

CYPM13 Canolfan Ymchwil a Datblygu Gofal Cymdeithasol Plant (CASCADE), Prifysgol Caerdydd

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Plant a phobl ifanc sydd ar yr ymylon | Children and Young People on the margins

Ymateb gan Canolfan Ymchwil a Datblygu Gofal Cymdeithasol Plant (CASCADE), Prifysgol Caerdydd | Evidence from Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE), Cardiff University

Please set out any views on missing children below.

You may wish to consider:

- **Nature and scale of the issue and regional variations.**
 - **At risk groups: including the impact of care experience and out of area placements.**
 - **Practice: issues such as information sharing and data collection.**
 - **Policy: the effectiveness of devolved policy and practice responses, including Welsh Government oversight. Whether there is effective read across to relevant Welsh Government strategies.**
 - **Devolved and UK powers: how joined up is the interface between devolved and non-devolved policy such as criminal and youth justice.**
-

Nature and scale

Missing episodes are “the biggest clue of all” for exploitation (parent cited in Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). They can be a warning sign to professionals that a child is being used or socially isolated, an attempt to hide the child from professional oversight or the child's attempt to escape from the people exploiting them (Pearce et al., 2009; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015, Wigmore, 2018). Children may go missing for less than 24 hours or for many weeks at a time. Yet when they have patterns of frequent, shorter missing episodes it can be difficult to obtain help from professionals:

"By then I think someone ... was sending him even further away and that's when I had to start saying “Look, he's disappearing just for 24 hours” but that's where the loopholes fell for me. They [services] said “Well, he always comes back the next day,

so it's not classed as missing and I thought okay then, so I can't literally do anything" (parent cited in Maxwell and Wallace, 2021)

A further challenge is the nature of the exploitation; children often believe the people exploiting them are their friends. When they say they are staying with friends they are not classed as missing. When children are missing for longer periods, some exploiters ensure parents receive regular messages from the child's phone to allay their fears and make them less likely to contact the police.

In our study of child criminal exploitation in Wales (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021), most parents were unable to locate their children. For the two that received Snapchats, one parent saw their child "in a [trap] house with what looks like drug addicts and some other children" while the other parent got a Snap of their child being "beaten up, he was attacked ... filmed it and then I got sent the video of it. It was awful and he ended up in hospital".

The figures show that children often have multiple missing episodes. In another CASCADE-led study, Bezczky and Wilkins (2022) found 4,922 missing reports for 1,434 young people for the period 2014 to 2019 in one Welsh local authority. These children were more likely to be white, aged between 13 and 17 years, and living in residential care. In a separate study of children affected by child criminal exploitation for the same area from 2020 to 2023, Maxwell et al. (2024a) found 71% of the 44 affected by criminal exploitation had at least one missing episode recorded. Of these, most children were male, white, and three quarters had more than one missing episode. Females had more missing episodes than males (51 to 70 episodes per female as compared to 1 to 35 episodes per male) and over a fifth of children (9/31) were missing from care homes. While in our current study of children's social care records in another Welsh local authority, Cserző et al. (2024), found that of the 34 known for concerns around child criminal exploitation, 180 missing episodes were recorded between January 2021 and 2023. Most children were located the same day.

At risk groups

All children are at risk of child criminal exploitation. This includes children who are healthy, happy, well-loved and from affluent homes. Yet when children are unknown to services or they are not stereotypically at risk, parents reported challenges in obtaining support:

"If the kid isn't from a single-parent or a deprived background, services simply don't recognise the danger. People said things like 'he'll grow out of it', 'he's just testing his boundaries'" (parent cited in Jay Review, 2024)

This creates a paradox as children less likely to come to the attention of services are those most at risk. In particular, children are at risk during transitions, such as maturing into adulthood, moving to secondary, further or higher education or changes incurred during parental separation. Children are targeted because of and

in response to these vulnerabilities. Thus, children are offered friendship and a sense of belonging or access to 'easy money'.

These needs make looked after children particularly vulnerable.

Our findings revealed that children who are looked after may perceive the drug network as a 'family and support network that they might not have had if they were in care' (professional interview cited in Maxwell and Wallace, 2021).

Our research highlighted four main groups :

1. Children around the age of 14 who experience multiple foster care breakdowns as they may be placed in supported accommodation or they can find themselves 'dipping in and out of either sofa surfing or a bed and breakfast sometimes, or they're back on the streets' (Professional interview).
2. Family breakdown around the age of 16 can leave children accommodated in a hostel, after having presented themselves as homeless to Children's Services.
3. Unaccompanied asylum seekers may be placed in semi-independent living at the age of 15. They are particularly vulnerable due to their limited social and economic capital rendering them susceptible to exploitation and cuckooing.
4. Out of area placements are a common service response but rather than removing the risk from the child, they remove the child from risk. Therefore, children are often found and returned to the exploitative relationships.

Children who are looked after also have less liberty and freedom than their peers. This leaves them susceptible to exploitation as they are groomed by older peers who offer them the opportunity to visit new towns or cities.

Even though children cannot consent to exploitation, some professionals told us that children who were looked after were 'streetwise' and knew 'exactly what they are doing' (Children's Services Professionals). We need to challenge this adultification as it blames and holds children accountable for their exploitation.

Practice

Our analysis of local authority data found inconsistencies in how and where missing episodes were recorded. Given the significance of missing episodes as an indicator of exploitation this is an important omission that must be addressed.

Our previous study (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021) revealed the importance of return interviews, especially when children were previously unknown to services. Return interviews should be held within 72 hours of the child being found and focus on who the child was with, where they were and what they were doing. This is vital information for safeguarding and for targeting those higher up the exploitation chain. Yet professionals told us there is an expectation that children will not respond. We must ensure children's right to have their voices heard under article 12 of the

UNCRC be enacted, so they can speak with someone they trust. This person must be independent from their parent or carer and based on the child's wishes as they may be wary of speaking to the police due to fear of arrest or repercussions. Professionals should not assume that children will remain silent or refuse to share information. They must be sensitive to the potential risks to the young person from exploiters from 'snitching'.

Policy

In practice, information is not always shared or acted upon. We found that concerns reported by schools were not always considered. Schools reported tensions between supporting the exploited child and protecting the pupil and staff population. They had limited access to specialist support and no extra funding. According to our research, the third sector has developed specialist provision but time-limited, fragmented funding models means this is also dependent upon the child's postcode. Children with direct experience of exploitation told us they would like youth workers in schools to help them develop their confidence, skills and gain employment. We need a one Wales Child First, Child Rights approach with sufficient resource for early identification, prevention and diversion delivered by services with the skills to work with adolescents and exploitation.

Please set out any views on children and young people who are victims of criminal exploitation below.

You may wish to consider:

- **Nature and scale across Wales and regional variations (e.g. traditional, drug related, sexual, financial).**
- **At risk groups: including care experience, children experiencing trauma in the home and children not enrolled in mainstream education.**
- **Policy: The effectiveness of devolved policy including Welsh Government oversight. Whether there effective read across to relevant WG strategies such as Child Sexual Exploitation.**
- **Practice: Approaches to prevention, community resilience, early intervention, support provided and exit strategies for victims. Practice issues such as information sharing and data collection.**
- **Devolved and UK powers: How joined up is the interface between devolved and non-devolved policy such as criminal and youth justice? Are there any points of tension between criminal law and safeguarding?**

Nature and scale

My research showed that professionals employ narrow definitions of child criminal exploitation (CCE). Therefore it is most commonly associated with County Lines Exploitation but this diverts professional attention away from other forms of exploitation. This includes children who are exploited by family members or local individuals and groups in areas of Wales that have retained more traditional modes of drug supply. It has also led to the criminalisation of children subjected to 'Blurred Lines Exploitation' (Cullen et al, 2020), where local groups mimic county lines and successfully retain control over their geographical area. In these instances, children are more likely to be held responsible for this 'lifestyle choice' rather than being seen as a child who has a right to be safeguarded. This is compounded by professionals who adopt gendered thinking where boys are seen as perpetrators of crime while girls are seen as victims of sexual exploitation. Such thinking obscures detection of harm for both groups. We need a broader definition of CCE which includes more nuanced understanding to the blurred distinction between victim and perpetrator. This includes acknowledgement that both boys and girls can be criminally or sexually exploited.

We need to acknowledge that children's vulnerability to CCE is influenced by wider societal factors such as poverty, social inclusion and access to employment opportunities. Poverty has been described as the main grooming tool as CCE provides children with an opportunity to 'live a nice life like everyone else' (young person quoted in Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). When children have limited employment opportunities and legitimate pathways to earn a living, the perceived benefits of CCE outweigh the negatives even when children know they may be subject to violence. The consideration of risks and benefits is obscured when children are manipulated by more powerful adults in three main ways. First, children see older peers with visible wealth. They wish to emulate their peers. Second, children are often told that they are too young to be arrested. Third, when children are excluded from school they often remain cognitively immature. This leaves them vulnerable to manipulation from unscrupulous individuals. It can also hinder safeguarding as when they reach 18 they are treated as adults regardless of their developmental age. Therefore, we need to address manipulative relationships and the age of criminal responsibility in schools. We also need to adopt transitional safeguarding based on developmental age and unmet needs rather than chronological age.

At risk groups

Any young person can be exploited, as CCE adapts to the local area and service responses. This means there has been an increase in the criminal exploitation of girls yet they often go undetected as due to professional stereotypes. Children with unmet needs and those with low self-esteem and confidence are also at heightened risk (Radcliffe et al., 2020). This includes those who lack social or financial capital such as children living in deprived areas, those excluded from school and those who have experienced a significant trauma in their lives (Hurley and Boulton, 2021).

Cullen et al. (2019) have warned of the increased grooming of university students as they do not attract attention if they disappear for short periods of time. We heard about schools refusing to hold information raising activities due to their fears about reputation damage. Yet, children are often targeted at the school gates by older peers and people in their local communities. Professionals must exercise their curiosity for all children whether known or unknown to services. Information and awareness must be given to children, parents and the public.

Policy

The lack of a statutory definition for child criminal exploitation leads to inconsistencies in how different organisations define and understand CCE.

This obscures attempts at multiagency working and confusion about who is best placed to support the child. This is compounded as many agencies are ill-equipped to address extra-familial harm. In practice, children are often criminalised, they fail to meet service thresholds and they can get lost in the system as there does not seem to be a clear agency to take the lead. The All Wales Practice Guides have separated sexual and criminal exploitation but in practice, they are not mutually exclusive.

Despite the local pilot of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), it remains subject to a postcode lottery. Some areas are experiencing delays as long as eighteen months between application and decision. Changes to the NRM which necessitate objective evidence of exploitation rather than a balance of probabilities look likely to reduce the number of children safeguarded. Although even when a NRM has been submitted, children remain victim to criminal exploitation. When children are not formally charged under section 45, Modern Slavery Act 2015, they remain vulnerable to continued exploitation (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021).

The introduction of a Child Criminal Exploitation Order akin to the Domestic Violence Prevention Order would prevent perpetrators from being in or near the victim's home for 28 days. This would give professionals the chance to develop trust with children and their families so they can access specialised support. To this end, there needs to be more sustained funding of specialist provision. Our evaluation of Action for Children's Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service (Maxwell et al., 2023) had promising results from children, carers and partner organisations regarding children's diversion from exploitation. However, limited funding means that these children will have their services stopped.

Practice

When children are being exploited they do not present as typical victims. More broadly, it has been suggested (Yea, 2015) that professionals consider whether children have been 'exploited enough' to be warrant safeguarding as victims or whether they should be criminalised. This goes against a Child First, Child Rights approach. More training is needed so that professionals can support children who occupy the positions of both victims and perpetrator.

Professionals experience challenges in responding to CCE due to service-based factors (Maxwell et al., 2019):

- Current service thresholds serve as a barrier, for example, the fluctuating levels of risk associated with CCE may mean that a child fails to reach the required threshold.
- Where children are assessed, professionals experience difficulties in capturing evidence. This is compounded by the child's reluctance to 'snitch'. Children are coached what to say by the people exploiting them and deterred from seeking help through threats of violence to themselves or their family members.
- The time limited nature of service delivery, adherence to office hours and staff turnover can hinder opportunities to form trusting relationships with the child.
- The current systems were not designed for CCE, e.g. parents have expressed disbelief that 'plugging' (where children are held down while drugs are inserted or retrieved from their gastro-intestinal tract) is not considered to be a form of sexual abuse (Maxwell, 2023).

There is also a tendency to castigate parents even though they are often secondary victims of CCE. We heard of parents being threatened by exploiters who visited them at their workplaces or in their homes. Consequently, they were reluctant to engage with services through fear their child would be harmed. Current service responses place parents under increased surveillance and in some cases, the child is placed on the child protection register for exploitation even when it constitutes extra-familial harm. We must include exploitation as a distinct form of child protection and include caregivers, where it is safe to do so, as part of the solution

Please set out any views on other groups of children on the margins.

You may wish to identify other groups of children “on the margins”. These would be groups of children in circumstances that require a specific response from children’s services or other statutory providers and for which there are concerns about the current policy or practice.

Smith's research studies (Smith, 2019; Smith, 2023) have highlighted the challenges faced by young people leaving Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in Wales. This includes young people who are looked after as they are disproportionately represented in PRUs. While many young people make substantial academic improvements while in the PRU, many are still behind their peers in mainstream schools. This is exacerbated by lengthy periods of disruption while the placement is arranged. In Smith's current study, young people had an average of one year away from education before they were placed in a PRU. Once placed, Smith's research has shown that professional attitudes, pedagogic approaches and the social environment inside the PRU provides a safe and welcoming space for young people. Staff build positive and supportive relationships with young people as they have the time,

patience and flexibility to help young people. Consequently, young people feel a sense of belonging, improve their social confidence and re-engage with education.

However, young people are often unprepared or ready for the 'real world' beyond the PRU (Smith, 2019; Smith, 2023). While PRU staff recognise this and encourage young people to think about their next steps in education, training or work, PRUs offer little in the way of continued support for young people post-16. In many cases, PRU learners lack other forms of support in their lives. They often have small social networks and will rarely engage with their peers outside of school. This may be the result of disrupted social networks due to school exclusion, geographical moves due to care placements, mental health needs or limited resource for leisure activities.

Despite having high ambitions and plans for the future, the young people in Smith's current study had all dropped out of their post-16 courses. This was invariably related to placement moves, mental health issues or the levels of belonging they felt in new settings. Some young people were not ready to leave the support provided by the PRU. Smith's research has shown that the 'typical' pathway through education has been disrupted for these young people. Therefore, changes must be made to how these young people are supported post-16. Such transitional approaches should include continued support from the PRU when they move onto post-16 pathways into education or training. Formal cross-professional working between PRUs and post-16 education courses does not appear to exist, and no pupils have stayed in touch with PRU staff (Smith, 2024). Young people need continued support if they are to make the next step. This could be through continued support from a trusted adult from the PRU or through the creation of a mentor post who develops a positive relationship with the young person before, during and after the post-16 transition. Further, more attention is needed regarding the development of protective factors for young people prior to leaving the PRU. This should include acknowledgement of the importance of social networks and positive relationships for young people. We would suggest the development of a project-based practical curriculum subject delivered in PRUs through partnership working with third sector organisations and employers. These projects would help young people to create links within their communities whilst developing their academic, vocational and social skills. Moreover, they would offer young people additional forms of support to help rise their aspirations, sustain post-16 transitions and reduce the risks associated with being not in education, employment or training.