, I'm not interested, I've moved on.

As noted above, parents felt that the negative connotations of snitching need to be addressed. Consequently, parents felt that increased knowledge and training was required for teachers and other professionals working with children to foster trust and create safe spaces for children to disclose exploitation. Second, parents wanted to be included in decision making and provision,

I think every social worker should be like that, you know, asking also the parents what they want and what they think. Not only like telling them, "You have to do this, you can do that," you know. Because like it's not like their children, it's like our children, so we are the parents and who knows the children better than us?  
(Ingrid)

Such inclusion should include information sharing. For example, Ella described how the police "*sprang into action*" as soon as she was able to relay the information she had received about her son's whereabouts. Implicit within this was the need for flexible service delivery and professionals available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In Ella's case, the referrals made to services by the police had proven helpful as this provided much needed support and reflected the nature of exploitation where parents were often left managing the chaotic and often violent and aggressive behaviour from their exploited children whilst also safeguarding themselves and any other children in the household.

## 7.5.2 Maintaining a connection

In response to the indoctrination exploiters use to recruit and retain children, findings demonstrated a need to maintain connection with the child. For many parents this was perceived as the most powerful, and potentially most challenging, method of facilitating change for their children. Numerous references were made to ensuring that their child knew that they were loved and cared for. In some cases, there was a sense that parents were waiting for when their child was ready to receive their support and an awareness that this journey would take time,

They've got to be physically and mentally prepared because what that is really, in a nutshell, is about giving them themselves hope that actually they will be de-radicalised, so to speak, over time. Because it's not overnight at all. I'm talking like a really, really long time (Fiona)

As Fiona went on to explain, this often requires specific tools with findings highlighting two main techniques. First, youth workers and other third sector professionals were perceived as being skilled at engaging with and developing relationships with children. This was particularly valued by parents as Ingrid explained,

I think they talk about everything, so that's like really good and he also, [youth worker] is also helping us like as a family ... I think everyone, every child who is in this situation, they should get somebody like [youth worker], someone who can understand them and that's good for the children.

Youth workers were perceived to be adept at establishing and maintaining a relationship with children even where other services had failed to engage with them. Findings from the All-Party Parliamentary inquiry into the role of youth services in tackling knife crime (Smith, 2020) supported the significant role of youth work in addressing risks in the wider community. While Hudek (2018) highlighted the need for workers to have either lived experience or cultural competence in order to establish credibility and develop trusting, respectful relationships with children.

Parent interviews also revealed that youth workers and other third sector professionals equipped children with the skills to disengage from their exploiters and emotional support and practical help to secure training or employment. For parents, this included greater emphasis on the provision of alternative pathways that can engage children, support them into employment and *“just showing them something different, you can't challenge the money, you know, 15-16 [years] and £200 a week and then, you know, it's a pull, isn't it?”* (Jake).

Second, several parents talked about having adopted a non-violent resistance (NVR) approach (Jakob, 2018). This is an intervention delivered through the Child Adolescent Mental Health Service for parents of children who exhibit destructive and harmful behaviours. For those parents who had received this intervention, the approach had taught them to use a range of techniques including de-escalation, increased parental presence, firm responses to acts of violence and continual verbal affirmations of their commitment to their child. Fiona provided a detailed description of how she had used this approach,

But what it really means is that, in a point of crisis, you are able to keep that connection, or at least try to sort of have some solidarity or some form of

solution to a problem or an issue that you may be dealing with. I've kind of used it, I kind of thought that was my lifeline, because I was doing everything that normal parents would do, but obviously it wasn't the best result, especially when a child is being manipulated and controlled as an outside influence.

Where parents had used this approach, they reported that it helped them to avoid parenting practices that reinforced disconnection and helped them to maintain a relationship with their child. Indeed, parental anxiety of losing their children permeated findings, *“you know, if something were to happen to him, I don't think I could live with myself if I had cut off from him”* (Grace).

### 7.5.3 Addressing hidden harm

Findings suggested that children did not tell their parents what they had endured, even when they had quite visibly been injured. Indeed, one parent described how her child had laughed despite having serious head injuries. Generally, parents stated that their children would not access mental health support even though findings highlighted a need for specialised support to address the emotional impact, or ‘hidden harm’ of exploitation. Such hidden harm includes the emotional and psychological impact of child criminal exploitation on the child and their wider family (Welsh Government, 2021). Parents spoke about the impact on their children of witnessing, experiencing, and being made to perpetrate acts of serious violence,

He doesn't sleep, to this day he doesn't sleep, all night he doesn't sleep. If he sleeps, he sleeps with music on, loud music on all night. (Amanda)

Due to the nature of the sample, the emotional impact was divided between those who were on pathways away from exploitation and those who were seemingly trapped through debt bondage and addiction. For the first group, parents described the fear they observed in their child's behaviour. Whereas in the latter group, parents described their child's feelings of hopelessness and desperation,

[he's] telling me it's never going to work for him, that he just wants to die. He's either going to be in prison or two options – prison or dead. He can't see another option. Telling me he never knew what was happening, that this, what was happening, was not what he wanted (Elaine).

Findings suggested that feelings of hopelessness increased the longer children had been exploited. Findings also revealed the emotional toll on parents, with Lillian stating that, *“I remember at one point where I just felt like being dead was the best solution, you know, because ... I felt that I had failed as a parent”*.

## 7.6 Youth based-factors in engaging with services. Findings from children

According to children fear of violence, family relationships and professional approaches and responses to children served to deter them from engaging with services. It is important to note that this section combines findings from children at risk with those involved in child criminal exploitation. As such, children had varying degrees of actual experience of service involvement.

### 7.6.1 Fear of violence

Findings suggested that violence was associated with two main factors: snitching and debt bondage. First, 'snitching' was perceived negatively by most participants as noted by Jordan,

We don't like tattle telling and telling our stories and we don't like people, for example – well they call it “snitching” – so that's a big factor there. Anyone who snitches – no matter who it is – again, you know that phrase, “Snitches get stitches.” That's still going on. So talking to police is a no. (Jordan)

Hence snitching, where children actively engage and offer information to professionals, goes against the cultural norms within their social environment (Clayman and Skinnis, 2012). Fear of repercussions to themselves and family members served to deter children from speaking to services. Findings from Hudek (2018) have shown that this may occur even where children are suspected of being snitches or trying to escape exploitation. Second, as noted earlier by Liam (section 5.1), drug dealers were clear about the potential for violence consequences for losing money or drugs. In this respect, service involvement is perceived negatively as it places the child in debt bondage,

I've lost the drugs and then I've had to pay him somehow he says. I go to him, “I ain't got the money.” And one of the dealers said, “Well, you're going to have to work it off” and then from there it carries on. It became a lifestyle then for me ... children at that age – you get scared, you take it the wrong way, you see this group of people as – how do I put it – as scary people. You watch all this music and drilling and they're all about knives and stabbing. It's just a psychological thing. It inflicts fear in you (Jordan).

Hence, debt bondage can place the child in an increasingly desperate situation as they are forced to repay these debts.

### 7.6.2 Family relationships

Where family factors were perceived to have a negative impact on engaging with children, this included parents applying too much pressure by restricting what the child could do or the invasion of privacy. Regarding the invasion of privacy, when asked whether parents should be monitoring or restricting mobile phone use, Isaac explained how detrimental this could be,

Because if that happened to me [parent monitoring his mobile phone], if I was still 14 and my mum did that to me I would literally, I'm not going to lie to you, I would run away because I would be scared. I'd be like oh man, if she finds out, man if she calls the police, and I get in trouble, I don't want to get in trouble. (Isaac)

The issue of getting into trouble and police involvement produced mixed findings. For example, Isaac perceived this negatively, whereas Liam stated that, *I stopped because my mum reported me to the police*. In this respect, police involvement signified a critical moment where the prospect of police sanctions prompted Liam to seek help.

### 7.6.3 Professional approaches and responses

The issue of getting into trouble extended to perceptions of professionals. Children demonstrated awareness of the professional safeguarding duties. These duties emerged as a barrier to service engagement. Participants noted the risk of confiding in teachers, counsellors and youth workers in case they involved parents, police or social workers.

In terms of relationships with professionals, the significance of teachers was emphasised. Some children noted the impact that a negative relationship with a teacher can have on a young person. This included teachers bullying pupils, publicly embarrassing them or removing particular opportunities. It was also highlighted that the negative effect of school exclusion was not always made clear to children.

## 8.0 Discussion

There has been growing interest in child criminal exploitation county lines across the UK. This has been fuelled by media portrayals of county lines as an inner-city gang problem and presented as children, generally from black and minority ethnic groups, commuting from cities to rural areas. In practice the drug dealing landscape has been changing for some time in response to the imbalance between the number of drug dealers and end-users within the larger cities, austerity measures that have reduced funding for statutory services and youth service provision, and a reduction in employment opportunities for children (Andell and Pitts, 2017). As county lines groups have sought to establish themselves in new drugs markets this has given rise to a change in traditional drug dealing models and introduced urban-based dealers into rural, coastal and border towns (Harding, 2020a). In Wales, this has led to variation in drug dealing models across local authorities. Some areas have been infiltrated by urban-based county lines groups whereas others have adopted hybrid models or blurred lines where existing local families or groups have adopted elements of the county lines model. Regardless of the model used, there has been diversity in the types of end-user, facilitated by product diversification and proactive sales techniques. Underpinning drug distribution and sales is the exploitation of children and vulnerable adults who have been used at the street level as a disposable workforce.

The terms child criminal exploitation and county lines are often used interchangeably (Olver and Cockbain, 2021). Yet, the variations in how county lines and drug dealing manifest in different geographical areas along with the presence of gendered and stereotypical views regarding children's vulnerability and agency, can serve to obscure understanding. This has led to the prevailing view that girls are victims of sexual exploitation and boys are complicit in their criminal exploitation. Such views have been facilitated by the age in which children have been targeted and the growth of youth culture that has popularised expensive branded clothing. This has enabled county lines groups and drug dealers to entice young people with the notion that drug dealing is easy money. It is not by accident that children are targeted during adolescence where they have heightened sensitivity to peer pressure. Described as an 'emotional way station' this period denotes the time when children strive for independence and reflect upon their identity in a range of social contexts, including family, peers and the wider community in which they live (Finigan-Carr et al., 2016; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Moreover, county lines groups and drug dealers have capitalised on parental minimisation and rationalisation of their children's challenging behaviour, school responses in terms of sanctions and exclusion, and professional tendencies to perceive adolescents as having sufficient maturity and agency to opt for drug dealing as a lifestyle choice, and service responses to children who are looked after. That is not to say, that parents and professionals have not started to develop their understanding and responses to child criminal exploitation. But rather that county lines groups and drug dealers appear to be adept at staying one step ahead as they gather local intelligence and adapt their business model to evade detection and isolate children from sources of support. This has meant that there has been a shift in the children who have been targeted. There is early evidence in Wales of the increased criminal exploitation of girls, boys and girls from affluent backgrounds and those attending further or higher education establishments.

In Wales, efforts to address and prevent child criminal exploitation are underway at both the national and local levels. The Welsh Government (2021) recently published guidance on

Safeguarding Children from Sexual Exploitation based on a child rights approach and advocating the need for multi-agency information sharing and responses. The latter, facilitated by the Wales Accord on the Sharing of Personal Information (WASPI) which addresses the challenges in information sharing across agencies. While the former is enshrined under the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Children's Rights Scheme 2014, which state that children's rights should be embedded in policy and practice. There has also been the establishment of the Wales Violence Prevention Unit whose role is to direct and coordinate a multi-agency response to child criminal exploitation. This unit is funded by the Home Office and includes core membership from the police and Public Health Wales and associate membership from a wide range of professionals including the Senedd, National Independent Safeguarding Board, probation, immigration, academics and the third sector. Locally across Wales variously titled multi-agency meetings are being used to share information regarding children who are being or at risk of exploitation. These meetings include consideration of extrafamilial risk and the collation of information relating to peers and places. In support of findings from Sloper's (2004) literature review of the barriers and facilitators to multi-agency working, effective practice required clear governance, shared aims, roles, responsibilities, and timetables. Whereas barriers to effective multi-agency working were different professional cultures and priorities, a lack of understanding and information sharing between agencies served. This literature review found some supporting evidence of the effectiveness of inter-professional training (Sloper, 2004). This lends tentative support to the development of a toolkit aimed at enhancing multi-agency responses. Indeed, the current research study was commissioned by Health Care Research Wales in order to add to the general understanding of what is happening in Wales, identify the information and training needs of professionals and develop a toolkit to enhance responses to child criminal exploitation. Following the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (SSWA), the research is underpinned by the principles of co-production so that the voices of children, parents and professionals were captured for this report and their views will be sought regarding toolkit content and dissemination. It is hoped that the toolkit will empower professionals to work with those in need of care and support to identify appropriate solutions.

Drawing on the findings presented, there is a need for approaches and interventions that address both the push and pull factors that make children vulnerable to criminal exploitation. This includes preventative work at the child and family level, system change to help and support children and families exploited or at risk of exploitation and community measures aimed at the provision of safe places and spaces. At the child level, consideration is needed regarding school inclusion and exclusion practices. Findings from a review (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020) of the 21 children from 17 local areas in England who died or experienced serious harm within a context of criminal exploitation, found that school exclusion was associated with an escalation of risk to children. This is particularly pertinent given that the rate of school exclusion in Wales doubled between 2014 and 2018 (Welsh Government, 2019). The recent enquiry undertaken into Education Otherwise Than at School by the Children, Young People and Education Committee (2020), highlighted the need for early identification of needs to support children to remain in school, a coordinated and timely approach across public services, whole school approaches to child mental health and well-being, and support for the family as a whole. In response, Kirsty Williams, Minister for Education (2021) reported that education officials will be working in partnership with the Wales Violence Prevention Unit to link education crime data to identify vulnerability indicators. While the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's review (2020) has recommended wraparound support for children who are excluded, Justice for Kids Law (Temple,

2020) have called for an end to the exclusion of children who have been criminally exploited. They argued that school exclusion may serve to punish a child for being exploited, rather than safeguarding them from future harm. Therefore, as the Young People and Education Committee (2020) have asserted, attention is needed to identify and address children's needs while they are in school. This may necessitate training for teachers and other professionals about child criminal exploitation and techniques that foster relationship building and trust with children. This is particularly pertinent given the culture against snitching. Interview findings from a study of children and professionals in a London borough (Clayman and Skinns, 2012) revealed children do not actively engage due to negative connotations of 'snitching' arising from learned behaviour from peers and family, previous relationships and notions of the legitimacy of professionals, as well as the potential for negative repercussions to themselves and their families. This places the onus on services to create safe spaces for children to divulge grooming and exploitation and for professionals to offer support in a timely manner in order to create reachable or critical moments when children are more likely to receive help, even when they occur outside of normal office hours (Child Practice Review Panel, 2019).

At the family level, the challenges of parenting adolescents and impact of exploitation on parents and siblings must be addressed. This includes the increased vulnerability to exploitation of younger siblings and highlights the need for whole family approaches. This is aligned with findings from Hudek's (2018) independent evaluation of a Home Office funded county lines pilot project in England and Wales which demonstrated that effective interventions needed to provide support for the wider family, including siblings who bear witness to the impact of child criminal exploitation on family members. Successful interventions included supporting families to understand what child criminal exploitation involved and improving parent-child relationships through advocacy and linking with services, where appropriate. Moreover, where families had received a whole family approach there was a need for the gradual reduction in services. It was noted that where all service provision stepped back simultaneously, there was a heightened risk the young person would be re-engaged in drug dealing. Indeed, findings revealed that children may use cannabis use as a way of coping with the detrimental impact of criminal exploitation on their emotional and psychological well-being. Yet this can be a hook that draws the child back into exploitative relationships. Therefore, findings have shown a need for substance misuse services and specialised mental health support. In recognition that exposure to the levels of violence associated with criminal exploitation can result in post-traumatic stress (Windle, Ross and Coomber, 2020), initiatives such as the All Wales Traumatic Stress Quality Improvement Initiative (Welsh Government, 2021), should be included in a toolkit for responses to criminally exploited children. This initiative is a whole system approach for children, children and adults with lived experience of post-traumatic stress disorder.

At the system level, findings revealed that there needs to be change so that child and family voices are heard and included in decision making. Such change requires the inclusion of extrafamilial harm in child protection and safeguarding practice. It also requires a more nuanced approach in the definition of victim and perpetrator (Olver and Cockbain, 2021), and a change in mindset where parents may be best placed to identify when a child is being groomed and exploited. While the value and significance of the role third sector agencies are currently contributing to criminally exploited children, more attention is needed to the statutory offer. This includes flexible services that are equipped with the knowledge, understanding and appropriate tools to work with children and families who are experiencing criminal exploitation. This requires an adapted system able to

work with extrafamilial risk and harms to adolescents. In addition, consideration is needed about the creation and maintenance of safe spaces and places for children in the wider community. More attention is needed regarding the manner in which the county lines models present and adapt within local contexts so that this information can be used to develop appropriate prevention and safeguarding strategies.

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**CASCADE**

## **Authors and Contributors:**

Dr Nina Maxwell and Catrin Wallace

Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE),  
Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences (SOCSI), Cardiff University

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Care Research Wales

## **For further information please contact:**

CASCADE: Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre

Cardiff University  
3 Museum Place  
Cardiff  
CF10 3RL

[CASCADE@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:CASCADE@cardiff.ac.uk)