Understanding Child Criminal Exploitation in Scotland:

A Scoping Review

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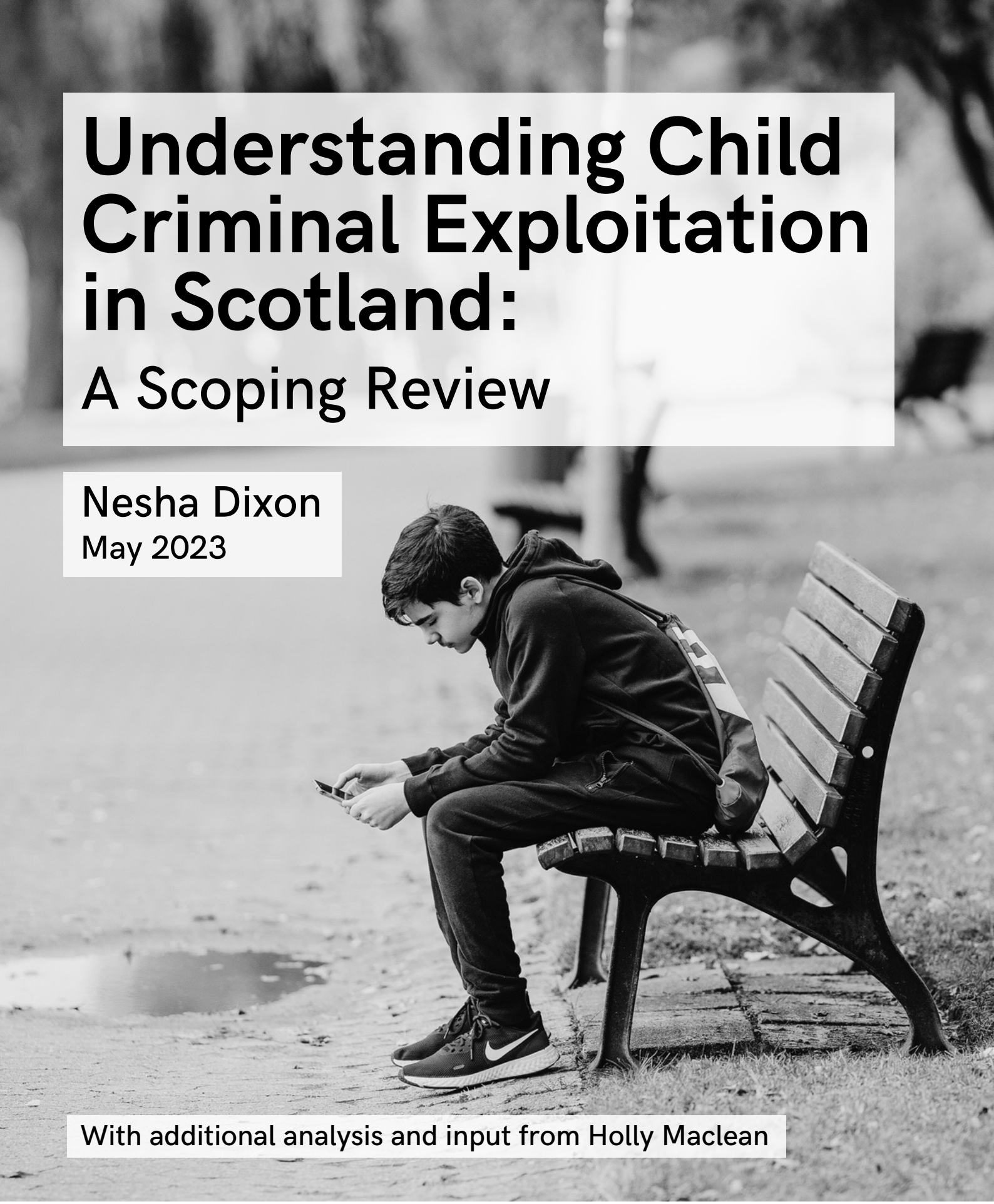

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Introduction

Over the past few years the issue of child criminal exploitation (CCE) has been consistently highlighted to CYCJ by many professionals. However, issues, definitions and practices appear to vary by sector and geographical location. Since COVID-19, the issue of CCE has intensified and the number of children being exploited in this way anecdotally appears to have increased. This research project is designed to identify the evidence base and professional perspectives that currently exist in relation to CCE in Scotland by conducting a scoping review to inform potential future research and service/policy development. This research has been commissioned by CYCJ, Action for Children and the Scottish Government.

There are four main stages to this scoping review:

1) A **literature review** to gain an understanding of what is currently known about CCE in Scotland and the UK.
2) Collation of existing **multi-agency data** in relation to CCE across Scotland to assess the nature, scale and extent of the issue and to identify evidence and knowledge gaps.
3) **Interviews with professionals** in Scotland who have a role in policy or practice in relation to CCE, or who work with children and young people who may be at risk of CCE, to explore how CCE is understood, including the definitions used, attitudes, professional perspectives and practice concerns.
4) A **survey of residential care staff**, an additional component of this scoping review, which is linked to The Promise and their aim of preventing the criminalisation of looked after children. Research suggests that children in residential care can be at increased risk of criminal exploitation and residential care workers are key to providing an insight into this. The interview stage was therefore converted into a survey for residential care staff to maximise responses from this sector.

This project received ethical approval from the School of Social Work & Social Policy's Ethics Committee at the University of Strathclyde. The findings of this research will be used to inform future research and inform the development of policies and practices to tackle CCE in Scotland.

Literature Review

Aim

The aim of this literature review is to gain an understanding of child criminal exploitation (CCE). Literature specifically relating to Scotland has been highlighted throughout the review, although it was essential to also draw upon literature from across the UK to maximise our understanding of this complex issue.

Literature Search and Selection Process

Although this literature review is not systematic in nature and does not offer an exhaustive review of all literature on the topic of child criminal exploitation (CCE), a transparent search strategy was adopted and has been outlined in Appendix A. Due to the scarcity of academic literature published on the topic of CCE in the UK, a broad search strategy was utilised to capture both academic literature and grey literature, such as policy documents and organisational reports that can provide wider contextual information on this topic.

Findings

What is Child Criminal Exploitation?

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) is a complex form of child abuse (ECPAT UK & Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021; HM Government, 2021a; Skills for Care and Development, 2022). In the absence of a statutory definition of CCE, the UK government provide the following definition in their 'Serious Violence Strategy': "*Child Criminal Exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 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*" (HM Government, 2018a, p. 48).

The imbalance of power plays a key role in these exploitative relationships and can extend to age, gender, cognitive ability, physical strength, status and economic resources (Local Government Association, 2021; Knowsley Safeguarding Children Board, 2017). Exploiters frequently identify material and non-material goods that children need or want (e.g. clothes, money, gifts, drugs, alcohol, food, accommodation, affection, status, protection, friendship,

sense of belonging, etc.) and use these to entice them into performing criminal tasks in exchange (Home Office, 2018; Knowsley Safeguarding Children Board, 2017; The Children's Society, Victim Support & National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). These are often referred to as "pull factors". Often these exchanges only occur at the initial stages to develop the exploitative relationship, with exploiters later using more menacing tactics to maintain control over the victim. These complex grooming, recruitment and control methods used by exploiters have been reviewed in more detail in a later section. It should be noted that receipt of these items does not diminish a child's status as a victim of exploitation (Home Office, 2018). Often they are not aware that they are being exploited and believe they have autonomy over their situation, giving the illusion that they consent, whereas in reality it is not possible for a child to consent to their own exploitation regardless of their appearance, speech or body language (Local Government Association, 2021; Knowsley Safeguarding Children Board, 2017; Skills for Care and Development, 2022; The Children's Society, 2022a).

CCE encompasses many crimes including the transportation and dealing of drugs (e.g. county lines), cannabis cultivation, financial exploitation and acquisitive crimes (e.g. begging, theft, burglary, shoplifting, pickpocketing, etc.). These different types of CCE have been expanded on in a later section. Victims of CCE may be required to commit multiple types of offences and may also experience multiple forms of exploitation, for example child sexual exploitation (CSE) (Home Office, 2018).

Legislation

As there is no statutory definition of CCE, it is not explicitly listed as a form of exploitation in the legislation. There have been attempts to rectify this issue through bills submitted to parliament but these have been unsuccessful to date (e.g. Barnardo's, 2021; UK Parliament, 2022). Despite this, CCE falls within the legislation concerning modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation.

Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015

The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 defines the offence of human trafficking as an individual taking a 'relevant action' (i.e. recruit, transport, receive, exchange or transfer the control of another person, or arranges or facilitates any of these actions), with the view to exploiting another person. This extends to whether the individual intends to exploit the person themselves or knows, or ought to know, that the person is likely to be exploited. The distance travelled and whether the victim provided consent or not is irrelevant to determining whether an offence took place. Exploitation, within this legislation, refers to an

individual being trafficked for the purpose of slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour; prostitution and sexual exploitation; removal of organs; or securing services and benefits. Based on the legislative definitions for these types of exploitation, CCE can fall under the following:

> **Slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour**, which refers to an individual holding another person in slavery or servitude, or where an individual requires another person to perform forced or compulsory labour, and the individual knows or ought to know that this is the case.
>
> **Securing services and benefits**, which refers to an individual being forced, threatened or deceived into providing services of any kind, providing another person with benefits of any kind or enabling another person to acquire benefits of any kind. This also refers to any services and benefits secured through using or attempting to use a child, vulnerable adult or an individual who would likely refuse to be used for this purpose.

Under this legislation, individuals found guilty of these offences on indictment can receive up to life imprisonment. Additionally, any offences committed against a child is considered an aggravating factor. Between 2016 and 2021, Scotland had eight prosecutions for modern slavery offences involving a child, although none resulted in a conviction (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

Of particular relevance to CCE is ensuring that victims are not prosecuted for offences they have committed as a result of being trafficked or exploited. Section 8 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 states that in these instances, the Lord Advocate must issue and publish instructions for the prosecutor outlining what factors should be taken into account and what steps should be taken when deciding whether to prosecute the individual. When considering potential child victims, the Lord Advocate instructs the following: *"Where there is sufficient evidence that a child aged 17 or under has committed an offence and there is credible and reliable information to support the fact that the child; 1) is a victim of human trafficking or exploitation; and 2) the offending took place in the course of or as a consequence of being the victim of human trafficking or exploitation, then there is a strong presumption against prosecution of that child for that offence"* (Crown Office & Procurator Fiscal Service, 2021). Guidance suggests that prosecutors should consult the National Lead Prosecutor for Human Trafficking and Exploitation who will make the final decision on whether the test in the Lord Advocate's instructions has been satisfied (Scottish Government, 2022a).

Section 38 of the legislation outlines that there is a statutory obligation for public authorities to notify Police Scotland about potential victims of human trafficking, exploitation or slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour. This is commonly referred to as a 'Duty to Notify'. The purpose of this is to gain a more accurate picture of the extent of human trafficking and exploitation in Scotland, identify and support victims, identify and disrupt perpetrators and tackle any issues that encourage trafficking (Scottish Government, 2020a). Further to this, potential victims of human trafficking and exploitation are also referred through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which is a framework developed by the Home Office to identify and support potential victims. The NRM has been discussed in more detail in the following section.

Modern Slavery Act (2015)

The relevant legislation that encompasses CCE in England and Wales is known as the Modern Slavery Act 2015. This is very similar to the Scottish legislation, outlining the same main offences of slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour, human trafficking and exploitation, with these offences also holding a sentence of up to life imprisonment for those convicted on indictment. Additionally, the Modern Slavery Act (2015) also considers it an offence if an individual intends to commit an offence of human trafficking, including aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring an offence. If convicted of this particular offence on indictment, they can be sentenced to up to 10 years imprisonment, however if kidnapping or false imprisonment is involved, this sentence can be increased to up to life imprisonment. Overall, prosecutions under the Modern Slavery Act (2015) are very low, with a steady decline in the number of prosecutions and convictions over the years. For example, CPS data obtained for a report exploring child trafficking in the UK showed that there were 36 prosecutions and 20 convictions in 2017/2018, decreasing to 33 and 21 in 2018/2019, 27 and 15 in 2019/2020 and only 2 prosecutions and 1 conviction in 2020/2021 (ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021).

The Modern Slavery Act (2015) specifically outlines a statutory defence for victims of modern slavery, human trafficking or exploitation who have committed an offence. This is commonly known as the 'Section 45 Defence'. When considering children, the legislation states that an individual is not guilty of a criminal act if: a) the person is under the age of 18 at the time of the offence; b) they commit the act as a direct consequence of being, or having been, a victim of slavery or exploitation; and c) a reasonable person in the same situation and having the individual's relevant characteristics (i.e. age, sex, physical illness, mental illness or disability) would have committed the act. Under Schedule 4, however, there are a number of offences

listed where the Section 45 defence cannot be raised. These offences include kidnapping, manslaughter, murder, sexual offences and any modern slavery or human trafficking offence. The full list of offences can be found here.

Slightly different to Scottish legislation, Section 52 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 outlines a statutory duty of public authorities (e.g. police service, National Crime Agencies, local authorities, etc.) to notify the secretary of state (i.e. Home Office). This notification is completed through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) process, which has been outlined in the following section. Some sections of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 extend to Scotland, including Part 4 which relates to an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner being appointed in the UK to encourage good practice in the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of slavery and human trafficking offences and the identification of victims of these offences. Other parts of the legislation that extend to Scotland are not particularly relevant to the topic of CCE, such as maritime enforcement (Part 3, Section 36, Section 38, Section 39 and Schedule 2), immigration rules for overseas domestic workers (Part 5, Section 53) and duties imposed on commercial organisations to have a transparent supply chain (Part 6).

The National Referral Mechanism

When a child has been identified as a victim, or a potential victim, of CCE, a first responder from an approved organisation is required to complete an online referral to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The NRM is a framework developed by the Home Office to identify and support victims of modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation (Home Office, 2022a). In Scotland, approved first responders include the police, UK Visa and Immigration, Border Force, Immigration Enforcement, Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), local authorities, Salvation Army, Migrant Help and Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance (TARA). Consent is not required to refer children into the NRM (Home Office, 2022b).

Once a referral has been submitted, it is received by a team of decision makers in the Home Office, known as the Single Competent Authority (SCA). Upon receipt, the SCA will evaluate the information in the referral and will make a ‘reasonable grounds’ decision within five days (i.e. whether there are reasonable grounds to believe the individual could be a victim) (Home Office, 2022b; Scottish Government, 2021a). If a positive decision is made, the individual is granted a ‘recovery period’ of at least 45 days to allow time for them to access specialised support, speak with police, etc., while their case is considered. During this time, the SCA gather further information to make a ‘conclusive grounds’ decision (i.e. whether there are conclusive grounds to believe that the individual has been a victim of modern slavery, human

trafficking or exploitation) (Scottish Government, 2021a). A positive conclusive grounds decision results in the individual officially being recognised as a victim by the state.

There has been some scrutiny around the benefits of the NRM, specifically for victims of CCE (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). Unlike adult victims, who receive support directly through the NRM process, support for children is provided by local authorities through the routine multi-agency child protection procedures (Scottish Government, 2021a). The lack of this additional support for children through the NRM has led to some practitioners describing the NRM process for children as a 'form filling exercise' (The Children's Society, 2019a). As this research was conducted with professionals in England and Wales, it is unknown whether this viewpoint is shared by professionals in Scotland. Other criticisms of the NRM include the significant delays in decision making due to the number of referrals received outweighing the resource capacity of the SCA (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; The Children's Society, 2019a). Also, a number of changes are being implemented by the Home Office to make the NRM process more efficient and sustainable in the long-term (Home Office, 2022c). For example, the SCA recruited more decision makers in 2021 to improve the decision-making timescales (Home Office, 2022d). Furthermore, a pilot programme was launched in ten areas of the UK during 2021 to test an alternative method of decision making for child victims, with local authorities making the decisions rather than the SCA (Home Office, 2022c). The aim of this approach is to ensure that decisions about whether a child is a victim of modern slavery, human trafficking or exploitation are made by agencies directly involved in their safeguarding (i.e. local authority, health, police, etc.) and to ensure the support and police response aligns with these decisions. Glasgow City Council is the only Scottish local authority included in the pilot. The results of the pilot have not yet been published.

The SCA make their decisions solely on the information provided to them. The SCA are not an investigative agency and any investigation into offences of modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation are conducted by the police. Upon receipt of an NRM referral, the SCA notifies the relevant police force that covers the area where the offence(s) took place or if the offence(s) occurred outside of the UK, the police force where the victim resides (Scottish Government, 2021a). NRM decisions are also based on the 'balance of probabilities', rather than the criminal justice system threshold of 'beyond reasonable doubt' (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). Roundtable discussions with professionals from strategic and operational roles relating to CCE noted that NRM decisions are often deemed insufficient in court and criminal investigations, with some experiencing the dismissal of conclusive grounds decisions during court proceedings (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). Furthermore, the court of appeal case *R vs BRECANI*, involving a 17-year-old male who had been found guilty of

possession with intent to supply class A drugs despite receiving a positive conclusive grounds decision from the NRM, ruled that NRM decisions were not admissible in court as expert evidence due to SCA decision makers not meeting the level of expertise required, upholding the initial guilty verdict (British and Irish Legal Information Institute, 2021). In some instances the COPFS or CPS request the conclusive grounds decision prior to making a charging decision (Scottish Government, 2022a), which practitioners have noted can lead to significant delays in court cases and potential victims of CCE being left in limbo due to lengthy decision-making timescales within the SCA (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022).

Prevalence of Child Criminal Exploitation

NRM Data

The NRM is currently the best measure of the prevalence of CCE in the UK, although the figures reported are likely to be a significant underestimation due to the overall hidden and complex nature of the exploitation (Office for National Statistics, 2022; Scottish Government, 2022a). In 2021, 5,468 potential child victims of modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation were reported to the NRM, the highest numbers since 2009, with 96% of children receiving a positive conclusive grounds decision (Home Office, 2022b). The majority of children were UK nationals, male (79%) and the most common form of exploitation was CCE (49%). The Home Office noted that the increase in CCE was likely attributable to an increase in the identification of child victims being exploited through the 'county lines' drug distribution model. This type of CCE has been discussed further in the following section. Only 3% of both adult and child NRM referrals went to Police Scotland for investigation in 2021 compared to 90% going to English police forces (Home Office, 2022b). It is unknown whether this disparity is a reflection of fewer cases in Scotland or lower levels of identification and subsequently less referrals being made. A working group has therefore been established to examine this issue (Scottish Government, 2022a). Although the 2022 NRM statistics have not yet been published for the final quarter, similar patterns are emerging from the data published so far. Between January and September, 5,085 children were referred to the NRM, demonstrating a consistent yearly increase in the number of referrals (Home Office, 2022d; 2022e; 2022f). Once again, the majority of child victims were male (80%) and victims of criminal exploitation (43%).

Modern Slavery Helpline Data

Figures from the Modern Slavery and Exploitation helpline, run by the anti-slavery charity Unseen, also provides some insight into the pattern of CCE in the UK. In 2021, 194 child victims were reported to the helpline, of which 40 were potential victims of criminal exploitation (Unseen, 2021). Of these children, 22 were male, 10 were female and 8 were of unknown

gender. The most common form of CCE was drugs related (26), although contextual information was not provided, followed by forced begging (5).

Types of Child Criminal Exploitation

There are various types of crimes that children are exploited to commit. Those which are known have been outlined below. The majority of research relating to CCE in the UK focuses on county lines, therefore a greater level of detail has been provided on this type of CCE compared to other types of CCE.

County Lines

The most common form of CCE in the UK is the drug distribution model known as 'County Lines' (Home Office, 2022g). County lines is defined by the UK government as *"a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons"* (HM Government, 2018a, p. 48). Some professionals expressed that the term "county lines" itself can be unhelpful as it does not highlight the crime or exploitation involved, limiting understanding for professionals or members of the public who may not be familiar with the full definition (Olver & Cockbain, 2021). Despite this, county lines has been described as "*the most violent and exploitative distribution model yet seen"* in the drug market (HM Government, 2021b, p. 22), with individuals exploited through this model being at significant risk of severe physical and sexual violence (HM Government, 2018a).

The National County Line Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC) was established within the National Crime Agency to assist with tackling the issue of county lines (HM Government, 2018a). The NCLCC act as a central point to gather intelligence on county lines activity across the UK, share information with relevant police forces, support operational policing and improve the understanding of county lines. Based on the information gathered by the NCLCC, over 2000 deal line numbers linked to approximately 1000 organised crime groups (OCGs) have been identified as active in the UK (National Crime Agency, 2019a). These OCGs are based in urban areas to facilitate the supply of class A drugs, primarily crack cocaine and heroin, to smaller towns and rural areas across the UK. An individual county line can profit over £800,000 per year. The majority of county lines originate from the Metropolitan (15%), West Midlands (9%) and Merseyside (7%) police force areas, although a further 23 police forces report county lines originating from their areas (National Crime Agency, 2019a). The NCLCC have also

noted county lines running to Scotland from the main originating areas (HM Government, 2021b). The Rescue and Response county lines project, a support service for children and young people being exploited through county lines in London, noted that it was not always gangs and OCGs that were involved in the running of county lines and exploitation of children, with some independent dealers setting up their own lines (Rescue and Response, 2020). However, there is a lack of data to confirm this.

The structure of county lines has been described by professionals and individuals involved in county lines activity as being a three-tiered system (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Coomber & Moyle, 2018). At the bottom of the hierarchy are “Runners” or “Youngers”, who are predominantly children and young people tasked with carrying out the high risk and low reward role of preparing, bagging, transporting and dealing drugs, collecting drug debts from vulnerable drug users and transporting large amounts of cash and weapons. The second tier are known as “Sitters” or “Elders”, who act as middle managers, oversee the drug supply, often manage the deal line and recruit and direct the “runners”. These are frequently ‘runners’ who have been promoted in their position, given more responsibility but remain under the direction of the head perpetrators. The head perpetrators are referred to as the “Top Boys”, who run the lines but remain relatively distant from the hands-on activity (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Coomber & Moyle, 2018). Police officers of various ranks have drawn similarities between the county lines business model and that of legitimate businesses, with both being motivated by generating profit, adapting supply methods according to demand, using marketing strategies when taking over new areas and selling consumer lists if leaving an area (Spicer, 2019).

As previously mentioned, a key component of the county lines business model is the recruitment and exploitation of children to act as “runners” (HM Government, 2021b; Ministry of Justice, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Robinson, McLean & Densley, 2019; Spicer, 2019; Stone, 2018). This strategy reduces the apprehension rate of the head perpetrators and ensures profit margins are maximised as they do not need to pay them or pay them minimal amounts. These children are forced to transport large amounts of drugs, cash and weapons long distances to suburban and rural areas. This is known as “going country”. Children are often forced to conceal drugs within their bodies, either anally or vaginally, in order to transport them without detection. This dangerous process is referred to as “plugging”. Interviews conducted to explore county lines drug distribution in Merseyside and Glasgow included one child from Liverpool who was sent to Cardiff for two weeks to sell cocaine and heroin which he had concealed internally (Robinson et al., 2019). He was promised £1000 per week but he did not receive this money and was later arrested by police. Another child recalled a similar scenario, where he was sent to various areas across the country but was not paid, only

provided with food, clothes and cannabis. Train is the most common method of transport for children exploited through county lines due to the distances they are required travelled and being too young to drive (National Crime Agency, 2019a). Other methods of transport used are cars, buses and taxis. Through facilitating this travel with the intent to exploit the child, perpetrators are committing an offence of human trafficking according to the legislation (Home Office, 2022g).

Some children are groomed, coerced and entrapped into county lines activity, whereas other children are aware of the illegality of this activity but engage for the financial status and reward (National Crime Agency, 2019a). For example many young people interviewed stated they could not earn the same money through a legitimate job at their age (Robinson et al., 2019). However, they do not have the same capacity as adults to weigh up the significant risks associated with this criminal activity and the perceived rewards and therefore, should be viewed as victims of exploitation regardless.

The majority of individuals associated with county lines are males (91%) (National Crime Agency, 2019a). In 2021, 2,053 NRM referrals related to individuals being exploited through county lines, which was an increase of 23% from the previous year (Home Office, 2022b). The majority of these individuals were male children (76%) and UK nationals. Similar patterns have been noted from the NRM data for 2022 so far, with 1696 NRM referrals between January and September 2022 being linked to county lines (Home Office, 2022d; 2022e; 2022f). Once again, the majority of these victims are male children (75%). Despite these figures, it is believed that the NRM data is an underrepresentation of the true number of victims being exploited through county lines.

The most common recruitment method for county lines is debt bondage. This can occur when a child purchases drugs from a drug dealer on a ‘buy now and pay later’ scheme, leading to a drug debt accumulating (National Crime Agency, 2019a; Ofsted, 2018: Robinson et al., 2019). They are then entrapped and forced to deal drugs to pay this debt off. Another method of debt bondage used by exploiters is staging a robbery of a child once they have been recruited as a “runner” (Children’s Commissioner, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Ofsted, 2018; The Children’s Society, 2019a; The Children’s Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs’ Council, 2018). The child is then held accountable for the loss of drugs and/or money and they are once again entrapped and forced to run drugs for free to pay this perceived debt back. Other methods used to recruit and control victims of CCE have been described in detail in a later section.

Due to the tasks these children have to complete, they face a significant risk of harm (e.g. threats, physical violence, sexual violence, etc.) not only from rival gangs and county lines but also from their exploiters if they were to lose the drugs, money or phone line through being robbed or arrested (Andell & Pitts, 2018; HM Government, 2021b; National Crime Agency, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council Review, 2018). The analysis of 21 cases across 17 areas of England involving children who had died or experienced serious harm after being drawn into criminal exploitation found that 12 of these children were strongly suspected of being linked to county lines and bladed weapons were involved in the majority of these cases (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). Children exploited through county lines can be exposed to firearms also, with 118 county lines reported as having links to firearms (National Crime Agency, 2019a). Full details of the harm and risks experienced by victims of CCE has been discussed in more detail in a later section.

The county lines model also involves exploiters taking over the properties of vulnerable people (e.g. individuals with disabilities, mental health issues, sex workers and drug users) to act as a base for preparing, storing and dealing drugs (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Home Office, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Jaensch & South, 2018; Macdonald et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2019). This is known as "cuckooing". The various types of cuckooing have been described in Table 1 (Spicer, Moyle & Coomber, 2020). Children will frequently go missing as a result of county lines exploitation and are forced to spend days and weeks away from home in these cuckooed properties (The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). One child interviewed about their experiences of being involved in county lines related gangs in London described being placed in a house on their own where they had to wait at the door, deal drugs and take money (Windle & Briggs, 2015). Another reported going missing and travelling to other areas of the UK for two weeks to sell crack cocaine. During this time, children are often exposed to violence being used against the vulnerable cuckooed adults, along with witnessing class A drug use and overdoses (Macdonald et al., 2022). Police officers from Southern England who were interviewed in relation to county lines reported missing children being brought to their area but put into local school uniforms to avoid detection by the police (Spicer, 2019). In other instances, exploiters have adapted to recruiting children local to the importing area to avoid detection, reduce the likelihood of children being reported missing and subsequently being identified as a victim of exploitation (National Crime Agency, 2019a; The Children's Society, 2019a).

Research comparing differences between county lines and non-county lines gang related drug offending in Essex between 2015 and 2016 found that county lines offenders were more likely to be younger, male, Black, travel further to offend, have warning markers for firearms,

weapons and being violent, have their first arrest and conviction at a younger age, commit less but more harmful offences, have larger criminal networks, be more likely to die and be less likely to abuse substances or suffer ill mental health compared to non-county lines drug gangs offending (Hallworth, 2016). The NCLCC's current strategy is to disrupt county lines activity by intercepting rail network distribution methods and online activity associated with county lines, along with conducting investigations and enforcement activity against specific perpetrators (HM Government, 2021b). So far, the NCLCC report a decrease in the number of active county lines per month from 800 to 1100 in 2019/2020 to 600 in 2020/2021.

County Lines in Scotland. When focusing on Scotland, the NCLCC has noted county lines running from the primary originating areas (i.e. West Midlands, Merseyside and London) into Scotland for which joint operations have been conducted with Police Scotland (HM Government, 2021b). Criminal exploitation through drug activity has also been identified as a significant threat theme in the most recent Scottish Multi-Agency Strategic Threat Assessment (SMASTA) (Scottish Crime Campus, 2022). Additionally, the SMASTA noted that the north of Scotland appears to be disproportionately impacted by county lines, with 75% of active county lines in Aberdeenshire and Moray originating from Merseyside. This primarily involves the dealing of heroin and crack cocaine. This was somewhat supported through research involving interviews with 12 young people involved in county-lines related gangs in London, with one child explaining that they would travel to Scotland, specifically Aberdeen, due to there being a demand for class A drugs (Windle & Briggs, 2015).

Research specifically exploring drug distribution and county lines in Scotland, through interviews with those involved in serious organised crime and practitioners aiming to tackle this issue, found that there were two main strands of drug distribution in Scotland (Holligan, McLean & McHugh, 2020). One strand is focused on the West Coast and one is focused on the remainder of Scotland. It was also noted that county lines in Scotland differed from England. English county lines were described as OCGs dealing drugs within established areas of their own city and then recruiting "runners" to also distribute drugs to other towns and rural areas, whereas Scottish OCGs either relocated from Glasgow to suburban and rural areas to avoid competition and turf wars or independent rural drug dealers would re-establish connections with Glasgow or West coast-based serious organised crime groups (SOCGs) to create a steady drug supply and benefit from the violence and reputation that the OCG can provide. The latter type of Scottish county line often involved re-establishing some form of kinship or familial connection in the main city, although the same structural hierarchy was maintained with children exploited as "runners" (Holligan et al., 2020). It was also noted that OCGs from England appeared to be extending their drug distribution lines to Scotland,

bypassing Glasgow and the West Coast but targeting rural areas where employment levels are low, such as Peterhead and Fraserburgh. Similar research exploring county lines and CCE in Glasgow and Merseyside found that Merseyside practitioners were more aware of the issues around county lines practices, although the Scottish sample were still aware that county lines activity was occurring (Robinson et al., 2019). It was also highlighted that English county line strategies were to target seaside towns and tourist areas, whereas Scottish county lines targeted more isolated and rural areas due to there being reduced police presence and the ability to easily take over from local dealers. Both studies highlighted that rivalries with competing lines often led to gang related violence emerging (Holligan et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019).

Police Scotland have Divisional County Lines Champions who work with analysts to manage and circulate intelligence about county lines and identify trends to inform proactive responses to tackle this issue (Scottish Government, 2022a). Police Scotland also drive intensification periods of enforcement and disruption to tackle human trafficking and exploitation,.

Table 1 - *Terminology associated with county lines.*

Term	Meaning
Going Country	Sending children and young people out to suburban and rural areas to supply drugs i.e. county lines.
Out There / Trappin / Cunch	Alternative terms for county lines activity
Runner	Individuals recruited to move drugs, money and weapons from one location to another
Trap house	Property used to prepare, store and sell drugs. These properties often belong to exploited vulnerable adults.
In the Bando	Abandoned property where drugs are prepared, stored and sold
Cuckooing	Property of vulnerable adults (e.g. drug users) being taken over by gangs or OCGs to facilitate drug supply. Types of cuckooing: • **Parasitic nest invading** – vulnerable adult targeted, groomed and coerced into their property being used. • **Quasi-cuckooing** – initially willing for their home to be used due to the exploiters funding their drug use, however they soon become aware of the realities and risks associated with being cuckooed. Threats and violence often used by exploiters to continue the cuckooing. • **Coupling** - males will enter a sexual relationship with vulnerable female residents and use the power of the relationship to take over the property.
Strapping / On Tick	Process of buying drugs and paying later.
Plugging / Bottling / Banking	Drugs concealed internally (e.g. vaginally, rectally, orally) for the purpose of transportation
Exporting region / Home bases	Area where the county lines activity originates from

Importing region / County bases	Area that receive drugs supplied through county lines activity
Ching	Cut cocaine
Ammo	Firearms ammunition
Coupling	Male dealers grooming females into entering sexual relationships in order to store illegal items in their property (e.g. drugs, money, weapons, etc.)
Blurred Lines	Where gangs and OCGs stop exploiting certain children and young people to prevent detection by the police OR Targeting children in the importing locations instead of exporting locations
Elders	Middle tier individuals in the county lines hierarchy who supervise the drug distribution activities
Youngers	Lower tier individuals in the county lines hierarchy who transport the drugs (i.e. runners)
Clean Skins	Children and young people without a police record

(Andell & Pitts, 2018; Caluori et al., 2020; Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; Holligan et al., 2020; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Local Government Association, 2021; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Ofsted, 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Spicer, Moyle & Coomber, 2020; The Children's Society, 2022a; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018)

Forced Cannabis Cultivation

Albanian nationals are increasingly being exploited through forced cannabis cultivation in England and Wales, whilst Vietnamese nationals are the most predominant victims in Scotland (National Crime Agency, 2019b). These victims are brought to the UK illegally after being promised a better life. The traffickers will then declare the victim is indebted to them due to the cost of travel, for which they will then be forced to cultivate cannabis to pay off this debt (National Crime Agency, 2019b). Victims are often held in a property against their will and required to water and tend to cannabis plants. Additional vulnerabilities that these victims experience include the language barrier, a fear of authorities due to their immigration status and some victims are under the age of 18 years old (National Crime Agency, 2019b). Practitioners and policy makers who work with trafficked and unaccompanied children noted a significant number of Vietnamese children going missing from care and being rediscovered in cannabis factories (ECPAT UK & Missing People, 2016).

The Scottish Government commissioned research into child trafficking in Scotland, which included the analysis of case files involving 37 unaccompanied children of non-UK nationality who were being supported by local authorities or the Scottish Guardianship service (Scottish Government, 2020b). Of these 37 cases, 10 involved victims of CCE through forced cannabis cultivation. The Scottish Guardianship Service supports unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and trafficked children who have arrived in Scotland without parental guardians (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Between 2019 and 2022, this service referred 147

children to the NRM, for which 36% related to victims exploited through forced cannabis cultivation.

Forced Begging or Busking

Children can be criminally exploited through forced begging or busking. This can involve a highly organised crime groups (OCGs) trafficking a number of individuals to particular locations to beg or busk, where victims will then be required to return to their exploiter throughout the day to hand over any money obtained (National Crime Agency, 2019b). The Modern Slavery and Exploitation helpline found this was the second most common form of CCE reported in 2021, following drug related exploitation, although only five of the potential victims were children (Unseen, 2021). The majority of these children were female (80%) and of Romanian or Bulgarian nationality.

Forced Shoplifting

Forced shoplifting most commonly involves the exploitation of Romanian victims by well organised crime groups. These victims are often recruited from their home country by OCGs and trafficked to the UK where they are exploited to steal pre-selected high value items (National Crime Agency, 2019b). Victims are provided with a rehearsed narrative to recite if caught. Migrant children being forced to shoplift under the supervision of adults is an emerging trend in the UK. Children are exploited to shoplift under the guise of a family unit to reduce the risk of identification and these children are often not known to any government agency (National Crime Agency, 2019b). Victims who are primarily being exploited through other forms (e.g. drug supply) may also be forced to shoplift to maximise criminal profits for the exploiter (National Crime Agency, 2019a).

Forced Pickpocketing

Victims of forced pickpocketing are primarily from Eastern European countries, where they are recruited, brought to the UK and exploited by OCGs (National Crime Agency, 2019b). Victims are absorbed into ‘bag dipping’ groups, where they will observe individuals using card machines or cash points at large events or in tourist areas, obtain their PIN number, then take the purse or wallet out of the individual’s bag or via distraction methods (National Crime Agency, 2019b). It is unknown how many child victims are affected by this mode of CCE.

Financial Exploitation

Some children are exploited through being forced to transfer, hold and launder money that has been obtained through criminal activity, for example through bank transactions (Brewster

et al., 2020; Home Office, 2022g; The Children's Society, 2019a). Financial exploitation may also involve victims being pressured into opening a bank account which is then controlled by the exploiter and any money paid in (e.g. benefits) is taken from the victim (National Crime Agency, 2019b). Victims who have been criminally exploited in this manner are sometimes referred to as 'money mules' however, this dehumanising language should be avoided as it detracts from the exploitation experienced by the child (The Children's Society, 2022a).

Victim Profile and Vulnerabilities

Gender

Data suggests that males are more likely to be criminally exploited, with very few female victims being identified (Home Office, 2022b; 2022d; 2022e; 2022f; Office for National Statistics, 2022; Rescue and Response, 2020). The literature did not expand on the potential reason(s) behind this overrepresentation of males. It is unknown whether this underrepresentation of females is due to gender bias, where males are seen as more likely to be associated with crime compared to females (National Crime Agency, 2019a; Rescue and Response, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a). This gender bias can also impact the response provided by police or partner agencies, leading to fewer opportunities to identify females being criminally exploited (Collins, Civil & Thompson, 2022; National Crime Agency, 2019a). Subsequently, exploiters can use this binary perspective of exploitation to their advantage by targeting females if they are more likely to fall under the radar than males (Brewster et al., 2020; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Rescue and Response, 2020). Professionals who worked with young women exploited through county lines also noted that young females with children were being targeted as they were more fearful of seeking help (Rescue and Response, 2020). It is therefore important to acknowledge that victims of CCE can be any gender (National Crime Agency, 2021).

The true extent and nature of females being criminally exploited remains unknown (Commission on Young Lives, 2022b; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2021). Interviews with practitioners highlighted that they were seeing an increase in girls being actively exploited to commit offences or being exploited to recruit other potential victims into criminally exploitative acts (The Children's Society, 2019a). Research into the voices of British survivors of trafficking and exploitation identified that county lines cases are increasingly involving the exploitation of girls (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2021), with young women often being forced to store illegal items (e.g. drugs, weapons, etc.) in their homes (Rescue and Response, 2020). Research exploring county lines activity in an English seaside town found that the role of females was often to transport drugs and avoid detection by the police (Jaensch & South,

2018). Of the girls who are being criminally exploited, it is unknown whether this is the primary form of exploitation or whether this is secondary to sexual exploitation (Caluori, Corlett & Stott, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a). For example, it has been noted that females may become criminally exploited through initially being groomed into relationships with gang and OCG members (Home Office, 2021; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Rescue and Response, 2020). This was also identified in a study examining county lines in Scotland, with one interviewee noting that a drug dealer groomed a young girl into a relationship before forcing her to store illegal items in her home, including drugs and money (Holligan et al., 2020). A similar study noted that some drug dealers sexually exploited girls by forcing them to engage in sexual activity with others, particular where they had a drug debt (Robinson et al., 2019). Other accounts from professionals note that girls being criminally exploited are frequently subject to severe sexual threats and assault (Commission on Young Lives, 2022b; National Crime Agency, 2019a). These examples highlight the overlap between CCE and CSE.

A number of studies also highlighted concerns around the assumption that males can only be criminally exploited and females can only be sexually exploited, without acknowledging the intersectionality of these two forms of exploitation regardless of the victim's gender (Commission on Young Lives, 2021; Rescue and Response, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a). For example, a study exploring data from local authorities in London found that 70% of assessments made by social workers for gang involvement related to males, whereas 70% of assessments made for CSE were female (The Children's Society, 2019a). Similarly, of the 513 children referred for support by an Independent Child Trafficking Guardian between 2018 and 2019, 98% of males were referred for CCE, whereas 80% of females were referred for CSE (Home Office, 2022h). This gender difference has also been identified in police data, with an analysis of CCE and CSE flags recorded by Merseyside Police finding that only 10 girls had an associated CCE marker compared to 75 having an associated CSE marker (Caluori et al., 2020). As a result, the number of criminally exploited boys who are also sexually exploited remains unknown, as does the number of sexually exploited girls who are also criminally exploited.

Age

Although primary school children, including children as young as 8 years old, are criminally exploited (Commission on Young Lives, 2021; The Children's Society, 2019a), the most common age range reported in the literature is between 14 and 17 years old (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Black, 2020; Home Office, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Rescue and Response, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018). This age range was also identified across the cases of 21 children who died or experienced serious harm as a result of being criminally exploited

(The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). Furthermore, separate serious case reviews involving two boys (Child 'C' and 'Chris') who were murdered as a result of criminal exploitation were both 14 years old at the time of their deaths (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018; Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). The age range of 14 to 17 years old was most predominantly identified for children exploited through drug related activity. When exploring this further, a study in Essex found that those exploited through county lines related drug activity were younger on average (13 years old) compared to those exploited through non-county lines related drug activity (15 years old) (Hallworth, 2016).

Ethnicity

Although any child can be criminally exploited, an overrepresentation of Black and minority ethnic children identified as victims of CCE was reported across the literature (Black, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a; Wroe, 2020). For example, 49.7% of children and young people referred to the 'County Lines Project', a service to safeguard and support children and young people exploited through county lines in London, were Black (Wroe, 2020). This figure increased to 64% when police data and associate mapping were taken into account. Research exploring the harms associated with children and young people who were recruited into drug gangs and running drugs from London found that 10 of the 12 young people they interviewed were from ethnic minority backgrounds (Windle & Briggs, 2015). Furthermore, research examining 21 cases involving children who had died or experienced serious harm as a result of being criminally exploited between 2018 and 2019, found that 15 of these children were from black or ethnic minority backgrounds (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). Similarly, two well-known Serious Case Reviews involving the deaths of 14-year-old boys as a result of CCE both involved young black males of Afro-Caribbean ethnicity (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018; Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). These findings suggest that the risk of harm to young males of an ethnic minority background who are being criminally exploited is profound. Additionally, research has found that Black children in residential care who have been placed in a predominantly white area are at increased risk of being targeted and criminally exploited (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020a).

It is unknown whether Black and minority ethnic children are more likely to be targeted by exploiters or whether biases, stereotypes and racism results in these children being more readily identified by police and other agencies (The Children's Society, 2019a; Wroe, 2020). The issues around systemic racism and CCE has been discussed in a later section. It has been identified within the research that children and young people from Black and minority

ethnic backgrounds are more likely to have complex needs that make them vulnerable to exploitation, such as adverse childhood experiences, neglect, family substance misuse issues, exclusion from school (Black, 2020; Wroe, 2020). Black Caribbean boys are four times more likely to be excluded from school compared to their White counterparts, putting them at greater risk of exploitation for reasons discussed in the next section (Commission on Young Lives, 2022b).

In contrast, other professionals noted that the ethnicity of victims of CCE was very much dependent on the area (The Children's Society, 2019a). Interviews with police officers in relation to drug gang activity and county lines activity in an English town noted that gang members from London were predominantly young black males, including second or third-generation Somalian or Afro-Caribbean males, however they recruited local dealers who were predominantly White (Jaensch & South, 2018). An interim analysis of the Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service provided by Action for Children in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Newcastle, highlighted that the majority of children and young people referred to their service during 2021 were White (Maxwell et al., 2022). The Home Office did note that White British children were increasingly being targeted by exploiters as they were less likely to be detected by police (Home Office, 2018). The ethnicity of victims of CCE may also be dependent on the type of criminality. For example, individuals associated with county lines drug dealing in Essex were more likely to be Black (81%) compared to those associated with non-county lines related drug dealing (3%) (Hallworth, 2016). It is unknown whether these patterns around ethnicity and CCE extend to Scotland.

Nationality

Children of any nationality can be criminally exploited (Home Office, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2021), however some trends around nationality have been seen within the literature. The NRM data shows that victims of CCE are most likely to be UK nationals, with the majority of these children being exploited through county lines ((Home Office, 2022b; 2022d; 2022e; 2022f). Vietnamese is the most common nationality of children referred to the Scottish Guardianship Service, with 25% of Vietnamese children referred to this service between 2020 and 2021 having been trafficked to the UK for the purpose of criminal exploitation (ECPAT UK & Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021). As previously mentioned, Vietnamese nationals were most predominantly exploited through forced cannabis cultivation in Scotland, whereas in England and Wales this was more prevalent amongst Albanian nationals (National Crime Agency, 2019b). Furthermore, victims of forced begging or busking were predominantly Romanian or Bulgarian (Unseen, 2021), whilst forced shoplifting most commonly involves

Romanian victims and forced pickpocketing primarily involves Eastern European nationals (National Crime Agency, 2019b). It is unknown if these latter trends extend to Scotland.

Not in Mainstream Education (including exclusions)

The correlation between CCE and school exclusions has been highlighted consistently throughout the literature (Black, 2020; Collins et al., 2022; Children's Commissioner, 2019; Commission on Young Lives, 2021; Home Office, 2018; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Just for Kids, 2020; Local Government Association, 2021; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018). The causality of this relationship is unknown but interviews with professionals identified that school exclusion is believed to be a predictor for grooming and has a significant impact on increasing the risk of criminal exploitation (The Children's Society, 2019a). This increased risk primarily stems from social isolation and reduced adult supervision, monitoring and structure throughout the child's day enabling access for exploiters (Commission on Young Lives, 2021; Just for Kids, 2020; National Crime Agency, 2019a; The Children's Society, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a). Exploiters also use school exclusions to their own advantage by taking this opportunity to instil a belief in the child that they now have no prospects of gaining qualifications or a regular job and therefore, have no other choice but to work for the gang or OCG (Children's Commissioner, 2019). This risk also extends to children attending alternative forms of education, such as pupil referral units or other part-time education, once again due to less supervision throughout their day (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Just for Kids, 2020; Local Government Association, 2021; The Children's Society, 2019a).

The Rescue and Response county lines project found that 43% of children and young people referred to their service were not in education (Rescue and Response, 2020). Similarly, over half of the children and young people referred to the Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service provided by Action for Children were out of education (Maxwell et al., 2022). Research also found that children referred to children's social care due to being involved in gangs are six times more likely to be in alternative education and five times more likely to have been permanently excluded from mainstream education in the year prior compared to other children referred to children's social care (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Factors that have been identified as increasing the likelihood of a child being excluded from school include being a looked after child (two times more likely), Black Caribbean ethnicity (four times more likely), being from an impoverished background (four times more likely), have special educational needs (seven times more likely) and experiencing mental health issues (ten times more likely) (Commission on Young Lives, 2022b). Other research also found that a disproportionate number of young males from ethnic minority backgrounds are excluded

from school, often due to low level behavioural issues that emerge from underlying or undiagnosed mental health issues, such as ADHD and Autism (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). Each of the aforementioned factors have been noted to increased vulnerability to CCE in their own right, therefore when combined with school exclusion, it is likely that this vulnerability increases even more.

Cases where children have come to serious harm as a result of criminal exploitation identified school exclusion as a critical point of vulnerability. For example, of 21 cases involving criminally exploited children who died or came to other serious harm, 17 (81%) had been permanently excluded from mainstream education (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). Likewise, the two previously mentioned serious case reviews involving 14-year-old boys who were murdered as a result of CCE had both been excluded from mainstream education (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018; Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020).

Not only does school exclusion increase the risk of CCE but the behaviours exhibited by children as a result of being criminally exploited may increase the risk of being excluded from school (Just for Kids, 2020; Local Government Association, 2021; Windle & Briggs, 2015). These behaviours can include carrying drugs or weapons into school, aggression, being disrespectful towards authority figures, not attending school to sell drugs, etc. In the serious case review of 'Child C', he had been permanently excluded from school for a gun-related incident (Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). Where the majority of schools will have zero tolerance for these behaviours, resulting in exclusion, it has been argued that these incidents should be viewed through a safeguarding lens and support should be put in place to keep them in education (Just for Kids, 2020).

Care Experienced Children

Examining the extent of CCE amongst looked after children is challenging. Research by The Children's Society found that only 33.8% of 142 local authorities recorded this information, of which only 46% could extract this information from their systems (The Children's Society, 2019a). Despite this, the majority of literature highlighted that looked after children are at increased risk of criminal exploitation (Black, 2020; Home Office, 2018; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2019a) and are frequently exploited through the county lines drug model (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Caluori et al., 2020). For example, 59% of children and young people referred to the Rescue and Response county lines project were in care (Rescue and Response, 2020). Looked after children are already vulnerable due to the experiences that led to them being in care (Local Government Association, 2021) and

professionals have reported that exploiters specifically target children's homes to groom and exploit these vulnerable children (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adult, 2019; Caluori et al., 2020; Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019a). Gangs and OCGs have also been reported entering children's homes, for example a practitioner recalled four males entering a care home looking for a child who owed them money through county lines drug debts (Caluori et al., 2020). Research also found that of 113 randomly selected children, criminal exploitation was the third most common reason that led to a child being placed into residential care (Ofsted, 2022).

Research exploring county lines and looked after children found that a number of children are placed into care settings that cannot safeguard them from CCE (Caluori et al., 2020). Two of the main concerns relate to placing children out of area or placing children in unregulated accommodation, which can increase the risk of criminal exploitation. Seventy-one percent of 41 police forces who responded to freedom of information requests noted that placing looked after children out of area increased their risk of exploitation (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adult, 2019). This increased risk can be attributed to new protective factors not yet being established in the new area, losing their previous network of support, decline in mental health, maintaining links with exploiters through technology and social media, and making new associates with other exploited children, which can lead to peer-to-peer grooming and recruitment (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adult, 2019; Commission on Young Lives, 2021; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020a, Rescue and Response, 2020). Alternatively, professionals expressed concerns of criminally exploited children being coerced into recruiting peers in their new residential care home, allowing the gang or OCG to expand their network (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adult, 2019; Shaw & Greenhow, 2019). Many looked after children placed out of area go missing to return to their home area, where they are at risk of further exploitation from their former exploiter(s) (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adult, 2019; Caluori et al., 2020; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020a). The increased risk of CCE for missing children and young people, including those missing from care has been discussed in following section.

A shortage of suitable placements or specialist placements for children who have been criminally exploited also increases the risk of children being re-exploited (Caluori et al., 2020). This leads to many children and young people being placed in semi-independent settings or other unregulated accommodation placements that are not suitable for those who are being exploited or are at risk of exploitation. These types of placements are not registered or inspected by Ofsted, therefore the safety of these placements for children and young people

cannot be ensured (Caluori et al., 2020; Commission on Young Lives, 2021). Furthermore, these placements only involve support rather than care or supervision, further putting the child at risk. There is no national data on the number of children in unregulated accommodation and subsequently at risk of exploitation (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adult, 2019).

It must be noted that being a looked after child is not always a predictor of criminal exploitation. For example, of 21 children who died or experienced serious harm following criminal exploitation, only two were looked after children, with the remainder living at home with family (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). The majority were also not known to children's social care until their exploitation was identified.

Missing Children

Going missing is both a risk factor and indicator of CCE. Children who go missing from home, care or school are vulnerable to being criminally exploited and those being criminally exploited frequently go missing as a result (HM Government, 2018a; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; National Crime Agency, 2019a; The Children's Society, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018). It is difficult to explore the extent of this relationship as many missing children go unreported or are not debriefed upon their return to explore the reason behind their missing episode (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; The Children's Society, 2019a). Despite this, many professionals have reported an increase in criminally exploited children going missing frequently or for long periods of time and later being located in other force areas or during police raids of trap houses (Ofsted, 2018; Shaw & Greenhow, 2019; The Children's Society, 2019a; Windle & Briggs, 2015). Some children have been known to go missing for a week (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018) and even six months (Windle & Briggs, 2015). These missing episodes are often a result of travelling or being trafficked to other areas to sell drugs through county lines exploitation (HM Government, 2021b; Spicer, 2019), with frontline practitioners noting that missing children being exploited through county lines often remain active on social media during the missing episode (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022).

Children who were referred to children's social care due to concerns of gang involvement were nine times more likely to have gone missing previously than other children referred to children's social care (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Many services who work with children and young people who are victims or at risk of CCE have also noted the significant relationship between going missing and criminal exploitation. For example, 50% of the children and young

people referred to the Rescue and Response county lines project in London had at least one county lines related missing incident prior to their referral to the service (Rescue and Response, 2020). Similarly, eight young people who were engaging with a specialised service in Nottingham for disadvantaged children at risk of exploitation had 56 recorded missing incidents between them (The Children's Society, 2020). Aside from offending behaviour and gang association, concerns of missing incidents was the most common reason for referrals to the Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service in Edinburgh (Maxwell et al., 2022).

The previous section highlighted that looked after children frequently go missing from residential care homes or unregulated accommodation, subsequently increasing their risk of being criminally exploited (Caluori et al., 2020; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2019; The Children's Society, 2022b). These children may go missing if they are not happy in their care placement or they may be coerced to go missing from care by exploiters (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adult, 2019). Going missing places children at risk of harm and being targeted for exploitation, for example travelling long distances alone and using public transport. Research into county lines and looked after children in Merseyside and North Wales found that children and young people from semi-independent accommodation with an associated CCE or county lines flag on policing systems went missing 28 times on average compared to an average of 19.1 (CCE flag) and 15.5 (county lines flag) times for those who went missing from residential care homes (Caluori et al., 2020). One child from Merseyside who had a county lines marker went missing from residential care 51 times in two years and later went missing 40 more times after being placed in semi-independent accommodation. Similarly, in North Wales, 71% of children with a county lines exploitation flag had a history of going missing (Caluori et al., 2020).

Special Educational Needs, Developmental Disabilities, Learning Difficulties

Children with special educational needs (SEN), developmental disabilities or learning difficulties have limited capacity when making sense of situations or making informed decisions, subsequently putting them at risk of criminal exploitation (The Children's Society, 2019a). These children are targeted by exploiters as they are perceived to be easier to control (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Home Office, 2018; Local Government Association, 2021; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Ofsted, 2018; Scottish Government, 2021a; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018). For example, 10% of children and young people referred to the Rescue and Response county lines project had additional needs, including Autism and learning disabilities (Rescue and Response, 2020). Social workers also noted an increase in exploiters targeting children and young people with learning disabilities or Autism for county lines drug distribution (Pitts,

2020). These children may feel isolated due to their special educational needs and/or learning difficulties, which exploiters will prey on by offering them a sense of belonging in exchange for conducting criminal acts (Commission on Young Lives, 2021). Interviewed professionals also noted that children may self-medicate with substances due to struggling with learning difficulties, which further increases their risk of criminal exploitation through potentially incurring drug debts (The Children's Society, 2019a). Professionals also expressed concerns that some criminally exploited children displayed signs of learning difficulties or educational needs that went unidentified or undiagnosed by education due to not attending school or being excluded from school prior to being assessed.

Impoverished or low Socio-Economic Status backgrounds / Affluent or high Socio-Economic Status backgrounds

Children from impoverished backgrounds or who live in deprived areas have been found to be at increased risk of criminal exploitation (Black, 2020; Commission on Young Lives, 2022a; Home Office, 2018; Scottish Government, 2021a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018). The societal impact of poverty results in children and young people being deprived of basic needs required to survive or other goods that would help them to 'fit in' with their peers. Exploiters target this vulnerability by offering the child food, clothing, money, etc., that they could not otherwise obtain, in exchange for committing criminal acts (Local Government Association, 2021; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Singh et al., 2021; The Children's Society, 2019a). Research examining reasons why children join gangs found that they often felt this was their only way to improve their financial situation and help relieve the financial situation of their parents or family members (Gladstone Annan et al., 2021).

In contrast to this, victims of CCE are not exclusively from impoverished backgrounds (Olver & Cockbain, 2021). Professionals have noted that children and young people from affluent backgrounds are increasingly being targeted by exploiters to avoid detection by police as they do not fit into the stereotypical idea of a 'drug runner' (Brewster et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2022; Local Government Association, 2021; Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019a). In these situations, exploiters target other vulnerabilities in the child, such as feeling isolated through bullying, neglect or family abuse (The Children's Society, 2019a).

Mental Health Issues

It has been acknowledged throughout the literature that children suffering from mental health issues are at greater risk of being criminally exploited (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Commission on Young Lives, 2021; HM Government, 2021b; Home Office, 2018; Local

Government Association, 2021; Ofsted, 2018; Olver & Cockbain, 2021; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). For example, children referred to children's social care due to gang involvement were more than twice as likely to self-harm, 95% more likely to have emotional health issues and 77% more likely to have mental health issues identified in their assessment compared to children referred for other reasons (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Children may self-medicate with alcohol or substances to try and relieve the symptoms of mental illness (HM Government, 2021b). This puts them at risk of accruing a drug debt, which in turn can lead to being criminally exploited to pay off the drug debt. Mental health issues frequently go undiagnosed and the symptoms of mental illness are worsened through the trauma that vulnerable children may experience in their day to day lives, further increasing their risk of criminal exploitation (Commission on Young Lives, 2022b).

Substance or Alcohol Misuse

Children and young people with alcohol or substance misuse issues often have complex needs and are at increased risk of being criminally exploited (Children's Commissioner, 2019; HM Government, 2021b; HM Government, 2021b; Home Office, 2018; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). Children referred to children's social care due to gang involvement were eight times more likely to be misusing substances compared to children referred for other reasons (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Additionally, 81% of children in the criminal justice system who are involved in gangs had substance misuse issues. Research examining child criminal exploitation through county lines drug dealing in Merseyside and Glasgow found that all of the gang-involved Merseyside children and young people that were interviewed were frequent cannabis users (Robinson et al., 2019). Criminal gangs used this to their advantage by allowing children to buy cannabis but pay later, leading to instant drug debts and subsequent criminal exploitation, as they were then forced to deal drugs to pay off the debt. This information does not appear to have been available from the Glasgow sample.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Trauma

Children who have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences and trauma are particularly vulnerable to criminal exploitation. These vulnerabilities can include the child being the victim of neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, bullying or bereavement (Children's Commissioner, 2019; HM Government, 2018b; Home Office, 2018; Local Government Association, 2021; Scottish Government, 2021a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018). Children with absent parents or who have

experienced parental separation or a breakdown of the family unit are vulnerable to exploitation (Black, 2020; Knowsley Safeguarding Children Board, 2017; National Crime Agency, 2019a; The Children's Society, 2019a). For example, both serious case reviews involving 14-year-olds 'Chris' and 'Child C' involved parental breakdowns and the absence of their fathers (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018; Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). Research found that children from impoverished or low socio-economic backgrounds often have parent(s) that work many jobs to provide for the family, resulting in less time spent with their child and the child being recruited into gangs (Gladstone Annan et al., 2021). Children with neglectful parents who did not show much support or interest in their child also acted as a push factor for children being recruited into gangs. Furthermore, professionals identified an increased risk of criminal exploitation in children and young people with vulnerable parents due to reducing the ability for the parent to care for the child (The Children's Society, 2019a). This can include parents with disabilities, substance misuse issues, mental health issues, suffering domestic abuse (National Crime Agency, 2019a; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018).

Research has found that children who were referred to children's social care due to being in a gang were 41% more likely to have a parent or carer misusing substances, 48% more likely to have experienced neglect and 39% more likely to have been the victim of domestic abuse compared to other children referred to children's social care (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Additionally, gang-involved children who are within the criminal justice system are 76% more likely to not have their basic care needs met at home, 37% more likely to have witnessed domestic violence, 68% more likely to have a parent or carer misusing substances and 41% more likely to be experiencing violence from a parent compared to other children in the criminal justice system (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

The above-mentioned adverse childhood experiences increase a child's vulnerability to criminal exploitation in many ways. The impact of these adverse experiences leads the child to want to escape the instability and dangers of their current situation and seek out a sense of belonging, acceptance, inclusion and structure from elsewhere (Action for Children, 2022; Home Office, 2020; Home Office, 2018; Knowsley Safeguarding Children Board, 2017; National Crime Agency, 2019a). These experiences also impact their attachment and without a positive relationship with a protective adult, the child is vulnerable to being targeted, groomed and exploited by others who can appear to fulfil their unmet needs (The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018). Neglectful, absent or vulnerable parents are also less likely to spot signs of exploitation

within their child or report concerns to the authorities, including reporting them missing (Ofsted, 2018).

It must be noted that some victims of CCE have come from an otherwise stable home and are specifically targeted by exploiters to avoid detection by the police (National Crime Agency, 2019a; The Children's Society, 2019a).

Links to Crime, Gangs and other Criminal Associations

The literature has identified that children who have links to crime, gangs or other criminal associates are at increased risk of criminal exploitation. The child's family members may be part of a criminal network or involved in the running of a drug line or their older siblings may be criminally exploited through county lines or other forms (Action for Children, 2022; Collins et al., 2022; Home Office, 2021; Home Office, 2020; Local Government Association, 2021; Rescue and Response, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a). Being in close proximity to this criminality may then result in the child being groomed and exploited into criminal activity. For example children in gangs were 60% more likely to have family members involved in offending and be twice as likely to be living with known offenders compared to other children known to children's services (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Children who have been recruited by gangs or associate with gang members are also at significant risk of being criminally exploited (Home Office, 2018). The serious case review relating to 14-year-old 'Chris' highlighted concerns around gang involvement and associating with older pro-criminal peers, with the policing identifying he was vulnerable to being targeted by these gangs (Newham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2018). Peer influences can also increase the risk of criminal exploitation, especially where peers are involved in crime or are being criminally exploited, as they may go on to recruit the child (Gladstone Annan et al., 2021; Home Office, 2021; Rescue and Response, 2020). In contrast, children without any offending background are also targeted as a method of reducing detection by the police (Black, 2020; National Crime Agency, 2019a). These children are often referred to as "clean skins" by their exploiters (Hesketh & Robinson, 2019).

Child going through a Transitional Period

Transitional periods are often a time of stress and uncertainty for children and young people, which subsequently increases their vulnerability to being targeted by exploiters. Children, young people and parents found the transition from primary to secondary school was a period of particular vulnerability for children being criminally exploited, especially moving from small intimate primary schools, where links to family and community are well-established, to more

independent, larger secondary schools (Commission on Young Lives, 2022a). A key finding in the serious case review of 14-year-old 'Chris' who was murdered following criminal exploitation, was that his special educational needs or learning disabilities were not fully understood or supported upon his transition into secondary school (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018). This was found to increase his vulnerability to criminal exploitation significantly. Other transitional periods of vulnerability that have been identified are moving home or care placements, breakdown of care placements and transitions out of secure care or young offender institutes (Action for Children, 2022).

Other Vulnerabilities

There were several other factors identified within the literature as increasing the vulnerability of children and young people being criminally exploited. The **lack of educational or employment opportunities** has been identified as increasing vulnerability (Caluori et al., 2020; Scottish Government, 2021a; The Children's Society, 2019a). For example, one child exploited through county lines stated, "what job are you gonna get paid 330 pound every two days?" (Robinson et al., 2019). Furthermore, children who are **not UK citizens**, do not have **immigration status** in the UK and **do not speak English** are vulnerable to exploitation as criminal gangs will use this to isolate the child and instil fear that they will be deported by authorities if identified (Local Government Association, 2021; National Crime Agency, 2019a). Other vulnerabilities that were identified in the literature included **homelessness** (Home Office, 2018; Scottish Government, 2021a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018), **social isolation** (Commission on Young Lives, 2021; Home Office, 2018), being **known to social care** (Black, 2020), **physical disability** (Home Office, 2018; Home Office, 2021), **debt** (Collins et al., 2022; Scottish Government, 2021a), exposure to **peers who are being exploited** (The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018) and **absence or removal of protective factors** (e.g. friends, family) (Scottish Government, 2021a; The Children's Society, 2019a).

Indicators of Child Criminal Exploitation

There are a number of potential indicators that a child is being criminally exploited. Table 2 summarises the different warning signs that have been identified across the literature. It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list and victims of CCE may or may not present with any of these warning signs.

Table 2 - *Summary of the potential indicators of child criminal exploitation*

Potential Warning Signs of CCE	
Behavioural	• School – truancy, disengaging, decline in performance • Misusing substances (e.g. alcohol, drugs, etc.) • Going Missing – frequent missing episodes, located in an area where the child has no obvious connections, unwillingness to disclose whereabouts, returning dishevelled • Carrying weapons • Being arrested for drug offences • Fear or mistrust of authority • Fear of reprisals and violence from gangs and others • Secretive, withdrawn, isolated • Holding drugs, money or weapons • Concern of losing money or increased interest in money • Being in a state of 'Fight' – (e.g. disruptive, hostile, aggressive, agitated, irritable, wary, angry, controlling or demanding) • Being in a state of 'Flight' – (e.g. running away, hiding, hyperactivity, disruptive, clumsy, 'silly', inability to concentrate) • Being in a state of 'Freeze' – (e.g. distracted, not listening, confused, forgetful, look distant, poor eye contact, struggle to communicate) • Being in a state of 'Appease and Submit' – (e.g. low mood, not questioning or answering questions beyond minimum, compliant, easily bullied)
Social	• Associating with other victims of exploitation • Receiving excessive texts and phone calls • Associating with older people • Isolation from peers • New peer groups • Associating with gangs and/or OCGs • Online connection to criminal networks
Verbal	• Closed off, scared to talk • Sudden change in language • Using language related to drug dealing • Disclosure of sexual and physical assault, followed by withdrawal of disclosure
Mental Health	• Self-harm • Emotional changes • Low self-esteem • Psychological trauma • Other mental health issues
Other	• Unexplained injuries • Malnourished • Increased or unexplained material items (e.g. gifts, money, clothes, etc.) • Multiple mobile phones or sim cards • Parental/Carer concerns • Drugs held internally (e.g. rectally, vaginally, orally) • Lack of identification documents or identification held by exploiter • Sexual Exploitation • Victims of abduction or forced imprisonment • SOC Matrix nominals being stopped out of area • Increase in children and young people being arrested for 'Possession with intent to Supply' offences outside area

(Action for Children, 2022; HM Government, 2018a; Home Office, 2022g; Home Office, 2018; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Ministry of Justice, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2021; National Crime

Agency, 2019b; Skills for Care and Development, 2022; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chief's Council, 2018).

Tactics used by Exploiters to Groom, Recruit and Control Victims

Data from the Modern Slavery and Exploitation helpline found that in 2021, although tactics used to recruit child victims into exploitation were unknown in the majority of cases (81%) referred to the helpline, the most commonly known tactics were false promises (7%), recruitment by family members (4%), specific job offer (2%), coercion (2%), grooming child into an intimidate relationship (2%), smuggling (2%) and abduction (1%) (Unseen, 2021). Furthermore, methods of control included financial control (i.e. debt bondage, 16%), tied accommodation (15%), monitoring (13%), sexual abuse (11%), physical abuse (11%), confinement (8%), emotional abuse (8%), threats (7%) and other (65%) (Unseen, 2021). These methods of recruitment and control have been discussed in more detail below.

Places where Victims are Targeted

Victims of CCE can be targeted face-to-face or through social media (Black, 2020; Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). Exploiters have been known to target vulnerable children and young people in various places, such as pupil referral units (National Crime Agency, 2019a; Response and Rescue, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a), schools, other higher education institutions, special educational needs schools, foster homes, homeless shelters (National Crime Agency, 2019a), sports clubs and religious organisations (Local Government Association, 2021). Some exploiters target children and young people in other countries under the guise of offering them a job opportunity in the UK before trafficking them and criminally exploiting them upon arrival, using their vulnerability of not having a legal immigration status or being able to speak English to their advantage (National Crime Agency, 2019b).

Social Media and Technology

As previously mentioned, social media is frequently used by exploiters to target and groom children into criminal exploitation (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime, 2019; Black, 2020; Gladstone Annan et al., 2021; Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; Home Office, 2018; Local Government Association, 2021; Rescue and Response, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). Social media is used to glamorise the criminal lifestyle and make it appealing to children by posting images and videos of designer clothing, jewellery, cars and cash (Collins et al., 2022; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; National Crime Agency, 2019a; The Children's Society, 2019a;

Whittaker, Densley & Moser, 2020). **Snapchat** is one of the main apps being used to communicate with children (Rescue and Response, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a; Whittaker et al., 2020). This is used as it is easy to add friends, there is no historical feed of information and images and videos can disappear after a period of time (Rescue and Response, 2020). **Instagram** is also used and allows direct messages to be sent to potential victims (Rescue and Response, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a; Whittaker et al., 2020). **WhatsApp** is another app that is used by gangs and criminal networks due to having closed groups and an end-to-end encryption feature that prevents messages from being decrypted or monitored by law enforcement (Whittaker et al., 2020). Exploiters use WhatsApp to send out 'job adverts' to groups that children and young people are added to through associations in an attempt to recruit them into county lines (Rescue and Response, 2020). **Wickr** and **Telegram** are other encrypted messaging apps that exploiters use, although less is known about these. **YouTube** is also used by gangs to promote music that glamourises the criminal lifestyle and gang culture (Rescue and Response, 2020; Whittaker et al., 2020). Finally, victims are also targeted through **gaming platforms** using the live game play function which allows exploiters to freely interact with children (Rescue and Response, 2020). Social media is more so used by newer gangs and OCGs as a way to develop their name and reputation and draw in new recruits (Whittaker et al., 2020). In contrast, more established gangs and crime groups are less likely to use social media as they have more to lose by drawing law enforcement's attention to their criminal lifestyle and activities.

Social media and technology is also used to facilitate the exploitation by monitoring children (Black, 2020; Ministry of Justice, 2019; The Children's Society, 2019a). GPS location tags on specific mobile phone applications (e.g. 'Find my iPhone' and 'Find my Friends') are frequently used to track where children and young people are when they are travelling for the purpose of county lines drug dealing (Whittaker et al., 2020). Exploiters also request that victims send them proof of their location and activity through photos or videos. Social media continues to evolve, new apps are developed and there are limited processes that parents or professionals can do to safeguard children online (Rescue and Response, 2020).

Music

Research exploring how children become involved in gangs in London found that a lot of local music artists they were listening to would include details of gang activity in London (Gladstone Annan et al., 2021). Similarly, county lines activity is referred to in some music, including drill and trap music (The Children's Society, 2019a). This adds to the glamourisation of the criminal lifestyle, with social media often being used to share music videos that show cash, weapons, cars, designer clothing and jewellery (The Children's Society, 2019a; Whittaker et al., 2020).

There are concerns that this music normalises this lifestyle but no link has been confirmed between this music consumption and criminal exploitation. In contrast, music that described the violence and rivalries involved in gangs was seen as a protective factor for some, as it created a sense of fear (Gladstone Annan et al., 2021).

Grooming

Exploiters aim to identify an unmet need or want in children and use this vulnerability to groom them into criminal exploitation. Four stages of grooming have been identified within the literature (The Children's Society, 2019a). The first stage is to identify a vulnerable child and gain their trust. This stage often involves the exploiter building a relationship with the child, expressing an interest in their life, isolating the child by telling them not to trust or talk to others and offering them status and gifts they would not be able to obtain themselves (e.g. money, designer clothing, drugs, etc.) (Caluori et al., 2020; Children's Commissioner, 2019; Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; Local Government Association, 2021; Ministry of Justice, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Rescue and Response, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). They also provide the child with attention, a sense of belonging and meaning (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Collins et al., 2022; Caluori et al., 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a). The second stage involves the exploiter including the child in activities, testing their loyalty by getting them to run errands (e.g. drug deal) and further building a sense of trust by protecting them from some form of danger (Children's Commissioner, 2019; The Children's Society, 2019a). The third stage involves making the child feel part of the group, giving them more responsibility and asking them to demonstrate their loyalty (The Children's Society, 2019a). This makes the child feel important to the exploiter, strengthening the harmful relationship. The final stage is where the exploiter's true intentions are then revealed, using threats, violence, humiliation, debt bondage and other harmful methods to trap the child into criminal exploitation (Children's Commissioner, 2019; The Children's Society, 2019a). Very few children recognise they are being groomed and are often groomed before the dangers can be realised (Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018).

Debt Bondage

Debt bondage is a frequent method used by exploiters to force children into committing criminal acts (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Collins et al., 2022; Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Rescue and Response, 2020; Spicer, 2019; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). One way this occurs is through the exploiter staging a robbery of the child (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019a;

The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). For example, during the grooming stages, the child will be asked to run an errand which involves carrying something of value as a sign of trust (e.g. drugs, money, etc.). They will then stage a robbery against the victim, where the child will be held responsible for losing the valuable items and forced to continue drug dealing to pay off the debts. The same applies where the child is genuinely robbed or are arrested and have the money and drugs confiscated by the police. Debt bondage can also occur where the child purchases drugs from drug dealers and accumulate a drug debt due to being unable to afford them (National Crime Agency, 2019a; Ofsted, 2018). For example, interviews with victims of CCE and individuals who work with these children in Glasgow and Merseyside revealed that drug dealers offer children drugs on a buy now, pay later scheme, leading to drug-debts and being forced to deal drugs to pay this off (Robinson et al., 2019). As drug debts often result in a risk of violence, including kidnappings and torture, dealing drugs for the county line was perceived to be the safest option.

The role of debt bondage in criminal exploitation does not always relate to county lines. The trafficking of children into the UK under the guise of a better life can lead to debt bondage through being forced to repay the costs of travel through criminal acts (e.g. cannabis cultivation) (National Crime Agency, 2019b). Analysis of 37 cases involving trafficked children referred to the Scottish Guardianship Service found that 13 had experienced debt bondage by their trafficker(s) (Scottish Government, 2020b).

Peer Recruitment

Children can also be recruited by their peers. Once children become entrenched in the criminal exploitation, they are then coerced into recruiting their peers or younger siblings (Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; Ofsted, 2018). Exploiters rely on the child's peer associations to expand their criminal network, whereas the children may see this as sharing an opportunity with their friends to make money or gain status (Rescue and Response, 2020).

Violence and Threats of Violence

Intimidation, threats of violence, physical violence, weapons and kidnapping are used to recruit and control victims of CCE (Caluori et al., 2020; Holligan et al., 2020; Home Office, 2022g; Knowsley Safeguarding Children Board, 2017; Ministry of Justice, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Ofsted, 2018; Rescue and Response, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a). Violence and weapons are also displayed in front of the child to demonstrate what they are capable of and the consequences of betrayal or disloyalty (Holligan et al., 2020; The Children's

Society, 2019a). Threats are also made to the child that if they do not cooperate, their family will be harmed or the family will be threatened directly (Local Government Association, 2021; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019a). In the serious case review of 'Chris', the 14-year-old disclosed that he had received threats via social media and was in fear of his safety (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018). There were suggestions that he had built up a drug debt and his family were threatened to repay this. Research examining CCE and drug dealing in Glasgow and Merseyside found that initial promises made to children and young people soon turn into threats, physical violence, being locked into premises and being monitored via mobile phone apps (Robinson et al., 2019).

Sexual Violence

Exploiters also use sexual violence and exploitation to coerce and control children into committing criminal acts. Exploiters may humiliate and shame children by forcing them to engage in sexual acts (e.g. kissing their friend, touching someone, etc.) and blackmailing them by taking photos or videos of these acts and threatening to post these on social media if they do not comply (Caluori et al., 2020; Ofsted, 2018; Ministry of Justice, 2019; The Children's Society, 2019a). Sexual violence may also be used as a method of punishment if they do not comply, especially female victims of CCE (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2019; National Crime Agency, 2019a; Ofsted, 2018). Threats of rape towards female siblings of the children they are exploiting is also used as a method of control (The Children's Society, 2019a).

Risks, Experiences and Impact of Child Criminal Exploitation

Serious Physical Harm and Death

Findings from inspections carried out by Ofsted to examine the multi-agency response to CCE found some children had been stabbed and killed by rival gangs (Ofsted, 2018). Separate serious case reviews were commissioned following the murders of two 14-year-olds who were believed to be victims of criminal exploitation. 'Chris' was shot at close range in the head (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018) and 'Child C' was knocked off a moped and stabbed to death nine times by members of an OCG (Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). A review of 21 cases involving children drawn into criminal exploitation in 17 areas of the UK found that 11 had died, 7 suffered serious harm and 3 inflicted serious harms to others (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). Of these, 12 incidents were suspected as being linked to county lines, four were related to suspected territorial gang links and five were apparently random stabbings.

As outlined in the previous section, victims of CCE are at risk of other forms of violence and serious physical harm (HM Government, 2021a; Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). This includes stabbings, firearm injuries, acid attacks (The Children's Society, 2019a), assaults, robberies and kidnaps (Rescue and Response, 2020). Analysis of 37 cases referred to the Scottish Guardianship Service for unaccompanied and trafficked children revealed that 21 children experienced physical violence (Scottish Government, 2020b). Similarly, the analysis of county lines drug dealing in the UK found that 10% of county lines showed evidence of serious physical violence (National Crime Agency, 2019a). Vulnerable adults who had been cuckooed by county lines also reported observing violence aimed at children and young people in their homes (Macdonald et al., 2022).

Children who are forced to run drugs are at continuous risk of serious harm due to being the carriers of drugs and money (National Crime Agency, 2019a). Children may be forced to conceal the drugs inside their bodies, which involves the risk of serious injury or death if the package were to rupture (Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, 2022a; The Children's Society, 2019a). Risk of harm is also posed by competing county lines and rival gangs or OCGs who may target them due to territorial disputes (National Crime Agency, 2019a; Rescue and Response, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a). Research into county lines drug activity in an English seaside town found a 22% increase in violence, which professionals and former gang members attributed to drug runners being robbed by rival gangs and retaliation to this involving violence, kidnappings and torture (Jaensch & South, 2018). Interviews conducted as part of similar research into county lines related CCE in Glasgow and Merseyside included one police officer recalling a murder in Merseyside during a fight between two OCGs over territory (Robinson et al., 2019). Scottish participants also recalled territory disputes resulting in physical violence. Other research into CCE and gang violence reported one child being stabbed for revenge over debts and other children being pursued while they are in prison for their debt (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

Exposure to this level of violence at an early age may also increase the likelihood of them using violence in the future (HM Government, 2021a; Local Government Association, 2021). Children may also feel they have to use violence to protect themselves in certain dangerous situations that they are exposed to (Rescue and Response, 2020).

Sexual Harm

Further to the descriptions of sexual violence used outlined in the previous section to recruit and control victims of CCE, once victims have been recruited, they remain at risk of serious

sexual violence and sexual exploitation (HM Government, 2021a; Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019a). This can involve rape, sexual violence and indecent images taken and shared (The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). Some criminally exploited children are forced into engaging in sexual activity with members of gang or criminal network (National Crime Agency, 2019a) and one vulnerable adult who had been cuckooed reported observing the sexual exploitation of children and young people in her home (Macdonald et al., 2022). Professionals who worked with victims of CCE noted that a high percentage of boys later disclose that they have been sexually exploited and forced to commit sexual acts that they later feel ashamed to disclose (The Children's Society, 2019a). Children being forced to conceal and transport drugs anally or vaginally is a form of sexual abuse and should be recognised as such (HM Government, 2021a; The Children's Society, 2022a; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). In the UK, 2% of county lines also involved the sexual exploitation of children (National Crime Agency, 2019a). This sexual abuse impacts significantly on the child's sexual health and wellbeing, along with their physical, emotional and mental health.

Trauma, Emotional and Mental Health Harm

The aforementioned threats, physical and sexual harm that victims of CCE experience, along with isolation from their family, peers and other positive social networks, can result in severe trauma and a decline in emotional wellbeing and mental health (HM Government, 2021a; Local Government Association, 2021; Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, 2022a; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). This can also result in children losing interest in activities and self-harming (HM Government, 2021a). Children may also witness traumatic events, such as drug overdoses, drug use, violence and sexual harm of others (Ofsted, 2018). An analysis of 37 cases referred to the Scottish Guardianship Service for unaccompanied and trafficked children found that 26 of these children reported experiencing threats and psychological violence (Scottish Government, 2020b).

Carrying and Exposure to Weapons

Victims of CCE are exposed to or are forced to use weapons, including bladed weapons, firearms, crossbows, axes, hammers, acid, CS sprays and make-shift weapons, (National Crime Agency, 2019a). Some children are also provided with weapons by their exploiter to protect themselves (The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). It was frequently reported in the literature that victims of CCE felt the need to

carry weapons in order to protect themselves from the dangers associated with the situation they have been forced into. For example, research exploring why young people carry knives through a meeting with Members of Parliament and 16 young people from England and Wales who were victims and/or perpetrators of knife crime reported that knives are an easily available form of protection and some young people saw carrying knives as the 'norm' (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime, 2019). The young people explained that "runners" for county lines often carry knives for protection and if a turf war between gangs occurs. The Rescue and Response county lines project also reported that many children exploited through county lines drug dealing carried weapons for protection (Rescue and Response, 2020). The serious case review of murdered 14-year-old 'Chris' noted that he had previously bought a Rambo style knife and bullet proof vest and after being arrested and convicted for carrying a knife, he explained that he feared for his safety and took the knife for protection (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018). He was also later found in possession of acid, which he also stated was for his protection. Research that reviewed 21 cases involving the death or serious violence to young people who were being criminally exploited found that 81% of incidents involved a knife (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). Once again, children felt that carrying a knife increased their own personal safety.

When considering the issue of children carrying and using weapons, 4,400 knife and weapon related offences were committed by children in 2019/2020 in England and Wales (Youth Justice Board & Ministry of Justice, 2021). Furthermore, the number of 10- to 17-year-olds cautioned or convicted of possessing a weapon increased by 12% between 2016 and 2017 in England and the number of hospital admissions for children assaulted with sharp object increased 20% from 2015/16 to 2016/17 in England (Children's Commissioner, 2019). The National Crime Agency (2019a) noted that the use of knives in county lines criminality remains an intelligence gap, although on the rail network between May and August 2018, 35% of individuals suspected of being involved in county lines activity had links to possession of a weapon in the last six months. Furthermore, 3% were in possession of firearms, with 118 county lines being identified with links to firearms. The level of weapon carrying or use by victims of CCE in Scotland is currently unknown.

Developmental, Behavioural and Health Issues

Victims of CCE may also suffer from subsequent developmental, behavioural and overall health issues (Ofsted, 2018; Windle & Briggs, 2015). Literature highlighted that significant brain development is likely to occur up until approximately 25 years old and the traumatic and adverse childhood experiences that accompany CCE may delay or disrupt this process (Skills for Care and Development, 2022). Victims of CCE are likely to be in a "high-alert survival

mode" and without a safe and appropriate adult to work through the impact of this (i.e. feelings of stress, fear, etc.), the brain remodels and unhealthy biological and psychological coping mechanisms emerge. These can present as behavioural difficulties, aggression, attachment issues, distrust or mistrust of others, alcohol or substance issues and impacts the way they see themselves and the world around them. The intensity of grooming may also lead to extreme changes in the victim's thinking patterns, including normalising criminality and violence (Skills for Care and Development, 2022). Criminally exploited children may also find themselves in unhygienic and unsafe environments, such as cuckooed properties and trap houses, being exposed to drug paraphernalia, drug use and witnessing others consuming substances (Rescue and Response, 2020; Windle & Briggs, 2015). They may also experience hunger and sleep deprivation due to being forced to travel and commit criminal acts over long periods of time and overnight (Rescue and Response, 2020; Scottish Government, 2020b; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018).

Trafficking

Victims of CCE are often found long distances away from their home area, having their travel via trains and public transport facilitated by the exploiters. Ultimately, this amounts to human trafficking according to both the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (Ofsted, 2018; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). Children being forced to work for the exploiter under force or threat also meets the slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour section of both legislations. Of professionals who were interviewed in relation to professionals, 67% agreed or strongly agreed that human trafficking was linked to CCE through county lines (The Children's Society, 2019a). National analysis of county lines drug dealing in the UK also found that 16% of county lines involved human trafficking, 11% involved human trafficking and criminal exploitation of local juveniles and 13% involved human trafficking of out of force juveniles (National Crime Agency, 2019a)

Impact on Future

CCE has a significant impact on a child's future. Persistently missing school or being excluded from school results in leaving education without qualifications (Commission on Young Lives, 2022b; HM Government, 2021a). Criminal convictions they may receive as a result of the crimes they have been exploited to commit can also have a lasting negative impact on the child's future (Black, 2020). This limits further educational or employment prospects (Local Government Association, 2021), which in turn, impacts the child's sense of self and status

(The Children's Society, 2019a). They may then become entrenched in a life of criminality with no perceived way out.

Other

Other impacts that CCE has on children is the deterioration of relationships with family and peers (Local Government Association, 2021) and risk of harm to families from gangs and OCGs (HM Government, 2021a).

Services and Support for Victims of Child Criminal Exploitation

Specialist support is essential for helping children to recover from the significant levels of harm and trauma they experience through being criminally exploited (Scottish Government, 2022a). A number of services specifically designed to provide support for victims of CCE and/or their families were identified within the literature, although these varied across the UK. Some of these support services have been outlined in Table 3, along with the outcome of any evaluations conducted. The majority of these services are based in England and Wales but these could help to inform the development of effective support programmes in Scotland. Other agencies that are not CCE specific but play a key role in safeguarding and providing interventions or support to victims of CCE and their families include the police, social services, health (e.g. mental health services, GPs, Hospitals, etc.), youth justice services and education providers.

Table 3 - *Intervention and Support Services identified within the literature for victims of CCE and their families.*

Intervention/ Support Service	Location	Description	Evaluation
Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service, Action for Children	Edinburgh, Dundee, Newcastle, Cardiff	Support children aged 11-18yo who are at risk of or have been coerced into serious offending and criminal activity. • Divert children away from exploitation and criminality • Improve knowledge and understanding of risk • Build resilience and empower children to prevent future involvement in serious organised crime • Support children to address vulnerabilities that put them at risk of exploitation • Support families to reduce children's involvement in criminal activity • Tailored intensive one-to-one sessions, risk reduction, group work and peer-mentoring • Provide positive opportunities • Relationship building is crucial to the success of service engagement • Child centred approach • Child viewed through safeguarding lens rather than criminal lens	• Evaluation from March 2018 to February 2021: o 144 meaningfully engaged with the programme o 83% reduced offending behaviour o 77% reduced risk-taking • In 2020/2021: o 65% supported to improve their situation and are no longer being exploited o 72% supported to make informed decisions around risk-taking behaviours • Evaluation of 61 referrals from May 2021 to August 2021: o Improved decision making o Improved understanding of risk o Improved control over their lives o Improved protective factors o Developed social aspirations o Improved health and well-being o Improved coping and resilience skills o Reduced offending behaviour o Improved family relationships o Improved access to services o Change narratives around criminality/victimisation o Provide evidence for policy and practice o Strengthened information sharing between agencies o Partner agencies reported the service was a valued addition • Key findings from programme between January to April 2022 through discussions with 21 relevant stakeholders o Assisted with connecting partner agencies together

			○ Peer-mentoring aspect of the programme was considered unique and valuable
Scottish Guardianship Service	Scotland	Supports unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and trafficked children who arrive in Scotland without parents/guardians (as per section 11 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015) • Intensive support through workshops, attending lawyer appointments • Run a mental health project and befriending service in partnership with the NHS psychological trauma service • Advocate for children and young people	N/A
Independent Child Trafficking Guardians, Barnardo's and Home Office	Scotland, England and Wales	Supports unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and trafficked children who arrive in England or Wales without parents/guardians (as per section 48 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015) • One-to-one support	• Evaluation of Regional Practice Co-ordinators from the ICTG service to understand perceived impacts: ○ 901 children supported between 2017 and 2019 ○ Three-quarters supported for CCE ○ Regional practice co-ordinators created links between the ICTG service and partner agencies ○ Raise awareness and training within local authorities on indicators of exploitation, the NRM process and how to support victims ○ Hands on support for operational professionals ○ Improved the reach of the ICTG service ○ Improved awareness of legislation ○ Increased referrals to the NRM ○ Professionals more aware of needs of children ○ Children and young people with an ICTG felt listened to
Missing People SAFECALL	UK Wide	Specialist helpline that provides support and advice to children and parents/carers who are concerned about county lines, CCE and gangs	N/A

Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline, Unseen	UK Wide	Free, confidential, 24-hour helpline that offers information, advice and guidance about modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation issues to victims, the public, statutory agencies and businesses	N/A
SPACE	UK Wide	National organisation that campaigns for changes in the statutory response to county lines exploitation and provides advocacy and advice to families affected by county lines exploitation and training for practitioners.	N/A
Hand in Hand Service, The Children's Society	North Yorkshire	Work with children who are at risk of or are being criminally or sexually exploited and repeat missing children aged 10 to 18yo. • Support children to identify their strengths and areas they need extra support with • Psychoeducation sessions with children about exploitation, grooming, unhealthy relationships, etc. • Flexible, confidential and non-judgemental service	• 67% of young people felt an overall improvement in their lives (e.g. mental health, knowledge of exploitation, confidence and self-esteem) • Reduction in arrests • Reduction in offending • Reduction in missing incidents • Engaged with education • Reduction of risk factors • Improved protective factors • Improved relationship
Rescue and Response County Lines Project	London	Service that supports children and young people from London who have been exploited through county lines • Provide out of hours rescue service for children and young people found in cuckooed properties linked to criminal exploitation • Opportunity to intervene during critical first hours • Advocate for the child • Work with other agencies to ensure child received appropriate report • Assist with safety plans • Support family • Minimise unnecessary contact with multiple professionals • Assist with NRM referrals • Identify patterns and trends and generate data	• 1142 referrals received from 2018-2020, 453 accepted, 313 engaged o 69% positive outcome o 60% reduced county lines involvement o 95 NRMs supported
County Lines Pilot Project, St Giles Trust	Margate and Dover	Pilot service from September 2017 to 2018 that provides one-to-one support to children and families affected by county lines exploitation. Also provides additional support from Peer Advisors.	• 35 children and families o 85% positive outcome o 31% successfully exited county lines

			○ 54% decreased risk/in process of exiting county lines ○ 5 children re-engaged with education ○ Improved relationships with family members ○ Decrease in offending ○ Decrease in missing episodes ○ Improvement in health ○ Increased stability and resilience ○ Peer advisors integral
The Disrupting Exploitation Programme, The Children's Society	Birmingham, Manchester, London	Programme works with children who are vulnerable to or are victims of CCE, including county lines exploitation • One-to-one sessions and group work • Targeted interventions • 6-week programme to improve knowledge around exploitation, healthy relationships, staying safe, etc. • Multi-disciplinary response teams • Work with schools regarding exclusion policies • Redesign policies and practice	• Evaluation of service between 2018-2019 – 350 young people participated, 26 received intensive one-to-one support, 45 received targeted group work ○ 50% reported greater understanding of exploitation ○ 75% reported better relationships with family and feeling safer ○ Media outreach to 68.4 million to raise awareness
National Parent Support Team, Parents Against Child Exploitation (PACE)	England and Wales	Telephone support for parents whose children have been groomed and exploited	• Evaluation survey of 64 parents/carers in 2021 ○ 93% had better understanding of impact of exploitation on their child ○ 73% felt communication with their child had improved ○ 82% had increased understanding of warning signs of exploitation ○ 83% felt increased resilience
Parent Liaison Officers Programme, Parents Against Child Exploitation (PACE)	England and Wales	Parent liaison officers within multi-agency child exploitation teams support other parents in person to increase their knowledge of exploitation, understand trauma and how best to report any concerns.	• Evaluation survey of 72 parents/carers who receive support from a PLO ○ 90% felt improved understanding of exploitation and trauma on their child ○ 90% improved understanding about control tactics from exploiters ○ 88% improved understanding of police and social care safeguarding ○ 82% increased understanding of internet safety and parental controls ○ 79% increased confidence to respond to their child's trauma

			○ Professionals working alongside PLOs valued their work and found it made a difference to the relationships between partner agencies and parents
Parent Participation Programme, Parents Against Child Exploitation (PACE)	England and Wales	Provides an opportunity for parents to be involved in consultancy, raising awareness of exploitation and improving practices within PACE.	• Evaluation survey of 22 parents ○ Felt they built strong relationships with other parents affected by child exploitation ○ Were able to share their expertise ○ Felt increased confidence and resilience as a parent
Prevention Programme, The Children's Society	England and Wales	Work in partnership with organisations in every sector to ensure child victims of exploitation and abuse gets the appropriate support. • Provide expert advice, resources and training • Systems change programme – transform places children spend time in • Look Closer Campaign – run with British Transport Police and the NCLCC to encourage members of the public to spot signs of exploitation and report concerns • Network of prevention officers across England and Wales to improve responses to exploitation • Bring partners together to develop long-term solutions • Support police operations	• 35 police forces engaging • 56,000 people reached • Awareness of child exploitation raised • Strategies and policies improved • Look Closer Campaign – of 2,200 who attended the learning programme, 97% said it improved their knowledge of child exploitation, 90% learnt something new that will improve their practice
Next Generation, The Children's Society	Nottingham	Pilot to explore how to support children and young people from 11 to 25yo who are disadvantaged and may be involved in criminality, gangs and/or were experiencing or at risk of exploitation • Work intensively with each child • Provides a safe space to explore emotions and feelings • Provide coping mechanisms and identify triggers • Improve communication skills • Support with education, training and employment	• Reduced missing incidents • Reduced risk of CCE • Reduced risk of CSE • Increased aspirations and self-belief • Improved physical health • Reduced substance and alcohol use • Reduced arrests • Increased school attendance • 71% said they could better manage their emotions • Low caseload/high intensity model • Consistent trusted professional

(Action for Children, 2022; HM Government, 2021c; Home Office, 2020; Hynes, Connolly & Duran, 2022; ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021; Lloyd, 2022; Maxwell et al., 2022; Rescue and Response, 2020; St Giles Trust, 2019; The Children's Society, 2022b; The Children's Society, 2021; The Children's Society, 2020)

Disruption Tactics

It is not enough to intervene when a child is found to be the victim of criminal exploitation. It is also necessary to identify the perpetrators and disrupt their criminal activities to subsequently prevent their ability to criminally exploit and abuse children (Scottish Government, 2022a; The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). This can occur through police intelligence gathering, operational investigations and national intensification periods of disruption activity (Home Office, 2022g; Scottish Government, 2022a; Whittaker et al., 2020). Other disruption methods can include the use of statutory orders. Professionals who were consulted on their views of responding to county lines related CCE were supportive of disruptive statutory orders, although some did not believe these methods were implemented often enough (Olver & Cockbain, 2021). Some of the most common disruption orders have been outlined below but others have been outlined in specific criminal exploitation disruption toolkits that have been published (e.g. Home Office, 2022g).

Trafficking and Exploitation Risk Order (TERO) – Scotland / Slavery and Trafficking Risk Order (STRO) – England and Wales. These orders can be implemented for individuals who have not been convicted of a slavery, human trafficking or exploitation offence but there are indications they are likely to commit these offences (Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015; Modern Slavery Act, 2015).

Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Order (TEPO) – Scotland / Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Order (STOP) – England and Wales. These orders can be implemented for individuals who have been convicted, cautioned, acquitted or found unfit to stand trial for a slavery, human trafficking or exploitation offence but there is a risk they will commit these offences (Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015; Modern Slavery Act, 2015).

Drug Dealing Telecommunications Restriction Orders (DDTRO). This order requires telecommunications providers to shut down a specific telephone line or restrict the use of telecommunications devices involved in drug dealing (Home Office, 2022g). There were approximately 121 DDTROs issued between 2020 and 2022 in England and Wales (Home Office, 2022i). An evaluation of the use of DDTROs in England and Wales through court data and survey responses of police forces and telephone companies found that there were limited evidence that DDTROs disrupt OCGs and county lines if used as a standalone tactic (Home Office, 2022i). It was identified that OCGs were able to recover relatively quickly from this through changing their telephone numbers and handsets, although larger

disruption outcomes are evident when used with other methods. This research was unable to evaluate the impact DDTROs had on violence or exploitation.

Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs). Police can issue this notice when an individual over the age of criminal responsibility is suspected of exploiting a child under 16 years old or a looked after child under the age of 18 years old (Home Office, 2022g). This warning prevents that individual from associating with the potential victim otherwise they can be arrested for an abduction offence. This does not require a court order or a disclosure of an offence from the child but it does require support from a guardian or parent.

Injunctions to prevent gang-related violence and drug-dealing activity. These can be implemented to prevent or restrict gang members from associating with each other, prevent travel to specific areas, prevent groups meeting and prevent individuals from having more than one form (Home Office, 2022g).

Key Issues and Challenges around Child Criminal Exploitation

Criminalisation

Victims of CCE are frequently criminalised. The visible aspect of this exploitation is crime, therefore, children often receive a criminal justice response, rather than the safeguarding required to tackle the abuse experienced (The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). Even children who have been identified as committing an offence as a result of being criminally exploited may also be convicted of the offence and subsequently criminalised (ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021). This criminalisation of CCE victims leads to negative outcomes where children are arrested, labelled as criminals, provided with a criminal record, their education is disrupted by time spent in Young Offenders Institutes where they will then associate with other children in the criminal justice system (Commission on Young Lives, 2022b; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020a).

Care experienced children are significantly more likely to be criminalised compared to other children, especially those in residential care (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020a). Professionals who provided their perspectives on looked after children impacted by CCE in North-West England raised concerns of criminalisation and some expressed that social workers and professionals in social care roles may find it easier to view a child as a victim, whereas police may initially see the crime (Shaw & Greenhow, 2019). Each professional

agreed with the need to recognise the vulnerability of children in care and avoid unnecessary criminalisation. Similar research exploring perspectives of professionals who provide support to children and young people exploited through county lines found that case workers were worried that sharing certain information with the police may lead to them being criminalised (Wroe, 2020). They also noted that older children were more likely to be criminalised compared to younger children, even though they are also a victim of exploitation. Parents also reported being hesitant to report concerns about their child due to fear they will be criminalised rather than safeguarded (Lloyd, 2022). Improvements to avoid criminalising victims of CCE has been noted in the literature (e.g. Jaensch & South, 2018; Wroe, 2020), although more work is required to prevent this entirely.

Adultification

Victims of CCE can be incorrectly perceived and treated as adults (The Children's Society, 2022a). This is known as adultification and can impact the response victims of CCE receive as they are believed to have more autonomy and choice in their situation than they actually do. A common finding amongst the literature is that black children are more likely to experience this adultification bias (Appiah et al., 2021; Commission on Young Lives, 2022b; Skills for Care and Development, 2022; The Children's Society, 2022a). The prejudice and racism experienced by victims of CCE has been discussed in the following section.

Systemic Racism

As previously mentioned, a common theme across the literature was the disproportionate number of young Black males being criminally exploited (Black, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019a; Wroe, 2020). For example, up to date 'stop and search' data in England and Wales showed 52.6 stop searches for every 1000 Black individuals compared to 7.5 stop searches for every 1000 White individual (HM Government, 2022). The highest rates of stop searches were for individuals who were recorded as 'Black Other', with 158 stop searches per 1000. There is also an overrepresentation of Black children being seen as perpetrators, arrested and criminalised in the criminal justice system and an underrepresentation of being seen as a victim of CCE (Commission on Young Lives, 2022b; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Wroe, 2020). For example, in England and Wales during 2020, 17% of children arrested were Black and 27.8% of children in custody were Black (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020b). The ethnicity was not recorded for 5,200 arrests, so these figures are likely to be an underrepresentation. Key findings from the serious case review of murdered 14-year-old 'Chris' also highlighted that young black males are disproportionately represented in the

criminal justice system, gang matrices and are more likely to be identified as victims and perpetrators of gang related violence (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018).

Adultification bias is also more likely to be experienced by Black children, who are less likely to be perceived as vulnerable, innocent or in need of support (Davis & Marsh, 2020, as cited in Skills for Care and Development, 2022). Black and ethnic minority girls are also more likely to be adultified, with these girls being viewed as harder to engage with, more aggressive and oversexualised (Commission on Young Lives, 2022b). This systemic racism ultimately impacts the response that Black and ethnic minority children receive (Commission on Young Lives, 2021). Findings from roundtable discussions with professionals responsible for tackling county lines noted that White children get the relevant support, whereas Black and ethnic minority children receive less support (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). Similarly, there has been a reported pattern of insufficient responses to families from racially minoritised communities who report their children missing, with biases leading to this behaviour being viewed as 'normal' for these children.

Victims turning 18 years old

Victims of CCE who turn 18 years old often experience a significant drop in support and the services they can engage with (Commission on Young Lives, 2021; ECPAT UK & Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021; Hesketh & Robinson, 2019; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). This transition is often described as a "cliff edge", with a strict line between childhood and adulthood, and does not reflect the experiences of criminally exploited children, with exploitation not suddenly stopping on a child's 18th birthday (Skills for Care and Development, 2022). For example, one social worker interviewed in relation CCE stated that there is "no magic switch…around 18/19 where everything disappears…we drop them and then the next week they're picked up by the police and seen as criminals" (Collins et al., 2022). Additionally, some 16- to 18-year-olds do not qualify for some children's services (Hesketh & Robinson, 2019). There are also similar issues with the criminal justice system. If a child turns 18 years old while waiting for court proceedings and there is a delay in recognising they are a victim of CCE, they may then be treated as an adult and convicted or sentenced as such (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). However, in Scotland, recent guidelines from the Sentencing Council (2022) acknowledge this maturation process, and place a greater emphasis on rehabilitation for young people aged up to 25. The committee on the rights of the child has also stated that they commend any party that extends the application of the child justice system to those over the age of 18 as this approach takes into account the developmental and neuroscience evidence around brain development (UNCRC, 2019).

Alpha Victims

An ‘alpha victim’ refers to a child who is being criminally exploited but has become more trusted by the exploiter and asked to recruit and exploit other children on their behalf (Skills for Care and Development, 2022). This child’s own situation may improve slightly despite still remaining a victim of exploitation themselves. This term is not always accepted but it is widely used in law enforcement. Many professionals question how best to respond when victims of CCE begin to commit modern slavery and exploitation offences by recruiting other children and where the line should be drawn between perpetrator and victim (Knowsley Safeguarding Children Board, 2017; Olver & Cockbain, 2021). Research exploring perspectives of professionals who provide support to children and young people exploited through county lines found that older children were more likely to be seen as an exploiter rather than being exploited (Wroe, 2020). One professional provided an example of two young people being arrested, with the younger child being referred to the county lines project but the older child being given a Slavery and Trafficking Risk Order.

Legislation and Definitions

The lack of a statutory definition or a consistent definition across agencies for CCE results in varying levels of identification, response, support and criminal justice processes (Children’s Commissioner, 2019; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Ministry of Justice, 2019; The Children’s Society, 2019a). Bills have been made to parliament calling for the legislation to be amended to include a definition of child criminal exploitation, although these have not been successful (Barnardo’s, 2021; UK Parliament, 2022). The proposed CCE definition was when *“Another person or persons manipulate, deceive, coerce or control the person to undertake activity which constitutes a criminal offence where the person is under the age of 18.”* – page 2 (Barnardo’s, 2021). There are also concerns that victims of CCE may experience other forms of abuse that are not yet considered an explicit criminal offence, for example it has been suggested that being forced to carry drugs internally should be seen as a form of child abuse and/or sexual offence (The Children’s Society, 2019a). Some practitioners suggested that the complexity of legislation acted somewhat as a barrier to identifying and responding appropriately to victims (The Children’s Society, 2019a). Similarly, professional views of county lines related CCE in the West Midlands revealed that even though they did not feel additional legislation was required, they believed that increased understanding of the current legislation was needed to ensure it is implemented effectively (Olver & Cockbain, 2021). For example, some professionals are not aware that trafficking does not have to involve the movement from country to country and can take place regardless of the distance travelled (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2021).

Research also found that the Section 45 defence from the Modern Slavery Act is not consistently considered by police at the outset of an investigation, i.e. whether the individual could have been forced to commit the offence (ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021). Exploiters have also been noted as using the section 45 defence and the NRM process to their advantage by instructing children that they will not be charged for any offences if they say they have been criminally exploited (Collins et al., 2022; ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021). There have also been concerns that modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation legislation is not always considered in court. For example, research examining court cases relating to prosecutions of CCE related crimes discussed the case of *R v Limby 2018*, where a 17-year-old London male was located in an address in Portsmouth and found in possession of heroin, cocaine and money (Stone, 2018). The child pleaded guilty to possession with intent to supply Class A but stated that he had been driven to Portsmouth and told to sell drugs because he was in debt to an older person that he could not say no to. At 16 years old, he was the victim of an acid attack due to gang conflict and was blinded in one eye. The court did not consider that he was a victim of exploitation nor did they implement Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and he was sentenced to 24 months detention and his appeal application was denied (Stone, 2018). When dealing with perpetrators of modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation, due to the complexity of this legislation, these investigations and criminal justice proceedings may be seen as lengthy and effortful compared to choosing to prosecute for more straightforward offences (e.g. drugs, etc.). It should be noted, however, that modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation offences hold sentences up to life imprisonment and therefore, would significantly deter individuals from exploiting children.

Difficulties identifying Victims

Many children do not recognise themselves as a victim of criminal exploitation and may appear to be engaging in criminal activity willingly, which results in child victims going unidentified and receiving a criminal justice response if encountered by professionals or members of the public who are not knowledgeable or aware of CCE (Knowsley Safeguarding Children Board, 2017; Local Government Association, 2021; Olver & Cockbain, 2021; Scottish Government, 2022a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018). Additionally, victims who do not fit the stereotype of being involved in criminality or criminally exploited may also fall under the radar (e.g. females, children from affluent backgrounds, etc.). Professionals also highlighted that children are often not identified early enough, potentially due to lack of awareness by professionals on the indicators of CCE (The Children's Society, 2019a). For example, research examining knowledge of county lines exploitation amongst

health care professionals in a paediatric emergency department found that 68% had limited or no understanding of county lines, 55% were not so confident or not confident at all in identifying signs of children involved in county lines and 36% were not so confident or not confident at all in responding appropriately to the safeguarding needs of a child involved in county lines (Beresford & Jenner, 2022). These results were significantly higher for medical students (87%, 82% and 82%, respectively). Similarly, the Scottish Government assessed the public's awareness of human trafficking in Scotland through a survey of 1000 adults and only 15% believed human trafficking was an issue in Scotland, 8% believed human trafficking was an issue in their local area and only 3% believed children were victims of human trafficking in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021b). Furthermore, only 8% believed human trafficking to be linked to drugs and 2% believed it to be linked to other criminal activities.

Inspections carried out by Ofsted to explore multi-agency responses to exploitation of children missing from care found that some agencies readily identified risks to children and responded appropriately, whereas others identified these issues too late (Ofsted, 2018). It was emphasised that children cannot afford to wait for agencies who are failing to recognise the issue of CCE. Similar concerns were raised in another study where the identification of, and response to, children at risk of CCE in care did not occur early enough (Commission on Young Lives, 2021).

Use of Unregulated Accommodation and Out of Area Placements

As previously discussed, there is an increased risk of criminal exploitation for children in unregulated accommodation and out of area placements (Commission on Young Lives, 2021). Unregulated accommodations are not registered or inspected by Ofsted, therefore the safety of these placements for children cannot be ensured (Caluori et al., 2020; Commission on Young Lives, 2021). Out of area private care home placements, on the other hand, increase the risk of children being criminally exploited as local authorities can lose oversight of their care and information is often not shared between the areas they are moving to/from (Caluori et al., 2020; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020a). There may also be disagreements around which agency is responsible for safeguarding the child or children may have difficulty accessing support out of their local area, leading to children falling through the cracks. Police forces are also not often made aware when a vulnerable victim of CCE has been placed in their area (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adult, 2019).

Data

There is not a single data source that can provide the true number of CCE victims in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2022). This is not only due to CCE being a relatively hidden form of abuse but also due to the issues with data recording. Police forces and local authorities use different data recording processes and systems, with CCE data often not explicitly being recorded (e.g. CCE flags/markers) and/or not being easily extractible from systems (Commission on Young Lives, 2021; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020a; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). For example, research exploring county lines exploitation in looked after children in Merseyside and North Wales found that police were not consistently using county lines or CCE markers on their system making it difficult to evaluate the true prevalence of this issue (Caluori et al., 2020). This lack of national data limits researchers and agency's ability to inform policy and practice.

Missing Children

The response to missing children is often not seen as an opportunity to identify CCE and provide early intervention. Roundtable discussions with professionals with operational or strategic roles in tackling CCE all agreed that the response to missing children is often inadequate and not used to explore the underlying reasons for going missing and whether there is a risk of criminal exploitation (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). Research found that children and young people who go missing from care are less likely to receive a return home interview and if they do, the information gathered is often not shared with the relevant agencies (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adult, 2019). Frequent missing episodes can also be seen as 'normal' for some children and those who have gone missing with a pending criminal matter are often believed to be 'absconders', rather than these children being seen as vulnerable to criminal exploitation (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). This results in children receiving a limited safeguarding response.

CCE during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The lockdown and other public health measures implemented as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in significant changes to children's lives. These changes included school closures, loss of contact with friends, financial difficulties, isolation, limited support, increase use in social media and delays in criminal court proceedings (Brewster et al., 2020; ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021; Singh et al., 2021). The impact of these changes increased the vulnerabilities of children and young people, for example impacting their mental health and increasing substance misuse issues, putting them at risk of

being targeted by exploiters (Brewster et al., 2020; ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021).

Prevalence of CCE

The NRM saw an increase in county lines related referrals during 2020 (14.5%) compared to 2019 (11%) (National Crime Agency, 2021). This increase was thought to be linked to victims of CCE being more visible during the lockdown restrictions, especially if travelling on public transport. In contrast, overall referrals to Police Scotland from the Modern Slavery and Exploitation helpline decreased by 20% between 2019 and 2020 due to the impact of covid-19 (Scottish Government, 2022a). It is unknown if this decrease was due to the level of exploitation reducing or whether there were fewer opportunities for members of the public to identify and report potential victims due to the restrictions that accompanied the pandemic.

Identifying and Safeguarding Victims

Practitioners reported that the public health measures during the covid-19 pandemic reduced the ability of professionals to identify children being criminally exploited and implement the necessary safeguarding measures (Brewster et al., 2020; ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021; Pearce & Miller, 2020). This was due to limited opportunities to conduct face-to-face safeguarding or risk assessments and having to rely on children making direct disclosures via telephone or video call, which they may not have felt comfortable doing (Brewster et al., 2020). Practitioners also found it difficult to maintain the quality and quantity of support remotely. Although services were strained prior to covid-19 (e.g. lack of resources and funding), covid-19 only exacerbated these issues further. Other professionals expressed it was difficult to gather data about children at risk of exploitation during lockdown (Pearce & Miller, 2020). For example, although there was a decrease in children and young people presenting to A&E with injuries that appeared to be CCE related, it was unknown whether this decrease was due to a reduction in CCE and subsequent violence or whether it was still occurring but hidden. Some police officers visited homes of children at risk of exploitation, including county lines related exploitation, to give the opportunity to disclose any issues or reflect on their experiences but the impact of this outreach is yet to be evaluated (Pearce & Miller, 2020). There were also concerns that focus remained on British children from deprived backgrounds during the pandemic meaning children of other nationalities who may be exploited are not identified (Brewster et al., 2020).

County Lines

The covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the adaptability of the county lines supply model. Prior to the pandemic, criminally exploited children and young people travelled to various parts of the county with the increased ability to blend in, however with the covid-19 lockdown and movement restrictions, children travelling on public transport or on the streets were more noticeable (Pitts, 2020). This caused issues for the county lines drug gangs and OCGs. The demand for drugs remained high (Caluori et al., 2020), as did the level of county lines activity (Rescue and Response, 2020). This strain on county lines supply resulted in some police officers and youth workers in London seeing an anecdotal rise in violence amongst rival county lines (Pitts, 2020). County lines had to subsequently adapt their drug transportation and supply methods to continue to maximise on criminal proceeds. Practitioners working with children at risk of or experiencing criminal exploitation through county lines identified an increase in the levels of cuckooing, with children and young people being forced to remain in trap-houses for longer than usual (Brewster et al., 2020). Other adaptations included children being forced to deal drugs in supermarket carparks to reduce detection and one professional noted that a child was provided with a supermarket uniform as a disguise. Exploiters also used private vehicles to traffic children and drugs to other areas of the country to allow for more bulk deliveries and avoid children being stopped on public transport. Common excuses were identified by professionals, with some exploited children located on bicycles stating they were getting their “daily exercise” or some children located on public transport stating they were going to visit foodbanks or going to a deceased relatives funeral (Brewster et al., 2020). It is likely these excuses were provided to them by their exploiters.

The criminal exploitation of children through county lines drug supply continued during the covid-19 pandemic, however gangs and OCGs also had to make adaptations to their recruitment methods (ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021; Singh et al., 2021). Firstly, professionals identified that social media was used increasingly to target and recruit children (Singh et al., 2021). Secondly, more children were noted as being recruited in the importing area, rather than exporting area, to prevent detection by police (Brewster et al., 2020; Caluori et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021). Young females and children from affluent backgrounds were also more likely to be targeted to avoid detection during this time (Brewster et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021). The financial impact that the pandemic had on families may have also led to some parents supporting their child’s involvement in county lines (Pitts, 2020). It is likely that these adaptations made by gangs and OCGs during the covid-19 pandemic will inform their future practices, further increasing their resilience to disruption (Brewster et al., 2020).

Missing Children

Research investigating the exploitation of looked after children through county lines noted that the number of children reported missing from home or care during the covid-19 lockdowns reduced significantly, although those who did go missing were some of the most vulnerable to criminal exploitation (Caluori et al., 2020). Children who did go missing during this time went missing for longer, particularly those exploited through county lines, and were still located far away from their home area and in possession of drugs (Brewster et al., 2020). This meant children spent longer in trap-houses. It is unknown whether the decrease in missing incidents was due to a genuine reduction in children and young people going missing or parents being worried of penalties for breaching covid-19 rules if they reported their child missing (Brewster et al., 2020). Therefore, professionals believed that CCE levels remained consistent but the reporting rate reduced.

Multi-Agency Working and Information Sharing

Professionals reported that the covid-19 pandemic increased and strengthened the communication between partner agencies responsible for safeguarding children at risk of or experiencing criminal exploitation (Brewster et al., 2020; Pearce & Miller, 2020). The intensity of the pandemic also accelerated the rate in which these relationships developed.

School Closures

Schools closed during the covid-19 lockdowns for all children except the most vulnerable, however many of these children attended sporadically due to fear of catching the virus or the stigma of being seen as “vulnerable” (Pitts, 2020). Research exploring the impact of covid-19 on CCE identified that the closure of schools increased the risk of children being exploited due to being unsupervised and spending more time on the streets where they could be targeted by exploiters (Brewster et al., 2020; Pitts, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). Being out of education also reduced the opportunity for teachers to identify potential victims and provide early intervention (Brewster et al., 2020). Long-term impacts of COVID-19 included some children not returning to school when restrictions were removed (Singh et al., 2021). This subsequently increased their risk of being targeted, groomed and criminally exploited.

Good Practice and Recommendations

Further to the issues and challenges identified in the previous section, below are some suggestions of good practice and key recommendations identified in the literature to improve the response to victims of CCE and tackle this issue. This is not an exhaustive list.

Child Protection

CCE should be viewed as a form of child abuse, which should trigger a statutory child protection response as soon as it is suspected by professionals. Child protection refers to considering, assessing and planning the required action when there are concerns by police, social work or health professionals that a child may have been abused or at risk of significant harm (Scottish Government, 2021c). Significant harm is referred to in the national guidance as *'the serious interruption, change or damage to a child's physical, emotional, intellectual or behavioural health and development'* (Scottish Government, 2021c, p. 89), which undoubtedly reflects the harm that children experience, or are at risk of experiencing, when criminally exploited. Child protection processes in Scotland are also underpinned by the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach, which is the Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring that all children, young people and their families receive the right support at the right time to allow them to reach their full potential (Scottish Government, 2022b). Collaboration between agencies working with children, along with a child centred approach, is essential for ensuring children receive the best safeguarding and support to promote their wellbeing (HM Government, 2018c; Scottish Government, 2021c).

Contextual Safeguarding.

This refers to safeguarding children from exploitation or abuse that may occur outside of the family home (i.e. extra-familial harm), including child criminal exploitation (HM Government, 2018c; Ministry of Justice, 2019; Wroe, 2019). This process of safeguarding requires agencies to assess different environmental contexts that could lead to harm and put measures in place to reduce this. For example, peer groups (e.g. ensuring the child has a positive peer group and protective relationships), school (e.g. ensuring the child has supportive teachers, engagement with school, support with any special educational needs, etc.), public spaces (e.g. ensuring public spaces where children spend time are safe – such as, parks, takeaways, cinemas, etc.), public transport (e.g. ensuring buses, trains and other public transport is safe for children) and social media (e.g. ensuring sufficient online protection) (Commission on Young Lives, 201; Rescue and Response, 2020; Wroe, 2019). The child's individual needs and vulnerabilities, along with the parental capacity to support the child, should also be considered (HM Government, 2018c). Where risks are identified, a speedy response is required to reduce or eliminate this risk. This was a key finding in the serious case review of 'Child C' (Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). Contextual safeguarding is also vital in scenarios where looked after children are moved to an out of area residential care placement (Caluori et al., 2020). Creating safe spaces for children should be viewed as everyone's responsibility and engaging the general public and local businesses in contextual

safeguarding is essential to keeping children safe (Wroe, 2019). This form of safeguarding was consistently cited as best practice across the literature (Caluori et al., 2020; Home Office, 2021; Local Government Association, 2021; Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs' Council, 2018; Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020; Wroe, 2020).

Transitional Safeguarding.

This refers to assessing key transitional stages in a child's life that could increase the risk of coming to harm and putting measures in place to reduce this risk (ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021; Local Government Association, 2021). For example, children turning 18 years old, transition from primary to secondary education, moving care placements, leaving care or transitioning to and from secure care or custody (CYCJ, 2022a; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018; Skills for Care and Development, 2022). In each of these situations, it is key to ensure a smooth transition of support, with the level of support and safeguarding remaining consistent. In Scotland, children receive a range of support when entering secure care or custody, during their time spent in secure care or custody and when reintegrating into the community. This is known as Throughcare support (CYCJ, 2022a). Similarly, the range of support provided to a child when entering a care placement, during their time spent in care and when leaving their care placement is known as Aftercare support. Both forms of transitional support involve helping children to build self-belief and promote positive change in their lives (i.e. personal support) and facilitating the changes needed to enable children to achieve these positive changes (i.e. structural support). This can include help with education, training, employment, financial stability, health, substance misuse, involvement of families, accommodation, etc. (CYCJ, 2022a). Ensuring this support is in place will ultimately reduce the likelihood of these children being targeted by exploiters during these transitional periods of vulnerability. Resolving any immigration status issues prior to a child turning 18 is also important, otherwise this may increase the likelihood of the child going missing due to fear of being removed from the country upon reaching adult status, subsequently increasing their risk of exploitation (ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021; Hynes et al., 2022).

Learning Reviews.

Formerly known as 'Significant Case Reviews', Learning Reviews in Scotland take place when a child has died, has been significantly harmed or is at risk of significant harm and there is learning to be gained from a review being completed (Scottish Government, 2021d). The case

must also involve either abuse or neglect as a known or suspected factor, the child or their sibling(s) being on, or previously being on, the Child Protection Register, the child being care experienced, or their death involving suicide, alleged murder, culpable homicide or an act of violence. The overall aim of Learning Reviews is to establish what happened, identify areas for improvement and inform the development of better child protection practices. Learning reviews may also be conducted in instances where outstanding work has taken place from which positive learning can be obtained. Scottish national guidance states that Learning Reviews should take a multi-agency approach and should support staff in reflecting on their practice, sharing their knowledge and contributing to the learning. They should also aim to explore the interactions of the individual within a wider context (e.g. cultural barriers, organisational barriers, etc.). Finally, the guidance states that Learning Reviews should be proportional, flexible and long review processes should be avoided (Scottish Government, 2021d).

Assessments

Vulnerability, needs and risk assessments of children being criminally exploited or at risk of criminal exploitation should be conducted at the earliest opportunity (HM Government, 2018c; Ministry of Justice, 2019). Vulnerability and needs assessments should consider the child's developmental needs (e.g. health, education, mental health, relationships, etc.), family and environmental factors (e.g. employment, income, family functioning, housing, etc.) and parenting capacity (e.g. basic care, stability, safety, supervision, etc.) (HM Government, 2018c). The aim of these assessments are to establish the wants and needs of the child and family, how best to meet these needs and reduce the vulnerability and strengthen protective factors (The Children's Society, 2019a; 2019b). Where the child is being, or suspected of being, criminally exploited, an assessment of the associated risks should also be conducted (e.g. debts, threats received, injuries, etc.) and the necessary risk management measures put in place. Professionals must take into account the various factors that intersect when assessing and meeting the needs of CCE victims, including their gender, age, nationality, immigration status, class, ethnicity, religion, disability and sexuality (Skills for Care and Development, 2022). Assessments of exploitation should not be biased by the idea of a "perfect/ideal" victim and professionals must challenge these biases, viewing all children through a child protection lens.

Alongside assessing the risk to the child, consideration should also be given to assessing the risk of serious harm that the child's behaviour may present to others. This is particularly relevant for victims of CCE who may exhibit some harmful behaviours as a direct or indirect result of being criminally exploited. As many of these children have complex needs and have

experienced significant traumas in their lives, services need to be highly knowledgeable and have the expertise to assess and manage this risk, whilst respecting the rights of the child and supporting them to address their behaviour and realise their full potential (CYCJ, 2022b). The Scottish Framework for Risk Assessment, Management and Evaluation (FRAME) process was specifically developed to inform risk practices around children aged 12 to 17 years old whose behaviours have or may cause serious harm to others (Scottish Government, 2021e). The aim of this process is to intervene and protect the child from causing such harm or reduce the risk or impact of further harm. This approach should be child centred, take into account child development and be systemically and trauma informed. Situational and contextual factors should also be explored to understand the reasons behind their harmful behaviour. Within FRAME, the Care and Risk Management (CARM) framework is considered the best practice formal risk management process, taking a holistic approach to managing children who present a risk of serious harm to others by balancing their individual rights, reducing their vulnerabilities and building their strengths (Scottish Government, 2021e). Both FRAME and CARM are underpinned by the overall aim of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), and a children's rights approach to risk practice, ensuring these children receive the right support at the right time to allow them to reach their full potential.

Intervention and Prevention

Risk can increase or decrease based on how agencies respond to the child when their needs first emerge (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Early intervention was therefore identified as good practice throughout the literature (Black, 2021; HM Government, 2018a; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Olver & Cockbain, 2021). It is vital to respond to critical moments in the child's life as soon as possible (e.g. when excluded from school, injured, arrested, etc.) to capitalise on the receptiveness of children during these moments (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). A key finding from the serious case review of 'Child C' was that agencies did not maximise on the 'reachable' moment when he was arrested out of area and it was apparent he was being exploited (Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). In these situations, victims of CCE often require assistance and support outside of regular working hours and therefore services need to have this flexibility (Olver & Cockbain, 2021). This serious case review recommended that every area should have a 'Rescue and Response' type of service that can respond to children arrested out of area through county lines exploitation and seize these reachable moments (Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020).

Victims of CCE may have developed a deep mistrust of adults and authorities, which may have been instilled in them by their own experiences, by their exploiter or by their family

(Children's Commissioner, 2019; Home Office, 2021; Ofsted, 2018). It is therefore essential that agencies work to break down these barriers, develop a trusted relationship, encourage the child to engage with support and divert them away from being exploited (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Home Office, 2021). Developing this trust takes time, persistence, creativity and flexibility (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). It is therefore essential that interventions are flexible, responsive to the child's needs and vulnerabilities, and are delivered in a way that makes the individual feel safe (Murphy, 2021). Parents may also be fearful of, or mistrust, the police and authorities through their own experiences, therefore agencies must also work to build trust with the entire family (Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). Parents should be seen as a protective factor and interventions should include the parents and families where possible (Children's Commissioner, 2019; HM Government, 2018a; Local Government Association, 2021; Skills for Care and Development, 2022). Parental engagement has been found to build resilience and lead to successful interventions (Commission on Young Lives, 2022a; The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020; The Children's Society, 2019b). Interventions should also ensure appropriate support for marginalised groups and take into account wider contextual issues, such poverty, unstable employment, housing, racism and mental health (Commission on Young Lives, 2022a; Commission on Young Lives, 2022b; Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018; The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020).

Interventions should be child-centred, trauma-informed and tailored to the child's specific needs (Murphy, 2021; Local Government Association, 2021; Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018; Skills for Care and Development, 2022). Interventions that are strengths-based and solution focused will help to encourage children and their families to engage by focusing on what goals they want to achieve and identifying the strengths they have to meet these goals (Murphy, 2021). Mental health support is also important for victims of CCE (Black, 2021; Commission on Young Lives, 2022b). Mentors who have lived experience of CCE are particularly effective in interventions due to children being able to relate and look up to these individuals as role models (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime, 2019; Collins et al., 2022; Home Office, 2021). Providing educational sessions in schools on drugs, grooming, CCE, financial exploitation, knife crime, negative relationships, etc. are also beneficial preventative measures (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime, 2019; Black, 2021; HM Government, 2021b; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). Supporting children and young people to continue engaging in education and the benefits of this for their long-term goals is also beneficial (The Children's Society, 2019b). Children should also have proactive and fulfilling activities available to them outside of school to improve their overall wellbeing

(Black, 2021; Commission on Young Lives, 2022b). Interventions should be evaluated in some way to establish the most effective methods of supporting victims of CCE.

Multi-Agency Working and Information Sharing

Multi-agency collaboration and information sharing is essential for tackling CCE and safeguarding and supporting victims (Caluori et al., 2020; HM Government, 2018c; Home Office, 2022g; Home Office, 2021; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Ministry of Justice, 2019; Olver & Cockbain, 2021; Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). Establishing shared definitions, goals and understanding of vulnerabilities and risks amongst partner agencies working together, whilst being clear about the role each agency plays, is key to multi-agency working (HM Government, 2021b; HM Government, 2018a; The Children's Society, 2019a). Victims of CCE often have various professionals working with them from different agencies, with each agency holding different pieces of information. Multi-agency strategy and safeguarding meetings help to provide the full circumstances of the case and allows the best support and risk management strategies to be put in place (Skills for Care and Development, 2022; Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). This also allows professionals to build a shared understanding of the scale, nature and risks associated with CCE in their area, allowing a coordinated approach to be taken when tackling this issue (Scottish Government, 2022a; The Children's Society, 2019a).

A consistent and effective framework for sharing information, along with the relevant information sharing agreements, are required (Home Office, 2021; Olver & Cockbain, 2021). Police Scotland are developing a Partners Intelligence Portal to allow for key partners to share important information they collate through their work (Scottish Government, 2022a). Information sharing is particularly important where a child is arrested, located or placed in residential care out of area, where intelligence and information must be shared between areas to ensure appropriate safeguarding and prevent children falling through gaps (Caluori et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2019; Skills for Care and Development, 2022; Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020). These situations also require co-ordinated responses from police forces (HM Government, 2021b).

Language

It is important to recognise the impact language can have when working with victims of CCE. Negative language isolates, stigmatises and criminalises children, therefore it is essential to consider the language used verbally and in reports, assessments, referrals, etc. (Appiah et

al., 2021; Collins et al., 2022). Professionals should avoid using labels or dehumanising language, for example ‘plugging’, ‘cuckooing’, ‘going country’, ‘drug dealer’, ‘drug/money mule’, ‘nominal’, ‘gang member’, etc., as these reinforce negative stereotypes and dismiss the level of exploitation and harm experienced by victims (Appiah et al., 2021; Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018; The Children’s Society, 2022a; The Children’s Society, 2019a). Terms that place responsibility on the child should also be avoided (e.g. ‘putting themselves at risk’, ‘choosing this lifestyle’, ‘not engaging with services’, ‘engaging in risky behaviours’, etc.) (Appiah et al., 2021; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; The Children’s Society, 2022a). In Scotland, the term ‘children in conflict with the law’ is used to avoid criminalising children through misusing terminology (Collins et al., 2022).

Professionals should use language that can be understood by the child (Collins et al., 2022; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). Language should be anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory (Appiah et al., 2021). Challenging inappropriate language within and outside of agencies can help to overcome entrenched stereotypes or perceptions (Appiah et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2022). Actively using the word ‘child’ in practice also acts as a reminder not to adultify the child and recognise their needs and rights as a child (Appiah et al., 2021). Language guides have been published to inform appropriate language when working with child victims of exploitation (e.g. Appiah et al., 2021; The Children’s Society, 2022a).

Schools

As previously outlined, the correlation between CCE and school exclusions has been highlighted consistently throughout the literature. As a result, there has been a call for school exclusion policies to be reformed and behaviours that may lead to exclusion should be viewed through a safeguarding lens (Just for Kids, 2020). Children should not be excluded from school for behaviours that have arisen as a direct result of criminal exploitation, as this puts them at greater risk (HM Government, 2018a). It has been suggested that headteachers and teachers should aim to understand the child’s actions or behaviours within a wider context (i.e. what could be leading to the decline in the child’s behaviour) and then put measures in place to mitigate the risk of exclusion and subsequently, reduce the risk of criminal exploitation (Just for Kids, 2020).

Missing Children

Missing incidents should be seen as a key opportunity to identify whether a child is at risk of criminal exploitation and implement appropriate safeguarding (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022). An independent return home interview (RHI) should be completed when a child is

located or returns from a missing episode to assess whether they have come to any harm and build intelligence (HM Government, 2018a; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Skills for Care and Development, 2022). This was also listed as a key recommendation in the serious case review of 'Chris' (Newham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2018). This will also begin to fill the intelligence gap in relation to the link between going missing and CCE.

Awareness and Training

CCE needs to be well understood by those most likely to come into contact with potential victims, especially those who work directly with children and young people (HM Government, 2018a; Ofsted, 2018). This includes education, health, social care, youth criminal justice system, housing, police, support services and other partner organisations. Clear training packages for professionals need to be developed and delivered across all agencies to improve understanding (Scottish Government, 2022a; Skills for Care and Development, 2022). Training should aim to cover a variety of topics, such as defining CCE, indicators of CCE, grooming and control tactics, role of social media and technology, how to respond and support victims, trauma, how to assess risk for victims, the NRM process, how to implement current legislation, impact of language, how to assess wider contextual issues and services and support available for victims (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Local Government Association, 2021; Olver & Cockbain, 2021; Skills for Care and Development, 2022; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). It is also essential to raise awareness amongst professionals of the power imbalance that drives the criminal exploitation of children and that children receiving some form of material item (e.g. money, clothes, etc.) in return for criminal activity does not make them any less of a victim (Robinson et al., 2019). Resources and webinars for parents and carers are required to increase their ability to identify signs of CCE, allowing for early detection and prevention (HM Government, 2021a). Awareness raising among the general public, communities and local businesses is also required to ensure that if they encounter a victim of CCE, they recognise the signs and know how best to respond and report their concerns (Scottish Government, 2022a). This also applies to bus drivers, rail workers and food outlet workers, who frequently encounter children and young people (Local Government Association, 2021).

Data

A data driven approach is required to tackle CCE (Caluori et al., 2020). Therefore, consistent and common data collection and recording practices need to be adopted by agencies to better understand the scale and nature of CCE (Caluori et al., 2020; ECPAT UK and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2021; The Children's Society, 2019a; The Child Safeguarding

Practice Review Panel, 2020). A strong and accurate evidence base will help to inform policies and practice for tackling this issue and supporting victims of CCE.

Multi-Agency Data

Aim

The aim of this stage was to collate statistics on CCE from multiple agencies (police, local authorities and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service) in order to assess the nature, scale and extent of CCE in Scotland. This exercise also provided an opportunity to identify any gaps in data recording, evidence and knowledge.

Methodology

Due to the time constraints of this research project, requests for CCE statistics were made informally via email to already established contacts of CYCJ and Action for Children. The information requested from each agency is outlined in Appendix B.

Findings

The statistics and responses from each agency have been outlined and summarised below.

Police Scotland

The CCE marker was first introduced onto the iVPD police recording system on the 20th March 2022, therefore the data provided by Police Scotland was from this date to the 15th February 2023. A total of **236 CCE markers** were recorded on the iVPD during this time, of which 167 were categorised as a 'child concern' (applies to any child for whom the police have a concern, including child protection) and 69 were categorised as a 'youth offending child concern' (applies to any child for whom the police have concerns around their offending behaviour so any additional underlying issues can be identified, recorded and shared with partners). Furthermore, 175 CCE markers related to male children (74%) and 58 related to female children (25%). The gender was restricted in two cases and unknown in one case. The age range or average age of these children was not provided. According to geographical location, the highest number of CCE markers were recorded by Edinburgh city (51), followed by the Highlands (40) and Glasgow (35). The number of CCE markers relating to all geographical locations in Scotland has been outlined in Table 4, although some data has been redacted for privacy reasons. Police Scotland noted that the most common reasons for a CCE marker being placed onto the iVPD were exploitation by adults, drugs (including drug use, drug dealing and county lines), shoplifting, theft, theft of vehicles, road traffic offences, gang related violence, anti-social behaviour and missing person incidents.

Table 4 - *Number of CCE Markers on the iVPD according to geographical location.*

Geographical Location	Number of CCE Markers on iVPD	Gender
Aberdeen City	7	All Male
Aberdeenshire	5	All Male
Angus	< 5	All Female
Argyll & Bute	< 5	Male and Female
Clackmannanshire	< 5	All Male
Dumfries & Galloway	7	All Male
Dundee City	12	Male and Female
East Ayrshire	< 5	Male and Female
East Dunbartonshire	< 5	All Female
East Lothian	< 5	All Male
East Renfrewshire	< 5	All Male
Edinburgh City	51	11 Female, 39 Male, 1 Restricted
Falkirk	< 5	Male and Female
Fife	< 5	Male and Female
Glasgow City	35	9 Female, 25 Male, 1 Restricted
Highland	40	18 Female, 22 Male
Inverclyde	7	All Male
Midlothian	< 5	All Female
Moray	< 5	All Female
North Ayrshire	5	Male and Female
North Lanarkshire	6	Male and Female
Orkney Islands	< 5	All Male
Perth and Kinross	7	Male and Female
Renfrewshire	5	Male and Unknown
Scottish Borders	< 5	Male and Female
South Ayrshire	< 5	Male and Female
South Lanarkshire	7	Male and Female
Stirling	6	All Male
West Dunbarton	< 5	All Male
West Lothian	< 5	All Male

Local Authorities

Responses were received from nine of the 32 local authorities (Aberdeenshire, East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverclyde, Renfrewshire, Scottish Borders and South Lanarkshire). Of these, only Glasgow and East Ayrshire council were able to provide statistics on CCE prior to the data collection deadline. East Ayrshire council identified one victim of CCE for whom there were concerns of drug related exploitation. Glasgow council identified 12 victims of CCE aged 15 to 17 years old. Information could not be sourced from one of Glasgow's localities, therefore these figures may not represent all victims of CCE in the Glasgow local authority area. The most common type of CCE identified in Glasgow was drug related exploitation. Glasgow also noted that 14 NRM referrals were submitted in relation to concerns of CCE involving children aged 11 to 17 years old. Although South Lanarkshire were unable to provide statistics on CCE, they noted concerns for a number of young males involved in gang related activity through which they were being criminally exploited to commit drug related offences and act as enforcers to cause harm to others. Despite being able to

provide this information, these three local authorities highlighted that further work is required to improve their current CCE identification and data recording and extraction processes.

Other local authorities who responded were either unable to provide this information due to this information not being easily extractable from their systems (five) and/or due to having limited time or resources to process the request for information (two). Some local authorities expanded on the reason(s) for this information being difficult to extract from their systems. For example, one local authority noted they currently use a shared partnership system to record information from Interagency Referral Discussions (IRDs) for cases that have met the threshold for child protection. However, 'criminal exploitation' is not currently available to select on this system as a reason for the IRD, therefore it is not possible to identify the number of IRDs initiated due to concerns of CCE without completing a manual search of the system. They also highlighted that it would be difficult to identify any cases where there are concerns of CCE but insufficient evidence to initiate child protection measures and an IRD. Similarly, two other councils also noted that CCE is not currently recorded as a category of risk on their system, with any concerns being captured in individual case records or minutes of formal meetings that are not easily extractable. Although CCE has been introduced as a new child protection risk indicator by one council, they noted that they would not be able to easily identify any incidences where CCE has been raised as a concern outwith child protection processes (e.g. additional assessments or where child protection concerns were not registered). Two local authorities raised concerns around the understanding and awareness of CCE amongst professionals, noting that some professionals view the offending behaviour by children being criminally exploited as being a 'choice' or 'bad behaviour' instead of acknowledging the vulnerability and exploitation. This, in turn, impacts on the number of children being identified and recorded as victims.

Some local authorities outlined their current efforts to improve their CCE data recording practices and raise awareness of CCE amongst staff. For example, one local authority has included these issues on their High-Risk Working Group's agenda and have included CCE in their upcoming multi-agency training. Similarly, another local authority is currently working on improving their CCE information collation processes and developing a strategic response to tackling CCE and supporting victims. In one local authority, the use of context pattern mapping has raised awareness of CCE within social work and other partner agencies, recognising that staff awareness has particularly increased over the past six months. They also noted an increase in the prevalence of CCE but were unable to identify if this was due to a better understanding of CCE amongst staff and/or a true increase in the number of children being criminally exploited. One local authority expressed that CARM and Framework for Risk

Management and Evaluation (FRAME) processes need strengthening in order to build safer systems of protection around victims of CCE.

Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service

A total of 350 charges relating to the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 were reported to COPFS as of 28th February 2023, of which 195 were prosecuted. COPFS were unable to provide details of how many of these involved the criminal exploitation of children due to 'criminal exploitation' not being recognised as a criminal offence in itself under the current legislation (see Table 5). Similarly, although 12 Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Orders (TEPOs) were issued to date, it is unknown how many of these were issued due to the criminal exploitation of children. The number of convictions under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 could not be provided by COPFS due to this information being held by the Scottish Government Justice Analytical team. Furthermore, the number of Trafficking and Exploitation Risk Orders (TEROs) issued could not be provided by COPFs as these are applied for by Police Scotland. Due to the time constraints of this research, it was not possible to request this further information from Police Scotland and the Scottish Government.

Table 5 - *Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 data held by COPFS*

	Total to Date	CCE Related	Type of CCE
Charges relating to the Human Trafficking & Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 reported to COPFS	350*	Unavailable	Unavailable
Charges under the Human Trafficking & Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 that were prosecuted	195*	Unavailable	Unavailable
Convictions under the Human Trafficking & Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable
Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Orders issued	12	Unavailable	Unavailable
Trafficking and Exploitation Risk Orders issued	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable

*Up to 28 February 2023

Discussion

The data provided by Police Scotland demonstrates that the issue of CCE reaches every geographical area of Scotland, albeit to varying degrees. As expected, more victims of CCE were identified in larger cities, however it cannot be confirmed whether the reduced number of victims identified in other geographical areas are due to lower populations, lower levels of CCE, reduced awareness of CCE amongst professionals and members of the public or a combination of these factors. Discrepancies were identified between the number of CCE

victims recorded on the iVPD database and those identified by the two local authorities that could provide this information. However, as a date range was not specified in the request for information to local authorities, it is unknown whether the figures reported by the local authorities relate to the same period of time as the police data. In line with other research, the majority of victims identified by Police Scotland and Local Authorities were male, although some female victims were identified. Drug related exploitation was also the most common form of CCE identified, including children being exploited to carry, transport and sell drugs. Victims of CCE identified by local authorities were aged 15 to 17 years old. The age of victims was not provided by Police Scotland, therefore it is not possible to ascertain the most common age(s) targeted by exploiters.

Due to the limitations highlighted within the responses regarding current CCE data recording practices and the lack of understanding and knowledge amongst some professionals, the statistics provided are likely to be an underestimation of the true number of children being criminally exploited. Improving data recording practices to ensure that child criminal exploitation is explicitly recorded in a way that can be easily identified and extracted from databases is therefore required. Additionally, efforts to increase the awareness and understanding of CCE amongst professionals will improve the identification of victims. By making these changes, a more accurate picture of the prevalence of CCE in Scotland can be established. The non-recognition of CCE within the legislation prevented COPFS from being able to easily identify the number of charges, prosecutions and TEPOs that involve the criminal exploitation of children. Amending the legislation to specifically include CCE as a criminal offence could perhaps improve the ability to establish if perpetrators of CCE are being charged, prosecuted, convicted and disrupted.

There were some limitations with the research itself. Due to the time constraints of the research, professionals only had a short timescale in which to provide the data. This is likely to have contributed to the lack of responses provided by local authorities, given the busy nature of their work. Similarly, formal requests for information would have been more likely to elicit responses. A date range was also not provided within the request for information to local authorities, therefore it was not possible to accurately compare the number of CCE victims identified by Police Scotland with those identified in the corresponding local authority area.

In conclusion, evidence shows that children are being criminally exploited across Scotland. However, improvements to data recording practices, awareness raising amongst professionals and current legislation can help further our knowledge and understanding of the true scale and nature of this critical issue in Scotland.

Interviews with Professionals

Aim

The aim of this stage was to explore how CCE in Scotland is understood by professionals who work in a role relating to CCE, including what definitions of CCE are used, what patterns and trends have been found, what perspectives professionals have on the issue and any practice concerns.

Methodology

Participants

Professionals who have a role in policy or practice in relation to CCE, or who work with children and young people who may be at risk of or are being criminally exploited, were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling methods by contacting 71 professionals who were already established contacts of CYCJ and Action for Children. A total of 22 professionals from across Scotland took part in the interviews. The geographical areas represented within the sample were Edinburgh, Dundee/Tayside, Highland, Stirling, Glasgow, East Ayrshire Aberdeen and Scotland-wide. Participants worked in various organisations and job roles including the third sector, Police Scotland, local authorities, Residential Care, Secure Care, and the Scottish Government. Of these, 7 professionals had a role in policy or practice in relation to CCE but did not work directly with children, 9 professionals worked directly with children at risk of CCE or who were victims of CCE and 8 professionals had a role that involved both aspects. The length of time professionals had been in their current role ranged from two months to 20 years, with the most common length of time being 1 to 2 years (10 participants), although some participants had previously worked in other roles relating to CCE prior to their current position. It must be noted that one participant was involved in organising this research project, however as their knowledge around CCE was valuable they were included in the sample. Due to the nature of this research, including this participant in the sample does not affect the validity of the study.

Materials and Procedure

All potential participants were sent a participant information sheet and consent form via email to read and electronically sign if they wished to take part. All interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams. The interview followed a semi-structured format and consisted of a series of questions to gather information on their understanding and perceptions of CCE in Scotland. Participants were prompted to expand or clarify any points if required.

Data Analysis

Once the transcripts were ready for analysis, these were imported into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 20. Each transcript was then analysed line by line, converting the information into initial codes that described the content. These codes were then combined into common themes and subthemes, with accompanying quotations from the interviews to illustrate these themes. These themes were then reviewed and refined, with the most prominent themes across the interviews being selected for inclusion in the final report.

Findings

Understanding of CCE

Definition of CCE

The definitions of CCE provided by professionals most commonly mentioned children being used to carry out criminal activities for someone else's benefit. Grooming, manipulation and coercion were also frequently cited as key aspects of child criminal exploitation. It was noted that children may gain from the exploitative circumstances, such as receiving money, clothing and drugs in return for carrying out the criminal activity, however one professional highlighted that children do not benefit in the same way as the exploiter. Some professionals recognised within their definition that children often do not understand that they are a victim of exploitation, with one participant stating that they do not have the capacity to make informed decisions about their situation. Participants noted that exploiters were often older individuals or adults, although some explained that children could be exploited by their own family members or peers. Other elements of CCE highlighted by professionals within their definitions included the power imbalance between the exploiter and child and CCE being a form of harm and abuse.

Types of CCE

Drug related exploitation was the most common type of CCE identified by professionals, with 19 of 22 referring to this within their interviews. This included children being exploited to transport drugs, store drugs, sell drugs and collect drug debts. Furthermore, over half of the participants reported children being exploited through the county lines drug supply model and two participants identified that children were being trafficked and exploited for the purpose of cannabis cultivation.

> *"…you've got what would be the typical county lines, you know, debt bondage, young people being groomed into gangs, you know, being trafficked around the country with drugs and finding themselves, you know, expected to conduct themselves in really violent ways and also put themselves in higher and higher situations."* – Participant H, Secure Care, Glasgow

> *"There's again in the drug side, you know we hear about…particularly trafficked youngsters coming over working in cannabis farms. They come over with the understanding that they're gonna, you know, they're gonna have a job. They're gonna have a nice place to live and when they get here, they're not…they don't find that is entirely the case."* – Participant B, Scottish Government.

The second most common type of CCE identified by professionals was children being exploited to carry out enforcement action and debt collection on behalf of the exploiter, including being instructed to cause harm to others.

> *"I had a young guy…who was 15 years old, stabbed a guy, taking on, taking on somebody else's beef with them and we can't say it's organised crime but there was certainly, you know, he's been exploited because somebody's said to him 'Go on…you're a big guy go on, you do this to that guy' and he did it."* – Participant O, Police Scotland

Some children were identified by professionals as being exploited to steal cars, motorbikes, mountain bikes and electric bikes to order. Similarly, others were exploited to shoplift by OCGs or peer groups.

> *"…you get some shoplifting rings that are targeting lads to go into Glasgow and Dundee and steal the most expensive aftershaves and the most expensive, this and that, and they've got like thirty guys working for them on a day-to-day basis, so it's big money."* – Participant N, Third Sector

Children were also criminally exploited to engage in fraudulent activity, with one participant from residential care recalling exploiters using the bank account of a looked after child to transfer money obtained from scamming elderly individuals. Begging was also identified by professionals as a form of CCE, whereby children are exploited by OCGs to beg and return the proceeds to the exploiter(s). Other criminality that children were identified as being exploited to commit included burglaries, breaking into shops, robberies, underage driving without a licence, holding illegal items, selling alcohol illegally and committing acts of vandalism on behalf of others.

Indicators of CCE

Professionals listed a number of potential indicators of CCE but it was highlighted by some that this should only be viewed as a guide for potential signs to look for in children and not as a definitive checklist. The main indicator professionals suggested was any significant changes in the child that cannot be explained.

Change in Possessions. The most common indicator that professionals identified (17 of 22) was children suddenly being in possession of new material items that they do not have the means to purchase themselves (e.g. expensive designer clothes, trainers, watches, drugs,

televisions, mobile phones, bikes, etc.). Children being in possession of a lot of money that they cannot account for was the second most common indicator identified by professionals (15 of 22). Other changes in possessions that were identified as being indicators for drug related exploitation included having more than one mobile phone, being in possession of a 'burner phone', being in possession of weapons or a significant amount of drugs.

Change in Behaviour. A significant change in behaviour was also cited by a number of professionals as being a key indicator of children being criminally exploited. These changes include disengaging or being excluded from school or suddenly being over compliant with school to avoid detection, disengaging from services or hobbies, going missing, going out frequently, going out in the middle of the night, change in sleeping patterns and travelling to different areas.

> *"When it starts to become really concerning is when, you know, the kids are jumping buses or trains and ending up in Edinburgh, Glasgow, you know, with none of that support network around and still telling you that they're meeting a 24-year-old person, that gets alarm bells ringing even more so…"* – Participant R, Residential Care

Other behaviour changes identified by professionals included the child engaging in excessive cannabis use, dealing drugs, being involved in increased levels of offending or risk-taking behaviours, being more vocal, increased levels of aggression or violence towards others, becoming secretive, withdrawn, isolated, changing the type of music they listen to and being hypervigilant without the ability to shut off or relax.

Change in Appearance. Just under half of the professionals noted that a change in a child's appearance can be an indicator of CCE. This can include a deterioration in personal hygiene or suddenly taking very good care of their personal hygiene and physical appearance, dressing differently or having tattoos that represent some form of gang affiliation.

> *"…they came into our group work and they had holes in their trainers and stuff, their hygiene was poor, they had like a ripped jacket, like, they were really like poverty stricken, and then within like 6 months to a year, they've got Moncler body warmers and they've got the nicest of trainers, they've got watches, Fitbits, and none of them work, they're like 14, 15, they don't go to college, so it doesn't take a rocket scientist there, it's just like, you know, you're being exploited."* – Participant N, Third Sector

Changes in appearance were not only due to having access to new material items but professionals found that children changed the way they dressed as a means to protect against the risks associated with CCE.

> *"…young people that may come with layers of clothes on, so they might be wearing like 3 pairs of tracksuit bottoms or like 3 t-shirts…and it's just to stop them getting stabbed or…to carry drugs in the lining of their trousers and things. So, that's a concern."* – Participant E, Third Sector

Change in Mental Health or Mood. Many professionals noted that victims of CCE may experience a deterioration in their mental health, such as emotional dysregulation, anxiety, low mood, depression and suicidal ideation. Participants noted various methods used by children to express themselves and cope with the impact that CCE has on their mental health, including self-harm or through creating music.

> *"Quite often our young people will have a history of self-harm as well because it's a form of coping with what they're experiencing and communication, so the self-harm's communicating 'I'm not OK, I'm not OK in this situation, but I don't know how to get out of it'…"*– Participant P, Secure Care

> *"A lot of these guys express themselves through rap music and some of the lyrics that we've heard…like it would break your heart man and we're thinking on paper these wee guys are monsters but you'll listen to some of this music and it's like, 'help me', do you know what I mean, 'somebody help me, like somebody see what's going on and help me because like I'm just too small to do it myself, like I don't know what I'm doing', so it's heart-breaking really."* - Participant N, Third Sector

Change in Social Activity. A significant number of participants identified a change in peer group as being of particular concern, such as children no longer hanging around with their usual friend group and having unknown older or adult associates. Other identified changes in social activity included increased use of social media, establishing new associates online, receiving frequent messages and calls and talking about people from other areas (e.g. 'the Londoners' or 'the guys from Liverpool', etc.). Changes in family relationships were also noted as being an indicator, such as not speaking to or concealing things from parents or being aggressive or violent towards their family members.

Change in Attitudes. Two professionals highlighted that some children may present with a change in attitudes, with one suggesting that children develop a 'gangster' mentality and another noting that children have an increased tolerance for violence.

> *"…their tolerance for violence. So what I've seen is young people, looking at maybe county lines or CCE, will use violence to resolve the situation and they can then recover the relationship really quickly as the victim or the perpetrator. So there's a tolerance and acceptance that violence…isn't the end of a relationship…because violence is tolerated and is an acceptable method of conflict resolution."* – Participant H, Secure Care, Glasgow

Signs of Physical or Sexual Harm. Professionals identified that children with physical injuries, particularly knife or weapon related injuries (e.g. stab wounds, slash wounds, etc.), can be an indicator of CCE. Children also being reluctant to attend hospital to seek medical care for their injuries due to the fear of alerting the authorities can also be an indicator. Other injuries that may be potential signs of CCE can be self-harm injuries or signs of sexual assault.

Children at Increased Risk

Many professionals identified a number of vulnerabilities that can increase the risk of criminal exploitation for children, acknowledging that exploiters prey on these vulnerabilities. These have been categorised below into individual vulnerabilities, family and home life vulnerabilities and socio-economic vulnerabilities. However, it must be noted that professionals equally highlighted that any child can be at risk.

Individual Vulnerabilities. The most common vulnerability identified was children not being in mainstream education, with 15 of 22 professionals mentioning this within their interview. This included children who were not attending school or had been suspended, excluded, given alternative education or had a reduced timetable. Professionals stated that their absence from school results in them having no structure to their day and being left unsupervised within the community without the protective environment that school offers. In turn, this increases their vulnerability and makes them more visible to exploiters.

> *"…they're being kicked out of schools, they're being excluded from schools, so they're like targets, you know what I mean? They're vulnerable young people that are on the street and they've got nothing to do with their time, they're on social media 24 hours a day, they've no break from it, they're just, they're prime candidates for these organised crime groups "* – Participant N, Third Sector

Half of the participants also stated that care experienced children were particularly vulnerable to being victimised, with these children often feeling marginalised or on the periphery of society. It was also noted that living in residential care increased the likelihood of multiple children being exploited at one time. Professionals also identified that children who are transitioning out of care and moving into other accommodation are also vulnerable to being targeted by exploiters.

> *"I don't think care homes are really set up to meet the needs of young people. I don't think them living in an environment with other young people is healthy. Like I think where one person creates a bit of a link, they all create the link…I do think it does create a bit of a culture, it gives other people to then abscond with or runaway with"* – Participant U, Youth Justice, Highlands

Children with additional support needs were also identified by professionals as being vulnerable to CCE, including children with learning disabilities, cognitive impairment, ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia and other neuro-developmental issues that may result in a child's mental age being younger than their physical age. It was recognised that children with these conditions may not have the capacity to fully understand the situation that they are entering putting them at increased risk of harm. It was also noted that often these conditions are not formally diagnosed in children, despite presenting with signs.

> *"So again, that adds another vulnerability into it because then people can look at, well, he or she doesn't, doesn't fully understand or comprehend what they're doing and they're easily manipulated, easily used and abused."* – Participant O, Police Scotland

> *"So I do think there's higher risk for young people with maybe ADHD, who are more impulsive, less thinking, less consequential thinking, but also [young people] with ASD as well are more vulnerable."* – Participant U, Youth Justice, Highlands

Professionals noted that children who misuse substances were also at increased risk of being criminally exploited, specifically children using cannabis. This appeared to introduce the child to older individuals or adults who sell cannabis, eventually becoming exploited either through accruing drug debts or being provided with 'free drugs', that they will then be expected to pay off by drug dealing. This was a common pattern identified by several professionals. Children who have attributes and capabilities that are appealing to criminal gangs were identified as being at increased risk of criminal exploitation. For example, children who are intelligent, fearless, bold, confident, have strong leadership skills, are physically strong, violent and willing to take risks are viewed by criminal gangs as useful, increasing their likelihood of being targeted. Children with childhood trauma or adverse childhood experiences were also considered to be particularly vulnerable by professionals, with one professional explaining why they believed this was the case:

> *"I think ones who are willing to run risks or already live with maybe so much trauma in their life that they've already experienced, that these risks don't actually to them feel like risks because every day of their life, their whole childhood was so potentially risky and they were always ready to, you know, they were always in threat of violence or attack or just unpredictability, probably to them it doesn't seem that much of a risk"* – Participant S, Alternative Education

Some professionals identified that children from racially minoritised communities are overrepresented amongst victims of CCE, although one participant highlighted that children of all ethnicities, races and cultures are at risk of exploitation. Other vulnerabilities identified by professionals included children on compulsory supervision orders, children who are isolated, lonely, lack friends or are being bullied. Concerns were also raised around unaccompanied asylum-seeking children being vulnerable to re-trafficking and exploitation as they are new to the area, do not know anyone, do not have any friends and have no money.

Family and Home Life Vulnerabilities. Over half of the participants noted that children with challenging home lives were particularly vulnerable to CCE. Professionals described the environments that these children have grown up in as 'unstable', 'disrupted' and 'chaotic'. These children were often identified as having some form of disconnect with their parents, such as having an absent parent or having vulnerable parents who are physically present but mentally absent (e.g. parents suffering from drug addiction, etc.). Through this

disconnect, children's basic needs are not met and they are not provided with a safe and supportive childhood. Professionals highlighted that this results in attachment issues and the child having to assume the role of an adult prematurely. It was noted that these children can crave a sense of inclusion, recognition and having someone to care for them and pay attention to them. Participants also highlighted that children often viewed their exploiters as friends or 'family' due providing them with the sense of belonging that they were so desperately seeking.

> *"They tend to be young people that are looking for their tribe. You know they're looking for their somebody. So there's something missing and if they think that they've made friends, if they think they're suddenly in with the big boys and they're doing well…you know, it's never the kid who's got a really good circle of mates around them…and they're all really positive and they're all engaged in really positive activities and forward thinking…that's not the ones that I see anyway."* – Participant V, Local Authority

It was also recognised that in some circumstances, children are acting as young carers to their parents but conceal this due to stigma and therefore do not receive the appropriate support. In contrast, one participant noted that children who grow up in a strict home life may also be vulnerable to CCE. Children with families involved in criminal activity were also recognised as being at increased risk of CCE due to criminality being normalised for the child through daily exposure and the intergenerational expectation that criminality will continue.

Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities. Children face many complexities and challenges when living in poverty that increase their vulnerability to being criminally exploited, with half of the participants mentioning that children living in areas of deprivation are at increased risk of falling victim to CCE. Multiple participants provided examples where criminal exploitation was almost necessitated by the poverty that families were experiencing. A powerful example of this was provided by one frontline practitioner:

> *"So he's 15 years old, mum is a cocaine or heroin addict, he has little sisters and a little brother. Now I see him all the time…going about on his electric motorbike, his wee rucksack, his balaclava…dressed for action as he would say, you know he's busy, he's working and I said, 'listen wee man, you need to stop that. You're gonna get caught'. He says… 'Are you crazy?...Because I do what I do, I put electricity in my mum's meter, I put gas in, I put food on my wee brothers and sisters table, my Dad's not even there, my Dad's a drug addict' but because he does that, he provides for his family. What am I supposed to say to him?"* – Participant A, Third Sector

In contrast, some professionals noted that children from affluent areas are also at risk of being criminally exploited, with two professionals mentioning the case of a criminally exploited young boy from an affluent area being murdered after being drawn into areas where organised crime was more prevalent.

Risks and Impact of CCE

Professionals identified a range of risks associated with CCE, both to the child and to others.

Risks to Child. The vast majority of professionals (21 of 22) highlighted that victims of CCE are at significant risk of physical harm, including violence, threats of violence and intimidation. This risk often stemmed directly from the exploiters, for example if children lost drugs or money through being arrested or if they were unable to pay back their own drug debts. Specific acts of violence noted by professionals included children being threatened with guns, having to undergo brutal initiations by gangs and organised crime groups, being tortured, being attacked with weapons and being stabbed. Children being criminally exploited are also at risk of being trafficked, with one professional noting incidences of children being abducted from their homes and being driven miles away. Professionals also noted a significant risk of death for victims of CCE, whether that is through consumption of drugs or as a result of the aforementioned physical harm experienced at the hands of exploiters or rival gangs and organised crime groups.

> "*The risk, the risks are massive. We lost a young person a couple of weeks ago who was stabbed to death…, so the risks are huge. We've had another young guy who was stabbed in between the ribs and by the grace of God, he's still about now and he's still walking about, but I mean, there's still, like, danger to his life, there's still people looking for him*." – Participant N, Third Sector

Professionals also identified that victims of CCE are at risk of sexual harm, with many children, both males and females, being sexually exploited and subject to sexual abuse through gang initiations or as a consequence of not paying back drug debts.

> *"I mean, we've had an unfortunate experience within the last year of a young person being raped by multiple adults…that was done as a, due to drug debt, so it was done as a kind of…gosh, I'm struggling to find the words even for it, but you know as a consequence of not paying their debt."* – Participant R, Residential Care

Professionals identified that children were also at risk of witnessing traumatic incidents, including physical and sexual violence against others, recognising that this often resulted in children becoming desensitised to violence and criminality. The impact of both experiencing or witnessing these traumatic incidents also increased the risk of emotional harm for the child, with professionals noticing a decline in their mental health, such as depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation.

Another significant risk that professionals identified is the criminalisation of children, where children are treated as perpetrators of crime rather than vulnerable victims. This results in children being arrested, incurring charges and a criminal record and ending up in secure units or prison. Professionals stated that this criminalisation had a long-term impact on their future through limiting potential job and education opportunities, resulting in children losing hope, motivation and failing to thrive.

> *"I've got one young person at the moment who is too fearful to apply for a job because he's worried about his criminal record before he's even begun… in his head, he's got, 'I've got a criminal record and I can't even apply for a job in McDonald's 'cause that might come up'…"* – Participant R, Residential Care

Finally, several professionals raised concerns around the risk of children failing to get out of the exploitative situation, subsequently becoming entrenched in criminality, and going on to becoming an active offender in their own right.

Risks to Others. Just under half of the participants highlighted significant risks to the family of the child, including threats and damage to the family home (e.g. petrol bombs, windows broken, etc.) as a result of children's drug debts or attempts to withdraw from the gang or organised crime group. Multiple professionals reported families having to be moved or other safety measures being implemented to protect families and the child. There is also a risk to other children, including siblings, friends and other peers, who may also be drawn into criminal exploitation as a result of their connection with the child.

Some participants recognised that there was a risk to professionals when working with victims of CCE, with some reporting that they do not use their own cars when working with children or parking their vehicle a distance away from their meeting point in case exploiters are monitoring the child. The following unnerving example was provided by a frontline worker:

> *"…we were walking back, you know, just having a conversation, like, oblivious to what's going on around us and, like, a…car pulled up, like, screeched the brakes on and a guys came out with a big like sword thing and that and started shouting and threatening him in the middle of the road …I can't even think what would have happened to this wee guy if I hadn't been there…I didn't half panic like, I was like 'one of us could be murdered here', like, that's what was going through my mind. So these wee guys are subject to this on a daily basis…"* – Participant N, Third Sector

As previously mentioned, professionals noted that children are often instructed to cause harm to others on behalf of exploiters, giving examples of children being instructed to stab others and threaten others with weapons. Professionals identified that the overall risk of harm that surrounds CCE poses a risk to the community, with individuals feeling less safe in their communities due to increased levels of drugs and violence.

Identified Trends

Professionals identified many CCE related trends which have been categorised below into prevalence, victims, exploiters, risks, geographical, Covid-19 and other trends.

Prevalence. Professionals highlighted that CCE has been happening for a long time but it has only recently been labelled as child criminal exploitation and on people's agenda. Forty percent of participants (9 of 22) reported that the issue of CCE is increasing, using words such as 'exploded', 'spiralling', 'epidemic' and 'unmanageable' to describe it. In contrast, one professional noted that the level of CCE has remained consistent, with another participant stating that it seems like it is increasing but there is no evidence to support this.

Each participant emphasised that the true scale is likely to be a lot higher than the number of children they are working with. For example, 11 children were reported as being formerly mapped on the Serious Organised Crime mapping system, although the significant disconnect between this number and the number of children that frontline staff are working with was highlighted.

> *"…what we've seen in every area as well is it starts off, we identify like I was just saying there, an initial cohort, but once you start to really unpick it and understand how all of that interlinks it just explodes and that's the only way I can describe it. It explodes everywhere and referrals come in from everywhere and this young person's associated to that young person and to this group and it's so obviously spread, it's not isolated in certain communities, it's across, it's city wide."* – Participant E, Third Sector

Victim Trends. The age of children being criminally exploited as reported by professionals ranged from 11 to 17 years old, with the most common ages reported being 13 to 16. A key pattern that was identified by six professionals is that victims are becoming younger, with an increase in victims aged 12 to 13 years old instead of the previously seen, 15- to 17-year-old victims. Participants suggested this decrease in age could be due to exploiters viewing them as being less likely to be detected or will receive lesser charges and sentences if caught compared to older children and adults. Alternatively, participants suggested that this pattern may have emerged due to children appearing to grow up quicker or having access to mobile phones and social media at a younger age. Two professionals also identified differences between working with older and younger children, with those who are younger being easier to divert away from exploitation compared to older children.

> *"The older…young people feel a bit more, and clearly they're still at significant risk, but slightly more streetwise in terms of...it's more difficult to divert them because they can have in their head that they know what they're doing. Whereas the young people … that are slightly younger, they're chaotic, they take greater risks because they don't understand and we're more likely to expose what they're involved in because they trip up at some point or they become so overwhelmed with it that they disclose everything. Whereas our older young people … are very much the opposite to that."* – Participant E, Third Sector

Professionals reported that the majority of CCE victims are males, although it was recognised that females can also be victims but to a lesser extent. Of the females who were identified,

professionals noticed that there was often an overlap between sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation. In terms of ethnicity, as previously outlined, some professionals identified that children from racially minoritised communities are overrepresented amongst victims of CCE, whilst others did not.

One participant who worked in secure care provided an interesting perspective on victim types. They identified two potential types of CCE victim, one who is seen as a short-term asset by the exploiter and one who is seen as a long-term asset. The professional noticed that children viewed as a short-term asset often had some form of cognitive impairment, received no benefits from the exploitation (e.g. money, status, etc.), remained at the bottom of the hierarchy, were forced to complete brutal initiations and were made to do risky things for little to no reward. In contrast, children viewed as long-term assets often had higher levels of intelligence, confidence and escalated through the hierarchy, eventually entering recruitment roles. Other professionals also highlighted the common trend of victims become entrenched in criminality and eventually going on to recruit others. For example, one participant recalled a 15-year-old having drug runners working for them and another noticed that when children returned to the community after leaving secure care, they were often re-recruited as 'elders' and began recruiting 'youngers' on behalf of the gang or organised crime group.

Exploiter Trends. Several trends were also identified in terms of perpetrators criminally exploiting children. Firstly, professionals identified that organised crime groups worked in a business-like manner, running a highly functional and calculated business model. A frequent recruitment scenario reported by professionals involved exploiters targeting a vulnerable child, offering them material items or free drugs to entice them into an exploitative situation. They would then ask the child to complete small tasks, such as delivering a small package a short distance, to test the child's loyalty. The level of responsibility would then continue to escalate into more serious criminality and fear, intimidation and violence would be used as a means to maintain the level of control over the child.

Professionals noted a number of specific places or spaces where children were identified and targeted by exploiters. The most common method of recruitment was via social media, with eight of the participants mentioning this within their interview. The social media platforms identified by professionals were Snapchat, Instagram, Xbox live and other online gaming portals, Facebook and the Dark Web. It was highlighted that these platforms continue to evolve and professionals are not always aware of new social media platforms that emerge. Children were also targeted at their schools, whether through being recruited by their peers or being

collected by exploiters from school and being transported elsewhere. Local shops and newsagents were also identified by professionals as an particular area of concern:

> *"We also see patterns where young people might say that they've got connections with like local shops, for example, where they can go and drop off drugs or weapons, that if they are travelling from example one area of the city to the other, that's quite a lengthy journey, if at any point they become quite concerned about not being able to make it all the way over or there might be a tip off from the police, that there's certain places they can go and drop off. So it's very organised, it's very structured and it's not kind of just kids running drugs from here, there and everywhere."* – Participant E, Third Sector

Professionals identified OCGs of specific nationalities who were involved in the exploitation of children. However, one participant from Police Scotland confirmed that the number of serious organised crime groups active in Scotland remains relatively static each year.

Risk Trends. Over one-third of professionals reported seeing an increase in levels of serious violence associate with CCE. This increase was believed to be the result of gangs, county lines and OCGs coming up from England and introducing new types of violence and intimidation tactics that have not been seen in Scotland previously. For example, children reported being exposed to firearms, with one child having a gun held to their head. One participant highlighted that this increase in levels of violence may also be attributed to the county lines model placing individuals in situations of conflict where they are unlikely to have to face that individual again compared to more localised conflicts.

> *"When you've got the criminal exploitation element to a particular county line where they're out with their own communities and no ties, they're effectively foot soldiers, you know…They're not hurting anybody they know, there's not that same likelihood of a backlash, there's not that somebody reasoning with you…it's just bodies, you know, people are commodities in that sense…so they can hurt somebody, not really having to face that hurt again…."* – Participant H, Secure Care, Glasgow

Sixty percent of participants noticed that as a result of the increase in violence, there has been an increase in children carrying weapons, including knives, baseball bats, coshes, batons, poles and knuckledusters. Children informed professionals that they carried weapons predominantly for protection, with professionals noting that this is has now become normal practice for children. Concerns were also raised that children would be more likely to use a weapon if they were carrying one. Some professionals hypothesised that both the increase in violence and weapon carrying can be attributed to the increase in amount and type of drugs, with more Class A drugs being associated with CCE. For example, previously children were exploited to transport and deal cannabis, whereas professionals reported that this has now escalated to crack cocaine, heroin and Valium.

Geographical Trends. Several geographical trends were identified by professionals within their interviews. One major trend involved victims of CCE, gangs, organised crime groups and county lines travelling to or between various locations across Scotland. The various links between geographical locations identified from the professionals' interviews has been outlined in Table 6, although it must be noted that these connections are primarily anecdotal.

Table 6. - *Geographical trends for victims, gangs, county lines and OCGs*

Geographical Location(s)			Reason
Aberdeen City	To/From	Aberdeenshire	YP running drugs
Aberdeen	To/From	Fraserburgh	YP running drugs; County line operating
Aberdeen	To/From	Peterhead	YP running drugs; County line operating
Arbroath	-	-	CCE type not specified
Central Belt	-	-	County line operating
Dumfries and Galloway	-	-	YP running drugs; county lines
Dundee	-	-	YP running drugs; OCG or County line set up base
Dundee	To/From	Aberdeen	YP running drugs
Dundee	To/From	Angus	YP running drugs
Dundee	To/From	Inverness	YP running drugs
Dundee	To/From	Perth	YP running drugs
East Coast	-	-	County line operating
East Lothian	-	-	County line operating
Edinburgh	-	-	YP running drugs; OCG or County line operating
Edinburgh	To/From	Aberdeen	YP running drugs
Edinburgh	To/From	Dundee	YP running drugs
Edinburgh	To/From	Fraserburgh, Peterhead	YP running drugs
Edinburgh	To/From	Inverness, Highlands	YP running drugs
Edinburgh	To/From	Oban	YP running drugs
Fraserburgh	-	-	YP running drugs; County line operating
Glasgow	To/From	Ayrshire	YP running drugs
Glasgow	To/From	Inverness	OCG or County line operating
Glasgow	To/From	West of Scotland	YP running drugs
Inverness	To/From	Ayr	YP running drugs; County line operating
Inverness	To/From	Stirling, Alloa	County line operating
Inverness	To/From	Wick and Thurso	YP running drugs; County line operating
Perth	-	-	OCG or County line operating
Peterhead	-	-	YP running drugs; County line operating
Scottish Borders	-	-	OCG or County line operating
Stirling	To/From	Edinburgh	YP running drugs
Stirling	To/From	Glasgow	YP running drugs
Stranraer	-	-	YP running drugs
West Coast (e.g. Oban)	-	-	OCG or County line operating
Wick and Thurso	-	-	YP running drugs

Note. YP = Young Person. It was not always specified if child running drugs was county line related

Another common geographical trend identified by professionals involved a number of CCE victims, gangs, organised crime groups and county lines travelling to and from England and Wales. The most common areas mentioned by professionals were London and Merseyside (including Liverpool, The Wirral). Other areas mentioned by professionals but less frequently included Bradford, Cardiff, Coventry, Derby, Manchester, Newcastle, Preston, Stockport, Stockton-on-Tees, Durham, Wales (including Cardiff), West Midlands (including Birmingham) and Yorkshire. One participant noted that the trends seen in England, including violence and knife crime, were rapidly filtering up into Scotland. Other trends seen by professionals within their local working areas have been summarised in Table 7 below.

Table 7 - *Other geographical trends identified by professionals in their local areas*

Geographical Location	Trends identified by Professionals
Aberdeen	• Aberdeen City and the North East have a long tradition of various amounts of drugs being available due to the various harbours along the coast
Dundee	• Dundee noted as receiving negative press for drug issues and is often referred to as the 'drug death' capital, which has led to organised crime groups, gangs and county lines exploiting this issue • Professionals note the level of CCE is likely lower than bigger cities but the CCE model remains the same • An increase in drug trafficking has been seen
Edinburgh	• Local drug gangs and crime groups are adapting the business model seen in England to use locally • Children also being exploited to run drugs locally • Gangs more chaotic and less organised, therefore it is easier for county lines to infiltrate • Increase in territorial violence • Children are being provided with electric motorbikes to facilitate drug running • OCGs, Gangs and County lines are exploiting the high drug demand in Edinburgh • Type of CCE has changed overtime – pre-covid CCE related to car theft, motorbike theft, house breaking to steal high value vehicles; post-covid has seen a significant increase in drug dealing, drug transportation and violent enforcement action • Specific areas of vulnerability in Edinburgh: o North of Edinburgh o Craig Miller o Drylaw o Granton o Leith o Muirhouse o Niddrie o Pilton o Wester Hailes • Romanian OCGs have been noted to pass through Edinburgh and children are exploited to commit fraud, theft and shoplifting as part of wider crime families.
Glasgow	• Gangs more localised, organised and territorial, therefore harder to infiltrate • Specific areas of vulnerability in Glasgow: o City centre o Clydeside o The 'Four Corners', e.g. Argyle Street, etc.

Highlands	• Professionals note that the model of CCE in the Highlands is no different to that seen in other cities • Recognised that it is more difficult to identify victims in more rural areas of the Highlands due to there being fewer professionals working in these areas • Inverness – there has been an increase in children coming up from London to sell drugs • Inverness – one professional noted that as Inverness is not as multi-cultural as other areas, it is easier to identify children who have come from out of area due to accents, appearance, etc.
Stirling	• One professional identified that the issue of CCE in Stirling is a lot bigger than people think

Covid-19 Trends. Professionals reported a significant impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on CCE, both during the pandemic and in the aftermath. Firstly, it was identified that children being out of school during the pandemic increased their vulnerability for reasons previously mentioned. The pandemic also led to an increase in children being online and using social media:

> *"With covid and all these other things, we encouraged all our young people to go on online platforms and encourage them that way but that has only enhanced the amount of exploitation online. We've made these decisions as adults, as governments, to encourage our young people to learn in this way, to develop in this way, to socialise in this way … it's just constantly online and I think that that has made it so much easier for the organised crime and the people who exploit young people to get in there…"*– Participant D, Third Sector

Additionally, less support could be provided to children, parents and families during this time, leading to a breakdown of support networks, access to services and fewer opportunities to identify children at risk and intervene early on. This amalgamation of factors increased the vulnerability of children, which exploiters took advantage of. The police did note that children being exploited to run drugs were easier to identify during lockdown periods due to children often having no other valid reason for being out in the community. Professionals noted some long-term impacts of the pandemic, including children not returning to school and mental health services having a severe backlog, meaning children are having to wait months to receive an appointment.

Other Trends. Another trend seen by professionals that caused them concern was the introduction of the free travel card for children, with multiple participants citing that this facilitated the exploitation of children by allowing them to travel to various areas with very little detection or questions asked. Some other trends seen by professionals included cuckooing and vulnerable adults' properties being taken over as part of the CCE model and an emerging trend of children selling vapes, although it was unclear if the latter was exploitative or an entrepreneurial venture by some children.

Professional Practice

Training and Learning

Six professionals stated that their CCE training included both formal training and learning on the job, six professionals stated they had solely learned on the job, four professionals stated that they had no specific CCE training and the remainder stated they had other forms of learning. Formal CCE training mentioned by professionals included training delivered by Action for Children or Bernardo's, engaging in e-learning packages and attending conferences or seminars. One professional did highlight that it is difficult to find specific training on CCE and another participant confirmed that CCE was not included in their training programme for social workers. Other relevant CCE specific learning included engaging with CYCJ resources, attending information sessions, own learning (e.g. personal research, University courses, other qualifications, etc.), previous knowledge from previous job roles or studies and shared learning and discussions with other professionals. Other non-CCE specific but relevant training received by professionals covered Care and Risk Management, Child protection and safeguarding, CSE, trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and Action for Children's 'The Blues Programme', which focused on emotional intelligence and emotional regulation.

Identifying CCE, Assessing and Managing Risk

Identifying CCE. Various approaches to identifying CCE were mentioned by professionals in their interviews including gathering all available information in the initial stages or at the point of referral, seeking out further information from other agencies to build a complete intelligence picture of the situation and holding discussions with internal staff or other external agencies. Some participants described conducting a mapping process to highlight vulnerability networks, including children who are victims of or at risk of CCE, their associates who may also be vulnerable to CCE and links to potential exploiters. Professionals also stated that consistently observing the presentation of the child is important in identifying CCE, although they highlighted that it can be difficult to distinguish between signs and symptoms of CCE and similar looking issues that can present in children who have had adverse childhoods and experienced trauma.

Of the 11 participants that commented on their level of confidence in identifying CCE, five stated that they found it easier to identify now that they are working in a job role where CCE is at the forefront of their minds, two stated that they find it easier to recognise victims from out of area compared to local children who are being exploited, two expressed that they would not be confident in identifying CCE due to not working on the frontline and two explained that they were confident that their staff were trained to identify CCE.

Assessing Risk of CCE. Professionals mentioned various approaches to risk assessing CCE, with the most common being Contextual Safeguarding. It was explained that this approach allows them to look at the wider network of risks, including family, school, peer groups, online use, individual vulnerabilities, strengths, etc., ensuring the risk assessment is holistic and completed through a child protection lens. Many professionals highlighted that multi-agency meetings were crucial for discussing the risks surrounding the child. These meetings were referred to as Interagency Referral Discussions (IRDs), with one participant explaining that IRDs take place when concerns for a child meet the threshold for child protection processes and involve multiple partner agencies coming together (e.g. local authority, health, social work, police, etc.) to determine what course of action is required to support the child and manage the risk. Having conversations with the child was also deemed to be important in order to understand the risks posed to them. Some professionals also noted using specific risk assessment tools and formulations to further understand the child's life, such as the START: AV. It was emphasised that risk assessments should be a fluid and continual process due to the risks constantly changing for victims of CCE.

The main challenge identified by professionals when it comes to assessing the risk of CCE is when they only have limited information or where relevant information has not been shared by other agencies:

> *"So for many of these children, we will suspect that [CCE] for a long, long time and we will talk to them, have open conversations, say to them we think you're being exploited, can we talk about that? And…they don't view themselves as being exploited and no one's confirmed to us they've been exploited and during that period, police may hold intelligence that indicates that they have been linked to an organised crime group or that they might be running [drugs], but they won't share that intelligence with us, so there's a tension there and that for me is where I sometimes struggle with our risk assessment and our planning because it's limited as to what we can do…"* – Participant K, Local Authority

Of the three participants that commented on their confidence of assessing the risk of CCE, one stated that they are confident if they have all of the necessary information, one explained that they feel confident if they are discussing the risk within a multi-agency setting and can gain the insights of others and one stated that they would not be confident in assessing the risk of CCE due to not being on the frontline.

Managing Risk of CCE. Once the level of risk was assessed, participants explained that specific robust safeguarding and child protection measures would be put in place to mitigate the risks to the child. Some participants highlighted that secure care placements may be required for the children deemed to be at the highest levels of risk, with these care

placements providing the child with a period of safety and stability to fully immerse themselves in interventions. One participant noted that children on compulsory supervision orders were also afforded some level of safety, with children seen to use being on tag as a valid excuse to withdraw from gangs or organised crime groups for a period of time without suffering repercussions. Risk management processes were also put in place for frontline professionals, including lone working policies.

One of the main challenges identified by professionals is that it can be difficult to manage all associated risks of CCE, especially when trying to maintain a balance between allowing children to live their lives and keeping them safe, with one participant questioning how the safety of secure care can be replicated in the community. Other professionals presented conflicting views on how best to manage risk, with one participant preferring to prepare for unknown risks and taking a more preventative approach rather than waiting for physical evidence of the risk, whereas another participant suggested focusing on the reality of the risks instead of the perceived risks and worst-case scenarios.

Other Processes to Tackle CCE. Participants from Police Scotland described various policing units that include CCE in their workstream, for example the Risk and Concern Hubs where reports of concern, including concerns of CCE, are submitted by police officers or external partners. These concern reports are then reviewed, triaged and relevant information shared with appropriate partners (e.g. health, social work, third sector, etc.). The reports are given a risk grading (standard, medium, high), with CCE concerns receiving a grade of medium or high depending on the antecedent information and risks posed to the child. The Risk and Concern Hubs are also responsible for recording this information on the Police interim Vulnerable Persons Database, ensuring a CCE marker is attributed to children at risk where necessary. The Violence Reduction Unit within the police service is another initiative designed to reduce violence and repair communities, which includes diverting children away from violence and crime.

The Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) Task Force within the police focuses on tackling serious and organised crime across Scotland, including the exploitation of children through SOC. Within this, they also identify information gaps and issues around CCE and SOC, aim to plug these gaps and highlight opportunities for intervention at earlier stages. They also aim to raise internal awareness of CCE to ensure the correct processes are followed internally (e.g. markers on iVPD, remembering vulnerability of children within organised crime investigations). One participant noted they were completing some research to understand

children's pathway into being exploited through serious and organised crime to help inform current practices and prevent this.

Experience of Multi-Agency Working and Information Sharing

The agencies mentioned by professionals as working together for the purpose of supporting victims of CCE include education, health (e.g. CAMHS, GPs, etc.), police, residential care, social work and third sector organisations (e.g. Action for Children Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service, Barnardo's, etc.). Although participants predominantly reported positive experiences of multi-agency working, they also highlighted some challenges. These have been outlined below.

Positive Multi-Agency Working. The overall benefits of multi-agency working highlighted by professionals included working together to achieve the same goal and sharing perspectives, hypotheses and information to identify victims of CCE and intervene at the earliest opportunity. Participants characterised positive experiences of multi-agency working as involving 'amazing relationships' with other agencies, working closely, sharing information and intelligence effectively and keeping each other in the loop. Some examples provided of positive multi-agency working specifically with the police included having a single point of contact or a dedicated CCE co-ordinator to speak to, police acting on intelligence shared by partner agencies and responding to children as victims of CCE rather than focusing on the offending. Participants within the police also recognised that a police response may not always be the most appropriate response and stated that they rely on multi-agency working to identify and protect victims of CCE.

Challenges of Multi-Agency Working. One main challenge of multi-agency working reported by professionals was the delay or a lack of information sharing, with some participants referring to challenges with social work and the police. Although professionals often understood that police could only share certain information, concerns were raised by both police and other partner agencies around the conflict of interest when it comes to not wanting to interfere with police investigations and ensuring the safety of children. The below extracts demonstrate this turmoil:

> *"Organised crime is seen as a really sensitive area of business and there's always this kind of concern that comes through from police about not wanting to expose an operation or interfere with an operation, so they'll limit the amount of information that they share with us. We've tried over the years to kind of say, well, we don't really need to know the ins and outs of what that is, but we need to know the details in terms of how a young person is being exploited and how we can potentially protect them. So that can be an issue."* – Participant E, Third Sector

> *"I think there's probably times certainly when it comes to dealing with young people involved in organised crime that some partners would prefer to have…more intelligence of what we have on that young person. So we can share what we can but what we can't do is compromise other things that are ongoing at the time. So if we've got live operations…we can't share everything because it may blow an operation that's been running for six months, a month, a year or 18 months and we understand that but then there's that balance of when does child protection overtake the criminality side of things. So yeah, if there's child protection matters, they need to be looked at and so it's about getting that balance right. It's about making sure that we don't lose sight of the bigger picture rather than just focusing on your own wee world of dismantling and disrupting and detecting, you might have to deter and you might have to divert people away."* – Participant O, Police Scotland

One police officer stated that they would never be criticised for oversharing if it was related to a child protection matter and professionals recognised that there has been an increased willingness of police to share information overtime.

Another challenge experienced by professionals when working with other agencies is the need to sometimes address and professionally challenge unhelpful or inappropriate attitudes, language or perceptions, although it was emphasised that this was not a frequent occurrence. Some examples provided by professionals included some individuals within partner agencies not seeing the child as a victim, using inappropriate language when discussing children (e.g. 'appalling behaviours', 'risk taking behaviour', 'choices they are making', etc.), appearing to engage in racial stereotyping, only focusing on the behaviour rather than the underlying causes (e.g. poor school attendance, offending, etc.) or having negative attitudes (e.g. suggesting children were 'exaggerating' their mental health symptoms to get a lesser sentence or responding negatively to returning children who are on compulsory supervision orders back to their residential care home).

Some challenges were experienced specifically by participants working in residential care, expressing that they often feel like they are not recognised in the same way as other agencies, resulting in information not being shared with them or not being listened to when requesting a multi-agency meeting to discuss concerns for a child. It was also expressed that they sometimes feel that full responsibility is placed on them to support the child, highlighting that they can provide care, nurture and safeguarding to the child but still need the involvement of other professionals to support and keep children safe. Similar sentiments were shared by third sector professionals, with some expressing frustrations about not always being invited to professional meetings despite working directly with the children and being able to contribute. They also felt that too much pressure was sometimes placed on their services to perhaps take on roles or provide support on behalf of other agencies that would not necessarily be within

their remit. Third sector organisations also reported significant delays to their services in the beginning due to the time it took to establish information sharing processes with statutory partners, however participants did recognise that once the benefits of their services were acknowledged, multi-agency working and information sharing improved dramatically.

Other reported challenges of multi-agency working included difficulties when some agencies: do not see eye to eye on an issue, take different approaches to issues, have different skillsets, appear to have their own agendas or appear to make decisions based on budgets and resources rather than the needs of the child. Some professionals reported difficulties when multiple local authorities cover one policing area and frustrations amongst other agencies if they do not see improvements quickly. Finally, professionals expressed difficulties when staff within agencies frequently change, impacting on the consistency of multi-agency working and the support received by children:

> *"…we've got a young person who's had three social workers in four months…how are you meant to build any relationship and do any kind of work with that young person as their social worker when the case keeps on getting changed hands? Like the communication is then terrible and then impacts on our partnership because we can't get information from them..."* – Participant D, Third Sector

Supporting and Responding to the needs of Victims

Professionals described multiple ways in which they support and respond to the needs of children being criminally exploited. These have been categorised and discussed below.

Practitioner and Child Relationship. The relationship between the practitioner and child was considered a vital part of the support process. The first stages of any support involved practitioners building rapport with the child, gaining their trust, respect and allowing the child time to see that the practitioner is there for them.

> *"So a major thing is building a relationship. The first couple of months is building a relationship and if you don't, if you don't have that…I mean, that is the currency of our job. If we don't have a relationship with the young person, we can't do anything."* – Participant I, Third Sector

Other important elements of a practitioner and child relationship that were highlighted by professionals included having empathy, compassion and understanding for the child, providing reassurance to the child that they are there for the child's benefit, providing the child with a space to talk in a non-judgemental environment, always treating the child with positive regard, advocating for the child, being a positive adult and role model in the child's life and being flexible to the child's needs and availability. The importance of establishing healthy professional boundaries with the child was also noted to avoid losing credibility when more

serious conversations are necessary. Professionals also described having honest and transparent conversations with the child at the outset of the relationship to inform them about confidentiality and the requirement to pass on any concerns. Despite this, some professionals found it difficult to maintain the child's trust whilst having to report any concerns or risks.

> *"…we often have really good relationships with these young people because we're voluntary sector because they don't feel that pressure but then what can be very difficult is challenging them on some of the topics around CCE because I'm thinking if I'm the only adult you're gonna have a positive experience with today, I don't want to push you too far…you don't wanna sort of ruin that…"* – Participant M, Third Sector, Dundee

Educate the Child. Professionals identified the importance of educating children about CCE, including what it is, what the associated dangers are, including the dangers of carrying weapons, and help them to recognise that they are a victim, making them more receptive to receiving support. Some professionals noted that this should be approached sensitively as it can be hard for children to hear that they are being exploited. Other areas that professionals sought to educate children on were healthy relationships (e.g. what these are, what they should look like, etc.), substance misuse (e.g. the impact of drugs on the brain, etc.) and about making a living legitimately.

> *"So that's what we try and teach our young people. It's not about instant gratification, real life...the 'honest life' is about hard work and you'll have moments of gratification but you have to work towards that and the reason you have to work is because the police can't come and knock on your door and take your money from you…because when you acquire these things illegally, they're not real. It's a mirage, it's not real…"* – Participant A, Third Sector

Divert the Child away from CCE. Within the support provided to children, professionals helped to divert them from CCE through a number of approaches. One key diversion strategy was to guide children towards alternative pro-social options in life. This often involved helping the child to realise their strengths and potential and find a way to apply these in a positive and pro-social manner to achieve their ambitions. Practitioners also reported encouraging children to engage with education, whether that be returning to school or some other form of education that could reduce their time spent unsupervised in the community with no daily structure. Similarly older children were encouraged to consider college courses, apprenticeships and training or employment opportunities. Professionals would also support children with their CV's, job interviews and work placements.

A large element of supporting children was to engage them in positive and meaningful experiences and activities. Some activities reported by professionals included sports, bowling, snooker or completing the Duke of Edinburgh qualification. These activities also provided children with the opportunity to create positive peer groups. One professional also noted that

it was important to give children with opportunities to have safe risk-taking experiences (e.g. go-karting, rock climbing, high wire courses, etc.), to provide children with high dopamine energy rushes that are often craved by teenagers. Ultimately, professionals felt it was important to give children the opportunity to be children:

> *"…you've got 14 year olds that are involved in selling drugs to adults, daily stress of having to carry drugs, having to give money to drug dealers…I think it's important that you take them out that environment and let them have a childhood as well, which a lot of them don't have and if you take them to a game of football or take them to the bowling alley or take them to McDonald's and just let them be a 14 year old boy or a 15 year old girl for half an hour, an hour, a day or something, then I think that's important as well."* – Participant C, Voluntary Sector

Address individual vulnerabilities in the Child. Practitioners would also aim to identify a child's vulnerabilities and build resilience around these. Some examples of this provided by professionals included building confidence in the child, providing the child with skills to keep themselves safe and getting the child specialised support (e.g. mental health, trauma, substance misuse, etc.). Some professionals noted that children may exhibit other negative behaviours aside from those displayed as a consequence of being criminally exploited, therefore highlighted that it was also important to address these behaviours and support them with understanding the consequence of these behaviours, rather than solely focusing on CCE in isolation.

Challenges and Concerns

Various concerns and challenges were identified by professionals throughout their interviews. The challenges have been categorised into professional practice, exploiters and wider organisation challenges, which have been outlined below.

Challenges of Professional Practice. Over seventy percent of professionals (16 of 22) identified the challenge of changing negative perceptions and attitudes held by others and the subsequent inappropriate language used by some individuals. One of the main concerns was around criminally exploited children being viewed as perpetrators as opposed to viewing them as victims of exploitation. Professionals expressed frustrations around some individuals focusing on the criminality rather than asking questions around who facilitated the child to commit these crimes (e.g. who provided them with drugs, why would a child travel long distances of their own accord, etc.). Professionals emphasised that these children should be viewed through a child protection lens instead of choosing to criminalise them:

> *"…the need for it to be a child protection response but the need for us to also see these children as victims and not criminalise them. I've had situations in Edinburgh where we've had children … maybe aged 14 with large quantities of drugs and instead of them just being reported to the Children's Reporter, which I would even question them*

> *being charged and held in a police station, but being jointly reported to the Procurator Fiscal and Children's reporter, which is really up tariffing them. Whereas the question would be, what did you charge them for because they're 14, where are they going to get the drugs from, who gave them them?"* – Participant K, Local Authority

Professionals also expressed frustrations that children were sometimes viewed as actively choosing to engage in criminality, with participants highlighting that children were often a victim of their own circumstance due to being surrounded by crime and exploitation from an early age. One participant from secure care stated that the mindsets of some staff within secure need to be changed to ensure they view the placement as a care setting rather than a prison sentence and use the time as an opportunity to provide the child with stability, safety and work with them to protect them from further exploitation when they return into the community. One participant identified the challenge of moving children out of area or placing them in secure care, when this may conflict with wider approaches (e.g. GIRFEC, The Promise, etc.).

> *"…what we're finding is that for county lines to be broken or for that involvement with the gangs, that there's actually more and more of a necessity for young people to be placed out of area or within secure accommodation in order to reduce the risks … it's very, very difficult to keep them safe unless they're in places of safety or they're in locations that are unknown and they're quite far out of area. So that's absolutely what we're finding. Where that contradicts for us is around our Promise agenda…"* – Participant P, Secure Care

A further challenge identified by professionals in secure care was around ensuring that appropriate transitional safeguarding is in place for when children return to the community, highlighting that this is an incredibly vulnerable time for children.

> *"If we don't get the transition right, they don't go to a place that's gonna keep them safe, then they'll not be safe. We can't...the notion of asking a 15-year-old who's been traumatised for 15 years to spend six months in secure care and come out untraumatised and no longer susceptible to criminality or grooming is madness."* – Participant H, Secure Care, Glasgow

Half of the participants reported concerns around the lack of awareness of CCE amongst other professionals and the general public, resulting in fewer victims being identified. One participant expressed that CCE was not something they could speak on with great confidence and another participant acknowledged that even though they worked with children at risk of exploitation, they explained that they were naïve to the full extent of the issue. Some participants highlighted that the lack of a shared or statutory definition of CCE in Scotland may affect the lack of awareness and understanding amongst professionals. Data recording issues were also highlighted amongst the participants, with frustrations frequently stemming from local authorities using different data recording systems and the IRD recording database not having the option to flag that the discussion was held due to concerns of CCE making it difficult to monitor the prevalence of the issue.

Finally, some professionals identified the challenging circumstances of working with only one child from a peer group, when it is clear from their discussions with the children that their friends are also being criminally exploited but have not yet been formally identified or referred to their service. It was recognised by professionals that interventions could be more effective if they were to tackle the issue of CCE amongst entire peer groups.

Challenges Posed by Exploiters. Professionals identified specific challenges posed by exploiters. Firstly, the lifestyle of organised crime groups and gangs has been glamourised within society, with exploiters portraying a life of money, expensive clothes, cars, jewellery, etc., making this more enticing for children. One participant highlighted the need to remove this glamourisation by reframing the issue as abuse:

> *"I think no individual or organisation glamorises serious organised crime but it is glamorised in our society and we need to change that. We need to say that those that are exploiting children are abusers. I mean to call them out on that, not to stigmatise individuals, but I think we need to take the glamour element away from it, because otherwise we're not gonna…I feel it's like, it's like a war. We're not gonna win the war…"* – Participant K, Local Authority

Equally, many professionals expressed that it was difficult for services to compete with the perceived rewards involved in CCE:

> *"…our selling point is like 'stop earning £1000 a week and come with me and I'll get you into Barnardo's and they'll give £30 a week…but you'll have peace in mind'. A 15-year-old doesn't even [know]…what's peace of mind? You don't even know about that when you're a young kid, you know, you're not interested in peace of mind, it's all about, like, instant gratification, so we're up against it."* – Participant N, Third Sector

It was highlighted that children often become entrenched in the criminality, making it more difficult to intervene and divert them away from the exploitation. Some professionals noted cases where children have returned to the gangs and exploitation due to the pull of the exploiters being so strong. Another challenge posed by OCGs and gangs is that they are always adapting, with some professionals feeling like they are playing catch up. Some professionals also recognised the challenge that not all exploiters understand that they are exploiting children, particularly where they have grown up in similar circumstances to the child and was once exploited themselves. Instead, they may perceive themselves as helping children to earn money and get out of a life of poverty, despite the risks posed:

> *"You know, their exploiter doesn't necessarily consider themselves an exploiter. They're within a community or an environment or a circumstance where options are limited, you know, and criminality is more accessible than a trade and more fruitful than a trade and not all of it is a Fagan type of exploiter, they're not all these types…. You know, they think they're giving a younger a step up, they're giving a young person a chance…"* – Participant H, Secure Care, Glasgow

Wider Organisational Challenges. Professionals expressed concerns around the lack of funding and resources available, with some participants predicting that this will only be exacerbated by the current economic climate. Professionals expected that the cost-of-living crisis will plunge children and their families further into poverty, increasing their vulnerability of being criminally exploited in order to provide for themselves and their families. One participant highlighted that the funding and resourcing issues has also led to the increase in children being placed in unsuitable and unregulated care arrangements (e.g. bedsits, B&Bs, etc.), further increasing their vulnerability. Other wider organisational challenges identified by professionals included the structure of services potentially resulting in children falling through the cracks, such as age limits on services and separate youth justice and child protection processes, when CCE spans over both systems. Frustrations were also expressed over the length of time it can take for changes to be implemented through the Scottish government.

Best Practice

Several examples or suggestions of best practice were provided by professionals, with some participants mentioning the importance of having UNCRC and GIRFEC underpinning their professional practice.

Identifying, Assessing and Managing Risk. One of the most common suggestions of best practice from professionals was identifying victims of CCE and intervening at the earliest opportunity rather than waiting until a child reaches a crisis point. This was also considered to be vital to preventing children becoming entrenched in exploitation where it is increasingly difficult to divert them. Professionals recommended several ways this could be achieved, such as delivering prevention and intervention initiatives in schools, supporting vulnerable families and single mothers at the early stages of childhood and professionals asking themselves at each point of contact with a child whether there are concerns of exploitation. Professionals also stated that early information sharing between partner agencies, effective and cohesive multi-agency working and awareness raising amongst professionals and the general public were also essential components to improving the identification and response to victims of CCE. In terms of risk assessment and management, best practices reported by professionals included contextual safeguarding, transitional safeguarding and ensuring the safety of the child and their families at all times to maximise their ability to engage with interventions.

Interventions. Over half of the participants highlighted that interventions need to involve supporting the entire family to increase the effectiveness of interventions. It was recognised that families were often struggling with the situation their child was in. For example,

one participant reported some parents feeling a sense of shame, embarrassment and grief when their child is being exploited and being taken advantage by others. In other instances, parents may be opposed to their child working with services whether that is due to not recognising their child is a victim of exploitation or having a mistrust of authorities, therefore it is essential to establish relationships with parents and get them on board.

Participants also reported that best practice was to ensure support and interventions are individualised, child centred and led by the needs of the child. Other suggestions of best practice for interventions was to ensure they are trauma informed, attachment informed and strength based, focusing on bolstering the strengths and positives of the child to enhance their resilience rather than simply focusing on negating the risks. It was also highly recommended that children are included in any decisions made around their lives and their views are taken into account:

> *"…there's no point sitting in a room with a group of professionals … making up a plan unless you've got the young person you're worried about on board as well. You can make up the best safeguarding plan you want, but if they're not in agreement with it, it's not worth the paper it's written on..."* – Participant R, Residential Care

Almost half of the participants highlighted the benefits of interventions that involve peer mentors with lived experience. Professionals described this approach as 'powerful' and 'effective' as it provides children with a positive role model that has lived the type of life that the child is experiencing and can show them that there is a way out of exploitation and there are alternative paths in life that they can take.

Practitioner Characteristics. Professionals identified several practitioner characteristics that are key when working with children who are being criminally exploited. The most common characteristic mentioned was consistency and being a consistent positive adult in the child's life, consistently turning up for them, even when they are not yet ready to engage. As victims of CCE have often experienced a lot of upheaval and instability in their lives, consistency demonstrated by a practitioner allows the child to recognise that they have a trusted adult that cares for them and wants the best for them.

> *"…it's just sheer tenacity and constant working with these people to let them know that we're not just gonna come along, chap their door and walk away and never be seen again. We're gonna come back and we're gonna chap their door every day or every other day and hopefully they'll actually see that we're there to make a change for the, for the better for them anyway."* – Participant O, Police Scotland

Professionals also highlighted that practitioners should be dedicated, passionate, appropriately trained, trauma informed, attachment informed, have an understanding of the challenges associated with criminal exploitation and have experience managing risk and

delivering interventions. Best practice recommendations also included practitioners being able to communicate with children in a relatable, understandable and child friendly way to breakdown the barrier of children often feeling like they cannot relate to professionals as they may not look like them or grown up with the same experiences.

Support for Victims of CCE

Services available for children

A number of services were identified by professionals as providing support to victims of CCE, whether that support specifically addresses CCE or provides other beneficial support for children. These services have been outlined in Table 8.

Table 8 - *Services identified by professionals for victims of CCE*

Service	CCE Specific	Location	Description*
Aid & Abet	Yes	Edinburgh Glasgow Lothian	Peer-led mentoring programme and support service for people aged 16 and over who have been released from prison (Aid & Abet, 2023)
Positive Steps	Yes	Dundee	Offer a support service for people aged 16 years and over who have been the victim of cuckooing
Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service, Action for Children	Yes	Dundee Glasgow Edinburgh Inverclyde	Work with and support children aged 11 to 18 who are either at risk of or being criminally exploited
St Giles Trust	Yes	England	Service based in England and Wales that supports children being criminally exploited. Service also supports the return of children found out with their local area, including children found in Scotland through county lines exploitation.
Barnardo's	No	UK Wide	Provide various supports to children (e.g. counselling, support victims of CSE, helping children to obtain a Young Scot card, a CSCS card, etc.).
CAMHS	No	UK Wide	Provides mental health support
Cash Back for Communities	No	Scotland	Scottish Government programme to reinvest criminal assets recovered through the Proceeds of Crime Act to improve the quality of life for children across Scotland. Phase 6 of this programme involved delivering a range of trauma-informed and person-centred services and activities for children and young people aged 10-25 years old (CashBack for Communities, 2023).
Glasgow Life	No	Glasgow	One professional reported this charity helped with getting a child horse riding lessons.
Includem	No	Dundee Glasgow Stirling Aberdeen Fife	Provide intensive support to children and their families. Also monitor movement restrictions of children in Dundee.
Intensive Support Service, Action for Children	No	Highlands	Work with children aged 11 to 18 years old who are in conflict with the law.

One Glasgow	No	Glasgow	Multiple agencies working together to provide specific services and support to the community. One service seeks to reduce offending in individuals aged 12 to 25 years old, particularly those involved in anti-social behaviour or in the criminal justice system (Glasgow Community Planning Partnership, 2023)
SHE Scotland	No	Scotland	Charity that provides support to girls and young women
Spartans Community Football Academy	No	Edinburgh	Delivers various programmes, including youth clubs and various educational projects to support children
Street Soccer	No	Scotland	Provides football themed personal development programmes for socially disadvantaged children and adults across Scotland (Street Soccer Scotland, 2023)
The Corner	No	Dundee	Service for children's sexual health but currently offer an outreach and substance misuse service for children and young people aged 16 to 19 years old.
The VOW	No	Edinburgh	Partnership between Police Scotland and Aid & Abet to reduce offending and harm to people. Involves peer mentors. (Aid & Abet, 2023)
Turn Your Life Around (TYLA)	No	Edinburgh	Partnership between Police Scotland, Edinburgh City Council and Aid & Abet to provide children with hope that they can turn their lives around. Involves peer mentors (Aid & Abet, 2023)
Who Cares Scotland	No	Scotland	Independent advocacy service for care experienced people (Who Cares Scotland, 2023)
Youth Justice Teams	No	Scotland	Work with children in conflict with the law between the ages of 12 and 18 years old

**Descriptions provided by professionals have been supported by information retrieved from the services online website where necessary to ensure accuracy.*

Barriers to children engaging with services

Professionals identified a number of personal and external barriers for children engaging with services and support.

Personal Barriers. One of the most common reported personal barriers for children was having a mistrust of professionals. Due to many of these children growing up in challenging circumstances, they often develop attachment issues and find it difficult to trust adults. For example, children may recall situations where authorities have made decisions on behalf of the child (e.g. social work removing the child from their home or changing their care placement), which the child may not have recognised the long-term benefits of these decisions and subsequently develop a mistrust for authorities. Another major barrier identified by professionals is children not recognising that they are a victim of exploitation, therefore do not believe they require any support.

> *"They see it as just making money, they don't actually see that. Yeah, you're making money, we get that but in order to make that money, somebody's using and abusing you and at the end of the day."* – Participant O, Police Scotland

Other barriers reported by professionals included children finding it difficult to identify who to trust, the fear of being let down, the fear of letting others down, being guarded, their own life experiences and trauma, finding it daunting meeting adults and the fact that it may not be the right time for child (i.e. not yet being open or receptive to support).

External Barriers. Half of the participants identified that fear of repercussions was a major external barrier to children engaging with support. Professionals highlighted that fear is instilled within children through intimidation, threats and violence towards them and their families, preventing children from engaging.

> *"I think probably fear of repercussions that they've been conditioned by their exploiters not to engage, not to say anything. The impact on them and their families, if they do say anything is so huge and…what they've kind of said to us is that they can sometimes feel it's like a bit of a pressure cooker that you know, they're holding stuff, trying not to tell anybody, but desperately wanting to say 'I am struggling with all this' and quite often after a significant event, so maybe an arrest or they've been seriously injured or something will happen they will disclose it and that can be a really vulnerable time for them emotionally because they've let all of this out and then the turmoil they go through about what you're gonna do with it now, you're gonna have to pass it on, what's gonna happen to me, what's gonna happen to my family? So that can be a definite barrier."* – Participant E, Third Sector

Other external barriers identified by professionals include family members being involved in criminality, having peers who are also being criminally exploited but not engaging with support, not having anything to meaningful to offer the child and there being too many professionals involved with the child's support, making it an overwhelming process.

Gaps or Improvements needed to services and support

Participants highlighted various gaps or improvements needed to services and support for victims of CCE. Over one-third of participants noted the lack of CCE specific services with multiple professionals calling for an equity of services across Scotland.

> *"I've said it for quite some time that I'm surprised that not all local authorities have a program similar to the Action for Children program, not saying it has to be that one but there should be something in place, a much more…dedicated, specific, bespoke program of interventions to basically prevent these children from getting caught up in it because it's been clearly shown through an evaluation of the project in Glasgow that it's saved the local authority significant sums of money."* – Participant B, Scottish Government

Participants equally highlighted the lack of mental health support for children, highlighting the significant delays that children currently have to wait. For example, one professional noted that one of the children they are working with has been waiting 18 months for a CAMHS appointment, despite being the victim of sexual assault. Professionals also expressed frustrations with mental health service processes, such as not being able to work children

while they are using substances, although they are potentially using substances to cope with their mental health. These challenges leave frontline practitioners feeling helpless as specialised mental health support is not within the scope of support they are trained to provide:

> *"All of these young people are dealing with huge amounts of trauma in their own way and there is… I…it's really, I find it really upsetting that there's no…you know, I can't get them a counsellor. I'm, you know, I'm happy to talk to them about these things but you know also, we're not mental health professionals, we don't wanna do it wrong…"* – Participant M, Third Sector

Other gaps in services that were mentioned by professionals included addiction services, with one participant stating that there are no addiction services in their area for those under 18 years old, positive activities (e.g. children's clubs, football initiatives, etc.), business education opportunities, services that are inclusive of working with children who have been in conflict with the law and more services and interventions involving lived experience mentors. One participant put forward the idea that professionals with existing relationships with the child should be adequately trained up to support victims of CCE, rather than adding more services and professionals to their support plan which can then become a barrier to engagement.

Current Views and Suggested Future Developments around Evidence, Policy and Practice

Evidence base around CCE

Professionals highlighted various gaps in knowledge around CCE and provided suggestions on how they would like to see the evidence base around CCE develop. Firstly, many professionals expressed that they would like more data and research to identify the nature, scale and extent of CCE across Scotland (e.g. how many children are being exploited, types of CCE, level of risks involved, number of police arrests, age groups being targeted, etc.). Professionals explained that this information will provide the necessary evidence to bring this issue to the attention of the government, professionals and members of the public, ultimately helping to identify victims and exploiters. One participant suggested a formal annual report of this data would be helpful.

Secondly, professionals wanted to gain a more in-depth understanding of CCE, with professionals raising several questions including: what is root cause of the issue, why are children being criminally exploited, how are children getting involved in the criminality in the first place, how many victims of CCE are being criminalised (i.e. arrested, charged, etc.), what are the school exclusion rates for victims of CCE, what is the role of social media and technology in CCE, who are the exploiters, how do the exploitation networks work and what are the long term outcomes for victims of CCE. It was noted that this information would help

to inform the development of effective interventions, targeted responses to tackling the issue of CCE and better use of resources. Many professionals also wanted to gain the perspectives of children who are being criminally exploited to further understand their experiences and understanding of the situation they are in. It was, however, acknowledged that it is difficult to carry out research with this population of children:

> *"I think that's a difficult one with research because … how do you reach the people who don't want to be reached but still get their views heard? I suppose it is maybe about … talking directly to carers and to foster carers and to other, you know, support services to try and get an insight because … you don't want it all to be stats ... I prefer the anecdotal stuff because when you put it into data you don't want people that are victims of CCE just to be a number really, do you really? You want their story to be properly heard."* – Participant R, Residential Care

Other suggested developments for the evidence base around CCE included learning from areas where the issue of CCE is more advanced to inform preventative action and evaluating the effectiveness of current practices and current services to determine what is working and where improvements are needed. Professionals also suggested that research should take into account culture related vulnerabilities in children.

Guidance, Policy and Practice around CCE

Views on Current Policies and Practices around CCE. Professionals provided various perspectives on the current policies and guidance around CCE. Some suggested that it was hard to keep on top of the amount of guidance and documents issued in relation to CCE but did not think the current policies and guidance were comprehensive enough. It was recognised that there was no specific CCE policy published by the Scottish Government and one participant stated that it was hard to find policies and guidance from a Scottish perspective, with the majority relating to England and Wales. In contrast, others believed that the current policies and guidance were sufficient, with some stating that the national child protection guidelines could be applied to the issue of CCE and police participants stating that they currently held sufficient internal guidance.

In terms of views on current practices, one participant from Police Scotland reported that their current processes appeared to be working effectively, although stated that individuals in higher positions within the police would have a better understanding of whether any improvements were required. Finally, it was suggested that the current Scottish justice system for children was much more appropriate compared to systems in England and Wales.

In terms of legislation, professionals highlighted that there was a lack of statutory definition for CCE within the current legislation. Despite this, the legislation was perceived as being

sufficient, offering the necessary protection to victims and providing the powers to disrupt and prosecute offenders. The pitfall, however, was that the lack of understanding around the legislation has resulted in it not being used effectively. Another limitation to the legislation that was noticed by one participant is that there are insufficient resources to implement the current legislation, i.e. no support in place to enforce the laws to the maximum.

When participants were asked for their views on the NRM process, some were unable to comment on this due to NRM referrals not being part of their job role. Of those who could provide their professional opinion on this process, some identified that the NRM was not being used as frequently in Scotland as it should be, although noted that the number of referrals were increasing. The decision of whether an NRM should be submitted was often discussed as part of an IRD to establish with other agencies whether this was appropriate, with some professionals noting that some were more supportive of the NRM process than others. The positives of the NRM as outlined by the participants included the NRM being the only current way to identify the number of victims in the UK, being a victim centred process and allowing children to be recognised as a victim of exploitation, which in turn could help to reduce charges against them for any criminal activity they committed as a consequence of being criminally exploited. In contrast, some limitations were identified by participants, such as there being no additional support for the child through the NRM processes and exploiters being found to take advantage of the process by telling children to state that they have been exploited upon arrest, believing that this will make it more likely for the child get off with any charges.

Suggested Developments for Policies and Guidance around CCE. Professionals suggested several potential developments for policies and guidance around CCE. Firstly professionals expressed that they would like to see policies and guidance written in a clearer, accessible and user-friendly manner, both for professionals and children, kept up to date and distributed widely to make them available for all agencies. It was also stated that policies and guidance should be written in a way that it can be applied to real-life scenarios, therefore suggested that those working directly with children should help to inform such policies and guidance.

A further suggested development from professionals was that CCE should be reframed within policies and guidance as child abuse and a child protection issue to avoid the criminalisation of children. It was also suggested that the age of victims should be increased within policies and guidance to include early adulthood, due to brain development continuing into mid to late twenties. Furthermore, some participants suggested that a new exploitation category should

be included in the Children's Hearing System, so practitioners can refer children for the reason of CCE:

> *"I think like within the Children's Hearing system as well, we have to have some kind of exploitation category, domain, something that we can refer in for that reason as well, because young people aren't safe and we can't refer in for exploitation but we can refer them because they don't go to school but they're not going to school because they've been exploited… so I think we need better mechanisms for that and to get that point over for the young people, because if we don't we're failing them."* – Participant D, Third Sector

One participant suggested that a change in legislation would be beneficial so that CCE is viewed in the same way as CSE, i.e. as a form of abuse that would receive similar response to those who sexually abuse children. It was thought that this would act as a deterrent for individuals exploiting children or highlight the seriousness of this issue for those who do not see themselves as exploiters. Another participant also suggested that if there was legislation focusing on exploitation in its own right, it would improve identification and responses to this issue. Other professionals questioned whether a specific statutory definition of CCE within the current legislation could also achieve this. It was also recognised that wider societal issues need to be addressed, particularly those that are exacerbating the vulnerabilities of children (e.g. poverty, disenfranchised children, deprived communities, cost of living and impact of covid-19, etc.).

Some positive developments that participants identified were currently taking place included a new dedicated CCE team being developed in the Scottish Government and a briefing paper on CCE being developed to build a shared understanding of CCE amongst professionals.

Suggested Developments for Practices around CCE. Although professionals noted that knowledge of CCE has increased over the years, over half suggested that further awareness raising and training of professionals is required to ensure that those who have contact with children are aware of the threat of criminal exploitation, can spot the signs and know how best to respond. It was emphasised that this needs to be continuous to ensure professionals remain up to date with the ever-changing trends of CCE. It was highlighted that training should also include learning around the legislation, NRM and services available to support for victims. One participant suggested that workshop-based learning would be more helpful than standard forms of training:

> *"I think the doing and the learning is all happening at once then … whereas, when you're reading, the reading and the reflecting and the putting into practice are all separate events almost. Whereas, workshop-based learning, where you're bringing cases to life, you're leaving sessions then with actions to do. You're like, I need to go and speak to that person. I need to ask that question. I don't know this, so I need to go and learn more … I think it's a much more present way of learning as opposed to quite*

> *linear, like read it, think about it try and to implement it in practice, by which time you have probably been asked to read something else or do something else…"* – Participant Q, Social Work

Professionals also suggested that awareness raising was also required amongst the general public to highlight that it is everyone's responsibility to identify and protect victims of CCE, with some suggesting national campaigns including signs placed in various public spaces (e.g. public transport, stations, hospitals, airports, workplaces, etc.).

Three professionals advocated for specific exploitation orders for children being criminally exploited, as opposed to the current compulsory supervision orders to recognise them as victims and not perpetrators. Another participant suggested more cohesion between the youth justice system and child protection processes due to victims of CCE spanning both systems. It was also recommended that more focus is placed on disrupting and apprehending the exploiters:

> *"…what's being done to disrupt their activity because my feeling is that too often we place the responsibility on young people to manage their exploitation … and it's never going to be a successful model to do that … all of the kind of means we have to protect children are generally around moving them, restricting them … them having more service involvement, accruing charges and going through systems, whereas if we focus more on the perpetrators and disrupting them, we disrupt the whole food chain basically."* – Participant E, Third Sector

Limitations

There are some limitations to the presented findings which should be noted. Firstly, these findings are based on the perspectives and anecdotal evidence of 22 professionals, therefore the information cannot be generalised. Furthermore, the sample of participants did not include representation from other potentially relevant sectors that have contact with children who are victims or at risk of CCE, such as mainstream education, frontline social workers, COPFS, Youth Offending Institutions, health, etc. Similarly, there was not a representation from each geographical area across Scotland.

Survey of Residential Care Staff

Aim

The aim of this stage was to explore how CCE in Scotland is understood by residential care staff, including what definitions of CCE are used, what patterns and trends have been found, what perspectives professionals have on the issue and any practice concerns. This was an extension of the interview stage, with the interview being converted into a survey to maximise responses from the residential care sector.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 45 people responded to the survey, although not all survey respondents answered all questions. The majority of respondents (16) were residential childcare workers, three were residential childcare managers, two were senior residential officers, two were social workers and two were service managers. In addition, there was one coordinator and 19 respondents did not provide their job title.

Respondents worked in 19 different local authority areas, with several respondents working across more than one area. Around half of respondents worked in the Glasgow area, with seven respondents working in a Scotland-wide role. The majority (56%) of respondents had been working in residential childcare for more than ten years at the time of completing the survey, with an additional 33% working in this area for 5-10 years. Four respondents had been working in residential childcare for 1-5 years. Interestingly, 58% of respondents had received no specific training relating to child criminal exploitation at the time of completing the survey, whilst 40% had, with one respondent not answering this question.

Materials and Procedure

The survey was designed using Qualtrics and comprised of 27 questions, one of which related to participant's consent, and a further four relating to participant's job role, local authority area, experience and training (as detailed above). Of the remaining 22 questions, 12 were closed questions eliciting quantitative data, whilst ten were open-ended, eliciting qualitative data.

Data Analysis

Frequencies for the closed questions were produced in Excel 2020, and, unless otherwise stated, are included in this report as 'valid percentages' of the total number of responses to each question. Qualitative questions were thematically analysed manually. During the first coding cycle, responses was analysed line-by-line to produce initial codes that were then combined into common themes and subthemes that described the data.

Findings

Definitions and types of CCE

Survey respondents were asked to provide a definition of CCE. Whilst some responses were unclear, appearing to refer to gang-related activity more broadly, most provided succinct answers that reflected the UK Government's definition (HM Government, 2018a, p. 48) in recognising CCE as occurring when a child has been manipulated, coerced or groomed into criminal activity for the benefit of someone else. Several respondents acknowledged that this often involves perpetrators taking advantage of power imbalances and/or a child's vulnerabilities, enticing them through the provision of an unmet need (money, food, clothing, substances, relationships or community), with three respondents explicitly stating that this constitutes a form of child abuse.

Respondents were then asked what types of CCE they had come across in their work. Results of this are displayed in Table 9. The majority of respondents (56%) had some experience of working with victims of forced shoplifting. This was closely followed by non-county lines drug supply (44%) and county lines drug supply (42%). Interestingly, when asked to estimate the most common types of CCE they have come across (rather than just listing all they had experience of), this order appears to be changed slightly: with non-county lines the most common type, followed by county lines and then forced shoplifting. Forced begging or busking appears to be the least common amongst respondents, with only five having any experience of this.

Of the eight respondents who selected 'other', some provided additional detail to clarify that they had also come across cases of CSE in their work. Furthermore, six respondents answered that they didn't know what types of CCE they had come across in their work. Whilst this is a relatively small proportion of respondents (13%), it is indicative of the inherent challenges facing practitioners who are trying to identify forms of exploitation that are intentionally covert, along with the lack of knowledge and training available to support workers in this task.

Table 9 - *What types of CCE have you come across in your work?*

	No. respondents	% of respondents
Forced shoplifting	25	56%
Non-county lines drug supply	20	44%
County lines	19	42%
Financial exploitation	15	33%
Forced cannabis cultivation	10	22%
Other	8	18%
Don't know	6	13%
Forced begging or busking	5	11%
Total	45	100%

Prevalence of CCE

Responses from this survey suggest a high prevalence of CCE within residential childcare settings, with the vast majority (80%) indicating that their current role involves working with children affected by CCE (although note that this might not mean direct victims of CCE). Only two respondents indicated that their role did not involve working with those affected by CCE. Importantly, seven responded that they didn't know if the children they worked with were affected by CCE. This reflects the challenges workers face when identifying CCE. When asked to approximate how many children they worked with were affected by CCE, one respondent emphasised this:

> *"Many- hard to quantify. Some low level to serious risk. There is far more than gets counted- outcomes for some young children very poor due to damage this type of child abuse brings- and often not seen or assessed as child abuse. Lack of confidence with practitioners engaging with this."* - Survey Respondent 1

Amongst those who did estimate the percentage of children they worked with who had been victims or at risk of CCE in the previous 12 months, the vast majority (14) felt this was up to about 20%, although it is notable that two respondents felt this figure was between 81-100%. This might reflect differing interpretations of the question, and what constitutes 'at risk' of CCE. Importantly, when asked whether this percentage had changed over the last five years, no respondents felt that this had decreased. Six respondents felt that this had stayed the same, five felt that it had somewhat increased, and nine that it had significantly increased, as detailed in Table 10.

Table 10 - *How has the number of children who are victims or at risk of CCE changed over the last 5 years?*

	No. of respondents	% of respondents
Significantly increased	9	31%
Somewhat increased	5	17%
Stayed the same	6	21%
Somewhat decreased	0	0%
Significantly decreased	0	0%
Don't know	9	31%
Total	29	100%

Risk factors for CCE

Respondents were asked to detail individuals or groups who they felt were at particular risk of CCE. Many respondents emphasised that all children are at risk of CCE, and that those who are 'vulnerable' are particularly at risk, with vulnerabilities used by exploiters to manipulate children into criminal activity. Of those who listed more specific vulnerabilities or risk factors, many of these reflected those identified in both the literature review and interviews, including:

Care experience

This was the most cited risk factor, with over half of those who provided a response (15 out of 29) mentioning care experience. This included children who were currently accommodated within residential settings, along with those who had previous care experience and/or were 'looked after' more broadly. Most respondents did not provide further detail on why this was a risk factor, although one did stress that children with care experience are often seeking out a sense of group belonging or community, a desire which can be leveraged by exploiters who promise group or gang affiliation in return for engagement in criminal activity.

Absence of positive relationships with adults

Often linked to care experience, the absence of a positive relationship with an adult was frequently identified by respondents as a key risk factor. This could involve the child having a poor relationship with parents or family members, and subsequently having no adult in their life who they could trust and felt cared for by. This absence can be used by exploiters, who children may interpret as being able to fill their unmet emotional needs.

Adversity, trauma, and bereavement

Several respondents highlighted that children who had experienced trauma, bereavement or other adverse experiences in their childhood were more at risk of CCE, including those who had previously been exploited at a younger age.

Mental health and low self-esteem

The link between poor mental health and CCE was emphasised by respondents under several of the survey's questions. Here it was emphasised that those experiencing poor mental health, and in particular those struggling with low self-esteem, can be particularly vulnerable to CCE. These children often have a strong desire to be liked and a fear of rejection, which can make them easier for organised groups to both recruit and retain.

Gender

Several respondents stressed that 'girls and boys alike' are at risk of CCE, whilst others emphasised differences in terms of gender. Amongst these, respondents stressed that whilst girls were more likely to be at risk of CSE, boys were more likely to be at risk of CCE.

Ethnicity

Three respondents detailed ethnicity as a potential factor influencing a child's risk of CCE. One respondent felt that Roma children were at particular risk, whilst another detailed that ethnicity could shape the specific ways in which children were groomed and exploited.

Poverty

Only three respondents cited poverty or being from a 'deprived background' as a potential risk factor for CCE. This is interesting, given that a key method by which exploiters coerce children into criminal activity is through the offer of money, gifts, and other items, indicating that a lack of these resources might put children at heightened risk.

Place

Three respondents flagged place-based factors as exposing children to a higher risk of CCE, with those living in, or frequenting, neighbourhoods where gang activity and/or crime is high more likely to be at risk of criminal exploitation.

Indicators of CCE

Survey respondents were asked what they felt were the warning signs of CCE. Responses to this question were diverse and detailed, and were very closely aligned to the indicators identified in the professional interviews. Responses have been grouped into the below key indicators:

New and unexplained money, clothing or other items.

This was the most common response, with 22 participants detailing new or unexplained money or other items as a key warning sign that a child was being criminally exploited.

Changes in mood, attitude, and overall mental health.

17 respondents cited this as an indicator of CCE. The most common amongst these was a child displaying secrecy and defensiveness, including protectiveness over their devices and online activity, and a refusal to share where they were going or who they were spending time with. In addition, respondents flagged poor emotional regulation, increased mood swings and aggressive outbursts as indicating potential CCE, along with the onset or exacerbation of depression and anxiety. Several respondents highlighted that changes in self-esteem can indicate CCE. Interestingly, this could be an increase or reduction in self-esteem – with some children displaying increased confidence in the initial stages of CCE, as they are afforded a sense of belonging and status from their new group affiliations.

Behavioural changes.

14 respondents highlighted some form of changed behaviour as a warning sign of CCE, with specific responses including: changed sleeping patterns, excessive mobile phone use, increased risk taking, displaying more 'challenging' behaviour, losing interest in hobbies, and going out more often especially where they are being picked up by unknown cars or taxis.

Relationship changes.

Relationship changes was also cited by 14 respondents. This included children withdrawing from existing positive friendships, family members or residential staff, and simultaneously spending time with new, often older, friends.

Going missing or absconding.

Ten respondents mentioned this as a key warning sign, which could include children going missing from school, the family or caregiver's home, or from the children's house.

Risks and impact of CCE

When asked whether the risks associated with CCE had changed over the last five years, the vast majority of respondents felt these had either somewhat or significantly increased (79%), with no respondents feeling these had decreased, and only three answering that these had stayed the same. In terms of the nature of these risks, respondents provided a detailed range of risks and the detrimental effect these can have on children, both in the immediate-term, and also in the long-term as they move into adulthood. These are grouped below:

Criminalisation. Criminalisation was the most prominent risk associated with CCE, with 15 respondents citing this. Respondents highlighted that children who have been exploited are often not recognised as victims by police and justice systems, and instead considered responsible for their offences, receiving charges and criminal records. Where the child has been exploited into repeat offending, there is a heightened risk that they will receive a custodial sentence, either in childhood or in later life if they offend again. In these instances, children are not only deprived of receiving recognition and support as victims of exploitation, but are more likely to remain within the justice system as they move into adulthood, with their long-term life chances impacted as a result.

Mental health. 12 respondents mentioned poor mental health as a key risk associated with CCE. This can happen in the immediate, with children experiencing extreme pressure, stress and fear, and a sense that there is no way out of their situation. This, some respondents added, could lead to self-harm and suicidal ideation. Further, it was acknowledged that CCE can be acutely traumatising for children, leading to PTSD diagnoses and an impact on their long-term development.

Physical safety. This was highlighted by ten respondents, who emphasised that CCE could involve threats of, and actual, violence against the child or their loved ones.

Sexual violence and exploitation. Ten respondents cited sexual violence as a key risk to children who are being criminally exploited, including rape, sexual abuse and/or CSE.

Drug and alcohol dependence. Drug and alcohol dependence was mentioned by several respondents, with CCE either initiating or exacerbating these dependencies. It was noted that exploiters often use drugs and/or alcohol as a means to recruit children and also retain them, as the child becomes dependent on their exploiter to supply these substances.

Stigma. Several respondents mentioned that CCE can lead to stigmatisation, including internalised stigma and shame, where a child's sense of self is shifted as a result of their

exploitation. One respondent highlighted that this can be exacerbated when people and systems around the child negatively label the child, or otherwise hold them responsible for their exploitation.

Across these responses, it is clear that respondents perceive the risks and impact of CCE to be very high for the children they work with, many of whom are often themselves unaware of the dangers they are being exposed to, as one respondent highlights:

> *"The risks are high for these vulnerable young people who are being exploited and this can have great negative effects on their well-being and mental health […] The long term effects will result in poor mental health, PTSD, lack of self-worth and being, zero confidence, trauma, the list goes on. These young people are not safe around these types of situations and they are completely unaware of the seriousness of this which is frightening."* Survey Respondent – 7

Current processes in responding to CCE

Respondents were asked to detail what their processes were when responding to a child who they suspect is being criminally exploited. Almost all responses detailed that this would involve some form of information sharing and liaising with other professionals, with several emphasising that this would follow a contextual safeguarding approach. This could include alerting higher management within the children's house, social work, police, third sector organisations already involved with the child and, where appropriate, parents and carers. These discussions might then lead to completion of a risk assessment, a child concern form, taking the case to a child's safeguarding panel, peer mapping and/or a child protection referral. Several respondents also indicated that staff within the children's house would then regularly update risk assessments, monitoring the child more closely and recording any potentially concerning events. When asked how they would rate their experience of this kind of information sharing across agencies when responding to CCE, respondents were generally positive about this – with only four detailing that their experiences had been 'poor' or 'very poor', compared to 19 who felt this had been 'good' or 'very good'.

Whilst ten respondents indicated that their processes also involved discussing their concerns with the child and providing additional support to them, more than half of responses did not include any mention of this. Those who did discuss this, mentioned that they would try to increase one-to-one time with the child, engaging them in activities they enjoyed and educating them around the risks associated with CCE, along with seeking out CCE specific services to support the child where possible. In terms of services to support children affected by CCE, many respondents felt that these were sparse, with very little available. Services that

respondents mentioned were available included Victim Support Scotland, Barnardo's, Police Scotland teams, child protection teams, HALT, NSPCC and CAHMS – although many of these supports may not be CCE specific.

Respondents were also asked to rate their level of experience and confidence in identifying, assessing, and responding to CCE. Detailed responses to this can be found in tables 11 and 12. Most respondents felt they had some level of experience in this area – with the vast majority indicating that they were either 'somewhat experienced', 'experienced' or 'highly experienced'. Similarly, confidence levels were generally high – with only one respondent indicating that they were 'not at all confident' in assessing the risks of CCE. When asked what would help them improve their response to children who are victims or at risk of CCE, participants highlighted that they would like more training, resources and CCE-specific services made available. It was felt training should include case studies and examples, and focus on how to provide a timely response when CCE concerns are first flagged. Respondents added that CCE-specific services should be set up in ways that encourage a child's engagement, with relationships built between services and children's houses so that there is an awareness of the service before the point in which they are needed.

Table 11 - *How would you rate your level of experience in the following areas of CCE?*

	Identifying (%)	Assessing (%)	Responding (%)
Not at all experienced	3%	0%	0%
Not very experienced	10%	14%	18%
Somewhat experienced	38%	46%	43%
Experienced	38%	29%	29%
Highly experienced	10%	11%	11%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table 12 - *How would you rate your level of confidence in the following areas of CCE?*

	Identifying (%)	Assessing (%)	Responding (%)
Not at all confident	0%	3%	0%
Not very confident	14%	21%	24%
Somewhat confident	38%	34%	24%
Confident	41%	38%	38%
Very confident	7%	3%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Addressing children's needs and barriers to engagement

Respondents were asked to detail what else is needed to meet the needs of children who are at risk of CCE. Respondents provide a range of answers detailing what is needed, and how this can be achieved. These responses are grouped below:

Strengthening relationships with adults. The need to ensure children had relationships with a supportive adult(s) came out very strongly in responses to this question, reflecting that a lack of support from adults was understood as a key risk factor for CCE. This included the need to improve family and care networks that nurture the individual child, ensuring they feel loved, supported and safe. This not only reduces the risk of the child being exploited, but also increases the likelihood that they will disclose exploitation to adults if it does occur. Several respondents emphasised the need for staff in children's houses to be cognizant of the importance of relationship building and trauma informed approaches to working with children.

Awareness-raising. The importance of raising children's awareness around CCE was also emphasised. Respondents highlighted that children needed more education around spotting the signs of exploitation, the risks involved, and practical strategies to keep themselves safe in the community. Several added that awareness-raising was also needed for parents and carers, along with other agencies including education, social work, and health services. One respondent also highlighted that there needed to be CCE training for police to ensure they treat children who are being exploited as victims and not perpetrators.

Opportunities for children and young people. Several respondents highlighted the need for children and young people to have viable alternatives to crime that can provide some of the 'benefits' children receive from CCE, including income and a sense of belonging. This could include education, employment opportunities or positive community-based activities and youth groups.

Improved mental health support and services. Improving mental health supports was also raised as key in preventing CCE. Respondents stressed the need for dedicated mental health or befriending services that did not have lengthy waiting lists or eligibility criteria that precludes early intervention.

Improved processes. The need for improved processes around how agencies respond to CCE was also emphasised. Within children's houses, respondents referenced the need for increased supervision of children, tighter risk assessments and quicker response times when potential exploitation flags are first identified. In terms of multi-agency processes, several highlighted they often needed more information than police or other agencies were

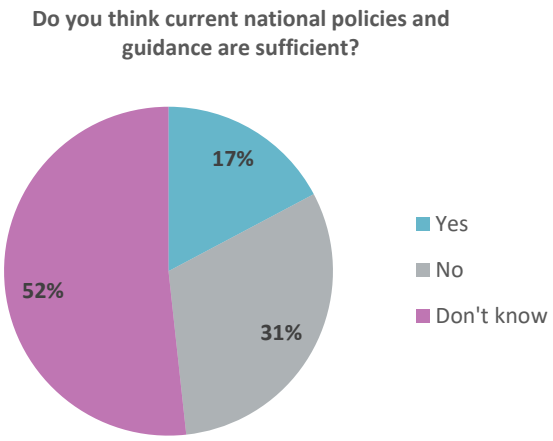
prepared to provide. This lack of information was understood as undermining their ability to effectively support the child. Further, several respondents felt they needed more input from statutory services including social work and education to allow CCE to be identified at an earlier stage.

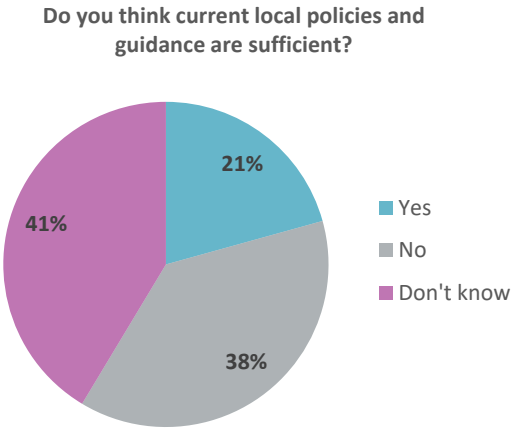
Respondents were then asked to detail what they felt some of the barriers were when responding to children who are victims or at risk of CCE. These barriers often reflected the answers above, with respondents citing:

- Poor multi-agency working, including poor information sharing
- Poor recording, monitoring, and risk assessment processes within the children's house
- A lack of training and skills for staff to identify and address CCE, and a lack of awareness over what support can be accessed
- Staff shortages, meaning there is less time for staff to build relationships with children, and also leading to slower response times to potential exploitation
- The child disengaging with services and/or not feeling safe disclosing exploitation
- Inadequate justice processes, with cases of CCE difficult to 'prove', and victims often criminalised
- Public perceptions and labelling leading to internalised stigma and shame

Policies

Lastly, respondents were asked whether current local and national policies and guidance relating to CCE were sufficient. Responses to this can be seen in the below two pie charts. Importantly, a very high percentage of respondents answered 'don't know' to both questions. This suggests a significant lack of awareness around what the local or national guidance relating to CCE actually is, and the need for more comprehensive CCE training for practitioners. Further, a significantly higher number of respondents answered 'no' compared to 'yes' – highlighting that those who were aware of guidance did not feel these were sufficient.





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Appendices

Appendix A. Search Terms and criteria for literature review

A number of electronic databases were searched to identify relevant academic literature that has been published in relation to CCE (see Table 13). Furthermore, websites of organisations whose work relates to CCE and/or criminal justice (e.g. police, social work, government, third sector, etc.), were manually searched for any relevant literature. These organisation websites have also been outlined in Table 13. The reference lists for literature returned in the searches were also examined for relevance.

Table 13 - *Academic databases and organisation websites searched for literature relating to CCE.*

Electronic Academic Databases	Organisation Websites
• ScienceDirect • Taylor & Francis • Wiley Library • EBSCO Host (APA PsychArticles, Business Source Complete, CINAHL Plus, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection) • ProQuest • Google Scholar*	• Scottish Government • UK Government • National Crime Agency (NCA) • Police Scotland • Home Office National Referral Mechanism (NRM) Statistics (2021/2022 stats) • Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) • Action for Children • The Children's Society • Howard League for Penal Reform • National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) • Stop and Prevent Adolescent Criminal Exploitation (SPACE) • Parents Against Child Exploitation (PACE) UK • Local Government Association • Legislation.gov.uk

Note. *Due to the sheer number of results returned by *Google Scholar*, only the first ten pages of results were searched.

Table 14 outlines the specific inclusion and exclusion criteria adopted for the search and selection process. A date range was applied to ensure the literature reflects up to date legislation, as relevant modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation legislation came into practice in the UK during 2015.

Table 14 - *Inclusion and exclusion criteria adopted for the CCE literature review*

Inclusion	Exclusion
Academic or grey literature pertaining to research, policy documents or organisational reports on 'child criminal exploitation'	Academic or grey literature not pertaining to research, policy documents or organisational reports on 'child criminal exploitation'
Literature relates to anyone under the age of 18 years old	Literature relating to individuals over the age of 18 years old
Published in the UK or relates to CCE in the UK	Not published in the UK or relates to CCE in another country
Published between 1st January 2015 and 31st December 2022	Published out with the date range of 1st January 2015 to 31st December 2022

Published in the English language	Published in a non-English language
Literature presenting original information (i.e. research findings, guidance, policies, conclusions, etc).	Literature not presenting original information (e.g. literature reviews, etc).

Appendix B. Data Requests for Agencies

Police Scotland

The interim Vulnerable Persons Database (iVPD) is a system used by Police Scotland to record individuals identified by the police or reported to the police as vulnerable, including victims of CCE. For this reason, the following information was requested from Police Scotland:

- What date was the Child Criminal Exploitation marker added to the interim Vulnerable Persons Database (iVPD)?
- How many children under the age of 18 years old have a CCE marker on the iVPD?
- How many of these children are male/female?
- What is the age range/average age of these children?
- What is the most common type of child criminal exploitation (i.e. what is the most common crime these children are being exploited to commit)?
- Are there any other statistics you hold that you think would further our understanding of this issue across Scotland (e.g. number of child criminal exploitation markers per geographical area, etc)?

Local Authorities

The following information was requested from the 32 local authorities across Scotland:

- How many children under the age of 18 years old have been identified as victims of child criminal exploitation in your local authority area?
- How many of these children are male/female?
- What is the age range of these children?
- What is the average age of these children?
- What is the most common type of CCE (i.e. most common crime these children are being exploited to commit)?
- If this information cannot be provided, is this due to the: a) information not being recorded; b) information is recorded but not easily extractable; c) information is recorded and extractable but limited resources/time to extract the information.

Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service

The following information was requested from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS):

- Number of charges under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 reported to COPFS to date?
    - Of these, how many involve the criminal exploitation of children?
    - What type of CCE do these relate to?
- Number of charges under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 which have been prosecuted to date and number of resulting convictions?
    - Of these, how many involved the criminal exploitation of children?
    - What type of CCE did these relate to?
- How many Trafficking and Exploitation Prevention Orders have been issued to date?
    - Of these, how many related to the criminal exploitation of children?
    - What type of CCE do these relate to?
- How many Trafficking and Exploitation Risk Orders have been issued to date?
    - Of these, how many related to the criminal exploitation of children?
    - What type of CCE do these relate to?
- If this information cannot be provided, is this due to the: a) information not being recorded; b) information is recorded but not easily extractable; c) information is recorded and extractable but limited resources/time to extract the information.