



Invisible Children:

Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation

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Introduction

Barnardo's has a long history of supporting children who have experienced sexual abuse, including exploitation, as well as criminal exploitation and trafficking. This includes directly supporting children who have been exploited, identifying gaps through research and evidence, providing training to professionals, raising awareness of the issues, and influencing decision-makers to take action to keep children safe.

In the 1990s, Barnardo's led from the front to challenge the term 'child prostitution' and campaigned to change the law so that children were correctly identified as victims of sexual exploitation.¹ We also launched the 'Cut them Free' campaign in 2011, to call for urgent action for child sexual exploitation to be tackled across the UK.²

Barnardo's currently delivers 45 services to support victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation across the UK and hosts the Home Office funded **Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse**. The CSA Centre works to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response, supporting thousands of professionals each year through its resources, training and research.³

Many of our services across England, Wales and Scotland support children who have been criminally exploited or impacted by serious violence. We run a number of services that work directly with criminally exploited children including:

- The Home Office funded **National Counter Trafficking Service** which supports children to cope with the practical and emotional trauma of being trafficked, and helps them to understand and navigate social care services, the police and immigration, and includes the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian service. Between 2021 and 2022, the International Child Trafficking Guardian service supported over 1400 children from more than 40 countries, such as Vietnam, Albania, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Eritrea;
- The **Independent Guardian Service in Northern Ireland** which provides guardians for 230 children and young people who are unaccompanied or separated from a legal guardian and who are at risk of human trafficking;
- **ROUTES**, which works with 8-24-year-olds at high risk of committing or being victims of serious violence.

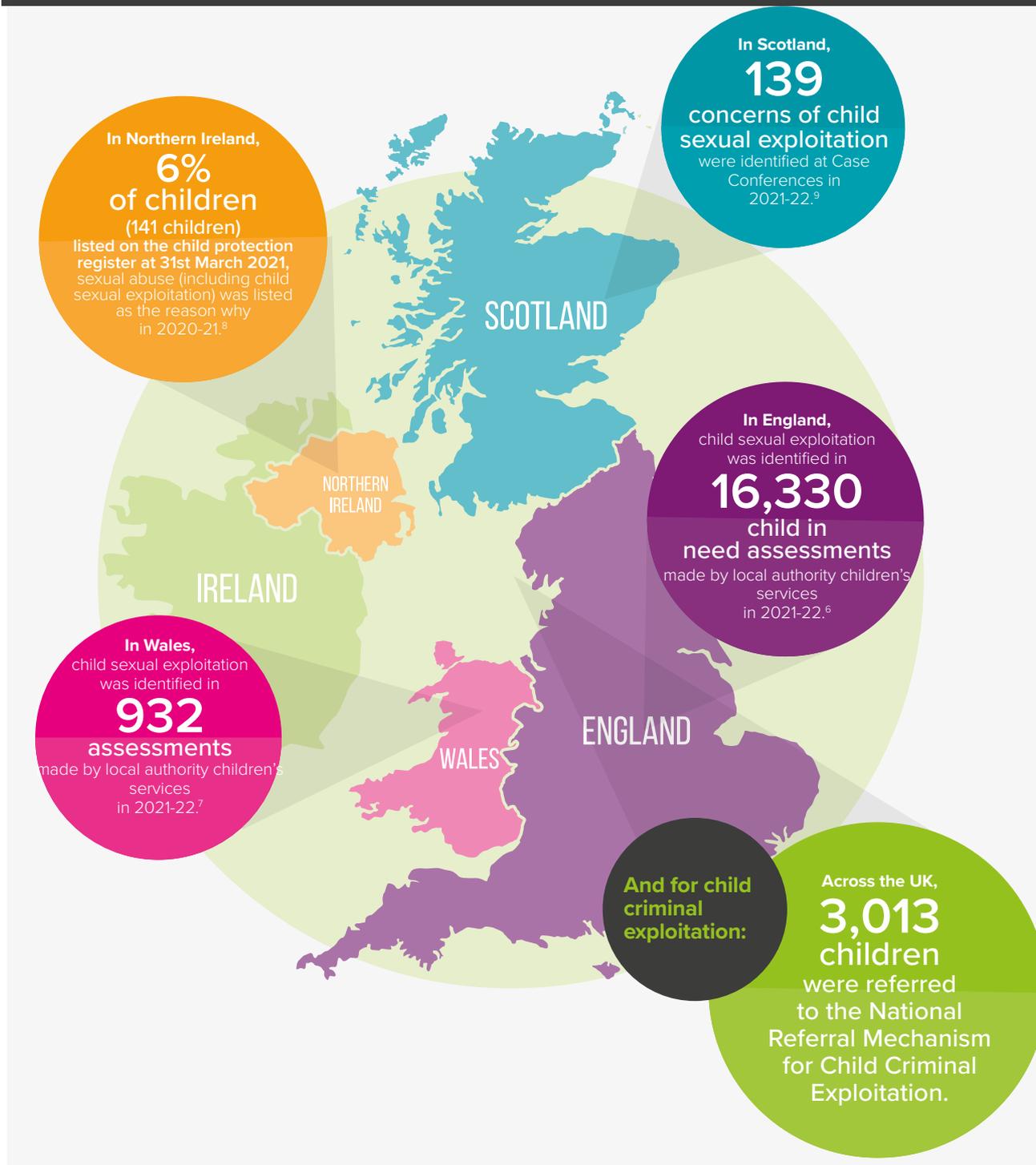
Whilst attitudes have changed, and policies and legislation have meant that child sexual and criminal exploitation has become more visible, children continue to face new and changing threats of exploitation. Emerging technologies and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, are providing new methods for organised criminal gangs to exploit children. In 2004, Barnardo's published one of the first reports in the UK to address growing concerns amongst professionals about the ways in which children may be at risk online.⁴ Now, online harm is present in almost all cases of child sexual and criminal exploitation, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this risk, which has remained present ever since.⁵

Scale of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation

The scale and prevalence of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation is difficult to assess for a number of reasons, including fragmented and insufficient data sets, a lack of understanding of the issues, victim-blaming attitudes, and the stigma associated with exploitation.

It's therefore likely that all data sets are an underestimate, and that the number of children experiencing exploitation is not known. See section 1.3 for further information on this.

What we do know is that, for child sexual exploitation:



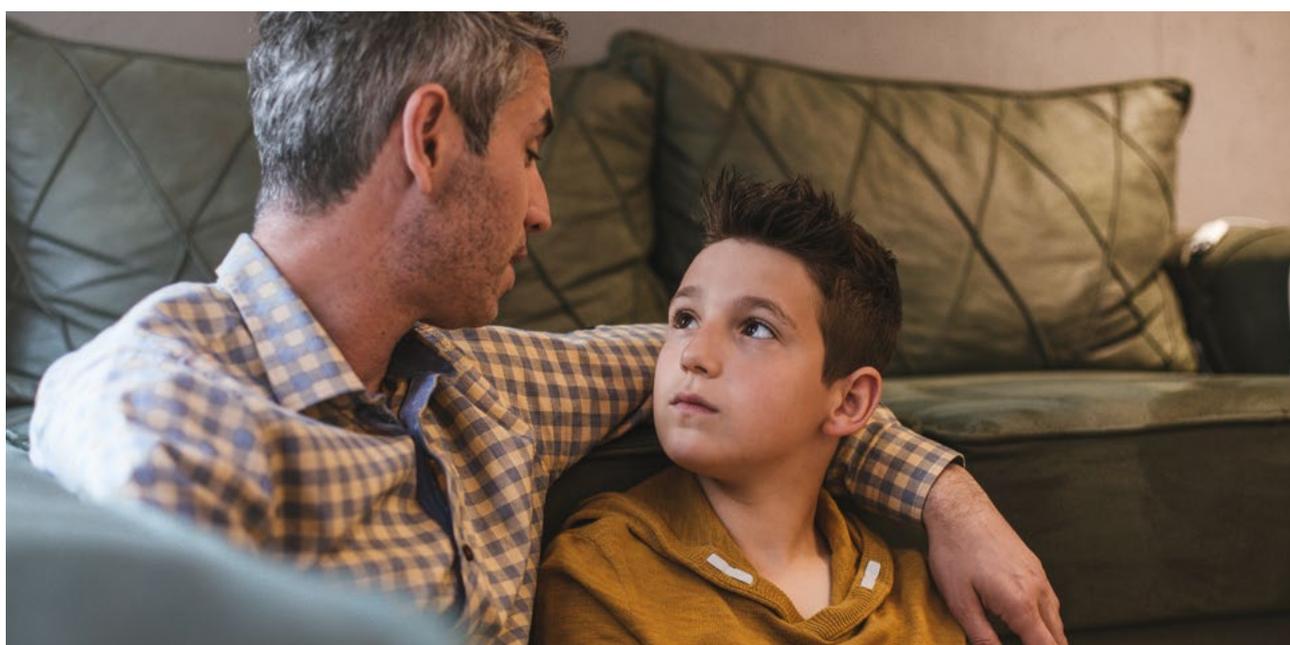
Barnardo's is concerned that the cost-of-living crisis will mean that more children are at risk of exploitation, and that statutory and voluntary sector services will struggle to respond to this increased demand. We know that the cost-of-living crisis is having an unprecedented impact on children, young people, and families, with many struggling to access food, fuel, clothing and safe and warm housing.¹⁰ This report suggests that, as with past crises, organised criminal gangs are capitalising on rising costs and financial pressures, leaving children more exposed to criminal and sexual exploitation. On top of this, already-limited services to protect and safeguard child victims of exploitation are being stretched, meaning that many child victims are going without critically needed support.

With the summer and school holidays approaching we are concerned that this risk of exploitation will increase even further.

The report includes new evidence gathered by Barnardo's, including:

- Findings from a Freedom of Information request made to the police regarding child sexual exploitation figures;
- Findings from a Freedom of Information request made to local authorities and to Offices of Police and Crime Commissioners regarding the commissioning of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation services for child victims;
- Statistics from YouGov polling commissioned by Barnardo's in May 2023;
- Input from children and young people supported by Barnardo's child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation services;
- Interviews with Barnardo's practitioners from child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation services;
- Interviews with Interns from Leaders Unlocked, an organisation that works with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those who have previously been exploited, to have a stronger voice and influence over the issues that affect their lives.

From this new evidence, it is clear that child sexual and criminal exploitation remains a hidden – and misunderstood – harm. Action is urgently needed to boost the visibility and understanding of exploitation, and investment is critically needed in specific support services for children to support and safeguard children and respond to increasing referrals for children impacted by sexual and criminal exploitation.



Full recommendations for action to tackle child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation can be found on page 43.

Summary of Recommendations

- We urge **all governments across the UK** to invest in and expand the provision of specific support services for victims of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. The **UK Government** should use the Victims and Prisoners Bill to place a duty on the relevant authorities to commission sufficient and specific support for children who are victims of crime, including abuse and exploitation.
- **The UK Government** should introduce a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation in England to better help professionals to identify victims, and make sure that victims are supported appropriately.
- **The UK Government** should strengthen protections from online child criminal exploitation within the Online Safety Bill.
- **The Scottish Government** should publish an updated National Action Plan to tackle child exploitation and abuse in Scotland.
- **All governments** should invest in and expand the provision of support for children and young people to help protect them and prevent exploitation. This should include increased investment in youth services; expanding access to the Holiday Food and Activities Programme to all families in receipt of Universal Credit; and ensuring that Mental Health Support Teams in schools have funding to continue supporting children across holiday periods.
- **All governments** should provide enhanced training and support for all professionals working with children regarding child exploitation and abuse.
- **All governments** should invest in and commission research on the scale, nature and prevalence of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation.

Chapter 1: Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Criminal Exploitation

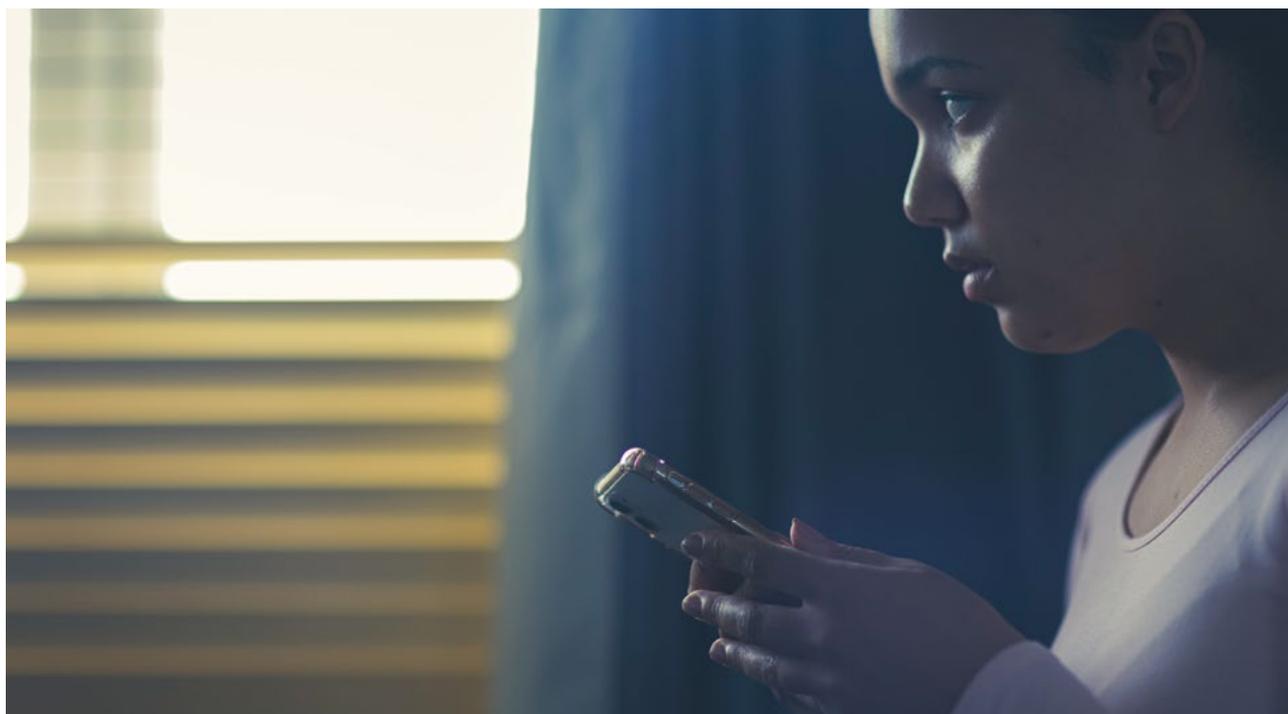
1.1: What is child exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation are both forms of child abuse.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse, and typically occurs outside of the family. CSE is defined as occurring when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.¹¹ This definition is consistent with Department for Education guidance, however does importantly avoid references to ‘exchange’ which may be seen as implying that children are somehow complicit in their own abuse. CSE offences are also defined and included in the Sexual Offences Act 2003, as amended by Section 68 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, which has allowed for an increased understanding of CSE amongst police and other professionals.¹²

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is when a child under the age of 18 is encouraged, expected or required to take part in any activity that constitutes a criminal offence under British law.¹³ CCE can take many forms, including ‘county lines’ (where children are coerced to carry drugs and weapons from one area to another to service complex drug supply chains), stealing or shoplifting to order, including perfumes, alcohol or cars, cannabis cultivation, and forced begging. Child criminal exploitation is often unrecognised, and this can mean children are more likely to be prosecuted for offending behaviour, rather than being recognised as victims of exploitation.

CSE and CCE are closely linked, and often overlap, with child victims experiencing both forms of exploitation. For example, some of the ‘initiation’ methods for child criminal exploitation can be of a sexual nature – either directly towards the child, or where the child is made to sexually abuse another child. Sexual exploitation can also be used as a powerful tool to exert power and control over children, with the stigma and shame associated with sexual exploitation and abuse being used as a form of blackmail to coerce and trap children into criminal activity and/or further sexual harm.¹⁴



Children can be exploited by individuals, who are most often external to the family, although sometimes family members may facilitate the abuse and exploitation of their child or a child known to them by others, as a way to ‘pay off’ or reduce adult debts, often for drugs. Often, children are criminally exploited by an organised criminal group. The internationally agreed definition of an organised criminal group is ‘a structured group of three or more persons existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing crimes for financial or material benefit.’¹⁵ The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse used the term ‘organised networks’ to refer to groups that sexually exploit and abuse children, recognising that members of the group may not know each other, but may, for example, share images with each other.¹⁶ For the purposes of this report, organised criminal groups (OCGs) will be used to refer to both OCGs and organised networks.

OCGs are extremely well-organised networks and are able to adapt their methods of recruitment and grooming to exploit different vulnerabilities and situations. In 2021, the National Crime Agency estimated that it’s likely that there is at least 6,000 – 8,000 offenders involved in the exploitation of people in the UK.¹⁷

“Exploitation happens by organised crime gangs – you know, the word is in the title. ‘Organised’. They organise this.”

– Adam, Intern at Leaders Unlocked

Being sexually or criminally exploited in childhood can have a serious, long-term impact on children.¹⁸ Different children will be exploited and impacted by exploitation in different ways, but examples include being threatened, deceived, manipulated, blackmailed, and subjected to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and serious violence on repeated occasions, which can cause physical harm and trauma, which can impact a child’s development. If this trauma goes unresolved or unreconciled, the impact of the trauma experienced can be life-long. It can also result in a child being more vulnerable to going missing from home, being isolated from their family and friends, and missing out on education and training.¹⁹



1.2: Online Exploitation

CSE and CCE can often start online, and either continue online or transition to the offline environment. Online platforms are used by OCGs and individuals to groom, recruit, and exploit and abuse children, and to keep them trapped in exploitation.²⁰ In YouGov polling commissioned by Barnardo's in May 2023, 58% of parents recognised that child exploitation is a significant issue online.²¹

Online child sexual and criminal exploitation have rapidly increased in recent years, with the NSPCC finding in 2022 that online grooming crimes had risen by more than 80% in the previous four years.²² The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns also increased and exposed the scale of online exploitation. With children spending more time online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and traditional methods of exploitation being disrupted, OCGs moved to online methods of grooming and coercion into sexual and criminal activity.²³ This increase in online exploitation has continued, even after lockdown measures ended.²⁴

“I think there is a need for stricter regulations [online] to protect children.”

– Georgia, Intern at Leaders Unlocked

At an All-Party Parliamentary Group event on child criminal exploitation and the Online Safety Bill, Barnardo's practitioners said that exploiters use online platforms to make initial contact with and groom children, such as by sharing posts of luxury objects in trap-houses,²⁵ such as money, trainers and weapons to show a 'glamorous' and 'luxurious' lifestyle, or even by sharing legitimate-looking job adverts (see section 2.1).²⁶ In recent YouGov polling commissioned by Barnardo's, over 1 in 10 children (13%) said that they currently communicate with people that they have met online but do not know in real-life.²⁷

Research in 2019 found that one in four (24%) of young people reported that they see illicit drugs advertised for sale on social media.²⁸ In 2020, research by the Youth Endowment Fund found that 20% of young people had seen online content promoting gang membership in the previous 12 months, and 24% reported seeing content featuring carrying, using, or promoting weapons.²⁹ Revealing Reality's recent report, Anti-Social Media, found that children across the UK are routinely viewing videos of illegal activity on social media, including fights, stabbings, and the sale of weapons and drugs online – with some children reporting that they see this type of content several times a day, every day.³⁰

“You can't close the door to the outside world anymore, it follows you in through social media. They can't even close their bedroom door to it. There could be people verbally beating them up and you as a parent don't know as its all on the phone. There is no escape for the younger generation, it fills their life, seeing what people are saying about them.”

– Parent of a young person supported by Barnardo's.

Barnardo's practitioners have also warned that electro-currencies, credits, and rewards are used by perpetrators in games to groom children into criminal or sexual activity.³¹

Technology and social media platforms can also be used for 'remote mothering', which can keep a child trapped in exploitation. 'Remote mothering' is the ability to monitor where someone is, what they are doing, and who they are with at all times. Exploiters can do this via location tags, using GPS technology to pinpoint the location of photographs, or using tracking features, such as the Snapchat feature SnapMaps.³²

Online platforms can also be used to perpetrate and capture child sexual exploitation. This includes using live-streaming platforms to capture child sexual abuse in real time, and coercing children to produce videos and images of their own sexual abuse. A Barnardo's service in the West of Scotland shared how they are seeing an increase in referrals for children as young as 8, where they have been mimicking the online behaviours of older siblings, including sharing indecent images. The Internet Watch Foundation, which assesses and take down images of child sexual abuse online, took down 255,588 reports of suspected online child sexual abuse in 2022 – this more than doubled since 2020.³³ Further, information from the NSPCC indicates that data from their Childline counselling service shows that there was a 35% increase in calls about online grooming from April to September 2022, compared to the previous year.³⁴

Lisa's* Story

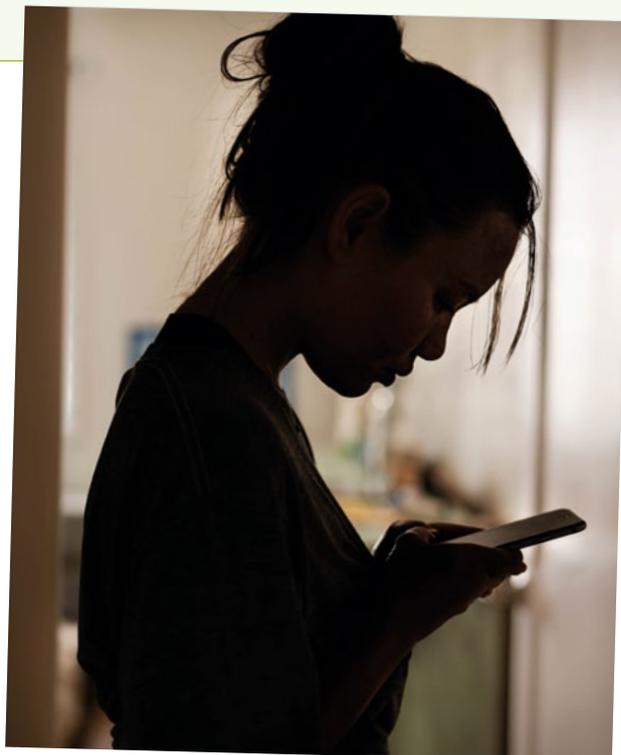
Lisa, from Scotland, is ten years old and a victim of online grooming where she had been coerced into sending indecent images and videos of herself, over a period of time, to adult men overseas.

The abuse was initiated through an online webcam chat generator site. This platform is a free online chat website that allows users to socialise with others without the need to register. The service randomly pairs users in one-on-one chat sessions where they chat anonymously.

Thereafter, the abuse moved to two social media platforms which lasted for four months before Lisa's mother, Angela*, discovered the abuse on Lisa's iPad and mobile phone.

Lisa's Barnardo's support worker met with her weekly. During their sessions, they covered different topics to help relieve Lisa's anxiety around being online or becoming a victim of abuse again.

The work was planned so that it was age-appropriate and mindful of Lisa's experience of abuse. Lisa said: *"I was embarrassed and felt very guilty about the conversations I had been in. And I felt trapped and was scared I would get in trouble."*



During this time, Angela was also supported by Barnardo's as she had struggled with accepting what had happened to her daughter. The Barnardo's project worker explained the grooming process and how Lisa came to be a victim of child sexual abuse.

**Names have been changed to protect the identities of children and families we help.*

1.3: The scale of child exploitation

It is difficult to get an accurate understanding of the scale of exploitation taking place in the UK. This is largely because of fragmented and flawed data collection, a lack of understanding of exploitation, the persistence of victim-blaming attitudes, the stigma associated with exploitation, and victims not being identified by the authorities. It's therefore likely that all data sets are an underestimate, and that the number of children experiencing exploitation known to services is just the tip of the iceberg.

One of the recommendations made by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse was for a single core data set for child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, which would see children's social care and criminal justice agencies producing consistent and compatible data, which is published on a regular basis.³⁵ The Inquiry recognised that limitations with data *"hampered"* the Inquiry's ability to conduct a realistic assessment of the scale of abuse and exploitation.³⁶ In the Inquiry's report, Child sexual exploitation by organised networks, they also set out that, in their six case study areas, *"overall the Inquiry did not receive data which it considered to give a reliable picture of child sexual exploitation across the six case study areas. This is likely linked to the absence of systematic and regular profiling of the problem of child sexual exploitation"*.³⁷ This has similarly been echoed by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, which recognises that *"official agency data can provide only a very partial understanding of the scale of sexual abuse, and potentially a skewed picture of its nature"* in its recent report on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse.³⁸

There is often a gendered response to exploitation, with girls often being seen as victims of sexual exploitation, and boys as victims of criminal exploitation. Although CSE and CCE are intrinsically linked, for boys CCE is often seen by professionals as the primary harm, and for girls CSE is. A report by Barnardo's Scotland found that 80% of boys (compared with 25% of girls) who were identified by the research team as likely victims of sexual exploitation had not been identified in official reports as being victims.³⁹

As well as impacting the types of support that child victims may receive, this gendered response can skew data sets. Systems that capture data, including the National Referral Mechanism, tend to only capture the primary exploitation type, rather than the layering of exploitation and the complexity that a child is facing.⁴⁰ Professionals are asked at the point of referral what the primary exploitation is, and as the response to exploitation is often gendered, this can mean that CCE for girls and CSE for boys is overlooked. Overtime, more exploitation types can be disclosed or found out about, but these are not captured in data systems.



Child Sexual Exploitation Data

It is difficult to assess the prevalence of CSE because of fundamental flaws in data sets, and the use of different definitions of CSE by different agencies.

For example, for police data sets there is no specific offence of child sexual exploitation. Instead, four different offences are listed under the heading of CSE, including paying for sexual services of a child; causing or inciting sexual exploitation of a child; controlling a child in relation to sexual exploitation; and arranging or facilitating sexual exploitation of a child.⁴¹ These categories do not include crimes which may involve CSE, such as rape.⁴²

To try and circumvent this flaw, the Home Office did make ‘flagging’ of CSE offences a formal requirement in 2016 – however this is very subjective and variable, with police officers or staff being required to manually ‘flag’ offences. The Office of National Statistics has noted that the data on offences flagged as CSE was not yet robust enough to provide an accurate comparison of prevalence between years.⁴³

Another key issue is that data sets can sometimes not disaggregate between forms of child sexual abuse, and so do not include figures solely relating to child sexual exploitation. This can mean that it can be difficult to get a clear picture of the prevalence of different forms of child sexual abuse.

The only national survey information currently available on child sexual abuse is the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which asks a sample of adults retrospectively whether they were victims of sexual abuse before the age of 16.⁴⁴ However, this has significant limitations. The survey does not distinguish exploitation from other types of abuse; sexual exploitation suffered at age 16 or 17 is not captured; and the survey is retrospective, meaning that it largely reflects historic patterns of abuse and exploitation rather than the current situation.

Further, victim-blaming attitudes towards child victims of sexual exploitation can persist. This can lead to cases being incorrectly identified as “*consensual sexual acts between young people*” or as “*inappropriate relationships*”; rather than CSE.⁴⁵ For example, Barnardo’s practitioners have shared examples where children had been labelled by professionals as exhibiting ‘online risky behaviours’, placing the blame for online grooming and exploitation on the child, rather than the adults who had exploited the child.⁴⁶ For these reasons, it is likely that CSE data is an underestimate. The Office of National Statistics is currently studying the feasibility of a survey designed to estimate the current prevalence of sexual abuse, that would distinguish child sexual exploitation from other forms of sexual abuse, which will be welcome.



Data recorded by local authorities



In England, child sexual exploitation was identified in **16,330** child in need assessments made by local authority children's services in 2021-22.⁴⁷



In Wales, child sexual exploitation was identified in **932** assessments made by local authority children's services in 2021-22.⁴⁸



In Northern Ireland, **6%** of children listed on the child protection register at 31st March 2021, sexual abuse (including child sexual exploitation) was listed as the reason why in 2020-21.⁴⁹

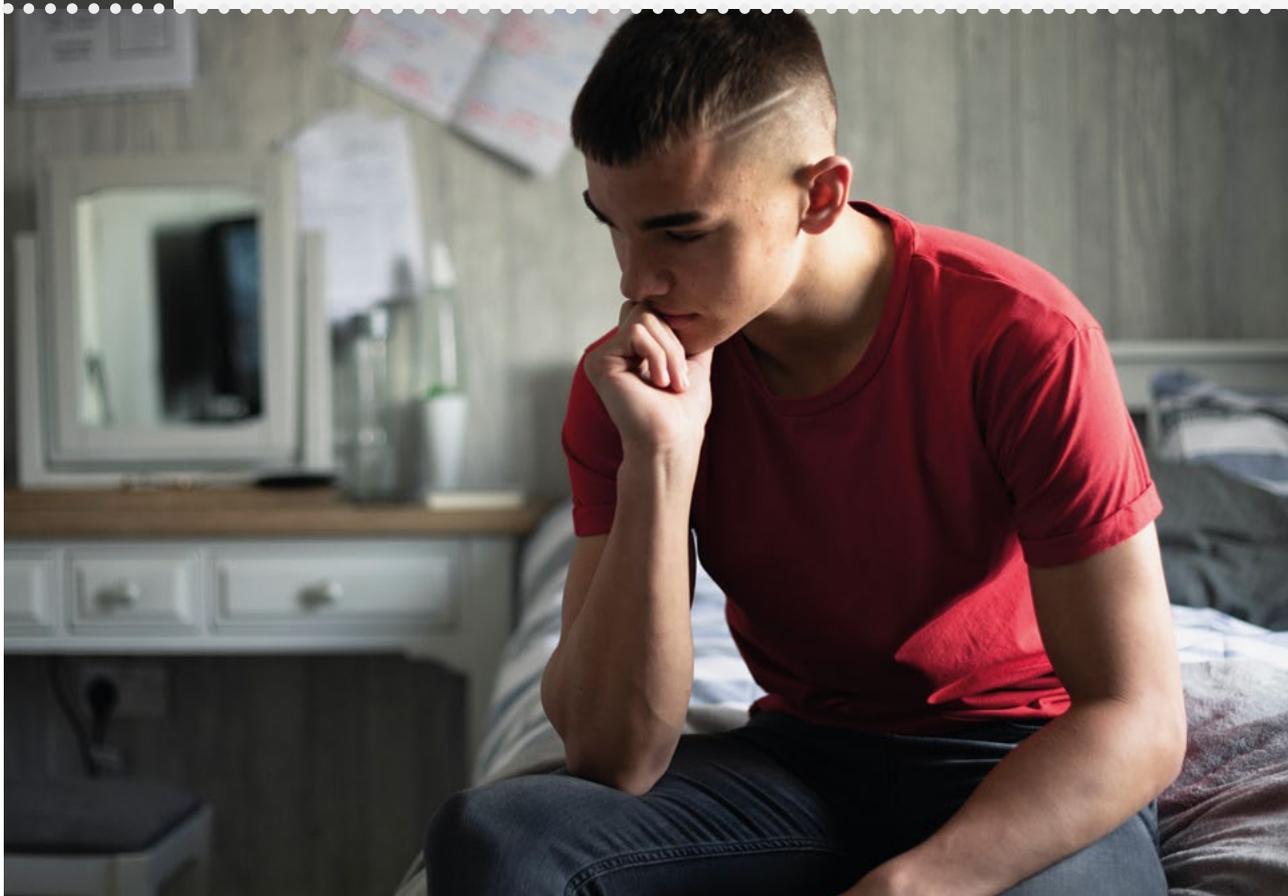


In Scotland, **139** concerns of child sexual exploitation were identified at Case Conferences in 2021-22.⁵⁰

National Referral Mechanism



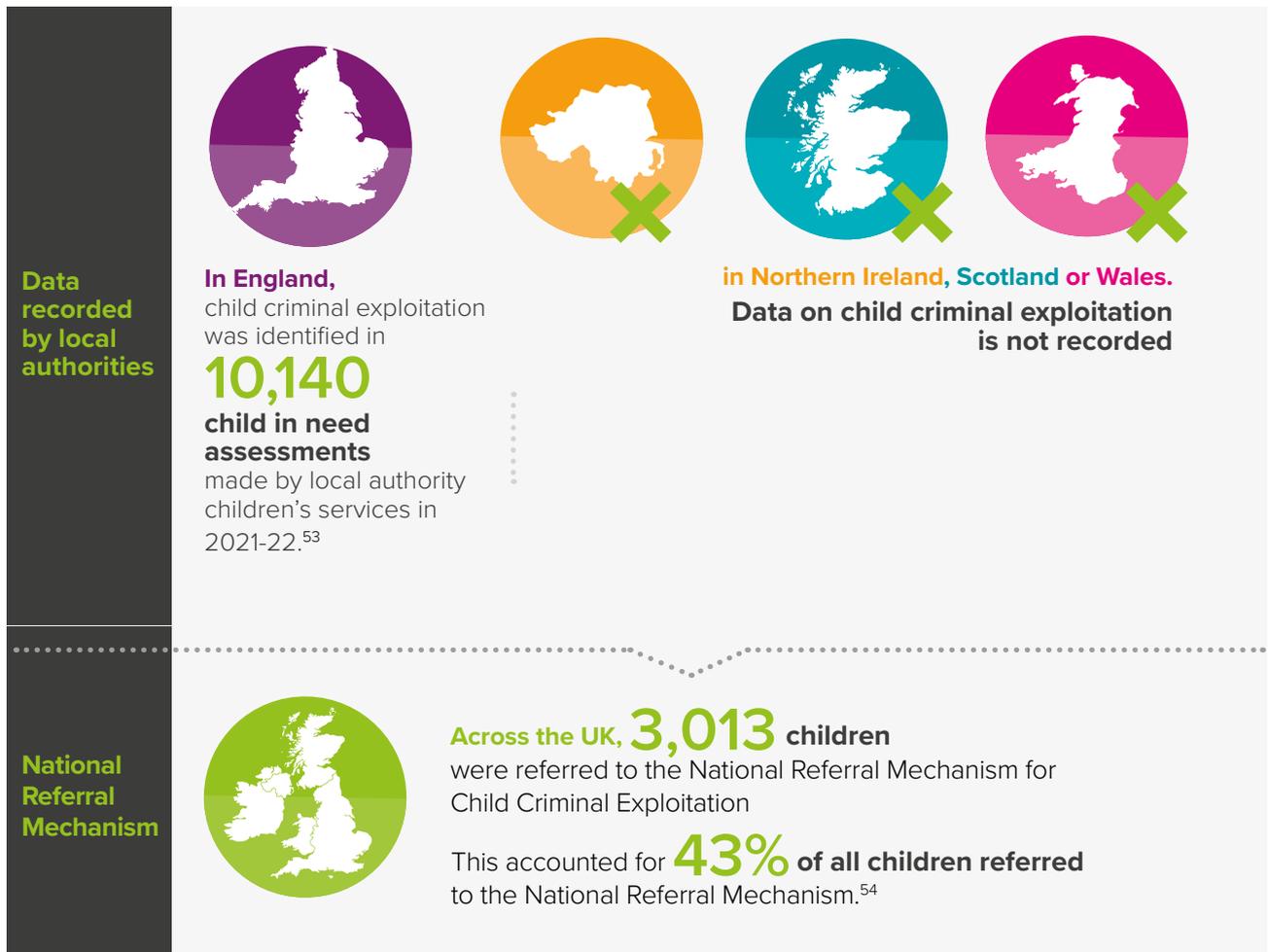
Across the UK, **679** children were referred to the National Referral Mechanism for sexual exploitation.⁵¹



Child Criminal Exploitation Data

Similarly, the scale of CCE is unknown, with figures likely to be an underestimate. There is no statutory definition of CCE, and no crime code associated with Child Criminal Exploitation, making it difficult to assess (see section 1.5).

In 2019, the then-Children’s Commissioner estimated that there were 27,000 children at high risk of exploitation by OCGs, however she did note that this is a conservative estimate.⁵²



1.4: All children can be victims of child exploitation

All children are at risk of being targeted, groomed and exploited, and there is no 'typical' victim, with children from different backgrounds and locations being vulnerable. Barnardo's and the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) conducted the first Scotland study on child sexual exploitation, which found that children who were being sexually exploited came from right across Scotland, including rural and island communities, and urban areas.⁵⁵

Often, there can be an 'othering' of the children that are at risk of exploitation, with people thinking that it does not happen in their community, or that their children are not at risk. In recent YouGov polling commissioned by Barnardo's, 60% of parents thought that child exploitation is a significant issue in the UK, but just 17% thought it was a significant issue in their own local area. This was similarly found in research in Scotland in 2019, which showed that more than a quarter of respondents did not know to what extent child sexual exploitation was an issue in their local area.⁵⁶

"It's quite easy to see exploitation through rose-tinted glasses – that it only happens to a certain type of person. So it's quite easy to say, 'oh my child doesn't fit this set of criteria that is the most likely to be groomed, and so it won't happen to them'. But it can literally happen to anybody."

– Georgia, Intern at Leaders Unlocked

Those who exploit children will often target children from particular groups that can be vulnerable because of inadequate protective structures.

In the recent YouGov polling commissioned by Barnardo's...



This includes refugee and asylum-seeking children, who face a real risk of exploitation. 20% of referrals received by Barnardo's Independent Child Trafficking Guardian Service for criminal exploitation are for children from abroad. Refugee and asylum-seeking children face additional risk factors, including existing debt bondage, social isolation, language barriers, and pressures from family abroad who may need monetary support.

Since July 2021 to 19 October 2022, there were 391 missing episodes of children and young people from the Home Office Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Hotels.⁵⁷ An investigation by the Observer, that cited child protection sources and a whistle-blower working for a Home Office contractor, described how asylum seeker children housed in Home Office hotels had been abducted from the street outside a Brighton hotel, and bundled into cars.⁵⁸ Children as young as ten have been placed alone in these hotels without access to help and advice, mental health support, and little access to healthcare. These children are at high risk of trafficking and exploitation and need access to specialist care and moved into local authority care, in line with the 1989 Children Act provisions. All children need support and protection, and this cannot be achieved whilst they are living in temporary and unsuitable accommodation, such as these hotels.

A Barnardo's service in Scotland that supports children and families from Ukraine said that they are concerned about children not being registered in education and not accounted for *“due to movement between all the hotels, ships and hosts, and all of the complex system that has been set up”*.

Illegal Migration Bill: Impact on Child Exploitation

The Illegal Immigration Bill currently passing through Parliament would disqualify victims of trafficking and modern slavery who arrived in the UK through 'irregular' means on or after 7 March 2023 from protections under the National Referral Mechanism. This includes children who have been trafficked whose family members meet these conditions. Children's claims will also become inadmissible once they turn 18, even if they have previously been identified as a victim of trafficking.

The Bill also gives the Home Office the power to accommodate children. This will risk creating a two-tier system⁵⁹ for children in the care of the state: children entering the UK through 'irregular' routes, including those who are trafficked, could be treated differently from other looked-after children, potentially missing out on the protections in the Children Act 1989, under which local authorities must promote and safeguard the welfare of children in need in their area. This duty should apply to all children, irrespective of nationality.

Barnardo's is gravely concerned about the implications of the Bill for child victims of exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery. We are hugely concerned this will further prevent child victims of from coming forward, for fear being removed. We are also concerned that this Bill could be used by exploiters as another way of keeping children and young people under their control, for example by threatening children with deportation if they were to leave the perpetrator or ask for help.

Our practitioners are reporting examples of children and young people feeling unwelcome or facing hostility from members of the public due to the negative government rhetoric facing asylum-seekers.





Children in care can also be particularly at risk of exploitation. A report by Crest Advisory found that children in care are disproportionately represented in ‘county lines’ networks, but they were not being systematically identified by police and local authorities.⁶⁰ Children in care are also more at risk of going missing – which is both a sign of exploitation and can be a risk factor for exploitation – with 1 in 10 children in care being reported missing compared to 1 in 200 children nationally.⁶¹ The thematic report by the Commission on Young Lives, *Out of Harm’s Way*, highlighted how this increased risk was likely the result of children in care often feeling isolated, which OCGs and individuals are then able to exploit.⁶²

The same report highlighted how failings in the current care system, including a particular failure to be able to adequately respond to the increasing number of children who enter care as teenagers, is likely increasing children’s risk of exploitation. Currently, the system still relies primarily on family-based foster care, which is designed for younger children, and has therefore failed to keep up with the needs of the growing profile of teenagers in care – who are less likely to wish or be able to live in traditional foster care or special guardianship arrangements. Demand for residential places significantly outstrips supply, making it difficult to find suitable placements, and meaning that for many teenagers, their experience of being care is marked by significant instability.

For example, children over 16 are the group most likely to have three or more placements in a year,⁶³ and moving placement is also strongly associated with being placed “*out of area*” - almost a third of children with three placement moves are more likely to be 20 miles from home compared with 20.6% of children in their first placement.⁶⁴ Both can compound a child’s feelings of loss and instability, and reduces opportunities to develop bonds – which increase a child’s risk of being vulnerable to exploitation.

The Government has recently committed to looking at large scale reform of the care system and in February 2023 issued a consultation document looking at how they intended to achieve this – *Stable Homes Built on Love*.⁶⁵ While this document provides some recognition that the system needed to do more to protect children from extra-familial harms, Barnardo’s is concerned that the proposed reforms will not go far enough to ensure the system is better able to respond to the needs of older children who enter the care system – particularly those with more complex needs. It is particularly important that the reform agenda looks to ensure that there are sufficient places available for older children at risk of exploitation, including looking at how to ensure there is sufficient residential care homes available to meet the needs of older children. Reforms must ensure that the experience of coming into care reduces and not exacerbates the risk of exploitation for this group.

A recent Child Safeguarding Practice Review highlighted how there were several failings that resulted in a young person who had been in care and was being exploited going unsupported.⁶⁶ Within 24 hours of the young person returning to their home area after turning 18 and reaching the end of their local authority residence requirement and no longer retaining Child in Care status, the young person then fatally stabbed another young person. The Review highlighted that it was not clear that *“appropriate multi-agency planning”* took place as part of transition planning for the young person, and how, despite concerns regarding association with organised criminal gangs and drug use for many years, intervention regarding extra-familial harm and exploitation was missed. The review stressed the need for a National Child Exploitation and Extra-Familial Harm Strategy to tackle child exploitation, that, among other areas, develops strategic initiatives to construct a ‘very early intervention’ approach, and supports timely, effective multi-agency information-sharing and communication.

Children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) can also be at risk of exploitation. This can often be because of a lack of awareness of their vulnerability to exploitation. A Barnardo’s service in Scotland which supports child victims of exploitation, and has a focus on supporting children with SEND said that *“with children with disabilities, professionals and parents in particular see their child as much younger than their actual age, and that can be real issue because they don’t feel the need to maybe share information and talk to them about sex and relationships... but there is a great need to speak to young people about these issues, because they need to get the awareness so their vulnerabilities are not exploited.”* One fifth of referrals into Barnardo’s Independent Child Trafficking Guardians service are for children who are reported as having a disability, but over the course of support, undiagnosed disability and neurodiversity can become better understood.

Children who are out of school, including children who have been excluded, can be at risk of exploitation, with school acting as a protective factor for children. A Government report on the protection of children from criminal exploitation found that *“even being absent from school for a short time, such as being missing for part of the school day, can increase the risk of both sexual and criminal exploitation.”*⁶⁷ Further, a recent Child Safeguarding Practice Review stated that *“there have been countless reports and articles over the past three or more decades that have drawn a direct connection between school exclusions, exploitation, knife crime and youth imprisonment. From a national perspective, the last decade or so has seen growing concerns in relation to the risk and harm faced by young people both at risk of and entrenched in exploitation”*.⁶⁸ The Child Safeguarding Practice Review also highlighted how Black boys are disproportionately excluded by schools.⁶⁹



Just as being excluded from school can make a child more vulnerable to exploitation, being exploited can make a child more vulnerable to being excluded. In October 2022, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime heard evidence from attendees that where a child's exclusion was orchestrated by exploiters, they would coerce the child into misbehaving, in order to further isolate them.⁷⁰

A practitioner at a Barnardo's CSE and CCE service told us that they have previously supported a child who was in post-16 education and their exploiter encouraged them not to stay on for their second year of education. The practitioner said that *"there were concerns about losing sight of a young person who was almost an adult... and no one would have sight on them. They've [the exploiter] then had the whole day to do whatever they wished to do with them"*.

Other groups of children who are at risk of exploitation include children in poverty and children who have experienced other abuse, including domestic abuse and neglect.⁷¹



1.5: Criminalisation rather than safeguarding

Although children who experience CSE and CCE are victims of abuse and are coerced into sexual or criminal activity, they are often still blamed and criminalised for their ‘behaviour’ and ‘risky’ actions, rather than appropriately safeguarded.⁷² Children who have been exploited often come to the attention of authorities when they have been arrested for a crime, or when they present at emergency departments for injuries relating to their exploitation.

The response to exploitation, particularly CCE, can often be a criminal justice route, rather than safeguarding. The Children Society’s report, Counting Lives, found that *“where children are being criminally exploited, safeguarding responses are largely reactive. Professionals reported that many children come to attention of statutory agencies when exploitation is already present in their lives and criminal groups are controlling them to deliver drugs. Typically, in these instances professionals report that law enforcement takes precedence over safeguarding responses.”*⁷³

In England and Wales, there were 4,811 arrests of children for drug offences and 3,909 arrests of children for possession of weapons offences in 2021/22.⁷⁴ In 2020, the Scottish Government admitted that *“child criminal exploitation is often unrecognised, and this can mean that children are more likely to be prosecuted for offending behaviour, rather than being recognised as victims of exploitation.”*⁷⁵ A Barnardo’s practitioner at a missing service in Scotland told us that they had recently supported a 17-year-old, who had not previously been known to services, and yet was charged with 19 offences all committed within a 3-day period. All of the charges were as a result of being exploited and forced into stealing to order.

Certain groups of children can be more likely to be criminalised for exploitation. For example, of the children arrested for drug offences in England and Wales in 2021/22, Black, Asian, other Ethnic Minority children, and Mixed Ethnicity children are overrepresented, at 22%, 12%, 43% and 10% respectively.⁷⁶ Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Mixed Ethnicity children were also overrepresented in the data for children arrested for possession of weapons offences.



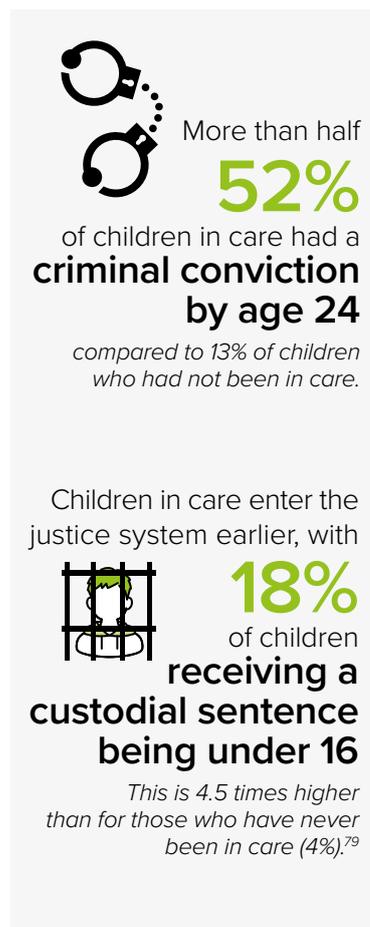
Black and Minority Ethnic children are less likely to be seen as victims, and more likely to be viewed as ‘offenders’, and subject to adultification.⁷⁷ Adultification is a bias that treats Black or Minority Ethnic children as if they appear older than they are, and with less vulnerability, the impact is they are not afforded the same assumptions of childlike innocence and subsequent protection as their peers.

Children in care are also more likely to be criminalised. Barnardo’s services have noted how, when children in care go missing – both a sign of exploitation and a risk factor to exploitation – they are more likely to be taken to a police station once they are found, compared to children living in their family home who are taken straight back home. In recognition of the risk that children in care are more likely to be criminalised by the police, the UK Government introduced a national protocol on reducing unnecessary criminalisation of looked-after children and care leavers in 2018.⁷⁸ However, statistics shows that the problem remains. More than half (52%) of children in care had a criminal conviction by age 24 compared to 13% of children who had not been in care, and children in care tend to enter the justice system earlier, with 18% of children in care who received a custodial sentence being under 16. This is 4.5 times higher than for those who have never been in care (4%).⁷⁹

Children can be criminalised due to a lack of understanding about exploitation. In England, there is no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation. In 2021, Barnardo’s made a Freedom of Information request to police forces across the UK about CCE.⁸⁰ 30 police forces responded, but only one police force was able to provide any data on CCE. Many police forces asked about how CCE is defined, demonstrating how misunderstood CCE is. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recently urged the UK Government to ensure that the Victims and Prisoners Bill clearly defines criminal exploitation of children in their concluding observations on child rights in the UK.⁸¹

“They [the police] really have got to have a clear message out there that exploitation is something that you don’t have a choice about. If you’re exploited, choice does not come into it. I’d really like to see the police have more of that at the front of their mind.”

– Adam, Intern at Leaders Unlocked



Even the design of the police recording system can criminalise victims of CCE. When recording a crime, the system mandates that the police must record a perpetrator. This can mean that, if a crime is committed by a child who is themselves a victim of CCE, they are automatically recorded as a perpetrator – criminalising them when they are a victim themselves.

It is then up to the discretion of the police officer to make an additional note on the Police National Computer that the perpetrator was a victim of CCE. As Barnardo's previous FOI request shows, CCE is not universally understood, and so this discretion results in inconsistency with children being criminalised.

This can prevent children from having access to support that they need to recognise and accept that they have been victims of exploitation, escape the cycle, and to recover from the abuse they have suffered. It can also result in consequences later-in-life if information is disclosed via a DBS or Enhanced DBS check which fails to provide the context in which the crime was committed by a child.

Taking a criminal justice approach rather than a safeguarding one can lead to exploitation not being spotted, children having no access to support services, and can have long-lasting impacts.

For example, a number of Serious Case Reviews, which are established where a child has died or come to serious harm, have found that, even where children have been known to authorities, they still haven't been safeguarded and supported. The Serious Case Review into the fatal stabbing of a 15-year-old boy known as 'Archie' in Sheffield in 2018 contains a list of failings by authorities to protect him from harm. Agencies were too slow to act; information was not shared; and youth engagement was abruptly ended.⁸² A recent report by the Public Accounts Committee found that, even though learnings from Serious Case Reviews and Child Safeguarding Review panels is available, it is not clear how lessons and learnings from the reviews are being embedded into day-to-day practice.⁸³

Being criminalised, rather than treated as a victim, can prevent children from being given access to support which will help them to recognise and accept that they have been victims of exploitation, and which can support and safeguard them.

Chapter 2: The cost-of-living crisis and exploitation

The cost-of-living crisis is having a severe impact on children and families across the country. Even before the crisis intensified in 2022, more than one in four children lived in poverty in the UK.⁸⁴ The cost-of-living crisis is impacting children's, young people's and families' health, wellbeing, and access to essential items, like food, and preventing them from accessing warm and safe housing.

Additional stresses and pressures can increase the risk of child exploitation, with those who exploit children capitalising on adversity to coerce and exploit children into sexual and criminal activity. We saw this with the COVID-19 pandemic; where OCGs targeted children online, and even disguised children as key workers so that they could continue to travel and service complex drugs networks.⁸⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, our services reported how children were being bought bikes by OCGs, under the guise of supporting their one-hour of exercise, and then forced to move drugs around.

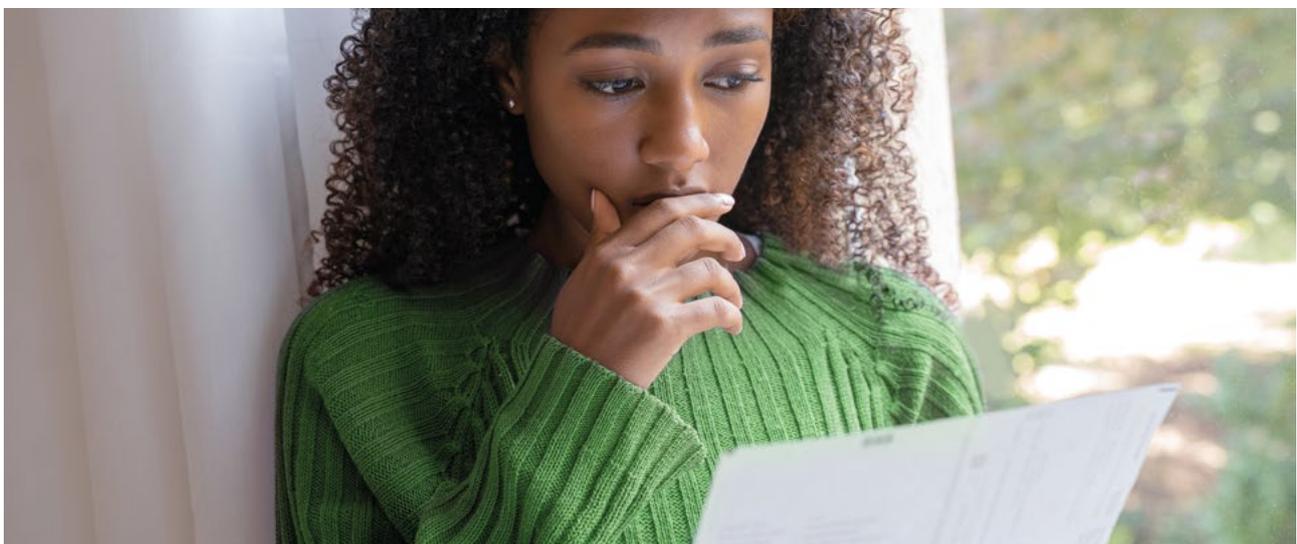
Early evidence suggests that the financial pressures families are facing due to the cost-of-living crisis are likely being exploited by OCGs and individuals looking to target children. In a recent survey of Barnardo's practitioners undertaken in February 2023, almost half (45%) of practitioners felt that children and young people are at a greater risk of being sexually and/or criminally exploited due to the cost-of-living crisis.⁸⁶ 43% said that financial issues and the cost-of-living crisis are key issues that they are seeing amongst children, young people, and families.⁸⁷

Poverty can be a contributing risk factor for exploitation. An Independent Review of Drugs commissioned by the Government found that *"there are strong associations between young people being drawn into county lines and increases in child poverty"*.⁸⁸ As more and more families are forced into or further into poverty by the cost-of-living crisis, Barnardo's is concerned that rates of sexual and criminal exploitation of children will increase, and cases could become more complex.

In a recent survey of Barnardo's practitioners undertaken in February 2023...

 almost half **45%** of practitioners felt that children and young people are at a **greater risk of being sexually and/or criminally exploited** due to the cost-of-living crisis.

 **43%** said that **financial issues and the cost-of-living crisis are key issues** that they are seeing amongst children, young people, and families.⁸⁷



2.1 Financial pressures and exploitation

As families struggle to afford items, including the essentials, there are concerns that OCGs and those looking to exploit children will capitalise on this.

In October 2022, The St. Giles Trust said that *“we have noticed an increase [in children involved in county lines activity] because the cost-of-living has gone up. A lot of parents, they’re struggling to put food on the table”*.⁸⁹ YouGov polling conducted for Barnardo’s in February 2023 found that, since October 2022, 1 in 4 parents (23%) said that they struggled to provide sufficient food, and half (49%) of parents worried about not being able to keep the home warm for their children.⁹⁰

Struggling to provide necessities, and other things that children might want – like a new phone, or clothes – can leave children at risk of exploitation. Barnardo’s Independent Child Trafficking Guardians have said how they are increasingly seeing smaller ‘debts’ being utilised to groom and exploit children. For example, they received a referral from a child who was given a Subway sandwich, after not being able to afford lunch. The child was then told that they had to repay the debt – the entry into exploitation was just not having lunch money.⁹¹ Other, low-cost items that are wanted by children can also be used to lure children into exploitation, including items such as vapes or Prime energy drinks, which are popular on TikTok.

The context of living in poverty and deprivation can sometimes act as a grooming process into exploitation for children and young people, with children’s desperation and need to have money resulting in exploitation. Barnardo’s services have shared how, since the cost-of-living crisis, girls in particular are being coerced into ‘selling’ sexual abuse images on Snapchat for as little as £2. Other services have said how, for children living in the context of poverty, they can see drug-dealing as a way to generate money, which is then exploited by OCGs. Often, professionals, including the police, can fail to see this as exploitation, and instead see it as the child seeking out and looking for the opportunity to earn money. In one case shared by a Barnardo’s practitioner, this was labelled as ‘self-grooming’ by the police. This is of course inappropriate and victim-blaming language to use, as children cannot ‘groom themselves’ – they are groomed by OCGs and individuals looking to exploit them.

Barnardo’s practitioners have shared how some exploiters are grooming and targeting whole families in light of the cost-of-living crisis. They shared how exploiters will gain information about different pressures that a family is facing from a child, and then step in to provide food and to cover payments, such as rent or bills, trapping the whole family in the cycle of exploitation. This can then lead to further forms of exploitation, including cuckooing.



“They’re [organised criminal gangs] very good at coercing, and manipulating people, and playing off their vulnerabilities. And then it can become quite easy – especially if the whole family is struggling, it can be hard to see the wood from the trees.”

– Georgia, Intern at Leaders Unlocked

When families are struggling to meet basic needs, like heating or food, some children can feel pressured to step in to help boost the household income.⁹² Some children are feeling the pressure to ‘step up’ and provide for their families. OCGs are using fake, realistic looking job adverts that are posted on social media to entice children looking to support their families financially into criminal or sexual activity. Speaking to the Education Select Committee, Johnny Bolderson from Catch-22 said that *“I have seen an advert on Snapchat and Instagram for young people to get involved in (what is in fact) county lines. The advert looked like it was professionally done, like a music video. It looked like something that you would see on TV every day. If I was a young person who was struggling economically, along with my family, my family was stressed, and I was seeing this advert that looks professionally done, I would almost think, “This must be legal because it looks so good. It must be.”*

Barnardo’s services have also shared how some OCGs are enticing children through the guise of a Saturday job, which looks legitimate, but in reality, can mean that the child is coerced into selling and supplying drugs and weapons.

Some children can feel additional pressures to support their families financially because of other factors, which OCGs can exploit. A Barnardo’s service in Scotland which supports children and families from Ukraine told us that many families are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis, as they have had to start from scratch in the UK, after leaving their belongings in Ukraine, and are often sending money back home to their families. Practitioners from the services said that, for boys from Ukraine in particular, they are *“hearing that your father, brothers, uncle, and friends are fighting a war for their country... and you’re here going to school. And you can’t bring any money in, but you’re hungry. That sense of identity of a young man growing into an adult might mean that they will be vulnerable to other people saying that we will help you feel like a man. You will be able to provide for your family. You will be able to fight. And then they are exploited.”*

2.2 Other pressures and exploitation

The cost-of-living crisis and subsequent financial stresses are putting additional pressures on families, which can be exploited by OCGs to coerce children into criminal or sexual activity.

Times of crisis can increase family conflicts and domestic abuse. According to research by Women's Aid, 96% of victims that they support say that the cost-of-living crisis is making their abuse worse.⁹³ Domestic abuse is one of the key adverse childhood experiences that are associated with poor outcomes into adulthood.⁹⁴ Children who experience domestic abuse are more likely to be sexually exploited, and 42% of female young offenders experienced domestic violence in the family home.

Domestic abuse and family conflicts can mean that children are more likely to not want to be at home, which can leave them at risk of exploitation. A Barnardo's practitioner who works in a CSE service told us that *"There's already breakdowns in family, but the added stress, financial stress, that families are under... I worked with a young woman previously, and when I first got to work with her, she was going missing, sleeping on the beach, getting drunk. But when you actually got to the bottom of it, her father was domestically violent. And her words to me were, 'I feel safer sleeping on the beach with this whole group of people' – some of them she didn't know – 'than being at home'."*⁹⁵

Exploiters, whether an individual (like an older 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'), or an OCG, can provide a child with a sense of belonging and identity, which can be used to coerce them into sexual or criminal activity. For a child living at home with domestic abuse or other family conflict, a sense of belonging, family or identity can be absent in their lives, which can leave room for the individual or OGC to exploit this unmet need.

"It's like, most people don't really have a father figure in their life or some people might not have an older brother, but then they could go on the streets and then someone will be at that older brother that they just never got. I have a cousin who's been kicked out of like 10 schools and he's only 13. And he doesn't really have a father figure in his life. So he looks up to the other people in life and stuff."

– Young Person Supported by Barnardo's



Increased financial pressures can mean that, in order to support their families, parents are having to work more often, or longer and irregular shifts (see section 3.1). This can mean that children are left on their own more, and can be lonely, again affecting their sense of family and belonging. Barnardo's services have warned how additional stress and mental health challenges caused by this stress can mean that parents struggle to meet their child's emotional needs.

“Having absent parents, when they've got to work so much, when they need the money, they're working every shift they can, then that will also affect the kids, not being able to see them.”

– Young Person supported by Barnardo's.⁹⁶

The need to work longer hours because of rising financial pressures can impact how parents are able to supervise their children. Barnardo's practitioners have told us that, even where children are at home with their parents, online exploitation can pose a risk.

A practitioner from a Barnardo's CSE service in Devon told us that that *“I think the problem is a lot of parents don't have the understanding of online, and it can be easier for them in some respects for their child to be quiet in their room. And then they don't have any oversight over them but they're able to sit and have their time because they're knackered – they've had a busy day and are stressed, so it's easy just to let them sit.”*

This was supported by a Barnardo's CSE service in London, which said that because parents potentially have to work more to make ends meet, *“they're stressed, so they're short tempered. So if their kids are quiet, then they get a break.... And they think that they are fine and they're quiet, they're on a laptop, they're on a device. So, we have quite a lot of younger children coming through that are being groomed online to send images.”*

2.3 Capacity of statutory and other services to respond to exploitation

As well as the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children, young people and their families, cuts made to statutory and other services are meaning that crucial early interventions and support for victims can be missing, which can impact children's outcomes. A Barnardo's practitioner labelled this as "*professional poverty*".

Intervening at critical moments is vital. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review's report, It was hard to escape – safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation reviewed a number of cases involving children who had died or been seriously harmed where criminal exploitation was a factor, and detailed the importance of not missing opportunities to safeguard.⁹⁷ The report highlights that critical moments to intervene include when a child is excluded from school, when they are physically injured (presenting in emergency departments), and when they are arrested. However, these opportunities are often missed.

Schools are a key safeguarding partner in protecting children from exploitation – they are often the best opportunity for early intervention, and parents can turn to their child's school first when they realise that something is wrong.⁹⁸ However, for many schools, they are at capacity and resources are limited. According to research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, after accounting for the specific costs facing schools, they estimate that school spending per pupil will be 3% lower than in 2010.⁹⁹

"Teachers spend a vast majority of the time with young people, and they're the ones that are really going to spot when something is wrong."

– Adam, Intern at Leaders Unlocked

Due to this lower capacity, it can mean that schools miss signs of exploitation or opportunities to intervene, and instead isolate, suspend or exclude a child from school due to their behaviour. This can sometimes happen without professionals trying to understand the underlying reasons for the child's behaviour or recognising that exclusion can result in harm.

"I think things just need to be picked up on sooner, then maybe kids won't go through so much. Picking up on like the little signs, like if a kid's being like an A star student through the whole of primary school and then suddenly so badly behaved the next year... I think schools do generally label kids as naughty kids."

– Guardian of Young Person supported by Barnardo's





A Barnardo's practitioner at a service for children who have been sexually and/or criminally exploited and those at risk said that *"the teachers tell me that when they suspend the kids, the kids are so frightened to go home that they do everything to stay on school property. So the teachers have to say 'You can't stay. Your behaviour is too bad, go home.' And the children come in with all of this trauma, and it overflows in school, and the schools just can't manage them. It's just lambs to the wolves. And there is no other space for these kids to go."*

Mental health services are also struggling, and demand frequently exceeds capacity.¹⁰⁰ Mental health issues can both increase the risk of CSE and CCE, and can also occur as a result of exploitation, and children not being able to receive support for their mental health at an early stage can increase the risk of exploitation. A practitioner at a Barnardo's service said that *"we've got issues around mental health services, and not being able to support children enough. So, it's just a lot of storms going into one"*. Further, 72% of children sentenced in 2019-2020 were assessed as having mental health concerns.¹⁰¹

Funding for children and young people's mental health services remains low, and on average children and young people's mental health only receives around 1% of all health and care funding.¹⁰² Despite some increased investment in Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and increased spending within Clinical Commissioning Groups (now Integrated Care Systems), more children and young people are experiencing poor mental health and referrals to specialist support services are increasing. Alongside this, fewer children and young people are being accepted for treatment and waiting times are increasing.¹⁰³

For example, in the financial year running from 2021/22, there were 734,000 referrals made to CAMHS services in England. Of these, 1 in 5 children and young people entered treatment within 4 weeks, and the average wait was 40 days, with almost 1 in 3 children having their cases closed before receiving treatment.¹⁰⁴ This increase in wait times is meaning that children and young people are increasingly reaching crisis, presenting in Accident and Emergency departments, and needing inpatient care.¹⁰⁵

Barnardo's services have also shared how reduced funding from commissioners and rising costs due to the cost-of-living crisis are impacting their services. For example, many practitioners at CSE and CCE services meet with children who have experienced exploitation by taking them out somewhere – for a drive in the car, or to get food. Methods such as this can help practitioners to build trusted relationships with children

and young people. Being next to a practitioner in a car or engaging in fun activities, rather than facing them in a room, can also make it easier for children and young people to open up to practitioners and discuss their experiences. However, rising food, fuel and activity prices may mean that this sort of activity is no longer affordable for services.

A practitioner at a Barnardo's CSE service in Northern Ireland shared what the impacts of losing these activities would mean for children and young people the service supports: *"I think it would be awful for our service if we couldn't take young people out because of costs going up... I don't think that we would get the same level of involvement if we were to say to a young person, 'yes, we're going to offer this service, but you come to our office and sit down.'"* She went on to say how she is subconsciously aware of rising prices, *"It is unconsciously impacting me too – I'm thinking 'oh God, look at the miles I'm doing'. Hopefully it isn't impacting our work. If we're forced to stop it because of the costs going up, I don't think it will be the same service. I really don't."*

Many other Barnardo's services have also shared how rising costs that are not being matched by an increase in funding by commissioners is restricting their ability to support children who are at the highest threshold/risk and are struggling, or are unable to engage in preventative work or support children at a lower threshold.

A Barnardo's CSE service in Wales works with other organisations in the community to carry out preventative work and awareness raising of exploitation with children, including activities such as barbecues on the beach during summer holidays, which aim to ensure that the service is visible to children in case they have any concerns to discuss, and also to ward off exploiters. However, with rising costs and funding constraints, they are struggling to afford to continue to do this preventative work. A practitioner from the service said that *"I think the thing around cost-of-living – for services particularly - everybody's cut to the bone. So you know what we can offer children is difficult... I have to use my existing staff to make sure I'm servicing our children who we are commissioned to work with, but also to be able to do some of this preventative work. We're not paid to do it actually, but it's important work to do, so we just say OK, this is happening."*

A Barnardo's practitioner at a CSE and CCE service in Tees Valley also shared how funding constraints mean that a lot of services are capped at a high threshold. The practitioner said that, *"So, let's say the top 30 kids are active [to the service]... but then we have 300 children that are being exploited but cannot even get there. We've got a complete bottleneck. How are we even considering the needs of children who aren't even on our radar yet?"*

At a time when there are concerns about rates of exploitation increasing due to the cost-of-living crisis, the inability of statutory and other services to fully respond to the risk will have a detrimental impact on children who have experienced sexual and criminal exploitation.

Chapter 3: Summer, school holidays and exploitation

As we approach summer and school holidays, it is likely that the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on exploitation will be further exacerbated.

“The summer months are bad. There’s two sides to it – not having the money, and having more time on their hands.” – Barnardo’s practitioner at a CSE and CCE service in Devon

Children, young people and professionals have cited concerns about the links between school holidays and exploitation – including how it can be a time of a heightened risk for exploitation, and how children are ‘invisible’ to services during this time. In 2017, The Childhood Trust found that almost two thirds (62%) of children in London were ‘frightened’ of being attacked or sexually exploited during the summer holidays.¹⁰⁶ Other organisations such as the Internet Watch Foundation have launched campaigns highlighting the risks of online child sexual abuse and exploitation during holiday periods.¹⁰⁷ Cleveland Police Force have also previously issued warnings that organised criminal gangs could try and recruit children for CCE, including county lines, over the school summer holidays.¹⁰⁸ Despite this, our understanding of the risks and incidence of CSE or CCE during holidays or unsupervised periods remains under-researched.



3.1 Cost-of-living crisis and school holidays

The summer holidays can often result in a lack of supervision for children, especially for those living in poverty. With the cost-of-living crisis, it is likely that more parents may need to work longer hours and multiple and/ or irregular shifts, to help make ends meet. Rising costs and financial pressures will also mean that many parents will not have the money to give to their children to keep them occupied or for them to attend holiday activities programmes. Whilst, alone, this does not necessarily indicate exploitation, they do demonstrate the unmet needs that many children will have during the summer holidays, which OCGs or individuals could target and exploit.

Barnardo's services have told us that they are concerned that parents won't be able to afford activities for their children during the summer holidays because of the cost-of-living crisis. A Barnardo's CSE service in Wales said that *"the families that said to us, they can't afford for their child to play on the Xbox because it's taking up electricity, that that will shift to – they want an ice cream, and they want a day out. And we will want to help our families. You may not need the support around gas and electric so much through the summer, but you know it's a trip to the swimming pool, or a day at the beach. You know those things? I don't think many of our children will get them unless we're able to help them."* Barnardo's practitioners also shared how school holidays can result in additional stress for families as children are unable to access free breakfast or lunch at school, and as a result children are having to go without meals.

The UK Government invests over £200 million each year in the Holiday Food and Activities Programme, which provides support to children in receipt of free school meals through holiday periods.¹⁰⁹ However, the reach of the Holiday Food and Activities Programme (HAF) is limited. It is only provided for children in receipt of free school meals, and the Government's own evaluation of the 2021 HAF programme did find that the programme does not even reach all of those on free school meals, stating that *"an additional 22% had to turn some free school meals-eligible children away. This suggests there was some unmet demand at a sizeable minority of clubs."*¹¹⁰

In 2021, in many local authorities, HAF clubs did not cover the full working day, or every week of the summer holidays. According to the Government's evidence, 70% of local authorities and 70% of clubs said that they were able to offer a place at a HAF club for four hours a day, four days a week, for four weeks.¹¹¹ This means that there is still an expectation for parents to provide some form of childcare for their children during the summer holidays, even for the limited group that are covered by the HAF.

The HAF does allow local authorities to have some flexibility, and they can use up to 15% of their budget for 'other vulnerable children'. According to the Government research, some local authorities did use HAF to specifically target those at risk of exploitation, as *"clubs sometimes provided specifically tailored activities for children considered to be at risk from exploitation and domestic violence, those known to the criminal justice system, and looked after children, to give them positive activities and role models"*.¹¹² A report looking at the impact of the Leicestershire HAF in 2019, which was developed by Barnardo's in partnership with a network of Improvement Partners including Leicestershire County Council, also found that a benefit of the programme was its ability to increase opportunities for safeguarding. The report found that there were a number of referrals made to local safeguarding boards as a response to needs identified during provision, and highlighted that these needs may have gone unnoticed if the HAF was not there. This included an example of one child who disclosed that they would leave the house at 8am, and not return until 10pm.¹¹³

However, the evidence shows that this was not done in all local authorities – a quarter (26%) of local authorities did not use their flexibility, and in some local authorities *"clubs were delivering at capacity and could not offer spaces to all the children they considered vulnerable"*.¹¹⁴ Further, less than a quarter (24%) of attendees at HAF programmes were of secondary school age, which means that older children, who are often at a greater risk of exploitation, may be missing out on vital provision.¹¹⁵

Whilst it is positive that some local authorities *"saw HAF as a means to reduce the risk of child criminal exploitation"*,¹¹⁶ this needs to be built into guidance for local authorities, to ensure that they all recognise the benefits of HAF in reducing the risk of CSE and CCE.

In the YouGov polling, more than one in three children (36%) said that they were worried about not having money for activities during the summer holiday.¹¹⁷ As children have more time on their hands because of the holidays, but are unable to afford to do things, it could leave them more exposed to exploitation. A Barnardo's practitioner at a CSE and CCE service based in Devon said that *"if young people are hanging about because they don't have the funds to go and do anything that then makes them vulnerable to exploitation... especially if they want money for something. This has happened in the past – where a young lad has been walking along and a guy comes up to him and says, look, if you do this for me, then I'll give you this."*

In the YouGov polling, almost half of parents (46%) said that they will struggle to afford family holidays and days out, with 1 in 4 (26%) saying that they will struggle to afford activities such as childcare and holiday clubs. 1 in 5 parents (21%) said that they will struggle to afford time off work to spend with their children.¹¹⁸

Free and affordable holiday activities and youth clubs for children and young people are few and far between across the UK. Research by the YMCA in 2020/21 found that, in England, local authority spending on youth services totalled £379 million – a £1.1 billion cut in youth services from 2010/11.¹¹⁹ In England, seven local authorities said that no money had been allocated to youth services in 2020/21. In Wales, in 2021/22, local authorities spent £37.7 million on youth services – a 31% decrease since 2010/11.¹²⁰

For some groups of children, access to youth clubs can be even more difficult. A Barnardo's CSE service in Scotland that has a particular focus on supporting children with SEND said that *"there aren't as many provisions for children with disabilities or additional support needs. [Providers] don't necessarily have the awareness or the ability to provide care or support or activities for children with additional support needs. And so, these young people are kind of lost with things to do."*



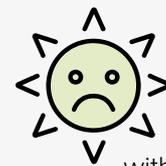
In our YouGov polling...



more than **1 in 3** children (36%) said that they were **worried about not having money for activities during the summer holiday.**



almost half of parents (46%) said that **they will struggle to afford family holidays and days out.**



with **1 in 4** (26%) saying that **they will struggle to afford activities such as childcare and holiday clubs.**



1 in 5 parents (21%) said that **they will struggle to afford time off work to spend with their children.**

Access to youth workers through youth clubs and other services can be a critical protective factor from exploitation and other harms. Youth workers are often not seen as connected with ‘scary’ statutory agencies, and are therefore better able to build trusting relationships with children that are sustained.¹²¹ In March 2020, Barnardo’s produced a report – *Securing a brighter future: the role of youth services in tackling knife crime* – in its capacity as co-secretariat of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime and Violence Reduction (now Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime). The report highlighted the role of youth services in supporting children and young people involved in serious youth violence, by providing counselling, social activities and careers support and guidance.¹²²

Paid-for holiday activities are also often out of reach for many families – research by CORAM has found that the average price of holiday childcare is £148 in Britain.¹²³ Per week, the costs of holiday childcare and activities cost is 2.2 times more expensive than childcare during term time, such as after school clubs.¹²⁴

A Barnardo’s practitioner at a CSE service based in London said that *“it’s the case that parents are having to leave children unsupervised and unattended... they potentially can’t afford the childcare. They can’t afford to put them in after school club.”*

Without having access to safe spaces during school holidays, children are congregating and socialising together in different locations – which are often away from the public view, such as beaches, parks or by riverbanks. This can leave them at risk of harm and exploitation; a Barnardo’s practitioner at a CSE service in Wales said that, when children are socialising together outside *“the kids are not going there to be antisocial or to cause anybody or to come to harm. It’s just that when groups of children are gathered in those spaces, they can come to harm.”*

The same Barnardo’s practitioner shared how, during winter, groups of children gather outside a leisure centre and sit by the air vents, as they let out warm air and there isn’t anywhere else to go that is safe and warm. Because groups of children do gather there, the practitioner said how it has become *“a bit of a hotspot for adults or older teens with cars driving by and offering lifts... and McDonald’s”*. Other Barnardo’s services have said how children will congregate in areas where there is access to free WiFi, or where they are able to charge their phones.

Children want and are asking for access to safe, supervised places outside of school time. A Barnardo’s CSE service in Wales said that *“the children mainly tell us that they want somewhere safe, warm, and where they can play music and spend time.”* When talking about access to youth clubs and spaces outside of school time, a young person supported by Barnardo’s said that *“if an adult is there it makes it safe. We just want a space where we can hang out and do our thing but you know there’s someone there who’s got your back”*.



Reach the Beach: Barnardo's Better Futures Summer Programme

Several Barnardo's services organise holiday programmes and activities for children and young people that they work with – such as a trip to the beach or the cinema.

During the summer school holidays, Barnardo's Better Futures service, together with the Swansea Child Missing, Exploitation and Trafficking Group (CMET), organise 'Reach the Beach', a pop-up preventative and disruption technique that aims to boost visibility of trusted adults in spaces where children and young people gather. This can just mean playing ball games on the beach, doing a barbecue, or even walking around areas where children and young people might be.

A Barnardo's practitioner from Better Futures said that:

"We tend to try and just be a bit more visible in those spaces. So, some of the team will get together with other professionals and play ballgames on the beach wearing our Barnardo's hoodies – do things that make us a bit more visible.

So anybody who is there and with sinister means can see that there are safe adults who are also there, and who are engaging with the children. So even if those kids don't want to come and play ballgames, we do a barbecue in the evening, and they might come and have some food. So those adults can see that there is other safe adult engagement with the children.

It's a bit of a prevention. We're just making ourselves visible so that anybody who walks by and thinks those kids look like easy targets to exploit, will see us or a PCSO or a youth worker and hopefully think twice."

3.2 School holidays and online exploitation

Children often can spend increased time online during school holidays, which can leave them at risk of online exploitation. YouGov polling on behalf of Barnardo's in May 2023 found that 7 in 10 children (71%) said that they will spend more time online during the school holidays.¹²⁵

The online world can offer a space for children to express themselves and make connections. However, it does have the potential to act as a source of harm for children. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, online CCE and CSE has increased, with OCGs and individuals seeking new ways to exploit children.¹²⁶

Linked to the cost-of-living crisis, Barnardo's practitioners have shared concerns that with parents not being able to afford to give their children money over the summer holidays or pay for other activities, children may spend more time online unsupervised. A Barnardo's practitioner at a CSE and CCE in Tees Valley said that *"so, during summer, when they're going to be at home... because parents can't afford to take them anywhere because it's too expensive, they will be on their phone in their bedroom, online. So, the exploitation online is just going to go through the roof – and we have no way of managing that, or tracking that, or dealing with that"*.

Some Barnardo's practitioners also shared concerns that, because of costs of childcare and other holiday activities, parents often leave their children with grandparents, who may not be as aware of online harms. A Barnardo's practitioner at a CSE service in London said *"often we find that parents leave their children with grandparents who might not be so tech savvy. I mean that's another thing... grandparents are providing a lot of the childcare. And the grandparents have no idea what's going on"*.

YouGov polling on
behalf of Barnardo's in
May 2023



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school holidays.

Raising awareness of exploitation: Real Love Rocks

Real Love Rocks is a ground-breaking, trauma-informed and age-appropriate educational programme developed by Barnardo's Safer Futures Trauma service. At the heart of the programme is the promotion of children and young people's rights to healthy, consensual and safe relationships with their peers, partners, families, and across their communities.

The programme has been updated and relaunched in 2022 with the statutory Relationships and Sex Education guidance (2019) in mind and consists of three resources, one for primary-aged children, one for secondary-aged children and one for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). They cover a wide range of issues, including grooming, exploitation, healthy relationships, consent, online safety, radicalisation and child sexual abuse. The programme is designed to challenge and change negative sexual attitudes, developing skills in emotional education and regulation and helps to build a support network of trusted people around children and young people.

Since Real Love Rocks launched in May 2014, more than 2,500 organisations and 3,000 professionals have used the resource with children and young people.



3.3 'Invisible' children

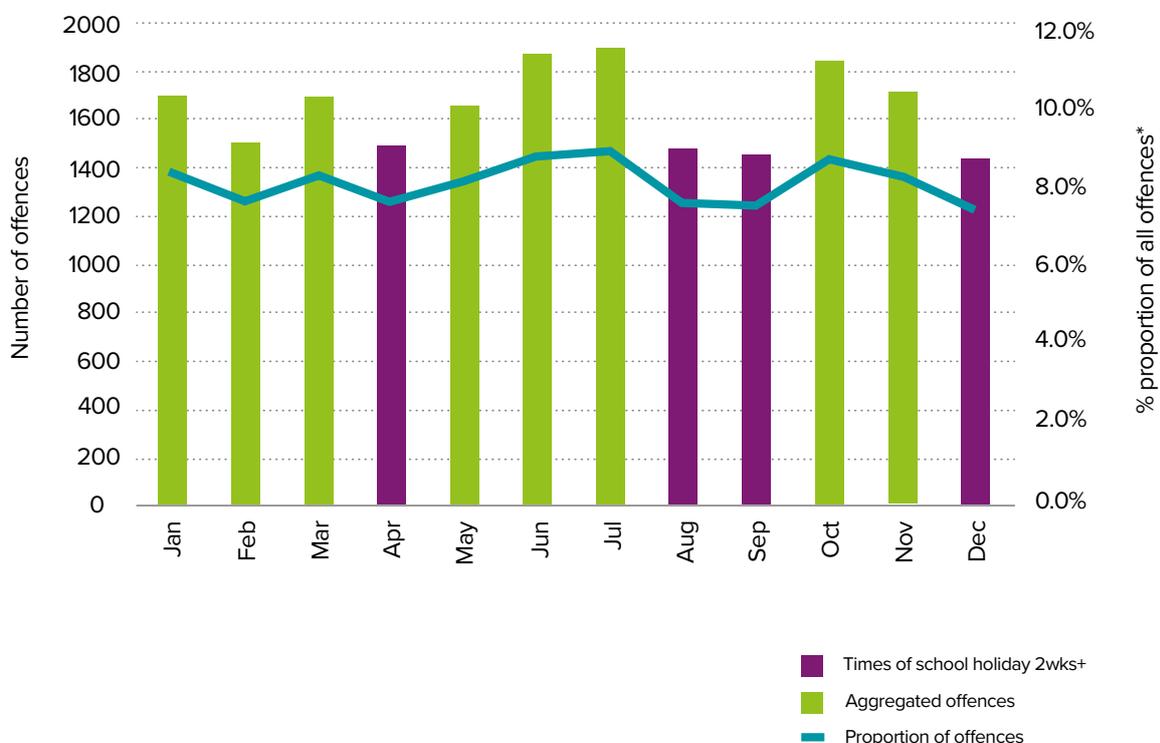
When children are out of school during holidays, they can be 'invisible' to professionals and services, particularly when they are not in contact with trusted adults such as youth workers or other professionals through youth clubs and holiday activities.

To find out how police records of exploitation are impacted by the school holidays, and summer holidays in particular, Barnardo's made a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to police forces across the United Kingdom in March 2023. We asked police forces to provide a monthly breakdown of child sexual exploitation offences per month from January 2016 – December 2022. We did not ask for offences related to child criminal exploitation, as there is no statutory definition for this offence. See appendix 1 for further information.

The majority (35 out of 47) of police forces replied to the FOI request, and 20 police forces were able to provide the full data set. After receiving the data, we calculated the average monthly figure between 2016-2022 for 20 police forces. The findings are presented in Figure 1.

The data shows that, during months when there are school holidays of two weeks or longer (i.e. Easter holidays in April, summer holidays in August and September, and Christmas holidays in December), there are dips in the monthly average records of child sexual exploitation. This then increases again during term time. The data from the FOI suggests that, when children are out of school during holiday periods, their exploitation is less likely to be identified and reported to the police.

Figure 1: Barnardo's FOI Request – Monthly Average of Police Records of Child Sexual Exploitation Offences from 2016-2022



We know that schools play a key role in identifying instances of child exploitation, given their close relationships with children and their ability to spot signs of exploitation. A Barnardo's practitioner at a CSE and CCE service in Tees Valley described schools as the *"eyes and ears"* regarding exploitation and said that there is *"less oversight"* of exploitation issues during the school holidays. A Barnardo's practitioner at a CCE and CSE service in Scotland also shared how multi-agency strategy meetings – which are used to flag child protection concerns and share intelligence - often cease to take place during the summer school holidays. This is often because education is not represented, meaning that crucial information-sharing is missed because the intelligence is not there from schools.

With children expected to be out more often and for longer during the school holidays – in particular during summer, with lighter nights and warmer weather – professionals and statutory agencies may also have a different response than usual during this weather. When talking about the police, a CSE and CCE service in Scotland said that they often have a *"different response to the same issues in the summer"*. This can mean that signs or instances of CCE and/ or CSE can be missed.

Chapter 4: Specific services to support and safeguard child victims

Specific support services can play a vital role in supporting and safeguarding children who are at risk of experiencing or have experienced sexual and/or criminal exploitation and can help them to identify that they have been exploited, and to come to terms with what has happened to them. These services include therapeutic and counselling services, mental health services, and advocacy services.

Specific support services help to support and safeguard children who have faced exploitation, harm and abuse, and help child victims to try to understand their experiences and work through their trauma. They are able to undertake proactive outreach work to support child victims, including contact through daily phone calls, messaging, and other ways of maintaining contact.¹²⁷



4.1 How specific support services benefit child victims of exploitation

Research indicates that specific services are best placed to meet the needs of victims or survivors, with many children preferring to receive support from third sector organisations and NGOs.¹²⁸ The National Audit Office has said that one of the particular benefits of the voluntary sector delivering such services is their closeness to the children needing the service, and their understanding of the needs of local service users and communities.¹²⁹

Specific support services can often be more flexible, and work with children for as long as necessary and are able to reduce risks associated with exploitation. For example, by tackling the sources of harm and exploitation. Access to specific support services can also reduce the risk of a child going missing from home, alcohol and drug abuse, accommodation and housing needs and interaction with the criminal justice system, and instead can mean a child is kept safe and supported, and is supported to access education, training and employment.¹³¹

Investment in specific support services for child victims of exploitation also makes economic sense. Often, commissioning contracts for CSE and CCE specific support services are short, but commissioning long term services allows the service to be flexible in their work with children and support them for as long as needed. Barnardo's and Pro Bono Economics evidence found that, for every £1 invested in specific support services for child sexual exploitation, it can save the taxpayer up to £12.¹³² These savings are shared by multiple agencies and Governmental departments.

“Something I always remember, on my first home visit, the first thing I asked is how long is this service for? Because I don't want to go to another worker in a couple of weeks time. And you told me there was no end date. And I said good. I've got used to social workers before and then they leave. Now it's been three years, and in that time, I've had three or four social workers, two Youth Offending Team workers and four schools.”

– Young Person supported by Barnardo's



4.2 Access to specific support services for child victims of exploitation

Despite the clear benefits that specific support services provide child victims of CSE and CCE, they are often few and far between, and whether a child victim can have the support of a specific support service can be a postcode lottery.

To find out about support services available for children who have experienced CCE and CSE, Barnardo's made an FOI request to local authorities and Police and Crime Commissioners across the UK to ask them how many specific support services they had commissioned in the past 12 months for (i) child victims of child criminal exploitation and (ii) child victims of child sexual exploitation. The FOI request only asked about commissioned support services for child victims, and not in-house provision or preventative services. See Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 for further information.

Out of those local authorities who provided information, two thirds (68%) had not commissioned any child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, or combined child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation services in the past 12 months.

For Police and Crime Commissioners, four in ten (39%) had not commissioned any child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, or combined child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation services in the past 12 months.

For the majority of child victims of exploitation, vital specific support services that they need to safeguard and support them simply are not there. Investment and large-scale expansion in specific support services for child victims of exploitation is crucially needed, but sufficient Government action has not so far been taken. The UK Government has taken some steps to invest in services aimed at tackling child exploitation and abuse and protecting victims – including investing £16.5 million in the End Violence Partnership in 2022 to tackle online child sexual abuse and exploitation,¹³³ and delivering £40 million to tackle child sexual abuse and child trafficking in 2017¹³⁴ – this is unfortunately just a drop in the ocean. Much greater investment is needed in services that can prevent child exploitation, such as youth clubs, and in specific support services for child victims of exploitation and abuse to really match the demand.

Our evidence suggests the public expect child victims of exploitation to receive support – in YouGov polling, 82% of parents said that they support victims of exploitation having the right to access support to help them recover.¹³⁵

In September 2021, the Ministry of Justice did acknowledge that research to date indicated that *'availability of specialist provision for children and young people is not sufficient to meet the level of need'*.¹³⁶ In its final report, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse recommended that the UK and Welsh Government should guarantee that all child victims of sexual abuse will be offered specialist and accredited therapeutic support.¹³⁷

In its response to the Inquiry's recommendations in May 2023, the Government committed to doing their *"utmost to ensure that access to high quality support for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse exists"* and will be eliciting views on the future of therapeutic support.¹³⁸



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The upcoming Victims and Prisoners Bill seeks to bolster support for victims and witnesses in England and Wales, including child victims and witnesses of abuse and exploitation. Despite this, the Bill does not put a duty on commissioners to commission specific services for child victims of exploitation, abuse and other harms – meaning that the gap in support is likely to remain. Alongside a coalition of children’s charities, Barnardo’s is calling on the Government to place a duty on the relevant authorities to commission sufficient and specific support for children and young people who are victims of crime, including abuse and exploitation. We also are calling for this to be supplemented by placing a further duty on the Secretary of State to make a national statement on the current volume, need, provision and investment in support services for children who are victims of crimes including abuse and exploitation, so that sufficient specific support services for child victims can be commissioned. Greater investment is also needed in specific support services for child victims of abuse and exploitation, and this should be announced alongside the Bill.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government’s commitment to deliver the Bairns’ Hoose model of specific support for child victims of abuse and exploitation is welcome.¹³⁹ However, this must be met with sustainable and sufficient funding to ensure that all child victims of exploitation and abuse are able to access this provision safely. This requires consideration of how children who may have harmed other children in addition to being harmed themselves can be properly supported by this model.



Recommendations

Investment in specific support services for children

- We urge **all governments** to invest in and expand the provision of specific support services for victims of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation.
- The **UK Government** should use the Victims and Prisoners Bill to strengthen support for child victims and witness in England and Wales. This should include:
 - Placing a duty on the relevant authorities to commission sufficient and specific support for children and young people who are victims of crime, including abuse and exploitation. This must be supplemented by placing a further duty on the Secretary of State to make a national statement on the current volume, need, provision and investment in support services for children who are victims of crimes including abuse and exploitation.
 - Placing a duty on the relevant authorities to consult with providers of children's services to ensure support is in place for child victims.
- The **UK Government** should roll out the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG) service nationally across all of England and Wales to enable all children that have been identified as trafficked to have specialist support, as underpinned by Section 48 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.
- The **Department of Justice in Northern Ireland** should consider the development of a Barnahus Model in Northern Ireland to ensure that children who are victims of sexual abuse and exploitation are not re-traumatised by participation in justice and are supported on a path to recovery.

Online safety

- The **UK Government** should strengthen protections from online child criminal exploitation, including within the Online Safety Bill. This should include:
 - Ensuring that content related to modern slavery and the trafficking of children, including for the purposes of child criminal exploitation, is included within the definition of 'illegal content' in the Online Safety Bill.
 - Extending the provision to detect and report child sexual exploitation and abuse content to content related to modern slavery and trafficking of children, including for the purposes of child criminal exploitation.

Action to tackle child exploitation

- The **UK Government** should use the Victims and Prisoners Bill to introduce a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation in England to better help professionals to identify victims, and make sure that they are supported appropriately.
- The **UK Government** should develop, publish and implement a National Action Strategy for Child Exploitation and Extra-Familial Harm.
- The **Scottish Government** should set up a National Working Group and publish an updated National Action Plan to tackle the exploitation of children and young people in Scotland, including child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. Local and national strategies must ensure a focus on locations of concern and people who abuse and exploit, with all agencies and services collaborating in order to tackle contextual risks.
- The **Department of Justice in Northern Ireland** should develop a distinct Child Sexual Abuse strategy that would sit within the overall Domestic and Sexual Abuse strategy.
- We urge **all governments** to invest in and expand the provision of support for children and young people to help protect them and prevent exploitation. This should include increased investment in youth services.
- The **UK Government** should expand access to the Holiday Food and Activities Programme to all families in receipt of Universal Credit.

- The **UK Government** should ensure that Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) in schools have funding to continue to support children across holiday periods in England.
- The **UK Government** should review whether the recent changes to the evidence required to confirm potential victims of trafficking via the National Referral Mechanism has resulted in a reduction in children who are being sexually and criminally exploited being identified as potential victims of trafficking.

Data and understanding

- **All governments** should invest in and commission research on the scale, nature and prevalence of all types of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation.
- The **Scottish Government** should invest in Scotland-specific research on the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation.
- The **UK Government, Scottish Government, and Northern Irish Government** should provide enhanced training and support, pre- and post-qualification, for all professionals working with children, so that they have the knowledge and confidence that they need to better protect children by identifying signs of and responding to child sexual abuse, exploitation and child criminal exploitation.
- The **Welsh Government** should ensure enhanced training and support is consistently and routinely provided, pre-and post-qualification, for all professionals working with children, so that they have the knowledge and confidence that they need to better protect children by identifying signs of and responding to child sexual abuse, exploitation and child criminal exploitation.
- The **UK Government** should review the police recording process to ensure that all crimes committed by children who are victims of CCE are appropriately mitigated so that information shared either at the time of recording or in the future is accurate, and does not unfairly lead to the detriment of the child or adult.
- **All governments** must support awareness raising and cultural change to eradicate victim-blaming attitudes and language. This should include through the delivery of training, supporting audits and reflection, and reporting on progress.

Appendix

Appendix 1: FOI Request made to Police Forces

FOI Request Question to Police Forces

1. How many recorded incidents of child sexual exploitation were there per month from January 2016 – December 2022?

Response

The FOI Request was sent to 34 police forces across the UK. 20 police forces responded with full information. The FOI Request was sent on 21st March 2023, and the analysis only includes responses received up to 9th May 2023.

Average proportion of child sexual exploitation offences per month from 2016-2022 across all police forces that responded

Month	Proportion of offences (%)
January	8.6%
February	7.6%
March	8.6%
April	7.5%
May	8.4%
June	9.5%
July	9.6%
August	7.5%
September	7.4%
October	9.3%
November	8.7%
December	7.3%

Appendix 2: FOI Request made to Local Authorities

FOI Request Question to Local Authorities

1. The number of services commissioned by the Local Authority in the past 12 months for:
 - a. Child Victims of Child Criminal Exploitation
 - b. Child Victims of Child Sexual Exploitation.

Response

The FOI Request was sent to 420 local authorities across the UK. 151 local authorities responded with full information. Not all local authorities that the FOI request was sent to were responsible for Children's Services. The FOI Request was sent on 29th March 2023, and the analysis only includes responses received up to 9th May 2023.

Percentage of local authorities who have commissioned CSE, CCE and/ or Combined CSE and CCE Services in the past 12 months (March 2022 - March 2023)

Service provision	Percentage
Percentage of local authorities quoting CSE, CCE and/ or Combined CSE and CCE Services	32%
Percentage of local authorities not quoting CSE, CCE and/ or Combined CSE and CCE Services	68%

Total number of CSE, CCE and Combined CSE and CCE Services Commissioned by local authorities in the past 12 months (March 2022 – March 2023)

Service type	Total number commissioned in past 12 months
CSE Services	60
CCE Services	67
Combined CSE and CCE Services	23

Appendix 3: FOI Request made to Office of Police and Crime Commissioners

FOI Request Question to Office of Police and Crime Commissioners

1. The number of services commissioned by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner in the past 12 months for:
 - a. Child Victims of Child Criminal Exploitation
 - b. Child Victims of Child Sexual Exploitation.

Response

The FOI Request was sent to 40 Office of Police and Crime Commissioners across the UK. 38 Office of Police and Crime Commissioners responded with full information. The FOI Request was sent on 29th March 2023, and the analysis only includes responses received up to 9th May 2023.

Percentage of Office of Police and Crime Commissioners who have commissioned CSE, CCE and/ or Combined CSE and CCE Services in the past 12 months (March 2022 - March 2023)

Service provision	Percentage
Percentage of Office of Police and Crime Commissioners quoting CSE, CCE and/ or Combined CSE and CCE Services	61%
Percentage of Office of Police and Crime Commissioners not quoting CSE, CCE and/ or Combined CSE and CCE Services	39%

Total number of CSE, CCE and Combined CSE and CCE Services Commissioned by Office of Police and Crime Commissioners in the past 12 months (March 2022 – March 2023)

Service type	Total number commissioned in past 12 months
CSE Services	49
CCE Services	16
Combined CSE and CCE Services	9

End notes

- ¹ Serious Crime Act 2015, **Section 68**
- ² Barnardo's, 2012. **Cutting them free: How is the UK progressing in protecting its children from sexual exploitation?**
- ³ Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse **Who We Are**.
- ⁴ Barnardo's, 2004. **Just one click: sexual abuse of children and young people through the internet and mobile phone technology**.
- ⁵ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime, 2022. **Online Safety Bill and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**
- ⁶ Office of National Statistics, 2022. **Characteristics of children in need**
- ⁷ Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, 2023. **Child sexual abuse in 2021/22: Trends in official data**
- ⁸ Information Analysis Directorate, 2022. **Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2021/22**
- ⁹ Scottish Government, 2023. **Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland: 2021 to 2022, Additional Tables, Table 1.13**
- ¹⁰ Barnardo's, 2023. **A crisis on our doorstep: The deepening impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children and young people in the UK**
- ¹¹ Department for Education, 2017. **Child Sexual Exploitation: Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation**. You can find the Northern Irish definition [here](#), Scottish definition [here](#), and Welsh definition [here](#).
- ¹² Sexual Offences Act 2003, **Section 47**
- ¹³ This is Barnardo's and The Children Society's preferred definition for Child Criminal Exploitation. We hope that this will be included by the Government in the Victims and Prisoners Bill. Child Criminal Exploitation is defined in the **Working Together Guidance** as 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 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. 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.
- ¹⁴ Barnardo's, 2018. **Who will notice, who will ask? How we keep children safe from sexual and criminal exploitation**
- ¹⁵ **United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and the Protocols Thereto, 2000**
- ¹⁶ Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2022. **Child sexual exploitation by organised networks: Investigation report**
- ¹⁷ National Crime Agency, 2021. **National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime**
- ¹⁸ Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, 2023. **Key messages from research on the impacts of child sexual abuse**
- ¹⁹ Barnardo's and Pro Bono Economics, 2011. **An assessment of the potential savings from Barnardo's interventions for young people who have been sexually exploited**.
- ²⁰ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime, 2022. **Online Safety Bill and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**
- ²¹ YouGov survey of parents: Total sample size was 1191 All GB parents of kids under 18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 17th - 19th May 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB parents.
- ²² NSPCC, 2022. **Online grooming crimes have risen by more than 80% in four years**
- ²³ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime, 2022. **Online Safety Bill and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**
- ²⁴ National Crime Agency, 2021. **National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime**
- ²⁵ A trap house is often a base for distributing and storing drugs
- ²⁶ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime, 2022. **Online Safety Bill and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**
- ²⁷ Barnardo's, 2023. **Child exploitation: A hidden crisis**
- ²⁸ Volteface, 2019. **DM for Details: Selling Drugs in the Age of Social Media**
- ²⁹ Youth Endowment Fund, 2022. **Children, violence and vulnerability 2022: A Youth Endowment Fund report into young people's experiences of violence**
- ³⁰ Revealing Reality, 2023. **Anti-social media: The violent, sexual and illegal content children are viewing on one of their most popular apps**
- ³¹ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime, 2022. **Online Safety Bill and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**
- ³² All-Party Parliamentary Group on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime, 2022. **Online Safety Bill and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**
- ³³ IWF, 2023. **Annual Report 2022**
- ³⁴ NSPCC, 2022. **13,000 online child sex offences could be recorded during Online Safety Bill delay**
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About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2021/22, we reached 357,000 children, young people, parents and carers through our 794 services and partnerships across the UK. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

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