

Research Findings



Earlier this year we asked young people, parents and professionals about child criminal exploitation for a research study with CASCADE, Cardiff University. This newsletter summarises the main findings from those who took part.

What does child criminal exploitation look like?



Photo by Priscilla Du Preez | Unsplash

We're piecing together the complex picture of child criminal exploitation in Wales.

Young people told us they are moving or selling drugs for their friends or for new people they meet. They said this was an easy way for them to make a lot of money. They were not always aware of the risks involved as sometimes they do not know the seriousness of the crimes they are made to commit.

Many parents told us that they missed the early signs their child was being exploited due to a lack of knowledge about exploitation and the age at which children are groomed. This meant that while parents noticed changes in their child's behaviour, routines, and friendship groups, this was seen as normal teenage development.

Parents found it hard to believe that exploitation could happen to their child. Exploiters often targeted children

who were going through changes, such as changing family circumstances, moving from primary to secondary school, or going to college. Exploiters groomed children to 'work' for them through the promise of a nice lifestyle, making friends with them, and making children *"feel important and powerful"* (parent).

What are the early warning signs?

1

HANGING OUT WITH NEW FRIENDS

Older kids (who may have once been groomed themselves) make friends with younger children in order to scout them to be 'foot soldiers' and drug runners. They might wear branded clothes and expensive trainers, and younger children may look up to them and their 'lifestyle'.

Parents reported that some of these older kids would give younger children pocket money, cannabis, or take them out for food. They would target vulnerable boys and girls and make them feel special. Some parents described it as being *'like a relationship'*.

2

SKIPPING SCHOOL

When hanging out with their new friends, young people might start staying out later and miss school.

Exploiters sometimes target children who have been excluded or who are going through managed school moves. They work on children with low self-esteem or think they're not good at school.

Some exploiters encourage children to get excluded or placed in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) because they will be put on a reduced timetable and have more time to hang out with their new group and potentially commit crimes.

3

GOING MISSING

Parents told us that this is *"the biggest clue"* that a child is being exploited by criminals.

Children are sometimes sent to deliver drugs in the community or further away. They can be gone for short periods, or all day and night, and sometimes they can go missing for weeks. They may say they are staying with friends, but they might be forced to stay in 'trap houses' under gang control, with violent people or drug users.

Parents told us they were frustrated at loopholes in the system which made it difficult to get help from the police when their children regularly went missing for short periods.



Who took part in the research study?

- **18 young people**
They were aged 12 to 18 and all lived in Wales.
- **15 parents**
They were mostly mothers who lived in Wales, but some lived in England.
- **56 professionals**
They included: doctors, nurses, teachers, police officers, social workers, youth workers, substance misuse workers, and probation workers. All but two worked in Wales.



Exploitation can happen to any young person.

This includes those who:

- might be having problems at home
- do not like or are struggling at school
- want or need money
- are looking for new friends
- have been excluded from school
- have other things going on such as parents separating
- are moving from primary to secondary school
- are living independently in hostels or care homes

Exploiters target children when they are at their most vulnerable, when they are going through changes or when they feel that they need money or to be cared about. They get their trust by buying them things, giving them money, or taking them out for food. After this, they trap the children in cycles of debt to them, force them to keep working, and threaten them and their families with violence.

A child's vulnerability can take many different forms, and sometimes it is not easily spotted or recognised. For some young people, getting involved with exploitative criminals isn't even about earning money or having nice things.

As one parent told us about their son:

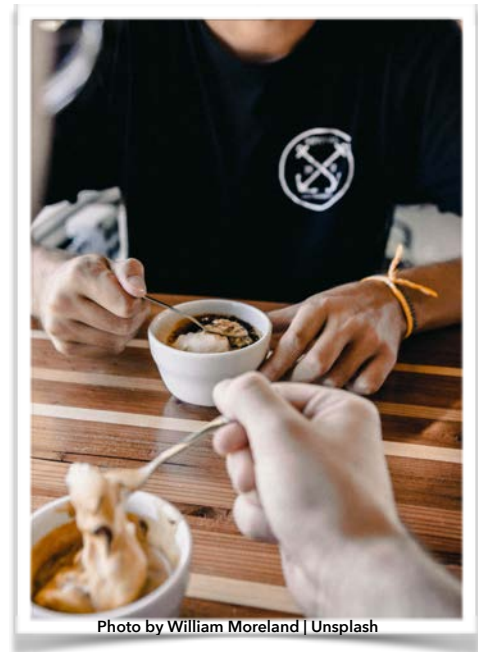
"...he's quite privileged in the fact that he has everything from home anyway. He's obviously got mum and dad, both working. He has exactly what he wants, he has all of the trainers he needs or whatever clothes, so he's never needed or wanted for anything."

Exploiters target a child's vulnerability. For some children this may be because they struggled academically and the idea of working in a factory or McDonalds on minimum wage is undesirable and uninspiring. Or it may be because they have not been listened to at school or they have been excluded. A young person told us:

"Once someone's 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 feeling of being part of something and feeling important and respected by an adult."

Drug dealers get children to work for them with promises of money or status, gain control over them, threaten them with violence, and trap them in a cycle in which the children are working out of fear. A parent told us:

"So he was really the foot soldier, generally just doing all of the dirty work and literally getting nothing for it."



What are the three main tactics that exploiters use?

1

INDOCTRINATION

Exploiters tell children that their families don't understand or care about them. They tell children that they are their new family. This is to undermine parents' authority and their relationship with their children.

When parents try to discipline their child, the child might further believe that it is true that only their **new 'family'** understands or cares about them.

Exploiters coach children to threaten their parents with reporting them for child abuse if they contact the police or Children's Services.

Older young people and gang members make children feel important and that they belong with the group. They try to replace children's families and make them dependent upon those exploiting them.

Some gang members are like local celebrities and young people might look up to them. Being seen or associated with them can be a status symbol and make young people feel like **'the big man'**.

2

DEBT

Exploiters target vulnerable children who might already be substance misusers or who may be tempted by the social status of using cannabis. They encourage young people to develop a habit which they can't afford. Drug dealers keep children 'on tick' which means they are given drugs and are allowed to pay for them later. When they can't pay, they're forced to work for them.

Drug dealers then set the child up to be robbed of any money and drugs they have on them. The child will then have to pay the drug dealer back for the stolen goods. This gets the child further into a cycle of debt. The exploitation carries on because they owe the dealers.

Sometimes families try to pay back their children's debts to the dealers but they end up getting dragged into the exploitative relationship themselves. Parents reported being afraid of getting the police involved because their kids had committed a crime.

They were also afraid to tell Children's Services in case their children were taken from them. However, some parents had received support from third sector services and groups.

3

VIOLENCE

Many parents told us that they and their children have been threatened with violence. Some parents had been threatened by their child as their child had felt trapped by their exploiter and increasingly desperate.

Parents reported that exploiters gave children burner phones and are told where to deliver drugs. Violence and threats of violence are used to control children and prevent them from seeking help. Exploiters often threatened their siblings and parents too.

Children were often the victims of serious violence, including being beaten and stabbed. However, some parents said that even after being badly hurt, children continued in the exploitative relationship believing they could earn large sums of money.

Children are taught to be violent to others in order to rise up the ranks. Once they commit violent crime they are trapped in a cycle and feel they can't get out and go to the police.

What changes do parents, young people and professionals want?

PARENTS WANTED:

- Services to listen to their concerns and offer early help.
- More support when children go missing.
- Safe spaces in the community for their children.
- To stay connected to their child so they could help them escape from crime and exploitation.
- Help from services when their children are over the age of 18.



YOUNG PEOPLE WANTED:

- Emotional help - to feel loved, cared for, and protected.
- Help to pay for food and clothing.
- Help from youth workers and people who understand their lives.
- Help finding work and filling out application forms.
- More work-based skills taught in schools, such as learning to drive.
- More information in schools about exploiters and exploitation.



PROFESSIONALS WANTED:

- Community changes: To create safe spaces in the community where young people can go without being judged or treated like troublemakers. This means working with local people to create acceptance of young people hanging out in public, and training adults in the community to help keep young people safe.
- Service changes: To do more to arrest the people who use young people to commit crime. To do more to tackle drug use in Wales. Schools to do more to support young people to stay in school, and to give them career advice and more support to get a job when they leave school. Services need to be open when young people and parents need them the most. Young people and parents need to have support for as long as they need it. Services should keep young people safe rather than arresting them.
- Professional changes: Professionals should spend time getting to know young people without judging them. They should understand that young people may get hurt if they snitch on their friends or exploiters. They should understand that there are different ways in which young people get involved in crime, and that exploiters can be people they know or strangers. They need to work with parents to help them protect and care for their children.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The aim of the research is to develop a toolkit to help professionals and parents to keep young people safe and to keep them away from crime.

We'd really appreciate your feedback on what to put into the toolkit for parents, schools, and other services!

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