# I'm Trying to Save My Family: Parent Experiences of Child Criminal Exploitation

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## Abstract

Despite growing awareness of child criminal exploitation, there is a dearth of evidence relating to parent views and experiences. This article presents interview findings from parents with lived experience of parenting a criminally exploited child. Early warning signs, such as behaviour changes, disengagement from school and child disappearances, were often rationalised in response to family circumstances or normal teenage development. Not knowing the child's whereabouts, increased missing episodes and disengagement from the family prompted parents to seek help. Findings highlighted the need for parent involvement in the development of suitable responses at the individual, local and national levels.

## Keywords

child criminal exploitation, county lines, multiagency, parents, social work

## Introduction

Despite growing awareness of child criminal exploitation, there is a dearth of evidence relating to parent views and experiences. Child criminal exploitation refers to children and young people who are manipulated or coerced into criminal activity for the personal gain of an individual, group or organised criminal gang (Home Office, 2018). Consideration of parent perspectives is important, given that family factors are widely accepted as influencing a child's susceptibility to exploitation. In terms of increased vulnerability, factors include neglect, abuse, poor parental supervision, domestic abuse, parental mental ill health, parent substance misuse or parent involvement in criminal activity (Children's Commissioner for England, 2019; Spencer et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2019; Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). Conversely, presence of a stable family structure and infrequent parent-child conflict are widely accepted as reducing a child's susceptibility to exploitation (Cordis Bright, 2015; McDaniel, 2012; Turner et al., 2019). What is lacking in the current literature is examination of parent experiences of caring for a child who is being criminally exploited. This article addresses this research gap.

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## Background

There has been growing concern about child criminal exploitation in the United Kingdom since the 2010s. While the National Crime Agency first reported a threat assessment for child criminal exploitation in relation to county lines in 2015, shortly before this, Andell and Pitts (2017: 12–13) highlighted its association with a 'perfect storm' of factors. This included the loss of employment opportunities for young people, reductions in staff and resources for youth services and the scarcity of appropriate accommodation which led to the co-location of care leavers with children leaving custody (Andell and Pitts, 2017). This coincided with the saturation of the drugs market in urban areas and increasing levels of competition which gave rise to the emergence of 'county lines', where class A drugs were distributed from urban areas into rural, border and coastal towns (Windle and Briggs, 2015). Such mobilisation has been underpinned by the exploitation of children who are controlled by 'senior controllers' and used to conduct drug dealing activities (Hales and Hobbs, 2010: 29). Hence, child criminal exploitation can be regarded as a 'wicked problem' as it has emerged as a symptom of other social and cultural problems; it consists of multiple independent actors, has no definitive formulation and has endless possible solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

Drawing upon complexity theory, child criminal exploitation will vary according to the behaviours of actors within the network, especially as the network self-organises in order to adapt, evolve and survive (Pycroft and Bartollas, 2014). Rather than a uniform transition from traditional models of drug supply to county lines, Harding (2020) proposed an evolutionary typology based on findings form a study of the transition of a London-based urban street group to the Home Counties. This study revealed transition away from the traditional drug dealing model, characterised by 'local drugs for local people' (Harding, 2020: 40) and run by local crime families, to more dynamic models dependent upon local factors. The first new model, 'commuting' (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Hales and Hobbs, 2010) is perhaps the most well known, with urban-based groups moving into new markets by using children from cities to transport drugs to rural areas. The ethnicity of these children reflected the ethnicity of the urban-based group, with black children from London-based groups, Asian children from Birmingham-based groups and white children from Liverpool or Manchester-based groups (National Crime Agency, 2017). However, once established in these areas, urban-based groups created a local base often taking over or 'cuckooing' the home of a vulnerable drug user and concomitantly grooming and using local children who mirrored the ethnicity of the local population (Harding, 2020). Such evolution was dependent upon local push and pull factors, such as road and rail networks as well as the level of resistance from both the local crime families and the police. For example, under the 'blurred lines' model (Cullen et al., 2020), local families retained control over the area by imitating the strategies used by urban-based groups, such as exploitation and violence. It follows that child criminal exploitation manifests differently in different areas (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021) and the development of possible solutions will be dependent upon how the problem is defined by the actor (Pycroft and Bartollas, 2014). With no statutory definition, child criminal exploitation is perceived according to the perspective of the particular actor or agency, whether it is professionals such as

teachers, police social workers and youth offending teams, or parents whose child, or children are being exploited.

While any child can be exploited, susceptibility may be heightened for some groups of children. The Children's Commissioner for England (2019a) estimated that 2.3 million children are at risk due to their family circumstances, which included parental mental illness, substance misuse and domestic violence. While these factors are widely accepted as posing significant risk to children, Skinner et al. (2021) have highlighted the paucity of robust evidence supporting this association. Furthermore, Hood et al. (2021) noted that these risk factors often omit the influence of wider socioeconomic factors on parenting. This includes poverty, child age, peer groups, housing stability and the local community in which the child lives (Maxwell and Corliss, 2020; Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). With respect to poverty, findings have shown that children may be enticed into drug dealing activities as a way of financially supporting their families (Apland et al., 2017; Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). While others have argued that rather than neglect, reduced parental supervision may be a consequence of parents having to work long hours in order to provide for the family (Whittaker et al., 2018). In terms of age, children between 15 and 17 years are most often exploited (All Party Parliamentary Group on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, 2017; Home Office, 2018; Hudek, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2017), yet the challenges of parenting an adolescent have often been overlooked. Adolescence is associated with the transition towards independence and greater influence from peers outside the family environment (Finigan-Carr et al., 2016). This is particularly pertinent given that children can spend up to 85 per cent of their free time with peers (Smith, 2020). During this period, parents may struggle to enforce boundaries, manage aggressive behaviour and limit social media (All Party Parliamentary Group on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, 2017). Findings from a study in Greater Manchester (Innovation Unit, 2019) revealed that while some parents were described as chaotic, other parents were

> highly aware and fearful of the consequences of making mistakes and how they handled complex situations. Parents told us on numerous occasions that they were at a loss and felt helpless. (Innovation Unit, 2019: 27)

Feelings of helplessness can be compounded where family calls for help go unheeded (Children's Commissioner for England, 2019b). Conversely, where children are known to services, findings show that parents often feel blamed and excluded by professionals rather than being helped to manage their child's behaviour (Hudek, 2018; Spencer et al., 2019). This highlights a dual approach where parents unknown to services do not receive help and support, whereas those known to services attract increased surveillance (Children's Commissioner for England, 2019b; Maxwell et al., 2019). That is not to say that this is never warranted. Indeed, children are more susceptible to exploitation if a sibling or extended family member is involved in criminality (Turner et al., 2019). Clarke's (2019) comparative study of children known to either children's services or youth offending teams found that gang-associated children were twice as likely as non-gang-associated children to be living with offenders. There may also be an indirect effect, with children

actively seeking nurturing relationships and a sense of belonging from their wider gang 'family' (Andell, 2019; Clarke, 2019; Fitch, 2009).

In terms of the wider community, the contextual safeguarding approach re-focuses service provision to risk and harm outside the family environment. In doing so, Firmin and colleagues have noted the limited influence parents have on adolescent children, and

> While parents/carers are not in a position to change the nature of extra-familial contexts those who manage or deliver services in these spaces are . . . This approach would extend the concept of **'capacity to safeguard'** beyond families to those individuals and sectors who manage extra-familial settings in which young people encounter risk. (Firmin, 2017: 6 bold in original)

This includes mapping peers and places in order to direct safeguarding approaches to the wider community. This approach aligns with Harding's (2020) evolutionary typology as it acknowledges the different needs of local communities based on local contexts, structures, dynamics and actors. However, it is unclear the extent to which it includes models where drug dealing and child criminal exploitation are run by more loosely structured, entrepreneurial groups of family members (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021; Windle et al., 2020).

In terms of possible solutions, the recent independent review from Dame Black (2020) highlighted a need for targeted drug treatment and prevention. The Ministry of Justice (2019) has called for a collaborative, multiagency approach consisting of co-ordinated responses from the police, the National Crime Agency, Government departments, local government agencies, and voluntary and community sector organisations. What appears to be missing is the inclusion of parents in the development and delivery of possible solutions. This is a significant omission given that child criminal exploitation is a non-linear, dynamic problem arising from the interactions between multiple agents. According to complexity theory, potential solutions are more than simply the sum of the different parts (Phelps and Hase, 2002). Given the relationship between family-based factors and a child's susceptibility to exploitation, further understanding of parent perspectives is necessary in order to develop possible solutions. This is particularly pertinent as possible solutions to wicked problems are not inherently right or wrong and they must be implemented rather than tested (Rittel and Webber, 1973). This means that the effects and consequences of solutions, 'can matter a great deal to the people who are touched by those actions' (Rittel and Webber, 1973: 167), yet, thus far, parent voices have been missing. This highlights the need to consider the perspectives of all actors with the aim of strengthening protective factors within the family and reducing potential risk factors. This article presents findings from a wider study that examined how child criminal exploitation manifests in Wales. The study captured the voices of children with lived experience of exploitation, parents and professionals, regarding how children are targeted, groomed and exploited in county lines in Wales. This article explores the views of a sample of parents from England and Wales in relation to identifying the early warning signs of criminal exploitation, managing child disappearances, child disengagement from the family and accessing help and support.

## Method

This article presents findings from a larger study which consisted of semi-structured interviews with three main groups of participants: young people with lived experience of criminal exploitation, professionals working with young people who had been exploited and parents who had at least one child who had been criminally exploited. The aim of the study was to examine how children are targeted, groomed and exploited in child criminal exploitation and what services need to effectively identify, engage and safeguard these children. This article focuses upon findings from semi-structured interview findings from parents. Interviews lasted an average of 55 minutes, ranging from 20 to 80 minutes. Drawing on findings from a rapid review of what is known about identifying and responding to criminally exploited children (Maxwell et al., 2019), parents were asked about warning signs, formal and informal sources of help and support and what service responses were most effective.

### Data collection

Data collection was undertaken between February and May 2021. This time frame coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures, and as such, the recruitment plans had to be adapted to provide for remote engagement. Engaging parents and carers proved difficult for two main reasons. First, some parents refused to participate due to fears of repercussions to their children or themselves. Second, there was a need to adopt a 'right time framework' (Urry et al., 2015) where parents were contacted when they felt able to engage. Hence, several parents were too emotionally distressed to engage in an interview.

### Recruitment

In response to recruitment challenges, the study adopted a purposive approach. Organisations working with criminally exploited children and those at risk of exploitation were asked to disseminate details of the study to parents and carers. Organisations included children's services, education, housing, police and voluntary organisations. A call for parents and carers was also made via an e-newsletter sent to foster carers in Wales (although no foster carers came forward to participate) and via Twitter through professional networks. In addition, the study parameters were extended to include parents living in England in order to yield a larger potential sample. This resulted in a total sample of 15 parents of criminally exploited young people.

### Data analysis

All study participants gave informed consent and interviews were undertaken remotely either by telephone or video call using Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Cardiff School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed according to the principles of grounded theory (Strauss, 1987) using a coding framework initially devised

deductively, based on findings from the literature review. The coding framework was then subject to continuous refinement based on inductive coding from the interview data. Analysis was facilitated by NVivo software version 12. In accordance with ethical guidelines, pseudonyms were used for participants and information has been anonymised.

## Findings

Of the 15 parents, 13 were mothers and 2 were fathers. One mother and father were interviewed together. All parents had at least one child who had been criminally exploited, although several had two criminally exploited children. On average, their children were 15 years of age. Eight parents were living in either South or West Wales and seven were living in South East England. The Welsh and English samples differed in three main ways. First, the average number years of exploitation: parents living in Wales reported an average of 2.5 years, while parents living in England reported an average of 6 years. Second, a lower proportion of parents living in Wales were from an ethnic minority than their English counterparts. Third, parents living in Wales were four times more likely to be married to the child's father than parents living in England. Despite these differences, findings have been collated across both samples as they provide a comprehensive picture of exploitation across different family backgrounds and locations. Furthermore, this sample yielded insight into the nature of exploitation from initial grooming to longer term involvement, with four parents reporting that their child had been incarcerated at least once on the basis of their involvement in drug dealing activities. Combining samples also aided the preservation of anonymity which is an important consideration given the potential for repercussions to both parents and their children.

### *Early warning signs*

On reflection, all parents had noticed changes in their child's demeanour and peer groups, but at the time, this was contextualised through a developmental lens. Hence, pushing back against authority and general disengagement from school and parents was deemed to be a normal part of adolescence (Innovation Unit, 2019). This served to mask grooming, especially when parents were unaware of the existence of child criminal exploitation:

> we never had an image of what else could be happening . . . he's just being a teenager trying to fight his hormones but it was at that point where we could begin to see some little changes. (Lillian)

According to Celeste, these changes occurred in an 'almost a step-by-step process' beginning with behaviour changes, then disengagement with school, disengagement from family, disappearing from home and finally aggression and violence towards parents.

Several parents attributed initial behaviour changes as a response to parent separation, 'I thought [son] was struggling emotionally to cope with the family unit breaking up' (Kiara). This highlighted the impact of separation on children and their parents, as Elaine recalled,

> I was going through an extremely horrible breakup as well at the time and it was horrible for me, it was horrible for the kids. It really wasn't the best. So there was a lot of things all up in the air all at one time, and this was another thing on top of it and trying to keep everything together was quite a difficult task.

This aligns with previous research which highlighted the emotional nature of relationship breakdown alongside the need to re-define parenting roles and for the main carer to re-establish themselves as a single parent (Maxwell et al., 2020). Hence, some parents were managing relationship breakdown and its effects upon themselves and their children. This meant that while they were aware their child was behaving differently and changing peer groups, they rationalised this within the wider family context.

Findings also revealed that some parents struggled to understand why their previously sporty child was no longer attending after-school clubs or why their studious child was disengaging from school:

> there was a lot of calls to the school that he was misbehaving and it was very strange, because everything was fine prior to that, and it got really intense to the point where they basically were saying, they can't have him in the school any longer . . . I had fought, actually, for quite a bit because I was adamant that something wasn't right. (Celeste)

Where children had begun to disengage from family, this left parents aware that 'something wasn't right' but unable to find out more about the nature of the problem from their child. In many cases, the lack of tangible evidence of exploitation meant that parents did not understand what was happening:

> He'd go out the time he'd normally go out and he'd be in the time he had to be in. There wasn't anything new, because most of the time, they're doing it for nothing. (Moira)

The lack of visible indicators was also apparent for children from 'privileged' (Jay) backgrounds and where children were not perceived as wanting for anything, as Jake described,

> I mean, the thing with [son], he never went without, I would always work hard and he would have good clothes, he'd have, you know, I looked after him well in that respect. (Jake)

Even where parents observed their child with different phones or new belongings, they were given what they perceived to be plausible explanations, such as borrowing from or looking after items for friends. This was reinforced by a lack of knowledge about criminal exploitation and parental disbelief that this could happen to their child.

## Child disappearances

Following the step-by-step sequence of events, behaviour changes were often followed by the child going missing; according to Anita, missing episodes were 'the biggest clue of all'. This supports previous research findings (e.g. Bonning and Cleaver, 2020; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; Wigmore, 2018), yet, reiterating findings above, missing episodes

were often attributed to normal adolescent behaviour. Two main themes emerged. First, going missing was often associated with a specific trigger such as in response to a family argument and as such it did not alert suspicion. This is not surprising given that family relationship difficulties are one of the most common reasons a child goes missing (Hutchings et al., 2019). Second, in some cases, this was a gradual process rather than marked by a sudden disappearance. In these cases, the child began staying with friends:

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

Not knowing their child's location signalled a departure from normal teenage behaviours. Indeed, it tended to be the combination of frequent disappearances, behaviour changes, and disengagement from school that provided parents with tangible evidence that something was not right. This prompted parents to seek help from a range of statutory and non-statutory organisations. In most cases, this was regarding their child's disappearance, with some parents reporting over 30 missing episodes. Generally, parents received mixed responses from authorities as Anita described:

> Some have been as if you're the criminal so they would come in and question you in such a way or interrogate you in such a way that they're questioning why are they going missing, where are they, why don't you know who they're with, type of attitude. So, I've had those. Then I've also had some who have been quite understanding and quite sympathetic.

Parents believed that the duration and nature of the missing episode influenced service responses. Children missing for up to 24 hours were generally dismissed, as 'it's not classed as missing and I thought okay then, so I can't literally do anything' (Kiara). This highlighted the adaptive nature of exploitation as it has shifted from longer periods away from home to shorter periods, which are less likely to attract attention and service responses (Turner et al., 2019; Windle and Briggs, 2015). As noted, when children said they were staying with friends, this produced tension for parents as to whether to trust their child (Turner et al., 2019). Although where parents were suspicious and attempted to gain help, they felt that there was little they could do in terms of garnering help from services. This could be difficult for parents, especially where they did not know where their child was or when they would come home:

> he was gone for ten days, so we had no contact . . . even the police were at the next stage . . . they thought there was a chance he could have been killed, because there was no sign of him. So, that was just horrendous; when we thought he was dead. (Zoe)

Most parents said they repeatedly tried to contact their child, urging them to come home and check they were still alive. One parent spoke of 'befriending' the people exploiting their child as this was deemed to be the only way to obtain information:

I didn't really want to do it but I'm glad I did. They knew I didn't approve of what they did but again what is it, there were times where I couldn't get track and they would just say to me he is OK. It's not much consolation but at the time just knowing that they'd spoken to him, and they would get my child to somehow call me, get a message through, it's like a peace of mind. (Kiara)

So while parents deemed this to be a strategy used by exploiters to deter them from contacting the police or other services for help, they felt this was the only way they could maintain contact with their child.

### Disengagement from family

Rejection of the family emerged as a key component of the grooming process. Many parents reported that older youths had befriended their child, gained their trust and detached them from positive influences in their lives:

There's definitely a lot of mind games being played to convince your children that you don't want them, you don't want what's best for them, and you don't want them to get money and obviously they do, and they will look after them. So my son did tell me that, they kept saying that to him that we don't care about him anymore. (Anita)

Parents felt that children perceived their attempts at parenting and enforcing boundaries as evidence to support these messages. Consequently, parents felt that they had little influence especially as their children were 'brainwashed' by exploiters (Moira). Such brainwashing included constantly repeating the message that they were the child's 'new family'. When describing a conversation with their child's friends, Edward recalled them saying, '"Oh, he's our big brother". But you know, at the back of your mind he's not a big brother, they are dealing with a drug'. This suggested that exploiters capitalised on the child's 'impressionability, desire for connection, belonging, and adult approval' (Baidawi et al., 2020: 5). Therefore, most parents reported their children had been befriended by older youths, with only a minority having been forced into drug dealing through threats of violence or approached on the street by strangers.

### Accessing help and support

In support of previous findings (Children's Commissioner for England, 2019b), parents reported feeling frustrated as their concerns went unheard:

I was getting no assistance from the police, no assistance from social services . . . I was being investigated; my family was being investigated. It was horrible. (Amanda)

Consequently, some parents had sought informal forms of support, including extended family members or friends. For most, this provided much needed support but two exceptions emerged. First, some parents were reluctant to divulge what was happening, either through fear or shame (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015). This was

exacerbated where parents had been threatened or harassed by exploiters or subjected to aggression and violence from their child:

> How do you tell people my son punched me and this is what has happened? You can't tell them that can you. (Lillian)

Second, in a few cases parents reported having shared their distress with family members, close friends or parents of their child's peers only to find out later that these were the people exploiting their child:

> I didn't know any of this . . . I would be, you know, really upset, you know, crying because I don't know what's happening, 'I don't know what's wrong with him' . . . I was telling [them] everything and the whole time, he was working for [them]. (Grace)

This led to feelings of betrayal, uncertainty and helplessness as parents did not know where to go for help or who to trust. The vast majority of parents spoke about isolation, stigma and being held accountable for their children's actions from services and the wider community. This was often compounded when service responses served to castigate parents even when it was the parent who had asked for help, as Amanda summarised:

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

According to parents, lack of support was due to the limited knowledge and understanding of child criminal exploitation. This meant that their initial concerns around their child's disappearances failed to reach service thresholds. Where these concerns escalated, some parents expressed disbelief that this was not perceived with the same severity as child sexual abuse and exploitation despite their children being made to put 'drugs up their backside' (Anita). Some parents alluded to the notion that the current safeguarding system was ill-equipped to respond to extra-familial risk and abuse (Firmin, 2019). Many described feeling that they were blamed by professionals:

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

Rather than being helped and supported, parents felt they were judged and placed under surveillance. Hence, mixed responses emerged in relation to their perceptions of statutory and non-statutory services. Positive experiences were associated with having their voices heard, willingness to support the family and individual factors such as the personality, knowledge and approach of the professional, regardless of profession. While negative experiences were associated with being assessed and told how to parent their children,

> They just told me, 'Oh, you have to do this, this, this'. And I was doing like everything what they told me . . . then [son] started running away from the house if I ground him. (Ingrid)

As well as reinforcing child disengagement from the family, this also reflected a lack of understanding regarding the challenges associated with parenting adolescents as Moira further described, 'if he walked out the door, I can't go and pick him up and bring him back in'. This revealed a sense of desperation of how to protect their child, as well as other children in the family and themselves. Thus, some parents had requested that their child be moved to a place of safety under local authority care. While Celeste stated that she had asked children's services to remove her child for their safety (section 20 Children Act 1989), she noted that 'if I'm honest, I didn't even know what that [section 20] was, all I knew was that they were going to take him out of an area to keep him safe'. Yet this offered only temporary respite either because the child continued to be groomed in the placement and subsequently collected by the exploiter and taken to a trap house (a building that is used as a base to sell drugs), or as Amanda described, such placements were time limited:

> I think it was three months and then they said he couldn't stay there anymore; he would have to come back home. So it's like you can't win. They're saying you're neglecting your children and then when you hand them over to them, they don't want to take the responsibility. So you can't win, either way. (Amanda)

Amanda's quote highlighted the general feeling of not being able to 'win' as parents felt alone and disillusioned with services due to the lack of professional knowledge and suitable provision appropriate for child criminal exploitation:

> a lot of families are losing faith in the system and that's why they give up and they don't want to even talk about it. They just isolate themselves, it's embarrassing, it's a situation where you feel you're alone. You're alone in it . . ., It's a lonely situation and it's not nice, it's not a nice feeling. . . . I know that we'll never be the same again. It's horrible. (Amanda)

Therefore, many parents felt that there needed to be greater training and 'an overhaul of the system' (Becky) with parents included in service decisions that affected their child and family life. Such parent involvement would enable parents to have their voices heard in relation to their own personal family circumstances as well as sharing information that could be used to shape local and national responses to child criminal exploitation as seen in parental advocacy (Tobis et al., 2020). Perhaps, more importantly, it was noted that parents continued to love and care for their children throughout exploitation and beyond service provision. As Celeste noted, when a child is in trouble, 'who are you calling first? You're calling mum. You can't call them because they're not going to be there for you'.

## Discussion

This article addresses the current research gap relating to parent experiences of child criminal exploitation. Such perspectives are important given the widely accepted relevance of family and household factors in a child's susceptibility to exploitation. Study participants were by no means representative of parents of criminally exploited children but rather constituted a group who wanted to share their experiences to raise awareness of the difficulties and challenges they faced. Whereas research findings have shown that

some children can be criminally exploited by their parents (e.g. Maxwell and Wallace, 2021; Baidawi et al., 2020). The sample comprised parents from different local contexts, for example, child criminal exploitation relating to county lines is an emerging issue in some parts of Wales. Indeed, Cullen et al.'s (2020) locality review highlighted that locally based groups have been effective at preventing urban-based groups from establishing themselves in some areas of Wales. That is not to say that Wales does not have county lines or child criminal exploitation but rather local groups have embedded these business strategies and methods into their own models in order to retain control.

While supporting Harding's (2020) evolutionary typology in relation to the grooming of locally based children and variance across the duration of missing episodes, these findings challenged common notions of child criminal exploitation related to the commuting model and gang members travelling from cities to rural areas (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Labelled as a 'gang problem', with gangs being commonly seen as predominantly an issue in black communities, this has perpetuated stereotypes of young black and ethnic minority children from deprived areas, rather than increasing understanding of the nature of child criminal exploitation as a wider social and cultural issue that can affect any child (Andell, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2019). In doing so, there has been a tendency to perceive exploitation as a lifestyle choice with black children deemed to be 'less innocent and less vulnerable' (Davis and Marsh, 2020 : 256). Media portrayals have reinforced this adultification and child agency (Coomber and Moyle, 2018) appearing to propagate the myth that child criminal exploitation happens to other children who live in deprived communities. The consequences of this are twofold.

First, perceived as a lifestyle choice for city-dwelling children living in deprivation obscured parental identification of exploitation. This was particularly pertinent where there was no tangible evidence of exploitation such as expensive trainers and multiple mobile phones. In addition to providing for their children, parents perceived their children to be loved and cared for. Hence, the possibility that their child was enticed into drug dealing activities by the prospect of money as well as affection and the promise of a new family was difficult for parents to comprehend. In support of Robinson et al. (2019), this demonstrated that some children were enticed by financial gains and status, despite being from affluent backgrounds and academically able. It also suggested that following this initial enticement, children were actively encouraged to disengage from their family as a means of isolating them from the family as a protective factor.

Second, as drug dealing models evolve (Harding, 2020) and networks self-organise to avoid detection from authorities, there has been a shift towards children who are unknown to authorities. This represented a distinct shift away from the commuting model (Coomber and Moyle, 2019) towards the exploitation of children from the local area, affluent backgrounds and across genders. These 'ghost children' (Bowen-Thomas, 2021, personal communication) are difficult to identify unless they are identified by parents or professionals such as school staff. This makes stereotypical notions of drug dealing, gangs and children crossing county lines at odds with detection. Indeed, most parents failed to consider child criminal exploitation as a potential explanation for their child's changing behaviour, disappearances and disengagement.

The findings also highlighted that the likelihood of detection was impeded by the age at which children were targeted. Viewed through a developmental lens, many of the early

warning signs resonated with normal adolescence where children push back against their parents and those in authority while also spending increased time with their peers. So while child disappearances have been identified as a crucial warning sign of exploitation (Bonning and Cleaver, 2020; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015; Wigmore, 2018), parents perceived early indicators as a normal part of adolescence. In contrast to other research findings that have suggested parents fail to report children missing as they may turn a blind eye or welcome the financial support (Bonning and Cleaver, 2020), the parents interviewed for this study suggested that disappearances were only reported when their child's whereabouts was unknown and when either the frequency or duration increased. Once reported, a range of responses were received with some parents feeling that they were blamed and scrutinised (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015) while others received no help or support. This revealed tension between local authority powers to intervene where a child's needs are greater than the family can support alone (Children Act, 1989) and actual receipt of help and support. While Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2018) has been amended to include extrafamilial harm, parents reported that they were the ones who were placed under surveillance even when they had requested help. That is not to say that family members were not the perpetrators of exploitation. In this study, a few parents reported that children had been exploited by extended family members, their friends and the parents of the child's friends. In these instances, parents expressed shock and disbelief. Indeed, the main theme was of helplessness, isolation and desperation as parents struggled to support their child, even when they were the victims of violence and harassment from either the exploiters or their child. There was a sense that most parents were struggling to keep their child and themselves safe with some requesting their child be removed and placed somewhere safe. Yet this only offered temporary respite.

Consideration of parent perspectives is an important contribution to what is known about child criminal exploitation as parents are uniquely placed to offer insight into the process from grooming through to entrenchment within exploitative relationships. Rather than refocusing extrafamilial safeguarding away from parents, their insight can help to identify appropriate preventive strategies and key indicators for early help that are appropriate for the drug dealing model in that particular geographical area or drug dealing network. This is important as networks are dynamic, adaptive and emergent (Stevens and Cox, 2008). This means that drug dealing networks operate differently according to the local context, actors and relationships. Moreover, safeguarding approaches will affect the manner in which these networks evolve in order to survive. Rather than adopting a uniform approach to child exploitation, safeguarding approaches must be able to quickly identify changing drug dealing models. They must also be adept at problem-solving in order to understand the wider influences on a child's vulnerability and the range of perpetrators of exploitation. Parents are ideally placed to contribute knowledge and support the development of safeguarding strategies. Perhaps more significantly, parents are living with exploitation 24 hours a day, often for many years, yet they are not having their voices heard in welfare decisions or service responses.

## Funding

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