



“ALL OF US WERE BROKEN”

**An exploratory study
into family experiences
of child criminal
exploitation**

A lifeline when someone disappears

**missing
people**

Registered charity in England and Wales (1020419)
and in Scotland (SC047419)

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Missing People is a lifeline for anyone affected by missing. We are here for missing people and their families 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to provide free and confidential support by phone, text or email. Understanding the reasons why people go missing and the impact on families left behind enables Missing People and our partners to provide better support and services. Missing People's research team conducts research and evaluation projects on a range of topics:

www.missingpeople.org.uk/research.

We are indebted to the families who took part in this research and chose to share their experiences in such detail and so honestly. Their main driver for doing so was to try and ensure that children who are victims of CCE and their families are better supported in the future and do not have to face the isolation, fear, judgement and sense of helplessness which define their experiences.



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Executive Summary

This report explores the experiences of family members whose children have been criminally exploited, including through county lines, and as a result have been frequently missing.

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) involves a child being exploited and receiving something in return for completing a, often criminal, task for someone else.¹ It involves:

- Pull factors: children receiving something, for example money, drugs, status, or a sense of safety, as a result of completing tasks
- Advantage, financial or otherwise, to the groomer
- Control: grooming and threatening the child

There are strong links between CCE and county lines. 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.'²

CCE is growing in prominence and understanding of the issue is developing. However, the support needs of families whose children are being exploited and missing from home is a relatively unexplored area. Missing People carried out exploratory qualitative research with parents of children who had been criminally exploited to start to address this gap in knowledge.

The main aims of this research were:

1. To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of families whose children have been exploited criminally, including through county lines
2. To understand the role of and response to missing within criminal exploitation
3. To understand more about the support services available both to the children and the families

4. To highlight family perceptions of where interventions may have been helpful, and any examples of successful interventions

The main body of the report provides detailed and harrowing accounts of the experiences of the children and their families and highlights a lack of effective support services to address the exploitation. This summary provides an overview of the main issues and recommendations that can be identified from the families' experiences.

FINDINGS

Early signs of CCE

Families describe their lives as having been split into two stark phases: 'before' and 'after' their children were groomed and exploited by criminals.

Common to all families were sudden and significant changes in their child's behaviour and personality. The speed and severity of the changes were shocking and included manipulative, evasive and aggressive behaviour, with extreme anger and mood swings, disengagement from activities outside of school and intense use of their phones and social media. In most cases, these sudden changes were mirrored at school with children becoming disruptive, disengaged and exhibiting escalating challenging behaviour.

Parents say they knew intuitively that the changes were an indication of something being very seriously wrong: they desperately searched for causes, considering things like mental health issues and bullying. Parents tried to do anything they could to stop their child's behaviour deteriorating further, however they did not know what was wrong, or where to go to get help. With hindsight families recognise these changes as early signs of CCE. They expressed feelings of anger, guilt and frustration that they and others did not identify this earlier and consequently opportunities for early intervention were missed.

¹ Home Office, *Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit: Disruption Tactics*, April 2019.

² Home Office, *Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines Guidance*, 2018.

The links between CCE and missing

CCE can be both a cause and a consequence of going missing. Children will regularly go missing whilst they are involved in CCE activity; they may be groomed to become involved in CCE whilst missing from home or care; or may run away to escape the consequences of exploitation. The links between CCE and missing are strongly evident in these research findings.

For all families, going missing was one of the early and serious warning signs of CCE and missing episodes persisted as a feature throughout, however, there were no consistent patterns of missing.

The research findings show that the quality of response to missing episodes was mixed and inconsistent across police forces and local authorities. There were examples where parents felt early missing incidents were not taken seriously enough and written off as ‘normal teenage behaviour’ by the police despite parents emphasising that it was totally out of character. Some felt that police activity was minimal and did not reflect the severity of the situation, particularly as the duration or frequency of missing incidents escalated.

When the children were found or returned from missing there were several signs of potential exploitation including being found with drugs and significant amounts of cash, and being found far from home, in places with which they had no association and with unknown adults. Parents described shock at the physical appearance and condition of their child when they returned, and spoke of their child telling them they had stayed in places with descriptions consistent with trap houses³, where weapons, drugs and addicts were present.

Becoming more embedded in CCE activity

Parents told us consistently that they did not think things could get any worse and at the same time were desperately searching for ways to prevent the situation deteriorating. However, the exploitation continued and families faced shocking, frightening and what had up until then been unthinkable experiences.

In addition to more regular or longer missing episodes, an escalation of the extent and severity of other activity relating to the criminal exploitation was common for all the families including deepening evidence of violence and physical injuries, involvement in offending, erratic behaviour and mood. This was combined with increased isolation from the family and communities, refusal to engage with services and evidence of coercion, control and being under the influence of unknown others. Families reported little recognition of, or support for, the impact on their children’s mental health and the resultant trauma from the situations they were exposed to.

Families felt that a lack of specialist support and failure of services to work together contributed to their children continuing to be exposed to the influences of, and becoming more embedded in, the criminal exploitation. Consequently, the children continued to be subjected to extreme danger: a terrifying experience for the parents who felt they were “banging their heads against a brick wall” trying to find appropriate help. Their experiences illustrate a number of areas for improvement in the support for criminally exploited children and their families.

With the exception of one family, little consideration was given as to whether the children were victims of exploitation. Instead the children were assumed to be making lifestyle choices and viewed as criminals. Families believe that there should be better use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)⁴ and suggested their experiences demonstrated inadequate

³ Trap house is a term used to describe a building used to store, buy, sell, produce and use illegal drugs.

⁴ The National Referral Mechanism is “a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.” Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration, *Modern Slavery Victims: referral and assessment forms*. Those suspected of being victims of modern slavery, including trafficking and exploitation, can be referred into the NRM. If a child is formally identified as a victim of trafficking this should help to ensure the child is appropriately protected and can be used in ensuring a child is not wrongly prosecuted for activity which is linked to this exploitation or trafficking. For more information please see: Youth Justice Legal Centre, *National Referral Mechanism (NRM)*.

levels of knowledge about how and when it should be used. They asserted that failure to use the NRM for their children resulted in them being criminalised and left them exposed to the criminals who continued exploit them further.

A lack of specialist support for children who have been criminally exploited was evident. Family experiences of local authority children's services showed they were ill-equipped for working with children experiencing CCE. This included being unable to modify established work practices focused on problems originating from within the family home. They were not generally able to effectively address the harm initiated by external exploitation using a contextual safeguarding approach.⁵

Refusal to engage with services was common and families felt their children had been groomed to respond in this way to prevent them accessing support. There were a number of examples of where support was withdrawn because of a lack of engagement. It is notable that the two exceptions to this were when professionals with specialist skills in exiting gang activity were involved and the children engaged and made positive progress as a result.

A lack of availability of appropriate housing arrangements or care placements was common across the family experiences when children were unable to return home because they needed to live outside of the area where the CCE activity was operating to escape exploitation, or were taken into local authority care for their own safety. Examples included children being placed with other family members technically outside of the area but in reality very close to their home and exploiters. Children were also placed with other family members or in residential care placements without the specialist expertise to prevent them going missing or having contact with the people exploiting who could then continue to exercise control over them.

The research provides examples of families whose children were groomed whilst under 18 and have subsequently turned 18 and entered

adult services and criminal justice systems. In these cases, the children are living with the impacts of the exploitation but without any acknowledgement of, or specialist support for, the impact of the exploitative activity they have been subjected to. Importantly, parents' ability to support their child is also limited by the fact that information exchange with services ceases at 18.

Impact of exploitation on the families

The impact of the CCE on parents was, and in some cases continues to be, significant: it was described as "taking over" their lives. All aspects of family life have been affected including relationships, work, physical and mental health. Family members reported feeling constantly exhausted, stressed, frightened, anxious, unable to sleep, and isolated from family or support networks.

Parents described the anxiety and fear that any of their actions, or inactions, to try and support their child might put them at risk of more danger or even death. At the same time families felt they lacked the knowledge or expertise to know whether they were making correct decisions and had no access to support to help them do so. This further exacerbated the strain and helplessness that parents were already experiencing. One family did receive support from a specialist social worker and found it very beneficial in helping them to understand CCE, county lines and how they could best support their child.

Siblings were also impacted negatively, sometimes subject to the aggression, violence and anger of the exploited child. Some siblings became anxious and nervous about leaving the house; others were angry with the behaviour of their exploited brother or sister and the consequent impact on their parents. The impact on siblings placed additional strain on parents who were anxious to avoid their other children becoming involved or harmed as a result of the exploitation.

⁵ Contextual safeguarding is an approach to understanding and responding to young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships young people form in neighbourhoods, at school and online can feature violence and abuse. Parents and carers have little influence over these contexts and it can undermine parent-child relationships. University of Bedfordshire, *What is Contextual Safeguarding*, March 2019.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations identified from this research are detailed below and it is incumbent on all professionals working with children who are being exploited by criminals or at risk of CCE to use the accounts families shared so generously to stimulate change and ensure there is an effective response to CCE for children and their families.

1. Training about CCE should be provided to all professionals working with children and young people, with a particular focus on the police, social workers, youth offending workers, foster carers, residential care workers and school staff. The relevant inspectorates including Ofsted, HMICFRS⁶ and HMI Probation should include a check on whether this training is taking place during their inspections. Training should include:
 - Understanding missing as a key warning sign of CCE, as well as familiarisation with all potential risk indicators and their inter-relationships.
 - Sources of support for children and young people being exploited, their families and the professionals who have identified CCE potential warning signs or activity.
 - The importance of acknowledging the concerns and observations of parents and carers to help understand the context of what is happening and then working closely with them from an early stage to best support the child.
 - Strategies for engaging young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation.
 - The need to be vigilant, curious and join up warning signs identified at different touchpoints to ensure the possibility of CCE is actively considered within the full context of a child's experiences.
 - Recognition that criminal activity may be a result of exploitation and the importance of treating children as potential victims.
2. The Department for Education should develop guidance for families to be shared with and then disseminated by local authorities. This should include information about the risks of grooming, how to recognise the warning signs of criminal exploitation, and how to raise concerns.
3. The Department for Education should ensure that the new mandatory curriculum for Relationships and Sex Education is developed by practitioners to explicitly teach children and young people about the risks of grooming for criminal exploitation alongside the other forms of exploitation and coercion. The Department for Education should use the early adopters programme to work with schools to develop appropriate guidance and resources.⁷ Specialist resources should also be developed in a similar way to those available through the National Crime Agency's ThinkUKnow programme.⁸
4. The response to missing from police must be improved to ensure children are safeguarded from CCE. The police should:
 - Consider the possibility of, and concerns about, CCE as part of their risk assessment, particularly in incidence of repeat missing episodes.
 - When a child does go missing repeatedly the police should consider giving the reporting person a unique CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch) number to enable quicker, more effective reporting and better identification of the level of risk of exploitation across multiple incidents.
 - Intelligence from missing person investigations and safe and well checks should be used to map local CCE hotspots and operational models of CCE.
5. Local authorities should improve understanding of, and response to, CCE by reviewing information from Return Home Interviews (RHIs) to identify warning signs, share information to safeguard individuals and map the local, regional and national picture

⁶ Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

⁷ Department for Education, *Early Adopters Programme*

⁸ National Crime Agency, *ThinkUKnow*

of exploitation and how this links to missing. When children refuse RHIs repeatedly local authorities should consider this is a potential indicator of CCE and develop an appropriate response.

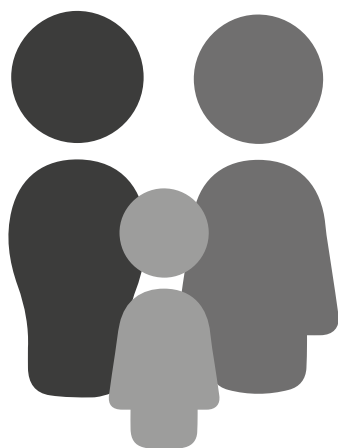
6. The Home Office, alongside the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) programme, should ensure a national, joined up approach to support for victims of CCE and their families. This should include the mapping of existing services and identification of any gaps. Local authorities, with oversight from Ofsted, should ensure that the support available is sufficiently expert to address the following:

- A lack of engagement from children who may have been groomed to distrust and not cooperate with services
- The impact of exploitation on a young person's mental health
- The links with child sexual exploitation
- The transition to adult services and the ongoing impact of exploitation into adulthood
- The need for advocacy for families to help them navigate the often complex system, as well as direct support to address the emotional and mental impact of the exploitation on parents, carers and siblings.

- When victims of CCE are placed in care, the need for specialist expertise in placements. These placements should be staffed by trained professionals with access to appropriate and expert support.

7. Police forces and local authorities must work across administrative boundaries when safeguarding victims of CCE because the children and young people being exploited typically move between local authority and police force areas as part of the exploitation. Joint Area Strategy Meetings should be arranged for children suspected or known to be being groomed or exploited across different police force and local authority areas. They should include resident police forces and local authorities, and those where the CCE activity is occurring to ensure that lines of accountability for interventions are clear and that support and protective actions are implemented effectively regardless of geography.

8. As part of the Modern Slavery Act Review, the Home Office should ensure that use of the National Referral Mechanism is effective for victims of child criminal exploitation, and that practitioners know when to make a referral and what a positive grounds decision means.⁹



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⁹ Home Office 2019, *Independent review of the Modern Slavery Act*



Introduction

Research aims and methodology

This report explores the experiences of parents with children who have been criminally exploited, including through county lines, and as a result have been frequently missing from home. Participants' accounts detail the harrowing experiences of the children and their families, as well as a lack of effective support services.

The main aims of this research are:

1. To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of families whose children have been exploited criminally, including through county lines
2. To understand the role of and response to missing within criminal exploitation
3. To understand more about the support services available both to the children and the families
4. To highlight family perceptions of where interventions may have been helpful, and any examples of successful interventions

Missing People conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with family members of 5 children who had been criminally exploited. The interviews were detailed: each took between 2 and 10 hours to complete. A topic guide was developed, see Appendix A, however the research was principally led by the participants; this approach gave participants the flexibility to talk about their experiences and self-identify what was important for them to share.

The key ethical considerations of this research include confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and ensuring research participants came to no harm.¹⁰

Research participants

All participants were the mothers of exploited children. The time frame of exploitation ranged from children first being exploited over 5 years ago, to children being groomed very recently. The current age of the children varied, with some remaining under 18, and others now being in their late teens and early 20s. The gender and ethnicity of the children varied, although more of the children were male.

Limitations to the study

The interviewees were self-selecting: family members who highlighted the fact that they would like their stories to be shared. This means that the research participants were not randomly or purposively selected.

Due to the nature of the topic matter it has been important to ensure the anonymity of both the participants themselves and their children. In some cases this has affected what has been able to be reported in the findings.

This research, while considering some aspects of the care system, only concerns children and families who were not involved with the care system when the child was first exploited. It cannot speak to the experiences of children who have been groomed and exploited while in care, or to carers within the care system.¹¹

This is an exploratory scoping study and findings are therefore not generalisable.

BACKGROUND: CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION AND MISSING

Child criminal exploitation

“Child criminal exploitation is common in county lines and occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”

UK Home Office definition, September 2018¹²

Child criminal exploitation (‘CCE’) involves a child being exploited and receiving something in return for completing a, often criminal, task for someone else.¹³ Three aspects have been recognised to be involved in CCE:

1. Pull factors: children receiving something as a result of completing tasks, for example money, status, a sense of safety or drugs
2. Advantage, financial or otherwise, to the groomer
3. Control: grooming and threatening the child¹⁴

The relationship between the exploiter and the victim will be exploitative and often involve violence, coercion and intimidation. Those exploiting the child will have power over them for various reasons, whether that is age, physical strength, resources, or status, amongst other things. Often the child who is being exploited will not be willing or able to identify that they have been groomed or are a victim of exploitation.

¹⁰ Those conducting the interviews used Missing People’s Safeguarding policies to guide the conduct of the interviews, including any potential disclosures. These were explained to research participants prior to beginning the interview. Missing People’s front line services were aware of the research interviews and available to provide support to research participants if needed.

¹¹ Children within the care system can be disproportionately likely to experience exploitation, and there is some evidence to suggest that groomers have specifically targeted looked after children. See for example: Home Office, *Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines Guidance*, 2018.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Home Office, *Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit: Disruption Tactics*, April 2019.

¹⁴ Ibid.

County Lines

“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 form of ‘deal line.’”

UK Home Office definition, September 2018¹⁵

There are strong links between child criminal exploitation and county lines. Children and vulnerable adults are exploited through county lines to move and store drugs and money, and the issue is now considered to be a nationwide problem,¹⁶ with the Home Office highlighting it as a priority in the 2018 Serious Violence Strategy.¹⁷ The National Crime Agency in January 2019 reported that there were 2,000 individual phone numbers identified as being used on established county lines networks, and that the “industry” is worth £500m.¹⁸ They also recognised that children as young as 11 are being groomed and exploited by those running county lines, with the majority of victims being 15- to 17-year-old boys. However, it should be noted that it is thought that practices around county lines are changing quickly in response to attempts to limit the practice, and that girls are increasingly being targeted.

County lines often involves “coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons,” however it should be noted that CCE is broader than county lines.¹⁹

MISSING

Missing

The College of Policing definition of missing is:

“Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed.”²⁰

An estimated 180,000 people are reported missing in the UK each year: over 80,000 of these individuals are children and young people.²¹

Of the total number of missing incidents recorded by the police, the highest risk age group is 12- to 17-year-olds. Over half of all missing incidents relate to this age group, with girls being reported missing slightly more often than boys.²² Children and young people are also more likely to go missing repeatedly than adults.²³

Missing should be seen as an indicator that children and young people are at risk of harm, and there are recognised links between missing and mental health issues, homelessness, child sexual exploitation, trafficking, and gang involvement.²⁴

¹⁵ Home Office, Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines Guidance, 2018.

¹⁶ Police Scotland, ‘County Lines drug networks campaign launched,’ January 2019.

¹⁷ Home Office, Serious Violence Strategy, April 2018.

¹⁸ National Crime Agency, ‘NCA publishes annual assessment of county lines as over 600 arrested as part of national coordinated activity targeting drug dealing model,’ January 2019.

¹⁹ Home Office, Serious Violence Strategy, April 2018.

²⁰ College of Policing, Missing Persons Authorised Professional Practice.

²¹ Missing People, ‘Key Information.’ It is likely that these figures are a significant underestimate as they are purely based on police data and there are limitations to the data itself, including different recording practices across police forces and incomplete data. Some people are not reported missing to the police at all, so will not be included in police statistics. Previous research suggests that as many as 7 in 10 children will not be reported missing to the police: Rees, G. ‘Still Running 3: Early findings from our third national survey of young runaways,’ The Children’s Society, 2011.

²² Nation Crime Agency, Missing Persons Data Report 2015-16, 2017: 55% of total reported missing incidents for those in the 12 to 17 age group were related to girls.

²³ On average, each adult missing person will equate to 1.3 missing episodes, while each missing child will equate to 2.6 missing incidents.

²⁴ See for example, Gees, G. and Lee, J. Still Running 2, The Children’s Society 2005; Berelowitz, S., Firmin, C., Edwards, G. and Gulyurtlu, S. ‘I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world.’ The Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, 2012; Biehal, N., Michell, F., and Wade, J., Lost from View (2003); Woolnough, P & Gibb, G, Missing Persons: Understanding, planning, responding, 2007.

LINKS BETWEEN CCE AND MISSING

By their very nature CCE and county lines are intrinsically linked with missing. CCE can be both a cause and effect of going missing:

- Children can be exploited by criminals whilst missing from care or home, i.e. being groomed and exploited while missing
- Children will regularly be missing whilst they are involved in CCE and county lines activity, i.e. going missing in order to perform an exploitative task
- Running away to escape consequences of exploitation, i.e. going missing to get away from exploiters

Previous research has found that these links exist, with research by Catch 22 and Missing People in 2015 finding that “exploitation and coercion are overarching themes linking all the factors pushing or pulling gang-involved children and young people to run away.”²⁵ In 2017 the All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults led a Ministerial

Roundtable on ‘children who go missing and are criminally exploited by gangs,’²⁶ with the subsequent briefing report outlining the need for professionals to understand missing as warning sign of CCE and put appropriate interventions in place. The report also detailed recommendations for improved mapping of missing episodes which are suspected to relate to county lines activity.²⁷

Throughout 2018 and into 2019 there has been significant media coverage of the issue of CCE and county lines, as well as increasing amounts of research and guidance for professionals.²⁸ Within this coverage missing is often recognised as an aspect of exploitation or county lines. However, the extent of the links with missing are still not clear as acknowledged by the National Crime Agency: “the use of missing persons is a commonly reported feature of county lines activity with many being encountered as children but it is often very difficult to get young missing people to engage with the police or partner agencies. The true correlation between missing persons and county line drug dealing is reported by many forces as an intelligence gap as it has not yet been fully established or understood.”²⁹



²⁵ Sturrock, R., and Holmes, L. *Running the Risks: the links between gang involvement and young people going missing*, Catch-22 and Missing People, 2015.

²⁶ APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, *Briefing report on the roundtable on children who go missing and are criminally exploited by gangs*, March 2017.

²⁷ Sturrock, R., and Holmes, L. *Running the Risks: the links between gang involvement and young people going missing*, Catch-22 and Missing People, 2015.

²⁸ See for example: The Independent, *Thousands of children used as drug mules by ‘county lines’ gang expanding into rural parts of UK*, November 2017; The Guardian, *Taskforce warns of risk to children from ‘county lines’ gangs*, November 2018.

²⁹ National Crime Agency, *County Lines Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply*, 2017.



Research findings: signs of exploitation

SCENE SETTING

“ They were [...] lovely kids [...] We would have football teams in our home and you know, feeding them, taking them to football tournaments [...] All the time pretty much our whole week was consumed in that, weekends and, after, you know, after school. ”

Families participating in the research spoke of their lives being split into ‘before’ and ‘after’ their child began to be exploited, emphasising that ‘before’ their lives were largely stable. The age at which this ‘before’ stage ended varied, but families generally mentioned this period as being until their child was around 13 or 14. They spoke of having a generally positive relationship with their child prior to them being exploited, with no serious issues present. Where the child had siblings they tended to get on well: “the two of them were very, very close

in age and close as in friends and brothers, so they did a lot of activities together, had shared a lot of the same friends.”

Most children were settled and doing well at school, their attainment was on track, and they were generally well-behaved. There was no real reason to be concerned about their futures.

“ In the weekends he would play a lot of matches [...] it was just the love of the sport ”

Parents said that their children were interested and engaged in extra-curricular activities. Sport was highlighted as something that many of the children were skilled at and spent time doing. Most children were stated to be good at one or more sports, particularly football, and family members had been told that they had positive future prospects in the sport.

While the mothers were keen to stress that things were not always perfect, there was little to no reason at this stage to be concerned about their child. They stressed that prior to being groomed, their children had had limited if any involvement with services and were not generally known to be involved in any criminality.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Parents spoke extensively about the sudden and significant behaviour changes exhibited by their children as being the first signs that something was happening to the children, although at that early stage families did not immediately recognise these as being linked to grooming or exploitation. They reported these changes to cut across all aspects of the young people's lives.

Common early warning signs

- Using abusive language
- Hostile or aggressive behaviour
- Obsessed by mobile phone
- Disengaging from activities
- Secretive
- Acting scared
- Disengaging from school
- Rapid and extreme mood changes
- New peer groups and / or relationships
- Exclusions and being moved from mainstream school to a Pupil Referral Unit

Changes in personality and behaviour

“ Dress sense changed, language changed, even facial, just how he looked, everything just completely changed. Just really rough and aggressive, and yeah, just not what you recognise. ”

Extreme and rapid changes in personality and behaviour were mentioned by all family members who took part in this research.

One family member spoke of the fact that their child was very quick to take on a completely different personality. Another explained that the change had been so extreme that they “didn’t recognise anything about” their child any more. The young people were reported to have become “arrogant,” “cocky”, manipulative and increasingly lying and being evasive: “it was always lots of secrets and I couldn’t quite figure out why.”

A notable change was an increase in aggression, anger and violence, particularly towards the family. Parents spoke about their child suddenly seeming to “hate” them and becoming very negative about the rest of the family.

“ When you know that someone’s got a kind of a loving and caring temperament and loves his family, to them completely hating them, everybody. ”

The rage and anger reported by some families was so severe that they were frightened of their child: “this is a placid boy going into rages, frightening rages with me; it was usually directed at me.” It was emphasised that this anger and aggression was not normal behaviour for the children and something that the parents had not seen before: “That’s what the disturbing part was: he’d never done this before.” Families mentioned the police being involved at these early stages, having been called by the family themselves due to fear of their child.

“ It was very odd... he was constantly using Snapchat, looking at these Drill videos to the point where he was glued to the screen [...] it was almost like he was brainwashed. ”

In addition to anger being shown, some of the children occasionally acted as though they were scared of something, although at this point the families did not know what.

Children were said to become obsessed with their phones, and secretive about what they were doing on them. Similarly, intense use of social media, particularly Snapchat, was observed, alongside a fixation on viewing particular online content such as drill videos.

A number of families mentioned specific instances which, in retrospect, would appear to be clear early signs of grooming: “in hindsight, piecing everything together, it’s obvious that all this is connected to exploitation.” One family told Missing People that at one point, shortly before things escalated dramatically, their son had become very panicked and stressed and asked for hundreds of pounds. The family did not give them the money, and shortly after that the young person went missing for the first time. Another young person became obsessed with his family’s finances and frequently asked his mother about detailed aspects of this. The mother reported that her impression was that he felt that he had to be the “man of the house” and provide financially.

Some children had been spending time with older people, with one child spending time with someone in their late teens, more than 5 years older than her and another found to be spending time with someone in their late 20s. This was a particularly notable worry for that family who were shown the images of the older person on CCTV by the police to see if they recognised him: “I now had the face of the person who was controlling my son.”

“I kept thinking, ‘oh my god, it’s me, I’m doing all the wrong stuff.’”

Families spoke of searching for an underlying issue to explain these behaviour changes, with mental health issues and bullying being mentioned: “I asked him if he was being bullied and he got very upset, very defensive, almost got into a rage when I asked him this which straightaway was the answer to me, he was being bullied, of course I didn’t know.” Families also blamed themselves for what was happening to their child.

Changes at school

“So obviously it was clear there was something wrong because detentions, bunking off school, his behaviour was getting worse, more distant from family members, shutting us all out.”

Parents explained that the changes in their child’s behaviour at home were mirrored in their behaviour at school. Schools told the

parents that their children were being disruptive and disengaged, leading to actions including detentions, being prohibited from school trips, and ultimately being excluded or put on a managed move.

Children were reported to be defiant at school and doing the exact opposite of what they were asked to do. One child decided not to do their AS-levels less than a month before he was due to sit them: “he went from having, I don’t know how many GCSEs do you do, passing them all to now having no A levels, dropping out of school.”

“He just went into a spiral of everything was negative, there was, if I’d get a phone call from the school you know you just think ‘my god not another phone call!’”

Almost all parents spoke of the constant communication from the school about their child and constant worry about what they were going to be told: “I was too scared to look at my phone at work. Because I was getting constant emails from the school that he has done this now, he has done that now and the other.”

Family members had varying experiences of the school response. One reported that the school did nothing beyond referring to the school counsellor, and did not take any further steps when their child didn’t want to engage. However another described the school response as good: they kept her informed of exactly what was happening with her child and the steps being taken to support him, including the offer of a mentor. Some teachers were reported as being “brilliant” at working with the parents to keep them informed of what was happening.

Extra-curricular activities

Children disengaged with the extra-curricular activities they had previously been involved in. This tended to happen at a similar time to when their behaviour started changing, and included completely disengaging from sports they had previously been very invested in.

For some this was gradual, from asking parents not to watch sports games to then deciding

to stop completely. For others they suddenly stopped engaging in any sport and other activities: “it just all started to disappear.”

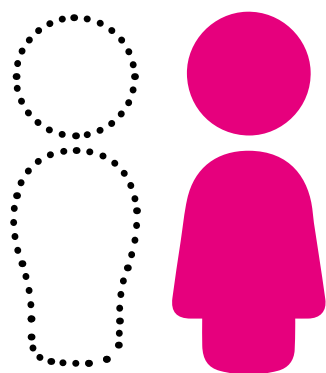
Family experience

“We were at the end of our tether by then. Like we were at breaking point already. But you just think it is just... and you are not realising at that point that someone needs to support you or help you. You are just thinking is he going off the rails? Is it a home problem at that point?”

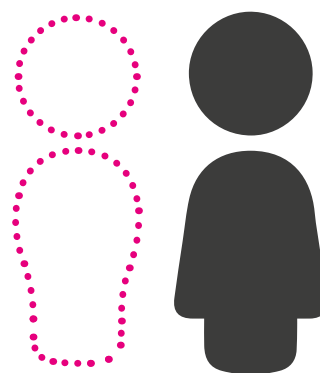
Families already felt intuitively that something was wrong: something far beyond ‘typical’ teenage behaviour. Any of these changes considered in isolation may not be a cause for big concern, particularly for those who work or spend a lot of time with teenagers. However, the speed and extremity of the changes and the fact that they were completely out of character was highlighted by all of the families Missing People spoke with. The complete change in the behaviour and attitude of their child was significant and shocking: “it was very clear very quickly that it was not your normal teenage angst.” Families felt that they were the best placed to know whether these changes were out of the ordinary for their child and something to be concerned about but did not feel that their concerns were heard, including by schools and the police.

Families reported trying everything to help their child at this stage. They spoke of everyone from grandparents, to aunts, to older family member’s boyfriends becoming involved. Where the child was still engaging with extra-curricular activities, families worked with coaches to try and maintain their involvement and prevent any further decline in their participation and behaviour. However, even at this stage these attempts were not successful, with children’s situations continuing to deteriorate further. When the young person was still involved with school and sport the families felt that other people were involved in trying to support their child, but once they stopped engaging this changed and the child and family became increasingly isolated, with families feeling that a lot of pressure was being put on them.

A key theme was the helplessness that the parents felt, even at this stage before exploitation was seriously considered. While families were trying to do everything to stop their child spiralling any further, they generally did not know where to go to get help. This was particularly the case where they had had no previous involvement with statutory services. Families also reported that they now feel guilty that they did not recognise that the changes they were seeing in their child may have been linked to exploitation: “I’m kicking myself now thinking about it, I’m really angry with myself that I could have stopped it but no-one knew.”



Parents spoke extensively about the sudden and significant behaviour changes exhibited by their children as being the first signs that something was happening.



Missing

EARLY MISSING EPISODES

“No-one could contact him while he was away so imagine what this was doing to me. I was a nervous wreck, not eating, not sleeping.”

College of Policing definition of missing:

“Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed.”

For all of the family members Missing People spoke with their child going missing was one of the early, but serious, warning signs that they were being exploited. Individual perceptions of missing were different, with individuals identifying missing on a spectrum: some were clear that missing was coming home late from school and not knowing where their child was, while others considered it to be missing overnight or longer.

Patterns of early missing episodes

Individual experiences varied for the families involved in this research, and there was no consistent pattern of missing.

For some, their child had started coming home late from school and they had not known where they were or what they were doing. For those, missing incidents tended to escalate, with children starting to then go missing overnight, then going missing multiple times per week, then longer term missing episodes.

For others, a longer term missing incident of at least overnight marked the first time their child was not where they expected them to be. These first missing incidents were days or weeks long, with neither the family nor the police knowing where the child was for an extended period of time.

“I thought I’m going to wake up in a moment and I click my fingers, wake up, this is not happening.”

For some, early missing episodes were the first time grooming was seriously considered. For one child who was found miles away from home with significant amounts of cash and drugs after his first missing episode, the police acknowledged that he could not have been acting alone. The police spoke to the family once the child had been found: “they took me to one side and they said ‘look at him, he’s just a kid. We know he can’t have done this on his own.’” The parent felt that the police “knew what this was” and, therefore, the incident should have triggered action to support her son: “there were all the signs of trafficking.” Parents spoke of looking for reasons behind what was happening to their child and then recognising that their child may have been being exploited: “I came across modern slavery stuff and realised that this must be behind it.”

Missing was something that persisted throughout all of the children’s grooming and exploitation, as will be explored below.

Family instinct

“For some reason my instinct said straight away, I don’t know, this is not normal. I don’t know why but my instinct told me so I said ‘we need to go to the police station.’”

All family members were clear that as soon as their child went missing they instinctively felt that something was very wrong. This was particularly pronounced where a child was missing at least overnight. This instinct was strong, and for some involved the feeling that their child was in danger or being exploited: “Mother’s instinct as they say. I just knew that [child] was somewhere under duress.”

“I think there might be a gang behind this and [the police] asked me how I know that and I said ‘I don’t know, it’s just my instinct’.”

Without exception, all family members emphasised that it was out of the ordinary for their child to stay away overnight without telling their family: “this is not a friend; this is something going on behind this.” Parents reported that ordinarily their child would not stay away overnight without permission, and that even following an argument they would never walk out: “It you’re upset, yeah you’re upset [...] but nobody’s leaving the house.”

Police response

After realising that their child was missing, family members told Missing People that they contacted the police. A number of interviewees reported that the Police told them they needed to wait for 24 hours before making a missing person’s report, something which is not accurate: someone should be reported missing as soon as they are not where they are expected to be and there is concern for their welfare.

“I felt from the start that this wasn’t really being taken seriously by the police, that was the main part about it.”

In addition to being told they needed to wait 24 hours to report their child as missing, parents felt that the police were “very blasé”, not taking the perceived risks to their child seriously. There was a perception from a number of family members that the police weren’t always doing everything they could to locate their missing child: “there’s lots they could have done.” Families felt that the police did not always keep them informed of steps being taken to find their child: “Their response was ‘we’ll get back to you, we’ll call you back.’ They didn’t call me back.”

Not all families had negative experiences while reporting their child missing and during the period they were away. One parent said that the police were really helpful: “they acted pretty much immediately. How you would expect them [to].” The police also kept her informed of everything they were doing and made sure she knew who was involved in her child’s case.

For those families who had a negative experience, their strength of feeling that something was

wrong was very evident. And whilst receiving a missing report is normal practice for police colleagues, with at least one person being reported missing every 90 seconds in the UK, for the families it is often their first experience and something which is extremely worrying. Training to ensure that police acknowledge and empathise with the level of concern of families experience might help address some of their concerns.

While missing: the use of publicity appeals

What are publicity appeals?

Publicity appeals are a way of raising awareness of a missing person using print and broadcast media to publicise posters and information about that person. They can be circulated by the police, members of the public and others, including on social media.

Family members spoke about whether publicity appeals were used in trying to find their missing child, either through the police or Missing People. This was most relevant for the young people where their first missing incident was longer term, for example over a week. Some family members were concerned about the impact the publicity appeals may have on their child and were worried that it may put them in a more dangerous position: “I asked them to take it down after a week because I was becoming very scared that this would be seen by the wrong individuals.” Another parent who decided to use publicity appeals said that in response her son contacted her by phone while he was missing to ask her to take them down. She reported that he sounded distressed and scared during the call.

One parent decided to use publicity appeals after her son had been missing for a number of months, and he returned from being missing not long after they had been used. While the parent is not sure whether this was due to the publicity appeals, the existence of the appeals helped her: “It definitely helped, just knowing that, you know, people in [*the area he’d gone missing from*] would have known, someone knew his whereabouts.”

“All I knew was that my child was being taken away from my home and I had this real big feeling they were going to be involved in something quite big. I made everyone aware of it.”

One family member was very confident in the use of publicity appeals, and shared them as widely as she could. By this stage she was aware that her child was likely involved in county lines and wanted the publicity to reach as far as possible to include all of the places her child was thought to be travelling.

The examples above demonstrate something parents were worried about frequently: that their actions, or indeed inactions, may have the inadvertent impact of putting their child in more danger, and that they did not always feel equipped to make these decisions. This is a key example of the need families and carers have for expert advice and support when their child is missing and / or being exploited.

Child's return from early missing episodes

“He was in a terrible state. He was covered in dirt from head to toe. He looked like he might not have slept. He looked delirious almost. He looked like he had hardly eaten.”

For all of the families their children did return from missing, although after different periods of time.

Parents were generally contacted by the police to be told that their child had returned and then went to the police station to pick them up. Some spoke of having very mixed emotions at this point, with a combination of happiness that they had been found to anger that they had been missing: “I did not know whether to cry or to hit him to be honest [...] My first words were ‘are you alright?’”

“He was really thin [...] he was dirty, smelly and he had the same clothes on clearly for days. He just looked dirty. It was horrible.”

A common theme was the extreme shock the families felt at the way their child looked and acted when they returned from being missing. They all spoke of the child looking physically different: “He was like a zombie [...] He was all dishevelled. He didn’t smell right, you know. He looked like he hadn’t slept for days.” Their children were dirty, smelt, looked hungry, like they “needed looking after” and “needed somewhere warm and safe to sleep in.” Some children were acting strangely on their return. One child laughed constantly while at the police station, including while being charged with drugs offences: “he was just laughing and I thought ‘this is not normal’”.

There were clear indications of grooming and exploitation at this stage for many of the children. One was found after a week-long missing episode in a situation which strongly suggested exploitation. Some children were found with drugs and substantial amounts of cash in their possession. Those children who spoke to their parents and family members about what had happened when they were missing spoke of being places where there were guns, drugs, and addicts, suggesting possible cuckooing.³⁰

The response from agencies will be discussed more fully later in this report, however it is important to mention here that most families were not provided with any support during early missing episodes or when their child returned.

ESCALATION OF MISSING EPISODES

Over 80,000 children are reported missing in 210,000 episodes each year in the UK: an average of **2.6** episodes each³¹

Regardless of whether their first missing episode was short or long term, all family members spoke of missing increasing in frequency and / or length as their child became more entrenched in being exploited. All children had at least one longer term missing episode of around a week, with

³⁰ Cuckooing is where “the group exploits young or vulnerable persons, to achieve the storage and / or supply of drugs, movement of cash proceeds and to secure the use of dwellings”: National Crime Agency, *County Lines Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply*, 2017.

³¹ Missing People, *Key Information*.

some having much longer missing episodes and some going missing dozens of times.

For some families their child was going missing multiple times per week: “he was going missing, coming back, going missing, coming back and just trying to deal with it myself just not knowing what to do a lot of the time.” One child was consistently going missing overnight, coming home for a matter of hours when his family was at work during the day, and then leaving again before they came back. The same child’s episodes escalated so that he was going missing for longer and longer periods of time, until he was going missing for months at a time.

“Every time he came home [...] literally a couple of hours later he would go again.”

Another child’s missing episodes quickly increased in frequency and length after the first episode, which was overnight. He quickly started going missing multiple times per week: one week he was reported missing 20 times. This escalated to going missing for weeks at a time, until ultimately he went missing for months.

Given that the average number of missing episodes per year for each missing child is 2.6 and 90% of children return within 2 days, both the increased frequency and the increased length of missing episodes should be a key warning sign for the police and others.³²

“This was not my son at all. He was frightened of something, I could feel that he was frightened. He was constantly looking out of the window all the time [...] Then he went missing two days later then it all fitted into place.”

Some children contacted their parents briefly while they were missing, normally in the form of short phone calls: “he did contact me and I could tell then something was very, very, wrong.” One parent could see the areas her child was travelling to through someone else’s Snapchat and the use of filters showing the area locations. Through Snapchat this parent also saw some of the things her child was exposed to while

missing, including alcohol, drugs, money and sexual activity. Another parent caught sight of an exchange on social media which they felt clearly indicated involvement in drug running: “I didn’t record it and I should have recorded it because if they police heard what I heard they would have believed he was trafficked because it was very disturbing.”

All parents were clear that their child was involved in something serious by this stage. Many specifically said that they thought that there was gang involvement, organised crime, trafficking and / or exploitation. Families spoke about the fear that they thought their child was experiencing, and spoke of particular incidents triggering a missing episode. For one mother her son flew into a “rage I can’t forget”, during which he persistently asked her for money, threatened her, spat and threw things on the floor: “at one point I thought he was going to bludgeon me [...] he looked so angry. I thought the anger must be coming from somewhere and I didn’t know where it was coming from [...] He wanted to tell me but he couldn’t so he was trapped and he’s still trapped even now.” Two days later her son went missing. For another, her son asked her for a significant amount of money, and when she refused he went missing for a long period of time. Another parent described her son’s obsessive use of social media in the period immediately before missing episodes.

Response to missing reports

Families had mixed experiences reporting their child missing once the frequency of missing episodes escalated. One mother had very positive experiences with the police sometimes, and at other times felt that they were very unhelpful: “It would be ‘do you live here on your own? Do you own this house?’ I’m thinking ‘you’re questioning me like I’m a criminal.’” Another felt that police did not take the missing reports very seriously: “It was the usual ‘are you sure he’s not with his mates? What did he have on? Did you have any arguments?’”

Similarly to early missing episodes, some families felt that the police were not taking their concerns seriously as patterns of missing escalated and felt that police activity to find their child was minimal. For example, some families experienced

³² Ibid.

police reluctance to open a missing person's report. Others were frustrated at there not being evidence to them of an active search, for example they could not understand why it seemed like no attempts were being made to trace them via their phone, social media or travel cards.

The level of police response to, and nature of, a missing person investigation is determined by the initial and ongoing risk assessments which should be made in accordance with the College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice. The family perceptions of what is happening with the search for their missing child may not accurately reflect the extent of the police investigation because not everything will be shared with the family. The Police may also have reasons for not taking action in, for example, tracing phones.³³ However, the family perspectives do suggest a need for improved communication from the police at a minimum so they feel that can be assured that the missing episode and exploitation is being taken seriously and receives an appropriate level of response.

“So my normal steps were to ... phone the police, report him missing, describe the situation, describe what he had on [...] They give you a CAD number [...] We'll send someone round prior to look at your home to make sure he's not just hiding somewhere. And also, when he returns home, get a police officer to give him a pep talk. Now, in one week imagine that happening at least 20 times. It's not good.”

Parents described keeping a detailed log of everything that was happening, and reporting their child missing every time they were not where they were expected to be. The need to emphasise how serious the situation was with their child was evident: “this is all of trying to convince people that something ain't right.”

A common frustration for family members was the process needed to report their child as missing. They would first have to call the police, ordinarily the 101 number, report them missing, give all of the background and information about the child and that episode to the call handler. They would then have to call when their child returned. For some parents this was happening multiple times per week, and the process was described as being very frustrating: “by now it is the same answers every day [...] you know a good forty minutes is going on doing this before they have allocated somebody.”

One parent was given a unique computer aided dispatch (CAD) number, which meant that she didn't need to explain everything every time she called, and the call taker had all of the information about her child's vulnerability, risk, and previous missing episodes in front of them. This was very beneficial for her, including because the call taker could then see and understand the context of the missing incident which helped to inform the response: “it made such a big difference because then I didn't have to explain myself, just call with the CAD number.” It also meant that the police weren't coming to her house all the time, which she had reported as adding to her anxiety and trauma around what was happening to her child, as well as negatively affecting her other children.

³³ Missing person investigations are governed by Associated Police Practice Guidance, and authorization will be required to access data including financial and telephone data where there is concern for a person's welfare: College of Policing, *Missing Persons Authorised Professional Practice*.

Steps to be taken when a child returns³⁴

1. Safe and well check / prevention interview: the police should carry out a safe and well check as soon as possible after the child has returned. This is an opportunity to check for indications that the child has suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, and to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them.
2. Independent Return Interview: local authorities have a statutory obligation to offer this to every returned missing child after every missing episode. This in-depth interview should be carried out by an independent person within 72 hours of the child returning. This is an opportunity to:
 - Identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered, including that not already disclosed during the Safe and Well check, either before they ran away or whilst missing
 - Understand and try to address the reasons why the child ran away
 - Help the child feel 'safe' and that they have options, to prevent repeat instances of them running away
 - Provide them with information on how to stay safe if they choose to run away again
3. Local authority children's services, police and voluntary services should work together to build up a comprehensive picture of why the child when missing, what happened while they were missing, who they were missing with and where they were found, and what support they require upon returning home.³⁵



³⁴ Department for Education, *Statutory Guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, 2014.

³⁵ Ibid.

Families spoke about how agencies responded when their child returned from being missing, although few specifically noted safe and well checks and return home interviews.

Families had varying experiences with police forces when their child returned. One child was found by a police force over 60 miles away from where he went missing: his mother said that the police force was more sympathetic than their local force, and she felt that they “genuinely cared” about her son. For that police force, which was a smaller rural force, the mother noted that the mentality was very different from her local force in a large urban area. She said that they were “Completely different to what we’ve got [here]. More sympathetic [...] I mean one officer, honestly [...] I could see they genuinely cared which was very refreshing.” In comparison, when she’d reported her child missing to her local force she had felt that the police “didn’t care” and they “weren’t being very sympathetic to me all the way through.” However, others experienced the opposite; instead reporting that more rural police forces seemed ill-equipped to deal with their child’s missing episodes and exploitation.

Children were found or returned in circumstances clearly suggesting exploitation, but were not treated as such. One child was found with cash and drugs of the value of over £1,600, with his parent reporting that the police recognised that he could not have been acting on his own. Others were found in areas they had no previous connection to, miles away from home. All of these suggested planning and involvement from external people and that the child was not acting alone. However, only one child had support put in place to help her exit exploitation at an early stage.

For one child who was already involved with the Youth Offending Team (YOT) before he went missing for the first time, the family reported that

they simply acted as though he had absconded: they had “no sensitivity, no compassion at all.” The family had the impression that they were being watched and judged by the YOT team rather than being involved in the attempts to support their child. Others mentioned that there was little understanding towards their child or them: “Empathy is a really big thing about this because local authorities, from my experience, there has been no empathy hardly [...] from social workers you would expect some kind of empathy. Youth offending services, well they wouldn’t even know the word empathy.”

One family felt that the YOT had become desensitised to the issue due to what they are seeing on a day to day basis, and that this meant they did not see any of the children as potential

victims: “maybe they’ve become hardened by it, that’s the impression that I get, they become hardened by the job that they do.” However, this parent also reported that this has changed recently as the understanding of CCE has improved, the YOT is now treating her child as a victim.

By this stage of their exploitation the children had all had some

engagement with services, however most felt that their response to exploitation was not always appropriate. Families felt that social workers were not always equipped to manage their child or their situation on return from missing. They reported that the model used by social workers does not always recognise exploitation and harm occurring outside the family home, and they felt as though social workers were quick to blame the family for what was happening: “she pretty much told me it was my fault.”

Most families were shocked that social workers showed limited empathy and sympathy for their situation. This included families’ perceptions that social workers did not understand why they were anxious about their child, or that their child

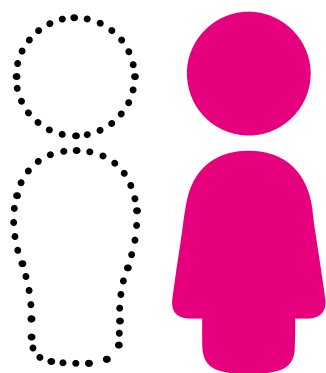
Some families had positive experiences with social workers, and this was normally where they felt the social worker had a good understanding of exploitation and the nuances around grooming.

may have experienced trauma while missing. Consistency of the social worker was also an issue for some of the families, with a number of different social workers being involved in their child's situation: "There is a line of social workers changing over [...] it was a complete mess."

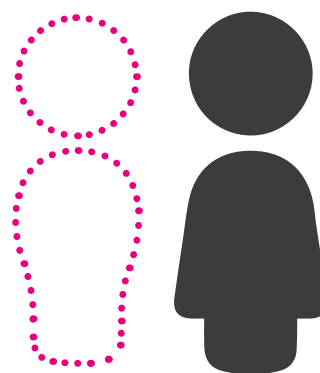
Some families had positive experiences with social workers, and this was normally where they felt the social worker had a good understanding of exploitation and the nuances around grooming. For one family a social worker supported the child extensively following a missing episode where the child was found with drugs, and the child has now been supported to exit county lines: "I don't know whether [what the social worker was saying] had a connection with things she had seen or heard or whether she was taking what the social workers were saying as true [...] That was the day she changed [...] That was her turning point." The same family received support from social services when the child was being exploited, with a social worker sitting down with the family to explain exploitation and county lines and how to best support the child.

Good practice example: Contextual safeguarding

The University of Bedfordshire has developed Contextual Safeguarding, "an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families."³⁶ This approach recognises that there are extra-familial relationships that can feature violence and abuse, including in neighbourhoods, schools and online, and that parents and carers have little influence over these contexts. Contextual safeguarding "expands the objectives of child protection systems in recognition that young people are vulnerable to abuse in a range of social contexts."



Most families were shocked that social workers showed limited empathy and sympathy for their situation.



³⁶ Contextual Safeguarding Network, *What is Contextual Safeguarding?*, 2019.

Escalation of exploitation: “I didn’t think it could get any worse, but...”

The experiences of almost all of the families continues to get worse and worse as their child continued to be exploited. The following composite case studies demonstrate the range and severity of this escalation, with the section following the case studies providing detail of those aspects which have not already been covered in this report.

JOSHUA’S STORY³⁷

Joshua’s exploitation began to escalate rapidly as his missing episodes increased in frequency and in length.

He had already been placed on a managed move from his first secondary school due to his increasingly disruptive behaviour, and while at his second school he was excluded and referred to a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). While at the PRU Joshua was given a reduced timetable and was only required to attend for a couple of hours a day. It was during this time that his mother felt there was a significant upsurge in the exploitation, and Joshua frequently missed school, was placed in detention, and his missing episodes increased.

Shortly after being placed in the PRU, Joshua was arrested on return from a missing episode, and was charged with a minor drugs offence.

On release it was determined that he could not go back to his family home for his own safety and due to the exploitation that was happening in the area in which the family home was located.

Joshua was then placed in multiple different living situations. Initially he lived with an extended family member who lived in a different local authority to that where the exploitation had occurred. When this situation broke down he was then placed in a children’s home in a different area of the UK. Multiple subsequent placement moves were not successful, and Joshua continued to be reported missing.

During a recent missing episode Joshua was attacked and stabbed, necessitating hospital care. He turns 18 next year, and his mother is very fearful about what will happen to him.

She suspects that without intensive support he will end up in the adult criminal justice system, more seriously injured or even killed.

HARVEY’S STORY

Harvey had been excluded from mainstream school and was attending a PRU when he was arrested.

He had previously been arrested multiple times, so a Detention and Training Order was made, and he then spent time in a Young Offender’s Institute. Harvey was not referred to the National Referral Mechanism, despite clear signs of exploitation.

On his release Harvey quickly began going missing again and was demonstrating clear signs of exploitation. Shortly after being released from the YOI Harvey turned 18.

Harvey was again arrested, this time receiving a custodial sentence in adult prison. He has now been released from adult prison and is trying to set up life away from exploitation. However Harvey’s mental health has deteriorated significantly, and he is now showing signs of trauma, depression, and experiences flashbacks to what happened before and during his time in prison. He has no confidence in his ability to get a job and does not think he will be able to move forward with his life.

He has been unable to access appropriate support or housing. Concerns remain that he will be pulled back into an exploitative situation, but will not be seen as someone who was groomed and exploited as a child.

³⁷ These case studies are composites of the family members’ experiences, all identifying information has been changed.



“So he’d say to me I’m better off in prison – go on call the police. And he’d do something, go on call the police. I’m better off there. I know what the rules are, I know what I need to do.”

School exclusion

“He was spoken to like a problem. He was never spoken to like a victim, ever. And it was quite nasty really.”

The majority of the children were either put on a managed move, some multiple times, or excluded from mainstream school: all were at least threatened with exclusion. This was often due to bringing a knife to school. Schools understandably need to take action where a child’s behaviour is extreme or where a weapon is brought to school, and schools will sometimes decide that an exclusion is the required course of action. However, this should also be seen as a clear sign of a safeguarding need.

Schools and others did not appear to use this as an opportunity to talk about vulnerability or safeguarding, but instead acted as though the child was a ‘trouble-maker’: “there was no empathy coming from the school [...] he just wanted him out the way.”

There were some positive examples of action taken however, including a teacher offering to be a mentor to the child: “he could see he’s got really good potential but he can also see that obviously he’s upset [...] and putting on this brave, angry persona.” One family member spoke about the school doing a joint referral to CAMHS with the parents. However, generally extreme behaviour being shown by children was not met with a safeguarding response which was appropriate to the level of risk they were experiencing.

Pupil Referral Units

“He was a boy who was generally an all-rounder [...] he was always reading different books at home, he was excelling in sports [...] he was interested in history, science, IT, music [...] so to go from that to, then to go to a boy who ended up in the pupil referral unit. I just feel very angry actually as well that people have done this.”

Where children attended a Pupil Referral Unit ('PRU'), things tended to escalate quickly, and groomers and exploiters knew that their children were at the PRU: “whoever was doing this, they knew, it was like they were tracking him which is very disturbing.”

Parents considered that PRUs were “breeding grounds” for groomers. The way PRUs are set up and structured was thought to contribute to their child’s deterioration and increasing exploitation, partly due to the limited attendance hours. Most parents were working, so the short PRU hours meant that their child was left completely unsupervised.

Throughout the interviews, school exclusion came through as a potential key intervention point. Children were reported as being badly affected by possible exclusion and being placed in a PRU, and for some families it was one of the only times that it appeared that their child might respond to support or intervention. However, generally this was not used as an opportunity to work intensively with the child to put in place effective support.

Youth criminal justice

During their exploitation, all children were involved in activities which brought them into contact with the youth criminal justice system.

For some their first involvement related to bringing a knife or machete to school and the youth offending team becoming involved: “This

was distressing, I think it was more distressing than the missing episode ‘cause obviously it was a machete.” Others were involved in other types of offending, such as mugging, other types of violence, or money and fraud related incidents. Some children were charged with a criminal offence after returning from being missing, including offences involving the possession and intent to supply drugs: “When I heard what they were charging him with I felt like I wanted to just fall on the floor.”

A notable thing for parents who witnessed their child talking to the police after being charged was that they appeared to have been coached to respond in certain ways. One parent said that her child was acting like an experienced criminal and was using phrases and words she thought he must have been told to use: “In the police interview it was ‘no comment’ the whole thing [...] like he was experienced, like he was a proper criminal.”

“it was the worst thing I’d ever want for my son, but it happened at that point to be the best thing that could happen for him at that time because of how embedded he was.”

For some families the arrest of their child was actually a relief: it was the only time they felt any peace because they knew that, for however short that period was, they were taken out of the reach of groomers and were safe: “that was the first time I had any peace knowing that he was being taken out of the mix”. This was also the case where a child spent time in youth offending institutions (YOI): while this was traumatic for the families, some spoke of feeling safer for their child while they were in the YOI because they then weren’t on the street.

Support while in criminal justice system

A number of families mentioned the National Referral Mechanism (the NRM) as something which should have been better utilised.³⁸ They

³⁸ The National Referral Mechanism is “a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.” Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration, *Modern Slavery Victims: referral and assessment forms*. Those suspected of being victims of modern slavery, including trafficking and exploitation, can be referred into the NRM. If a child is formally identified as a victim of trafficking this should help to ensure the child is appropriately protected and can be used in ensuring a child is not wrongly prosecuted for activity which is linked to this exploitation or trafficking. For more information please see: Youth Justice Legal Centre, *National Referral Mechanism (NRM)*.

spoke of thinking that the police were not using the NRM properly, and that this resulted in their child becoming more embedded in criminality: “it’s not protecting children or young people.”

Families spoke of the need to see exploited children primarily as victims, not as criminals: “they were seeing a 14 year old who’s making a lifestyle choice rather than seeing that he’s the victim. And of course that was devastating ‘cos I knew that was not the case.” While some thought that this perception is currently changing, others thought that some still see exploited children as criminals: “I’m starting to wonder will these boys ever be seen as victims. I don’t know.” Families spoke of this both in relation to initial police perceptions and of better use of the NRM to support exploited children. Where children are suspected of being exploited and found in situations linked to criminality, for example where children are found with drugs, families spoke of the need to support them not criminalise them. One family member thought that they should not be put under the Youth Offending Service, but instead “go to a special service where they’re going to receive support and care.”

“I don’t know why it’s done, if it’s done because of an ideology, ignorance, or if it’s done, I don’t know. I can’t get my head around it.”

Mother talking about children being criminalised

Some families considered that the attitudes of police and others suggest that it’s “easier” to treat the children as criminals than “to deal with this differently.” There was no specialist support for children while in the YOI and very little support for families. This was “very, very challenging” for families who felt that they had to do everything themselves and constantly be pushing for their child to get any help.

Child goes into care

All of the children had some interaction with Children’s Services during their exploitation and were moved out of the family home. This was principally due to the fact that the area in which

their parents lived was thought to be unsafe for them to be living in as it was typically where they had been groomed.

Examples of children being placed away from home included:

- Children being placed with family members out of area
- Children being placed out of area in residential children’s homes
- Unsuccessful placements, resulting in children being moved multiple times across the country
- Older children being placed in supported accommodation

For families their child going into care was very difficult: “And they said ‘to be honest he will have to go into care.’ You know you are hearing all these phrases that are alien to you [...] You are thinking how are these words being mentioned around my family.”

There were problems with all situations when the children were in care. For children placed with family members outside of borough, parents reported that those family members were not necessarily able to look after the child to the extent that they needed and keep them safe. Often, although the family member was technically out of the borough or area the child had been groomed in, for some this was practically not very far away from their family home, meaning they remained close to the exploiters: “she lives in a different area and under a different borough, but actually it is not that far. It is a few bus stops away.”

Where children were placed in children’s homes, parents thought that they were not appropriate for their child’s circumstances. One child, at age 14, was placed in a home where the other people were all much older teenagers: “the home wasn’t equipped for his age group.” Many reported that care homes were not able to manage their child as someone being exploited from outside the family home: “they were just dealing with a child they’re used to dealing with which is the standard stuff in care rather than because of the fact they had been exploited.”

Families spoke of the challenges faced in simply identifying somewhere for their child to go and the limited spaces available, even for very high risk children: “if I’m honest, things were so messy, all they wanted to do was just get him somewhere.” They also spoke of the disruption where placements were changed. One child had been settling into safe accommodation and had been doing well there and starting to engage with family again, but he was moved and progress was lost: “it felt like I was finally getting to be with a normal teenager again doing normal stuff, and then all of that was changed.” Some children were placed in multiple different residential homes across the country, from London to the south coast, to areas in northern England.

A key frustration for families here was that they generally felt kept out of decision making about their child. They felt that they were not kept informed of key discussions or decisions, and that they were generally seen as part of the problem and not the solution. A number of mothers spoke of the fact that they weren’t told when meetings were happening with their children, and that big decisions were being discussed and decided without them: “I was pretty much an outcast”. Families were not thought of as part of any solution to what was happening to their children. There was a struggle to be included in discussions and decision making, and it was difficult for family members to be cut out of decisions as fundamental as where their child was going to live. Where families spoke of positive examples of support for them, it was often around accessing help to be included in decision making about their child.

Turns 18

Two of the families who participated in the research presented experiences of children who had been exploited in their mid-teens but had since turned 18 and were now legally

classified as adults. This move into the remit of the adult legal and justice systems and adult services presented a range of new challenges. In particular, families felt that there was little or no recognition of the vulnerabilities resulting from having been groomed and exploited by criminals when they were children. The lack of recognition of the exploitation meant that no support was available or tailored to address their specific needs as adults: “They’d just say well he’s over 18 so you know he’s an adult. But not recognising that he’s a vulnerable adult.”

Furthermore, at the time their children were being groomed, criminal exploitation was not something that was generally recognised; their children were simply viewed as criminals not victims. This has had a knock on impact to their support as adults, where it remains the case that they are not recognised as having been a victim of exploitation in the past.

Turning 18 impacted on the families’ access to information, with services no longer able to share information about the situation or plans for support. In turn, families said that this affected their ability to support their child effectively.

This was particularly frustrating because they felt they were the only ones who understood and acknowledged the criminal exploitation and consequent vulnerabilities and, furthermore, were often required to provide a safety net or crucial support in the absence of other options. One mother addressed this by arranging for her son to give consent for agencies to disclose information to her which meant she was then able to work in partnership with the organisations to encourage her son to engage with the services available to him.

Difficulties in accessing appropriate housing support after their child turned 18 were highlighted. Their children did not qualify for any priority on housing waiting lists and they faced

Families felt that they were not kept informed of key discussions or decisions, and that they were generally seen as part of the problem and not the solution.



complexities of finding suitable accommodation outside of the family home, away from areas where they had been criminally exploited and with access to support to help prevent them re-entering the criminal activity they had been groomed into. One young adult had been offered semi-independent supported housing but his mother felt that they were not sufficiently expert in working with young adults who had been criminally exploited. They failed to identify patterns of unusual behaviour, suspicious activity or report her son missing when he was not where he should be, exposing her son to an increased risk of further criminal exploitation.

“The assumption is that you come from a bad home, have no qualifications, are uneducated so you just need to do all this entry stuff”

Those who have turned 18 have also had involvement with the adult criminal justice system, including spending time in adult prisons. Families spoke of their child being given little to no support while in prison, and that the support was “diabolical” for those who did receive any. Where prisons offered courses and qualifications, parents reported that this was offered at a low level: “he was saying there isn’t anything to engage you if you have qualifications.”

Deteriorating mental health

Families spoke of the trauma experienced by their child during their exploitation and how this was generally not recognised by those responding to them, whether that be in a missing, criminal justice, or social care setting. For those who have spent time in YOIs and / or adult prison,

their mental health was badly affected by their experiences there as well.

“He’ll tell me ‘you don’t know the things I’ve experienced in there, no one should ever have to experience that.’”

The families spoke of the consequences of the criminal exploitation on their child’s longer term mental health, confidence and self-worth. One of the young adults had been prescribed medication for depression and experienced flashbacks from the violence he had been exposed to when he was being exploited and in prison. However, he has had no access to specialist support to process what had happened and how it is affecting him: “He’s got trauma, there’s a lot of trauma.”

Similarly, they reported a loss of confidence in how to participate in everyday activities like replying to emails or making an appointment with the doctor. This in turn resulted in low mood, erratic behaviour, a lack of self-worth and seeing no way to break out of having been criminalised: “He says ‘I’m just a criminal aren’t I and no-one is gonna give me a job.’ So he constantly says he has no confidence and he doesn’t know how to do things. It is like having a 21 year old who is a child and we are going right back to basics again. Just basics on their personal development and their social skills.”

Children reportedly told their families that they feel worthless, and questioned whether they will ever be able to move forward: “So many times he would phone me up and say ‘I go to bed and in the morning you know I just hope I will not wake up.’ That’s it. Because he can’t see anything beyond it. He cannot see that he could have a job and a girlfriend.” And while support schemes are in place and have been offered to them to help them get a job, families reported that until their child’s mental health has stabilised, they won’t be successful.

“The things that he’s experienced over the last few years have, you know these are the years when you’re supposed to be learning from your adults [...] But he’s learnt from, you know, people who are criminals, people who are exploiting them so they teach them things that are not normal.”

Furthermore, families recognised that as adults their children exhibited learnt behaviours reflective of the influence the criminal exploiters had on them in their formative years. Trying to “undo” what they had been groomed to understand as ‘normal’ was particularly challenging, especially without any specialist support: “he’s like a kid that you’ve got to take one day at a time, step by step”. The repercussions of the exploitation on their child’s ability to function effectively in adulthood were enduring.

Even where the child’s situation has stabilised families reported the relentless nature of needing to be there to help their child all the time, including missing work and staying up overnight: “we’re just running on exhaustion.”

Families felt that throughout every stage of their child’s journey, from initial grooming through to being involved in the criminal justice system, homelessness, and mental health impacts, they have consistently and constantly had to advocate for their child to get help. They felt that without this their child would have received very little help, and a number of the families questioned how much support a child without this type of advocacy would actually get: “What happens to that young person who doesn’t have a parent that’s supportive? [...] You just don’t know what happens for them [...] they’re not going to get the help that they need.”

Impact on family

“I think they really need to recognise how it does impact on families. You know I am just so grateful that my other children did not fall into the same trap, because it could have been so easy to do [...] There is no typical family for this.”

Whole family impact

The impact on families was, and in some cases still is, significant, with every aspect of their lives being affected. The relentlessness of even the early changes was evident, with families reporting that even at that stage every aspect of their lives was being affected.

“You become distant from your family.”

Families emphasised the fact that the impacts were felt by the whole family, including siblings and others: “it kind of stresses the whole family out.” Some family members felt that the exploitation caused divisions and barriers in the family, partly because different family members wanted to handle the situation differently. For others, family members didn’t want, or didn’t know how, to talk about it. Those experiencing this were confident that other family members did care about them and their child, but the situation was so emotional they did not want to discuss it.

For some, their child’s exploitation and behaviour impacted their relationships with partners, with examples of their child physically threatening their partners, or different parents approaching the exploitation differently causing problems between them.

Impact on parent

“I was devastated [...] I’d isolated myself, I became unwell [...] I was working and I ended up having to be off sick.”

Parents were significantly affected by what was happening to their child and their family. They spoke of all aspects of their lives being affected, including family life, work, health, and mental health. The extent to which their child’s exploitation took over their lives was very clear in all interviews, although each parent was affected differently.

Most were worried and frightened almost constantly, and this was the case both when their child was missing and when they were at home: “you literally live your life on the edge”.

“I was there constantly waiting for her to turn up. For the police to bring her back. Part of me dreaded if the police knocked on my door. What were they going to be knocking on my door with? Were they going to be knocking on the door with telling me she was in danger? Something happened to her? Or were they going to be telling me she is safe, we have got her back.”

Families reported being tired and stressed all of the time: “exhausting, it really is exhausting.” They were not able to sleep, even when their child was at home. Some reported trying to keep track of everything that was happening, from reporting every single missing incident to the police, to writing down and saving every communication about their child: “it became a full time job to keep on top of what is going on.”

Work was affected, with some families not able to work due to their health being affected by their child being exploited. Others’ work was impacted because they couldn’t always go in or had to leave to deal with something which had happened with their child. Others had to take steps to try to keep their child safe, which then impacted upon their ability to work as they used to, for example needing to drive the child from door to door to make sure they were where they were supposed to be: “there is massive disruption left, right and centre work wise.” Families emphasised that, although their child’s exploitation did take over their lives, they had to try to manage that alongside everything else happening for them and their families, including work and looking after siblings.

“I have to say that I would like to wrap them up for a little while longer in cotton wool.”

Families were fearful that their other children would also be groomed. One family member reported becoming very protective over her other child and another family member spoke of the fact that it would “break her” if her other child went into the same situation as their sibling.

Parents felt blamed for what was happening to their child, particularly when social services became involved. Families felt that social workers were looking for problems within the home and ignoring any external risks to the child: “I had already been pretty much blamed for... ‘you didn’t do this, you didn’t do that. It is your fault as a parent.’”

The impact on families whose children have made steps to try to exit the situation was also highlighted, principally around the financial aspect. Families reported getting no support so that they can help their child and this being a “constant financial burden.”

Impact on siblings

Families spoke of varying impacts on the exploited child’s siblings, with most siblings being affected badly in some way. Relationships between siblings deteriorated, some to the extent that their siblings do not want anything to do with the exploited child any more.

Some of the exploited children were aggressive or violent towards siblings, including during early stages of grooming. Older siblings who would previously have been able to look after the young person no longer could due to their behaviour. One young person was reported as being aggressive towards his younger sibling: “He’d get really cross and want to fight his brother, and you know at that point his brother was quite a lot smaller.” Another parent reported that one younger sibling is now very closed up and speaks about the exploited child as being “horrible” to her. Family members reported being too worried to leave siblings alone together in case things became violent.

“You are hoping they are managing but you realise that they have a lot of emotions around it too.”

Some siblings are now very anxious. One younger brother is reportedly very nervous about going to school, and worries about his older sibling a lot. Others blame their sibling for the effect they are having on other family members, and don’t understand why their parent keeps giving the exploited child more chances. One family member spoke of encouraging her children to attend family counselling, but that they are not ready to do that: “maybe relationships will just get built as time moves on.”

“I’m really making a point of...even if it’s just sending them messages and checking how are they getting on with their studies [...] I realised I was actually neglecting the fact that they were doing really well”

Families spoke of the difficulties in trying to keep things as normal as possible for their other children, while trying to manage the situation with the exploited child. A key impact families identified was that siblings are frequently not given enough attention due to the parent’s need to focus on the exploited child. Families recognised that this had happened to their other children and spoke of trying to keep things as normal as possible for them but sometimes not being able to: “you are trying to keep everything going for your other child at the same time.” Families spoke of trying to be more considerate towards other siblings, for example checking with them before inviting the exploited child over to the house.

For some siblings, they could not understand that their sibling was being exploited: “they’ve not been able to get their head around any of this, like it was done through exploitation and not his own doing.” Some siblings, and wider family, did not accept the fact that the child had been groomed and considered that they were making a “lifestyle choice,” which was “devastating” for the parents. And while they were worried and upset about them, siblings often felt anger and frustration at what they saw as a choice to become involved with criminal activity, particularly where their siblings were found with drugs.

What do families want?

Awareness and training on CCE

A key frustration, particularly with hindsight, was the perceived lack of awareness of CCE, especially the early warning signs of grooming and exploitation. Families felt this was the case from a range of agencies, including schools, local authorities, the police, and social workers. They felt that the behaviours their children were exhibiting and things they were doing should have been recognised as potentially being due to grooming and exploitation, but that this generally wasn't the case.

Regarding schools, most families thought that teachers should be trained to be able to better identify when a child may be being groomed. One parent suggested that a dedicated exploitation service within the school would be positive, and that a mentor programme could be adopted where older pupils are trained in the signs of CCE and work with younger children who have been groomed. It was thought that more broadly staff in schools should be trained to identify signs, including nurses working with schools. There should also be awareness raising for children and young people to ensure they are aware of the early signs of grooming.

As discussed above, families felt that significant opportunities to identify grooming and exploitation were missed, including early missing episodes and early involvement in the criminal justice system. These signs were missed by agencies including the police, children's services, and education providers. This lack of identification meant that key opportunities for early intervention were missed by these agencies, resulting in intervention attempts not being put into place until the child was much more embedded in exploitation.

It will be important to ensure that individual behaviours identified by professionals working with children and young people at different touchpoints are joined up. In isolation, some of the behaviours may cause little concern but when put together could give a much clearer picture of the potential risk CCE. Professionals working with children and young people must be vigilant, curious and actively consider the possibility of child criminal exploitation when presented with warning signs. Where appropriate they should work closely with parents to create a complete picture rather than dismissing changes in appearance and behaviours as not being a cause for concern.

Families felt that significant opportunities to identify grooming and exploitation were missed, including early missing episodes and early involvement in the criminal justice system.

A secondary impact of professionals not recognising exploitation warning signs was that the issue was not flagged with families. At the early stages families were generally unaware of the issue of CCE and therefore, without professionals alerting them to the possibility, did not consider it as something that might explain what was happening to their son or daughter. Most families spoke of not being aware of the early warning signs

and what might happen if their child was being groomed, so they didn't know what to look out for and how to react. They also didn't recognise at this stage that they might need help.

Among suggestions for how to better support parents to understand grooming and exploitation was a suggestion that an exploitation app be developed to guide parents through the typical stages of grooming and exploitation and possible preventative steps to take. Families mentioned that this should also help parents to understand that it is not necessarily their fault and not to blame themselves. Others spoke of the need for more guidance for family members and more awareness within communities: one suggested local events where agencies come together to talk to the community.

One family member had a more positive experience and spoke of an emergency social worker explaining everything to her shortly after the police became involved with her child and suspected she was being exploited: “She sat down with me and she spoke in depth about what county lines was and exactly what it was all about.” This was very helpful for the parent in understanding what was happening with her child and how to support her.

Early intervention

For most families any attempts at intervention came too late, and only happened once the child had been groomed to such an extent that they were unlikely to engage in support. Early recognition of warning signs is key, followed up with early intervention. Where there had been recognition of exploitation and grooming, families spoke of looking for prevention strategies and support, but “obviously it wasn’t there.”

Families spoke of children refusing to engage with support when it was offered, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, child psychologists, return home interview workers, social workers and youth support workers. Examples of this include children “not turning up” for appointments or going to appointments but then not saying anything. Where support was offered at the child’s home they still would not engage, and families gave examples of children refusing to show their faces to services and hiding under duvet covers.

Parents were clear that this lack of engagement was something the children had been groomed to do: “he had been told if you just don’t engage they will just go away. And that was what he was trying.” For most children this then came true, with services making one or two attempts to engage with them and then closing due to

lack of engagement. Families understood why this happened but were clear that they thought more attempts should be made to support exploited children, particularly given the lack of engagement was likely to be a direct result of the grooming and exploitation.

Existing support points should be better utilised where children are showing early warning signs: a key area here is returning from missing. Local authorities have a statutory obligation to offer a Return Home Interview to every child who returns from being missing, every time they return. Given that missing is a key indicator for child criminal exploitation, Return Home Interviews should be seen as an opportunity to identify children at risk and for appropriate support to be put in place.

Specialist support for child criminal exploitation

Families felt that there was a lack of support tailored for those who had been affected by criminal exploitation, and that where support was offered it was often not appropriate for this specific type of exploitation. Where local authorities and children’s services were involved families felt that their

approach did not always recognise that the principle problems were outside the family home, and that the current model of support focuses on issues within the family home. This meant that services were not always “equipped for child criminal exploitation.”

Family members suggested the development of specialist support services or specialist units with knowledge of criminal exploitation and resources and strategies to try to tackle it. The example of the support available to victims of child sexual exploitation was mentioned by the families as a potential model. Families underlined the fact that their children have been groomed and coached to either not engage with

Families felt that there was a lack of support tailored for those who had been affected by criminal exploitation.



professionals, or behave in a way that will result in predetermined outcomes. Their experiences showed that where the professionals dealing with their children are not sufficiently expert, then they will fail to recognise or respond to this groomed behaviour.

Support and schemes which involve people with lived experience were highlighted as being positive and provided examples of where children engaged relatively well. However, such schemes tended to be geographically limited or support was only provided for a small number of sessions. Families gave examples of paying for support privately due to being out of a geographical remit, "I just cobbled it somehow," and services

being removed very quickly after children started engaging. Support was not given enough time to result in lasting change, instead it was removed as soon as any positive steps were taken which resulted in the children quickly retreating back into exploitation.

Consideration also needs to be given to ensuring there is appropriate support for children who have been criminally exploited once they turn 18 and enter adult systems. The grooming and exploitation of the children in some of the families had taken place before CCE was widely recognised. Therefore, their children were never treated as victims and did not have access to any specialist support. Now they are adults, they are

still living with the impacts of that exploitation, but without any acknowledgement of, or support for, the exploitation they were subjected to. Similarly, it is important that for children who are receiving support for exploitation, the help does not fall away completely after their eighteenth birthday. This is even more important because parents' ability to support their child is likely to be limited by the fact that information exchange with parents ceases at 18.

Listen to families

Something that came through strongly during interviews was that families did not feel like their concerns about their child were taken seriously, particularly during the early stages of exploitation. They felt that their worries were often brushed aside, or that their child's behaviour was treated as though it was 'just normal teenage behaviour.' This was particularly the case where children were excluded from school and moved to a school where teachers and others did not know what they were like before.

Parents spoke of it feeling like they were "banging their head on a brick wall" trying to get help for their child and really struggling to have their voices taken seriously: "When I have spoken it would have been nice to have been heard. I've had to literally beg on my knees, crying." They recognised that what they were asking for might not always have been possible, but all strongly felt as though they were not listened to and their concerns were not taken seriously.

Parents and carers will often be some of the only people who can really speak to whether certain behaviours or actions are worrying for their child: what is concerning for one child may not necessarily be for another and parents may provide the crucial context to help make this judgement. It is therefore vital that parent and carers' concerns are taken seriously by those

involved in responding to a child's potential grooming and exploitation.

Linked to this is the impression from families that services had almost become 'de-sensitised' to some of the behaviours which can be early warning signs of CCE. Families reported that their child's behaviour was not necessarily considered a serious cause for concern because professionals working in the police, youth justice and social services are exposed to such severe incidents, issues and circumstances on a regular basis. Families sensed that their children's behaviour indicated their involvement in something extremely serious and out of character, but they felt that responses from police and youth offending teams did not reflect this perceived severity and consequently their concerns were not taken sufficiently seriously.

School exclusion

For most families exclusion was a point at which the exploitation of their child seemed to increase dramatically. As discussed above, this was particularly the case where the child was excluded and moved to a PRU. Families reported that their child only had to attend the PRU for a

few hours a day or week, and the rest of the time had little to occupy themselves with, which gave groomers a perfect opportunity to exploit them. Families felt that their children were not adequately safeguarded during and after exclusion, and that it was a key point where intervention should have been in place. For one family, at a point where their child had not been excluded, the parents were told that the only thing stopping him from becoming "a professional criminal" was the full days he was spending in school. They were told that "if he did not have school [...] you are looking at prison or death really now."

The Department for Education is currently reviewing exclusions, with a call for evidence

Families felt that their concerns were not taken sufficiently seriously.

closing in March 2018 and a report expected later in 2019.³⁹ This review should be taken as an opportunity to assess school exclusions in the context of exploitation and grooming and to ensure that safeguarding action is taken when exclusions are deemed to be necessary.

Long term support needed and mental health support needed

The mental health impacts of exploitation was highlighted as a key area in which exploited children needed more support. Families spoke of the fact that any support for their child would need to include mental health support: “they won’t be able to get back on track until the mental health barriers are broken down.”

Housing support and care placements

Families feel that the system for identifying appropriate housing and or care placements should be strengthened for children who have been criminally exploited. It is often the case that the child is not able to return home after arrest because they have been groomed from within that Borough or local area, however, neither is there a safe or appropriate alternative for their child. Children are often housed with other relatives or family members who live outside the area but who are not equipped to manage someone who is being criminally exploited. Where children are being placed in care, families feel that there needs to be specialist placements available where the carers have received specialist training in how to keep their children safe and prevent them from returning to those exploiting them.

Better multi-agency working

The exploited children had multiple agencies involved at different stages of their exploitation, from CAMHS to social services to gangs workers to youth offending services, however there were few examples of those services working effectively together.

Positive multi-agency work

One family spoke of an effective example of multi-agency working. Around 10 agencies had some involvement with her son, including social services, probation, a gangs links workers and others, but there was little collaborative work happening which resulted in a lack of engagement for her son.

At an emergency meeting all agencies decided to communicate with each other on one e-mail chain and keeping each other informed of all steps being taken: “everyone knew what was going on for this particular, crucial moment. When everyone started stepping in with all of their different things that they needed to do, he started doing what he needed to do.” Something as simple as this meant that all agencies knew what other agencies were doing, and resulted in better support for her son: “as soon as they started working together [...] he actually attended some of his appointments that he was supposed to go on. His housing was sorted. He was on job seeker’s allowance. They were looking at employment.” Before this, everyone was acting separately and no-one knew what the others were doing.

Victimisation not criminalisation

Most parents did not feel that the police and others responded to their child as a victim of exploitation: “either they just don’t want to understand and acknowledge this because they just find it easier to deal with him as a criminal. They’ve got [...] an ideology or there’s something else going on, I don’t know.” Families felt that the lack of recognition that their child was being exploited, or lack of action on that basis, resulted in them becoming more embedded and difficult to extract.

They felt that in criminalising the children the police were not getting to the ‘real’ criminals, although they recognised that this was inherent in the nature of how their child was being exploited: “If the real criminals were where they

³⁹ Department for Education, *Exclusions review: call for evidence*, 2018.

should be they would not be able to get in touch with the people they are exploiting. But it is about how do you distance them and make sure they do not have any contact.”

Some families felt that exploitation of children within the UK was treated as secondary to the trafficking of children into the country, and that the support for those within the UK was not good enough: “It’s no different from someone coming from overseas and being asked to do that stuff that they don’t want to do. It’s no different. And we’ve got it happening right in, you know, if they can help that from escalating why can’t they do the same?”

The criminalisation of exploited children has been recognised in an All Party Parliamentary Group report on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, which reported that “patterns of grooming of children for criminal exploitation are very similar to those of sexual exploitation. In the past, child sexual exploitation was often perceived amongst professionals as the victim’s fault or due to their risky behaviour. We believe that in some areas of the UK a similar culture currently exists around criminal exploitation by gangs.”⁴⁰

While some parents spoke of this perception appearing to slowly change, and some media and other reporting of criminal exploitation referring to children as victims, those responding first hand should not criminalise children where exploitation is suspected. This should include better use of the NRM and safeguarding of children, even where some criminality is suspected.

Support for families

“There should be things in place to work with families, to help them, support them through this and enable them to support their

children as well as not judge their children, be sympathetic.”

CCE had significant life changing impacts on the children, but families themselves were also seriously affected. However, most of the families felt that they had been offered and received very little support throughout their child’s exploitation. Particularly during the early stages of exploitation they reported not knowing where to go for help, but being desperate for help both for themselves and in how to best support their child: “I need help with my child. I need something. I don’t really know where to go.” The absence of support for families whose children are being criminally exploited is stark. As mentioned earlier, the problem causing the exploitation is often external to the family. In some circumstances, families

can be a crucial part of the solution to supporting their children when they have been exploited, however, need the right support to be able to effectively do this.

Families would have liked more information and advice about exploitation and grooming from the outset.

Families would have liked more information and advice about exploitation and grooming from the outset so that they could understand what might happen and how to respond to that. Even where families were offered some

support only one reported being given detailed information about exploitation. Families wanted help in how to understand and cope with what had happened to their child: “It’s like you’ve lost their childhood, it’s been taken from them too fast and their innocence has been lost.”

In retrospect, families said that being able to talk to someone who knows about exploitation would have been very helpful. It is important to recognise the acute anxiety the families experience as a result of their child having been criminally exploited and the extreme levels of concern for the safety of their child. Parents are constantly worried about the impact of any of the actions they choose to take – or not to take - on the safety

⁴⁰ APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, *Briefing report on the roundtable on children who go missing and are criminally exploited by gangs*, March 2017.

and welfare of their child and express a need for expert advice and support to help them navigate a situation for which they have very limited knowledge or experience to draw upon. Empathy and understanding is also very important, and something families did not experience very often.

The research also showed that there can be a considerable impact on the siblings of the exploited child, including increased anxiety, fear or anger. It is important that support for families can help them and their other children cope with, and where appropriate protect them from, the impacts of the exploitation.

“It was enough for parents to then start working together and helping themselves and rebuild their families and relationship with the child that was literally being dragged away from us.”

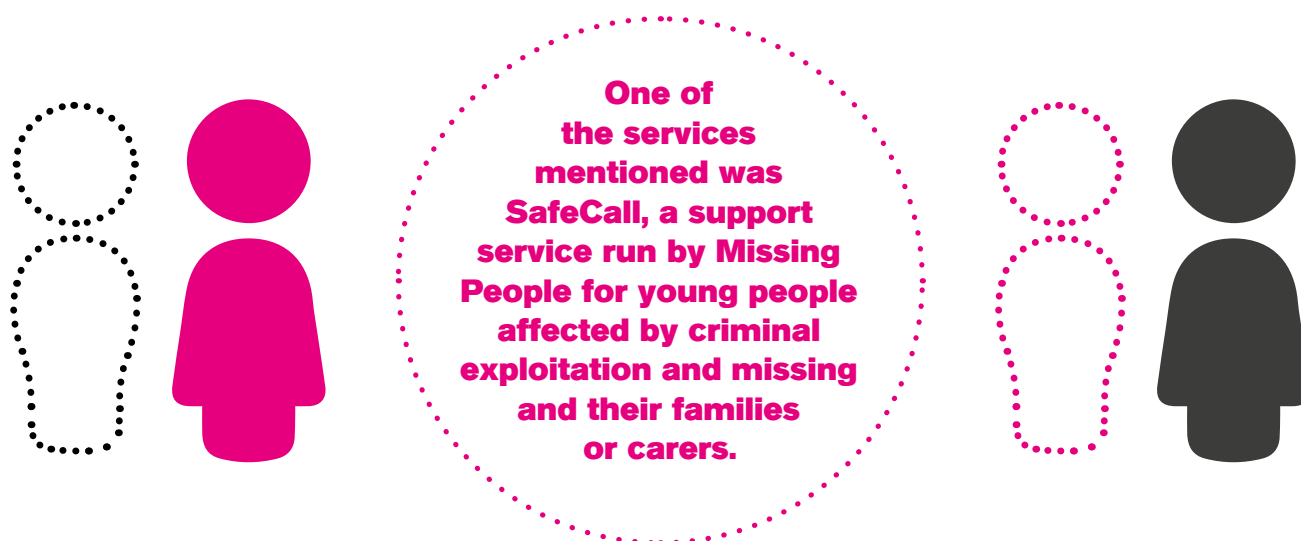
Something a number of family members mentioned was the importance of support provided by others in the same situation as them. Being able to discuss strategies and build awareness of what was happening was really beneficial and something that families valued highly. Parents spoke of it being really important in changing their mind set and attitude towards their child, and recognising why they were acting the way they were. For those families whose

children are still involved in exploitation and county lines, many are very focussed on helping others in their position. For many, their child remains at real risk, with some very entrenched in the situation. Risks of serious violence, long term prison sentences, and further family breakdown remain, and for families “what’s keeping me going now is really about helping other parents.”

Good practice example

Families spoke of the importance of being able to access support from a consistent individual or service with knowledge of exploitation, and who knew about their child’s situation, was able to listen, provide advice, and act as an advocate when needed.

One of the services mentioned was SafeCall, a support service run by Missing People for young people affected by criminal exploitation and missing and their families or carers.⁴¹ The service is phone based, does not have any geographical or threshold requirements, and is free to access by those affected by gangs or exploitation: “I think for me, out of everybody that I have had involved [SafeCall worker] has probably been the most solid for me. Because I have just been able to talk.”



⁴¹ For more information, please see: <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/how-we-can-help/173-safecall.html>



Recommendations

The recommendations identified from this research are detailed below and it is incumbent on all professionals working with children who are being exploited by criminals or at risk of CCE to use the accounts families shared so generously to stimulate change and ensure there is an effective response to CCE for children and their families.

**RECOMMENDATIONS
INCUMBENT ON ALL
PROFESSIONALS**

1. Training about CCE should be provided to all professionals working with children and young people, with a particular focus on the police, social workers, youth offending workers, foster carers, residential care workers and school staff. The relevant inspectorates including Ofsted, HMICFRS⁴² and HMI Probation should include a check on whether this training is taking place during their inspections. Training should include:

- Understanding missing as a key warning sign of CCE, as well as familiarisation with all potential risk indicators and their inter-relationships.
- Sources of support for children and young people being exploited, their families and the professionals who have identified CCE potential warning signs or activity.
- The importance of acknowledging the concerns and observations of parents and carers to help understand the context of what is happening and then working closely with them from an early stage to best support the child.
- Strategies for engaging young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation.
- The need to be vigilant, curious and join up warning signs identified at different touchpoints to ensure the possibility of CCE is actively considered within the full context of a child's experiences.
- Recognition that criminal activity may be a result of exploitation and the importance of treating children as potential victims.

2. The Department for Education should develop guidance for families to be shared with and then disseminated by local authorities. This should include information about the risks of grooming, how to recognise the warning signs of criminal exploitation, and how to raise concerns.

3. The Department for Education should ensure that the new mandatory curriculum for Relationships and Sex Education is developed by practitioners to explicitly teach children

and young people about the risks of grooming for criminal exploitation alongside the other forms of exploitation and coercion. The Department for Education should use the early adopters programme to work with schools to develop appropriate guidance and resources.⁴³ Specialist resources should also be developed in a similar way to those available through the National Crime Agency's ThinkUKnow programme.⁴⁴

4. The response to missing from police must be improved to ensure children are safeguarded from CCE. The police should:

- Consider the possibility of, and concerns about, CCE as part of their risk assessment, particularly in incidence of repeat missing episodes.
- When a child does go missing repeatedly the police should consider giving the reporting person a unique CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch) number to enable quicker, more effective reporting and better identification of the level of risk of exploitation across multiple incidents.
- Intelligence from missing person investigations and safe and well checks should be used to map local CCE hotspots and operational models of CCE.

5. Local authorities should improve understanding of, and response to, CCE by reviewing information from Return Home Interviews (RHIs) to identify warning signs, share information to safeguard individuals and map the local, regional and national picture of exploitation and how this links to missing. When children refuse RHIs repeatedly local authorities should consider this is a potential indicator of CCE and develop an appropriate response.

6. The Home Office, alongside the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) programme, should ensure a national, joined up approach to support for victims of CCE and their families. This should include the mapping of existing services and identification of any gaps. Local authorities, with oversight from Ofsted, should ensure

⁴² Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

⁴³ Department for Education, *Early Adopters Programme*

⁴⁴ National Crime Agency, *ThinkUKnow*

that the support available is sufficiently expert to address the following:

- A lack of engagement from children who may have been groomed to distrust and not cooperate with services
 - The impact of exploitation on a young person's mental health
 - The links with child sexual exploitation
 - The transition to adult services and the ongoing impact of exploitation into adulthood
 - The need for advocacy for families to help them navigate the often complex system, as well as direct support to address the emotional and mental impact of the exploitation on parents, carers and siblings.
 - When victims of CCE are placed in care, the need for specialist expertise in placements. These placements should be staffed by trained professionals with access to appropriate and expert support.
7. Police forces and local authorities must work across administrative boundaries when safeguarding victims of CCE because the children and young people being exploited typically move between local authority and police force areas as part of the exploitation. Joint Area Strategy Meetings should be arranged for children suspected or known to be being groomed or exploited across different police force and local authority areas. They should include resident police forces and local authorities, and those where the CCE activity is occurring to ensure that lines of accountability for interventions are clear and that support and protective actions are implemented effectively regardless of geography.
8. As part of the Modern Slavery Act Review, the Home Office should ensure that use of the National Referral Mechanism is effective for victims of child criminal exploitation, and that practitioners know when to make a referral and what a positive grounds decision means.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Home Office 2019, *Independent review of the Modern Slavery Act*

APPENDIX A: TOPIC GUIDE

Services / experiences we might expect to come up

School

Missing

Mental health

Police

Social services

Criminal justice / prison / YOT

Housing

Starting questions

Could you tell me a bit about your child?

When did his / her behaviour start to change?

When did you first suspect that he was involved in a gang / criminal exploitation?

Questions to explore generally

Finding out

- How did you find out?

Help

- Did you / (s)he get any help at that point?
- Which services were involved?

Exploring help offered / services

- What was the response?
- What was good about the help?
- What wasn't good?
- What would have been better?

Wider impact

- How do you think that affected your child / how did that affect you?
- How did your child cope with any trauma?

Areas to explore if they don't otherwise come up

Aspects of their child's journey

- Were there warning signs? What were they?
- How was the internet involved? E.g. do they think any grooming was happening over social media?
- Missing
 - Did your child go missing?
 - What was the pattern of the missing episodes?
 - How did that affect you?
- Was your child referred to the NRM?
- How did your child engage with the criminal justice system and the youth offending team?
- What was the impact on their mental health?
- How did the response change as your child got older? (Focusing on the transition point of 17-18)
- How have things changed since your child has become an 'adult'?

Wider impact

- Siblings: how were siblings affected?
- How has your family been affected?

Rounding up questions

- Are there any particular points in your child's journey where you think support might have been most effective? (I.e. missed opportunities)
- What would a good response look like?
- Do you have any examples of times where you did feel supported / you felt that your child was being supported?
- Are there any other services / experiences you would like to tell us about?
- What is your child doing now?
- Knowledge and awareness of child criminal exploitation: do you think anything has changed in terms of the availability of support or services?

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Registered office at the above address.
Throughout this report we have used some stock
imagery and changed details of the stories of
missing people and their families to preserve
their anonymity.

A lifeline when someone disappears

**missing
people**

Registered charity in England and Wales (1020419)
and in Scotland (SC047419)